

Analysis

The Hardships of Becoming “Locals”: Refugees Before and After the State Housing Program in Armenia

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Abstract

This article outlines some of the challenges refugees living in dormitories in Armenia still face. Twenty years after fleeing their homes in Azerbaijan, the provision of housing is among the crucial issues in order for these people to overcome their sense of being “refugees”. On the basis of anthropological fieldwork conducted over the course of a year, the author depicts the life of the refugees in the dormitories of a town in Armenia, analyzes the effects of the state housing program and asks whether the provision of housing helps refugees in becoming “locals”.

The Importance of Housing

“Can one be a refugee for more than 18 years? Does this exist in other countries? One can be a refugee for 5 years, maybe a bit more, but not 18!” (M., 52 years old, 2007)

Words like this, filled with frustration and bitterness, could often be heard from refugees in Kotayk in 2006–7. They came as a strong critique of the Armenian state, which until then had not provided for their well-being. The word “refugee” was understood by many as a temporary condition, which should have been left behind a long time ago, as soon as their lives would more or less resemble their past lives, or those of “locals” in contemporary Armenia. However, for them this condition lasted for almost two decades.

How does one stop being a refugee, and what does one become then? Throughout their lives in Armenia, refugees would have identified different factors for this transition, be it income, job, language, or emotional attachment. Nowadays, however, housing has become the most pronounced topic: according to interviews which I conducted in Kotayk, the many refugees shared the opinion that a “refugee” could “become a local” through the private ownership of a house or a flat. On the one hand, Armenian society is described as a society where the majority owns housing (UNECE 2000), and this marks one of most important differences between “locals” and refugees. Since 2003 the state in Armenia has launched a housing program, and the refugees were anxious whether they would be able to receive housing.

These and other related factors have made housing the “hottest” issue among refugees: when I asked them what kind of policy they would expect the state to provide for refugees, the majority said “let the state first of all provide us housing, we could do the rest on our own”. But do the refugees indeed become “locals” after receiving houses, as they expressed? What is the result of the housing program on the lives of refugees?

Housing, Layers of the Refugee Population, and Refugee-Local Relations in Kotayk

Around 360,000 refugees arrived in Armenia beginning in 1988 soon after the anti-Armenian pogroms in Sumgait and outbreaks of mass violence in other towns in Azerbaijan (De Waal 2003; Movsesova and Ovanyan 1991). The refugees arrived in different waves, depending on the situation in their towns and on personal factors. Some were able to exchange housing, or sell and purchase homes. Many had to move into rural homes instead of a central city flat. Others only brought belongings, while many were compelled to flee and arrived, as they said, “only with clothes they wore”. Azerbaijani neighbors and friends of those who became refugees often assisted them to protect themselves and transport their property to Armenia. The then existing Soviet Armenian state tried to organize relief for the refugees: housing was provided in all suitable public buildings, including hotels, dormitories and rest houses. For some of the refugees arriving early on and without property, the state was able to provide private housing, such as the first wave of refugees from Sumgait. Therefore, there were initially significant differences in the refugees’ conditions.

Kotayk, a town close to Yerevan, with about 45,000 inhabitants (RA 2006), was a Soviet industrial town, where intensive construction went on during the 1960–80s. According to my interviews with officials from the state Refugees Department (RA Migration Agency), the city is the second largest host of refugees in Armenia after Yerevan. It seems to have attracted refugees since it is close to the capital, having centrally located and numerous dormitories, and enterprises which still worked at the end of the Soviet Union. Many refugees moved to Kotayk directly, while others migrated later on from other regions in Armenia. More than 50 percent of the interviewed sample mentioned having relatives in Kotayk as one of the main reasons for settling there. Others had found a job in one of its industrial or

educational enterprises, which the majority lost again after the collapse of Soviet industries. Hence, it is difficult to speak of a complete exclusion of refugees from the local society. They certainly were partly excluded from the labor market (mainly due to the economic crisis and restructuring and partly because of language incompetence), had fewer informal connections, but at least the majority had relatives, who could host them and provide emotional support.

The relationships of the refugees with the local population have been contradictory since they arrived (Baghdasaryan 2005). On the one hand they were received as part of the nation and suffering compatriots: the pogroms against them in Azerbaijan were perceived within the history of genocide against the Armenian people (ibid). Additionally, they were recognized and welcomed by the then socialist Armenian state and granted administrative support. The local population, at the height of nationalist feelings at the end of 1980s, shared this perception of the refugees as a group, supported them by hosting and helping them find employment, or by giving them some basic furniture, and caring for other needs. This support was mainly provided by relatives and friends, i.e. people with whom the refugees had personal connections, though strangers did offer some short-term help too. On the other hand, however, as in many societies, there were tensions between the arriving refugees and the local population. One of the major problems was that a significant number of refugees were Russian-speaking, while many locals at that time perceived using Armenian language for communication as a marker of national identity. Therefore, often Russian-speaking refugees were rebuked and requested to speak Armenian by certain layers of the local population (ibid). Today such tensions have mostly receded, while certain stereotypes and prejudices, connected both to the origins of refugees and living in the dormitories are still widespread.

