

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Forum on Displacement in Georgia: *Human Impact, Policy Implications, and Lessons Learned*

On October 3, 2008, a distinguished panel of scholars, NGO activists and diplomats gathered at the Forum on Displacement in Georgia: Human Impact, Policy Implications, and Lessons Learned, an all-day event co-sponsored by the Georgian Studies Center at the Harriman Institute, the Center for European Studies at Rutgers University and the Department of Geography and Regional Development, University of Arizona, with support from the National Science Foundation for the project “Forced Migrants Living in Post-Conflict Situations: Social Networks and Livelihood Strategies.”

The new wave of IDPs that flooded Georgia following the August 2008 war greatly exacerbated the already dire humanitarian crisis in the country. According to UNHCR data, 127,000 ethnic Georgians fled South Ossetia and Abkhazia following the war. The number of the IDPs of the “first wave,” who arrived following the Abkhazian war in 1992 and during the ongoing conflict in the two breakaway territories stands at 208,000 from Abkhazia and 13,000 from South Ossetia. The panel concluded that in the absence of a coherent long-term

strategy of dealing with IDP issues on the part of the Georgian government, the social, economic, and political implications of the crisis threaten to spiral out of control.

Beth Mitchneck, of the University of Arizona, and **Joanna Regulska**, of Rutgers University, developed the “Forced Migrants” project in 2003. They were joined by Georgian researchers George Tarkhan-Mouravi and Nana Sumbadze in 2005. As Mitchneck reported in her morning presentation, the project investigated the meaning of home in displacement with two primary variables in mind: dwelling type (collective center or private accommodation) and gender. The team surveyed 60 individuals in each of three Georgian cities—Zugdidi, Tbilisi, and Kutaisi.

Research assistant **Peter Kabachnik** joined Mitchneck for the opening session, “An exploration of long-term territorial displacement and material lives: the case of Georgia.” Their analysis of IDPs’ narratives identified a kind of “double displacement”—that is, a dislocation in

both spatial and temporal terms. Regarding the latter, the presenters pointed out the ways in which IDPs' narratives of loss focus on the past and the future at the expense of real consideration for the present. Mitchneck pointed out that talk about a real possibility of return was intensifying prior to the outbreak of conflict in South Ossetia this past August, which effectively "turned back the clock." In comparing the conditions of "first wave" and "second wave" IDPs, the presenters underscored that current dwelling conditions are even more dire than those of fifteen years ago. Some new IDPs have been placed in operating rooms, they reported. They also addressed the IDPs' "everyday collective economy," an egalitarian survival strategy which contrasts with consumptive or accumulative practices, and operates independently of any kind of government intervention. The presenters pointed out that, in general, IDPs' collectivist approach to economy affords them greater access to material possessions (computers, telephones, etc.) than the local population, even if ownership of these possessions is shared. Finally, they reported that rates of employment are basically equal among IDPs and local populations, but that IDPs work mostly in the informal economy while locals are formally employed.

In their presentation titled "Gendered Meanings of Displacement: The Redefinition of Traditional Roles," **Joanna Regulska** and **Magda Grabowska** of Rutgers University looked at the "forced and violent" ways in which the gender roles within the IDP community underwent transformation through "rapid departure and separation of families." These violent, traumatic shifts in identity involved both the "de-masculinization" of males, who lost their

social status and the "ability to protect their families," thus leading to "increased passivity"; and the phenomenon of "role-reversal" of women, who had to take on new responsibilities, including those of "caregivers" and "breadwinners." Furthermore, as the study's authors point out, the majority of employees of NGOs and grass-roots organizations dealing with IDP issues are women. The inter-gender tension is high in the current climate in Georgia where "psychological assistance" and "vocational training" for men is insufficient. As a result, women have been thrust into various competing roles, among which are those of "leaders/community organizers," members of the "most vulnerable group," and members of the "target group for international donors." The authors decried the "lack of gender component in state approaches to IDPs" and urged the government and the donors to incorporate more men into the "institutional programs," and demonstrate "greater sensitivity to cultural context" and "greater gender sensitivity to policy recommendations."

