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SYRIAN-ARMENIANS IN ARMENIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Overview of the situation

Starting from 2012 the mass influx of Syrian-Armenians demonstrated that Armenia was not ready for such a new reality in terms of valid predictions along with practical policy considerations. The decisions made by public authorities were mainly based on a situational approach, as opposed to a prospective strategy. Notwithstanding the existence of procedures overseeing legal status (such as dual citizenship, asylum, refugee) there is a lack of an adequate policy framework to address overall problems of Syrian-Armenians today. Although Syrian-Armenians exercise a legal status in Armenia, there is a need for a comprehensive and unified future vision and policies, considering the prospect of their permanent residence in Armenia. The Armenian government shall adequately address relevant policies considering the issues of Syrian-Armenians settlement, social, legal, cultural and economic integration.

The refugee crisis is one of the major and complex issues in the world. Since 2012 around 22,000 Syrian-Armenians arrived in Armenia.¹ The majority of them however remain in dire living conditions. At the outset, there has been no system or data collection mechanism in place to document and regulate the migration flow, except for the formal border-crossing and visa procedures. Once in Armenia, and at their own discretion, the Syrian-Armenians started to refer to institutions (Ministry of Diaspora, Migration Service, Police Department of Passports and Visas) with a range of problems upon arrival. Subsequently, the government has issued an order to allow applications for Armenian citizenship, in accordance with the Geneva Refugee Convention² prescribing member states to contribute to assimilation and naturalization of refugees.

Issues of concern

Currently, Syrian-Armenians have various legal statuses in Armenia, including Armenian citizens (dual citizens), refugees, asylum seekers, and persons with temporary or permanent residence (one/five/ten years). According to the Armenian Ministry of Diaspora a total of 10,707 people received citizenship in the period of 2012-2014.³ Refugee and asylum seekers comprise a smaller number, around 700-800 Syrian-Armenians, for the period of 2012-2013.⁴ According to the Migration Service of Armenia: 236 people were granted asylum, of which 136 provided with shelter. It should be noted, that after the issuing of citizenship, the state does not have any obligations related to Syrian-Armenians' integration or other concerns. Considering the regional developments and multiple challenges Armenia faces today, the need for a relevant infrastructure to address the social and economic issues of Syrian-Armenians becomes extremely urgent.

The problems related to the integration of Syrian-Armenians can be divided into two groups. Housing is one of the key issues facing Syrian-Armenians today. There have been certain measures enforced to provide housing compensation by the Ministry of Diaspora, local and international civil society organizations.

¹ Ministry of Diaspora of Armenia, 2015

² The Refugee Convention 1951, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (ratified by 145 states)

³ Ministry of Diaspora of Armenia, 2016

⁴ European University Institute Migration Policy Centre, *Impact of the Syrian Crisis on Migration Governance of Armenia*, 2013. Available at:

http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/policy_brief/PolicyBrief-Armenia-2013.pdf

Accommodation

The majority of Syrian-Armenians however rent housing, which is a short-term solution to the situation, obviously without any feasibility of lasting long. Originally, the authorities undertook a project to build a new district, intended to be funded by the donations of Syrian-Armenians, other individuals and organizations (the project was to be curated and implemented by a council coordinating issues of Syrian-Armenians). Many Syrian-Armenians registered to be considered for the program (which indicates an intention of settling in Armenia), at the same time however hoping that the district will be constructed by another means, due to limited personal financial resources. Therefore, the program was not implemented. The solution to the housing issue of Syrian-Armenians remains crucial, as will contribute to the possibility of their permanent residence in Armenia.

Education

Education is one of the foundational links towards integration. Selected policies were adopted: by the government, higher educational institutions and civil society organizations to provide support, such as compensation of tuition fees and trainings. The problems of Syrian-Armenian students in the Armenian general education system are mainly conditioned by linguistic problems, with respect to certain subjects, as well as by the difference of educational systems in Armenia and Syria. In this context, educational integration necessitates attention regarding both language and pedagogical aspects. The new educational environment represents another problem manifested in the clash of cultures, and leading to alienation and similar negative consequences. In this context, the role of teachers becomes highly important, who exercise few methods in dealing with such issues. The issue of children's integration is highly sensitive necessitating attention, to disallow marginalization of families intending to establish a permanent residence in Armenia.