Nowadays in Kotayk refugees live in various kinds of housing. There are those who received, bought or invested in housing in city districts. This is a rather invisible group of refugees, who mainly consider themselves to be former refugees. They mix and interact with the non-refugee population of the city. Some have their own small or big enterprises. There is also a group of refugees living in a district of cottages provided by an international organization. People still and often say that “refugees live there”, although there are also many non-refugees living in this district. In contrast, many others live in dormitories, in temporary dwellings provided by their workplace, in illegally constructed housing and, a few, in metal wagon-houses. Certainly there were refu-

gees who did not have their own housing but lived with their relatives.

The Hardships of Life in Dormitories

In Kotayk there were many dormitories inhabited by refugees. In some, refugees and non-refugees lived together, while, in others, refugees formed an overwhelming majority. One of the hardships identified by the refugees in the dormitories was the harshness of their living conditions. The buildings they inhabited were built in late 1980s – early 1990s, and the refugees were the first inhabitants there. However, since then the infrastructure was not maintained, and they had many problems with freezing water-pipes in the winter, or leaking pipes in the bathrooms. Some state officials complained that refugees received a new building and destroyed the infrastructure over 20 years, while the refugees complained that the state, which is responsible for the buildings, has not done anything for maintenance. Indeed, the lack of resources and organization on both sides resulted in the subsequent deterioration of living conditions. In winter 2006–2007, for instance, the water pipes in one building froze for about two months and the whole sewage system stopped working, preventing people even from using the toilets.

The general condition of the dormitories during my stay in 2006–2007 was alarming: the basement of one of the buildings was flooded. The walls were quite moist. There was no gas and no heating in the buildings. Because many refugees did not have material resources to purchase the cheapest heating material – wood, many had to survive winters in cold rooms. Consequently, elderly and middle aged people complained about their worsening health conditions, and were afraid to visit doctors because doing so involved additional expenditure. The inhabitants used either wood, small electrical heaters or gas tanks for cooking, which was often done in rooms, corridors or even bathrooms. Only very few dormitory rooms were renovated by their inhabitants due to the lack of resources: many did not wish to invest their scarce resources in renovating public buildings which they hoped to abandon as soon as they could afford to do so. The sanitary facilities were hard to endure: they were often for common use, sometimes for several families. The use of public spaces of a dormitory caused emotional stress and increased the refugees’ feelings of not being settled. Additionally, living in the dormitories triggered various prejudices and mechanisms that excluded refugees from certain social relations: for example, the absence of a permanent home made it difficult for young male refugees to marry.

Other than lacking private property and living in detrimental conditions, the main problems of dormitory inhabitants included poverty connected to low-wage employment, depreciation of skills, partial exclusion from the job market, the lack of initial resources to establish their own enterprises, limited social connections and lack of state support. The family cash incomes of about 60 percent of the interviewed ranged between \$0–200 per month at that time, while approximately 22 percent received \$200–300. The informants were mainly involved in blue-collar work; a very small percentage included teachers or people working in state institutions, such as the police and the military. The majority were pensioners and housewives. The NGO “Mission Armenia” provided some support for the needy, which the refugees appreciated, but it was minimal and aimed at the elderly (like giving them basic medical assistance) and pupils (i.e. organizing after-school classes for them). The problems in the refugee dormitories were aggravated by the fact that the elderly made up a large part of the population: many young people and families migrated to Russia in the mid-1990s in search of work and for starting a new life in Russia, while elderly family members stayed in the dormitories. Many of these elderly refugees were lonely and needed social support.

The State Housing Program and its Outcomes: New Challenges and an Emergent Sense of Security

The state housing program for homeless refugees started functioning in 2003, parallel to a program implemented by the UNHCR and the Norwegian Refugee Council.¹ Since then, the program has addressed various regions in Armenia. While the state program is supposed to provide certificates for purchasing housing to refugees living in temporary, state-provided, administrative dwellings, the international organizations are supposed to build houses for those who already own land or live in wagon-houses or half-built houses. The state provides cer-

¹ This article only concentrates on the current state housing policy for refugees. It must be mentioned, however, that since the refugees arrived, the state has treated them, at least discursively, as compatriots, and has taken the responsibility to provide housing for them. Beyond a few specific rights which only citizens or refugees have, the state treats them similarly in most legal and policy aspects. However, the assistance provided to the refugees with no property was hardly enough to give them a living standard equal to that of the locals. Significant numbers of refugees were among the poorest in Armenia (UNDP 1999). The state representatives explained this fact by pointing to limited resources of the state due to the war and economy crisis. Ghazaryan (N.D.) offers a critique of the state naturalization program.

tificates to refugee families that were registered in a dormitory or who had similar temporary housing by 2003, and lived there constantly, i.e. with no other available living space. The lists of refugees were checked against the availability of property and actual residence in the dormitories. Those refugees who did not have their own housing, but lived at relatives' places were not included in the current program, resulting in contestations. At the same time, those registered in the program were anxious about whether the amounts declared on the certificates would be enough for purchasing housing (the value of the certificate was calculated according to local market prices for housing).