In her presentation titled "IDP Identity and its Psycho-Social Consequences," **Nana Sumbadze**, co-director of the Institute for Policy Studies in Tbilisi, compared and contrasted the realities and responses of the first and the second waves of IDPs by looking at the sources for the possible "psycho-social consequences of displacement." Among the main differences between the two groups is the lack of "preparedness for displacement" among the second wave of IDPs, owing to the fact that the new conflict was "sudden and short." Moreover, the situation with the second wave is "very dynamic," as many are returning. Compared with the first war,

the August conflict produced “more disrupted families.” In drawing comparisons between the two waves, Professor Sumbadze pointed to the feeling of “being abandoned and not cared for by the state.”

Among the various sources for possible psycho-social consequences of displacement, the professor mentioned the following: traumatic experiences of the majority of IDPs, who have witnessed bombings and other military actions; humiliation suffered as a result of the lack of shelter and general poverty; lack of proper medical care and supplies; and the inability to move freely, as one’s prospects of receiving material assistance depend on his/her physical presence at the “collective center.” The feelings of neglect on the part of the state were especially pronounced in the second wave of IDPs, the majority of whom were not warned of the possibility of a conflict and subsequently had to rely on their own means to evacuate. Despite this grim picture, the presenter ended on a bright note, referring to statistics showing that most IDPs remain hopeful about their future and noting that despite the politically complex issue of IDPs’ return, “many negative consequences of displacement can be cushioned by sound policy.”

The first IDPs—ethnic Georgian villagers--began arriving in Georgia the “very next day after the Russian tanks rolled in South Ossetia,” began his presentation **George Tarkhan-Mouravi**, co-director of the Institute for Policy Studies, Tbilisi. Simultaneously, there was outflow in the opposite direction, with Ossetian villagers fleeing across the border to North Ossetia. About 100,000 ethnic Georgians initially fled to Gori, the

majority subsequently continuing on to Tbilisi. Around 2,000 Georgians fled from the Kodori Gorge area.

Despite the August 12th cease-fire agreement between Presidents Medvedev and Saakashvili, sporadic military actions continued, with the bombing of a civilian radar in Tbilisi and rockets being fired at the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, although with no significant damage reported. Security remains a concern with recent reports of Georgian policemen killed near the Abkhazian and South Ossetian borders. The situation remains tense in the Akhagori District, separated from South Ossetia by a ridge, where local population is reportedly being forced to assume Russian citizenship under the threat of expulsion.

According to UNHCR statistics, the total number of IDPs from the second wave is 127,000. Of those, about 70,000 were from areas that were bombed or otherwise attacked, but were subsequently able to return. They are in desperate need of assistance with food and shelter. 23,000 IDPs had their houses destroyed, while 12,000 came from buffer zones and are supposed to be able to return, according to the agreement, but cannot do so due to the uncertain status of these areas. It is furthermore doubtful whether European observers will be able to maintain order in the buffer zones, and the situation there remains tense. According to international organizations, 31,000 IDPs will remain displaced, while 23,000 will return only after the winter.

IDPs from the Kodori Gorge will probably not be able to return for at least several years, forecast Mr. Tarkhan-Mouravi. The Abkhazian de-facto president was on record saying that he

will “burn the last Georgian village to the ground” to prevent any ethnic Georgians from returning.

According to Tarkhan-Mouravi, it was not only IDPs who were caught unprepared by the invasion, but also the Georgian government, which was surprised by the scale of the ensuing crisis, despite having adopted an action plan on IDPs 3 weeks prior to the hostilities. As a result, it remains unclear how these IDPs will be provided for. With winter approaching, the need for shelter is becoming a matter of life and death. The main long-term need for the IDPs remains stable employment. Meanwhile, IDPs’ hosts are also vulnerable as their resources are being stretched thin. The UNHCR is launching a plan to subsidize those old IDPs who have been hosting new ones. There are signs of a mounting frustration with the government on the part of the new IDPs. “As mobilization subsidies,” warned Tarkhan-Mouravi, “we should expect the criticism directed at the president and his policies to rise.”