Social and economic concerns

Social inclusion and citizens' active participation in the social and economic life are the basic indicators of social citizenship. Such indicators demonstrate the actual quality of the citizenship, apart from formal rights and responsibilities. In Armenia, the Syrian-Armenians are represented by various social groups, such as businessmen, craftsmen, doctors, etc. It is worth noting that those successful in the field of small and medium enterprises in Syria were able to make a successful transition to the same field in Armenia. This means that such human and social capital can be additional stimulus for the activation of economic activity in the county. Although Armenia implemented selected loan projects to help boost the engagement of Syrian-Armenian business community, at the same time however difficulties to such engagement remain. While the Syrian-Armenians are willing and ready to

“The calls from tax authorities are non-stop. They say I don't want to pay the taxes. But how can I do so, if I've got no profit yet? The problem is that once the business is established, it registers with tax authorities, and the payments should start from exactly the first month.” -- Interview with a Syrian-Armenian businessman

engage in economic activity -- the tax, customs duties, tariffs, fines, administrative and business environment conditions hinder successful economic integration at large. Additionally, the problems are also conditioned by differences in market volumes and diversification of economic activity.

Most of the time, the difficulties and complaints based on individual experiences revolve around the issue of high taxes and increased loan responsibilities. In general, labor conditions and salary policy in Armenia are problematic. For example, the Syrian-Armenian doctors considered opportunities with regional medical institutions. However, there too they encountered problems conditioned by mandatory payments (otherwise known as percentage of service fees paid by employees to hospitals), as well as the general problem of private institutions, or *monopolization of medical sphere* recognized with lack of vacancies and policies imbued in partisanship and corruption.

Recommendations

■ Review the Homeland-Diaspora Partnership

Armenia has to review its Homeland-Diaspora partnership strategy, taking into consideration that different countries, based on their own interests pursue policies of citizenship and adopt immigration promotion policies. Armenia shall develop and pursue a clear and targeted immigration program, especially considering the demographic situation of the country, not to mention the outflow of citizens from all the regions.

■ Review the National Security Strategy Approach towards Diaspora

According to the Strategy the weakening of Diaspora's ethnic and cultural identity is considered as an external threat. Interestingly however, the preservation of Armenian identity is one of the main components outlined in the strategy, which at the same time aims to resist *assimilation of Diaspora* and the loss of *linguistic and cultural identity*. The Strategy has no mention of physical safety and security of the group belonging to that very identity (while in the condition of absence of physical safety there can be no question regarding the preservation of Armenian identity). Therefore, in the situation of crisis or conflict, the only guarantee can be the organization of immigration, which will ensure the physical security of the people, the preservation of Armenian identity, as well as contribute to the solution of demographic problem in Armenia.

■ Immigration Policy to Include a Package of Social, Economic, Housing, Cultural and Health Issues

The policy shall refer to the entire territory of the republic, as well as specific measures and mechanisms shall be identified and implemented by the Armenian government. Armenia should adopt a unified policy towards Syrian-Armenians considering the potential prospect of their permanent residence in the country.

■ Transition from Investment Housing to Social Housing Construction Approach or Resettlement

It is recommended to make a shift to the social housing construction approach, based on state liability, responsibilities and guarantees. The program shall include the housing terms of reference, which will also provide an opportunity to develop corresponding housing infrastructure for the future.

■ Linguistic Integration Programs in Schools

It is important that professional integration programs are initiated in schools for Syrian-Armenians to be able to absorb the range of subjects. The children are in need of additional courses facilitated by professionals to be able to improve performance in schools.

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Author: Arsen Hakobyan. Policy paper is available upon request.

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