After the program began in Kotayk in October 2007, 180 out of the 240 originally-eligible refugee families bought housing, while 60 could not, or did not receive the certificates, according to a state official I interviewed. For example, one of my informants, an elderly woman living alone, did not receive the certificate because she did not live in the dormitory constantly: on several occasions, she visited grandchildren in Russia for long periods of time. Another informant mentioned two single women of mature age and one family (mother and son) among her neighbors, who could not purchase housing in time.

I interviewed three informants who were able to purchase flats and they explained the general situation of neighboring families as follows: the value of the certificates was higher than many pessimistically had guessed and they enabled them to purchase property. Families of 1–2 people received AMD 6,750,000 (roughly EUR 14,000), of 3–4 people AMD 8,250,000 (EUR 17,000), and 5–6 people AMD 9,000,000 (EUR 18,500).

However, the amount was minimal and mainly allowed for the purchase of un-renovated apartments, many not inhabited for a few decades, with barely functioning infrastructure, usually on the top floors of socialist-style block buildings, either on the outskirts of Kotayk or outside of it. Many, however, used this chance to purchase apartments in order not to lose the money they were offered. Some families purchased housing in a small settlement not far from Kotayk, in buildings which were formerly constructed for refugees, but left uninhabited due to their marginal location and the out-migration of the refugees.

In fact, for some refugees with 1–2 person families, the minimal amount of the aid provided meant that they had to purchase housing outside of Kotayk, and then spend a long time commuting to their workplace, or any other part of town. Given the bad living conditions in cheap flats that were similar to conditions in

dormitories, their remote location from the city center (a contrast to the central location of the dormitories), and lack of resources for renovation, some simply found it more convenient to continue living in the dormitories. Others did not manage to find an appropriate offer. Usually families who purchased flats in the city districts either added a sum of money to the certificate (often with relatives' help), or purchased housing in a dormitory for families, which was organized more like private flats.

All three informants had moved into their own flats only several months after purchasing them, because initially it was not possible to live in them. Two of the flats were on the top floors and their roofs had been damaged with rainwater flowing in, leaving the walls full of moisture. The flats had not been inhabited for about two decades. The floors, windows, doors were old and partly destroyed. The refugees hoped to renovate them. One family, a widow with two young sons, both blue-collar workers, purchased a remote, 2-room-flat in a settlement near Kotayk for AMD 7,000,000 (about EUR 14,000) which was on the top floor of a nine-storey building, but did not have a working elevator. They had saved AMD 1,250,000 for renovations and started renovating the flat immediately while staying in the dormitory. The mother worked as a cleaner and did housework, while the sons worked two shifts a day: they used to visit their flat after the working day and do repair work in the evenings. Working alone, they first repaired the building's roof, benefiting the neighbors as well. They connected the flat to the gas network, replaced the windows and installed a new toilet. They also changed the electrical wire and water pipes in their flat. They had to install a pump for the water system, because without it

the water simply did not reach the 9th floor. However, they quickly ran out of money. The floors consisted of bare concrete and were quite cold. The mother covered the floor with old cloth to survive the winter. In October 2008, the family was planning to move into their new flat, which still needed considerable work. The family, however, was eager to keep on working, earning, and saving in order to continue the renovations.

Instead of a Conclusion: Finally Becoming "Locals"?

In general the refugee families who purchased flats were very enthusiastic despite the new hardships: at least they had a goal to work toward and a way to accumulate the results of their labor. If earlier they saw no real end to their precarious living conditions, now life had become more meaningful for them, at least with expected improvements, which were under their own control. For the first time, they felt they were able to add to their well being. Indeed, the state program has given refugees greater agency, at least those who purchased housing. Obviously, the stereotypical view of refugees as passive and only waiting for state support is misleading: the families I met worked quite hard. The scarcity of state provisions, however, made their current living conditions hardly different from those of dormitories: cold, damp, and a general lack of resources.

This discussion leaves open many questions. I have worked with refugees at a moment of transition. Will they ultimately be able to establish a life with which they will be satisfied after the first excitement passes? Will they be able to establish connections with their neighbors and get rid of the "refugee" label?

Notes:

In order to preserve the anonymity of the informants, I use the name Kotayk instead of the real name of the town where I conducted my fieldwork. Kotayk is the name of the region in which the town is located.

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Milena Baghdasaryan is a PhD candidate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, Germany. This article is based on anthropological fieldwork carried out in Kotayk in 2006–2007 among the refugees from Azerbaijan living in dormitories. The fieldwork is a part of a research project at MPI for Social Anthropology.

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