Irakly Chikovani, Deputy Head of Georgia’s UN Mission, opened his presentation by stating that “the fact remains that the Georgian territory is being occupied, as both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are a part of Georgia.” According to Chikovani, the peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia failed from the beginning, since they were composed of Russians – “a party to the conflict.” The diplomat went on to recount facts about the August war and its aftermath: the aggression against Georgia affected 7 regions of Georgia out of a total of 9; ethnic Georgians were cleansed from Abkhazia and South Ossetia; incidents of looting and murder against ethnic Georgians which occurred during the

invasion have “not received sufficient response from the international community.”

Chikovani criticized the Russian side for failing to fulfill the terms of the Sarkozy plan: it took the Russian army one month to pull out of Georgia and 11 so-called buffer zones remain, which Russians claim are necessary for “security reasons.” The Russian military denied southern access to South Ossetia to major international humanitarian organizations, forcing them to go around and enter from the Russian side, thus slowing down deliveries of assistance. Chikovani also added that Russia is impeding the work of the 200 EU observers who have recently arrived in Georgia, as well as members of UNOMIG (UN Observer Mission in Georgia), by denying them access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Chikovani stressed that as a “party to the conflict,” Russia “is not and cannot be a mediator in Abkhazia or South Ossetia.” This fact opens up an opportunity of invoking a UN procedure, never before used, whereby if a Security Council member is a party to the conflict, the case may be moved to the UN General Assembly, provided the agreement of the majority of the Council’s 14 members and all 4 of the remaining members of the Permanent Five. The diplomat also expressed his hopes for the October 15 expert talks in Geneva, which should be devoted to solving “pressing needs, such as the return of IDPs.”

In concluding, Chikovani underlined that “Georgians have never accepted and will never accept a Georgia without Abkhazia or South Ossetia,” restating his government’s offer of significant autonomy within the Georgian state to both territories.

The forum ended with all speakers participating in a concluding panel.

Catharine Nepomnyashchy, director of the Harriman Institute, recalled her encounters with ordinary people during her June 2008 trip to Abkhazia. Due to the ongoing conflict, regular Abkhazians, most notably youth, have been prevented from taking advantage of opportunities that their counterparts in Georgia enjoy, including study abroad.

Beth Mitchnek, who also took part in the June 2008 trip, warned about the problem of “the virtual hidden population of IDPs living in private accommodation,” who are in great need. A key fact to remember, according to her, is that “IDPs issues are not limited to those in collective centers.” A long-term solution to IDP problems is to create jobs (“income-generating activities”), which are scarce both for IDPs and the local population. Although “lots of assistance is now coming to Georgia,” directing it to the right places is “tricky business,” cautioned **George Tarkhan-Mouravi**, urging “more conditionality” to be tied to the aid’s delivery. Tarkhan-Mouravi lamented the absence of “team spirit” and “clear, united vision” on the part of the government with regard to economic policy, which has mainly relied on international investments - scarce following the August war. The activist urged the government to “reconsider its vision on social development and formulate a strategy for economic development.”

Joanna Regulska pointed out several potential pitfalls in dealing with IDP issues and provided prescriptions. There is a danger that the first wave of IDPs will be forgotten as assistance is being distributed, while also making the

temporary status of IDPs permanent. Additionally, the new wave of IDPs may spawn more children born into the IDP status, with “serious implications for the society as a whole.” For Regulska, IDPs’ needs are deep and cannot be satisfied merely with job-creation: as more and more IDPs are becoming passive and not utilizing their skills as a result of their uncertain status, they have to be trained individually to be able to “cope emotionally and be productive.”

For **Nana Sumbadze**, the main effort should be directed at “pressuring the government to observe human rights” and create institutions that will “ensure the participation of the society as a whole,” which will in turn lead to improvement of the IDP situation.

In responding to the question regarding the public opinion in Abkhazia and South Ossetia regarding reverting back under Georgian rule, **Irakly Chikovani** insisted that for any possible referendum on the matter to be valid, the “400,000 Abkhazian IDPs must have their say.” “War wounds are not easily healed, they must be addressed. But it was Georgians who were ethnically cleansed from those territories, in addition to Estonians, Latvians and others,” continued the diplomat.

Chikovani warned the audience of Russia’s attempts to “shake the faith of Georgians in their own government,” stating that the only way for the latter to counteract this is to become more “skillful” at building “stronger institutions.”

By Peter Zalmayev