

The Political Fallout from Armenia's Refugee Response

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Executive summary

As a result of Azerbaijan's takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, Armenia is currently host to more than 100,000 refugees. The initial response to the forced displacement of the region's Armenians was significant. The Armenian government quickly mobilised resources, international actors introduced comprehensive support packages and civil society organisations reoriented their activities to deal with the influx of people in need. A year and a half has passed, however, and the government has begun to phase out support packages for refugees while also dropping calls for their right to return.

Despite its seemingly generous response, the refugee crisis reveals the government's lack of institutional capacity and the absence of a strategic approach to the problem. As the ruling party attempts to move ahead with normalising relations with Azerbaijan, it is struggling to balance the needs of the displaced with pursuit of political stability and the promotion of peace. For a normalisation process to move forward successfully, the Armenian government must recognise the imperative of anchoring peace strategies among conflict-affected populations. Failure to do so risks jeopardising any future steps towards a lasting peace.

Introduction

On 29 March 2025, thousands of people [gathered](#) on Freedom Square in Yerevan to demonstrate against the government's policy on the Nagorno-Karabakh refugees. The protestors demanded continued social assistance and recognition of their right to return. While the protest was not particularly decisive in scale or influence, it served as a reminder of a lingering issue that remains emotionally and politically charged.

Today, some [115,000](#) refugees¹ from Nagorno-Karabakh reside in Armenia – a country with a population of approximately three million. The government, along with international partners and civil society, mobilised rapid and substantive support when the refugees arrived in September 2023, but the authorities have since been criticized for not doing enough. This plays into broader frustration over Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's approach to the conflict with Azerbaijan.

The recent announcement that Armenia and Azerbaijan have agreed on a text for a peace treaty is a significant step forward in the normalisation process between the two countries, although the prospects of both parties signing the treaty in the near future are uncertain. In the meantime, the Karabakh refugees remain a marginalised group with an unclear future. Focusing on this group highlights the pressing need to anchor peace strategies within conflict-affected populations – and underscores the Armenian government's failure to do so.

Government Response

The sudden influx of refugees in September 2023 put Armenia's crisis response to the test. Given their abrupt uprooting, many required immediate assistance in terms of food, medicine and clothing, as well as psychosocial counselling. National and local authorities coordinated with international organisations to address the most pressing needs. These efforts were complemented by those of broader Armenian society, with significant support from civil society organisations and individual donations.

Armenian society demonstrated high levels of solidarity in responding to the crisis. Many of the refugees were able to stay with relatives or friends, community members volunteered their help and diaspora organisations contributed resources. Pashinyan frequently [referred](#) to the refugees as 'brothers and sisters', [stating](#) that, in the absence of a 'desire or opportunity to return to Nagorno-Karabakh, our policy is to do everything so that they remain in the Republic of Armenia'.

In the face of the challenges involved in accommodating such a large number of refugees, the authorities showed an ability to mobilize resources quickly and decisively. As of 1 January 2025, approximately [89.7 billion AMD](#) (US\$ 228 million) in support had been provided from the state budget. Those without acquaintances to stay with were directed to temporary government shelters, sometimes housed in vacant buildings such as repurposed [kindergartens](#) or schools. To address the problem of long-term housing, the government [introduced](#) a monthly stipend of 50,000 AMD (US\$ 128) to cover rent and utilities, in addition to an earlier one-off payment of [100,000 AMD](#) (US\$ 256) to meet the most urgent needs.

¹ This number fluctuates significantly, as some sources include individuals who arrived before September 2023, and many have migrated to and from Russia or other countries.

Furthermore, in the spring of 2024, the government announced a [five-year plan](#) aimed at encouraging refugees to purchase homes. Under the programme, eligible refugees receive a grant of 2–5 million AMD (US\$ 5,100–12,800) to buy property away from urban centres. Other types of support [include](#) scholarships and pensions.

Despite this ambitious response, however, the government lacked a comprehensive strategy. As the monthly financial support is [scaled back](#) from April 2025, many Karabakh Armenians are still struggling to secure permanent housing and employment. The monthly stipend is linked to the minimum wage but the average salary in Armenia is around [280,000 AMD](#) (US\$ 717). Rents have soared in recent years, largely due to an influx of Russians. Employment opportunities are scarce in rural areas, so the five-year programme to incentivize refugees to settle outside of cities has gained little traction. While providing endless support is neither realistic nor advisable, the sporadic protests suggest that uncertainty is a key driver of public frustration.

This frustration is in part a symptom of the government's failure to communicate its objectives and intentions clearly. It has never been clear to refugees and locals alike whether the aim was full and immediate integration of the refugees into Armenian society, or if the ultimate goal was a return to Nagorno-Karabakh. Nor is it obvious how refugees' needs and rights will be advocated for in the future. Armenia has [announced](#) that the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh has been dropped from negotiations with Azerbaijan. By agreeing the draft peace treaty, it has also agreed to withdraw legal proceedings against Azerbaijan in the international courts. It is therefore unclear who, if anyone, will advocate for the rights of the refugees in the future.

Political Implications

The handling of the refugee influx has stirred broader criticism of Pashinyan's leadership. [Some](#) suggest that the government is instrumentalising the plight of the displaced to undermine political opposition. [Critics](#) highlight statements from pro-government parliamentarians and members of the ruling party that portray the refugees as temporary guests in Armenia, seemingly aimed at exacerbating tensions between the Karabakh Armenians and the local population. While it may be an overstatement to classify this rhetoric as hate speech, such criticism should be understood in its wider context.

On the one hand, Pashinyan has reason to fear growing support for the opposition linked to the influx of Karabakh Armenians. It is widely assumed that the Karabakh Armenians are more likely to be anti-government, given Pashinyan's approach to the conflict with Azerbaijan. According to an [opinion poll](#) from September 2024, only 2 percent of those who identify as displaced said they trust Pashinyan as a political figure, while 75 percent reported that they trust no politician. Among the rest of the population, the figures were 16 and 61 percent, respectively.

There is also an assumption that the Karabakh Armenians are more pro-Russian as Russia had traditionally been viewed as a guarantor of their security. There may therefore be incentives and opportunities for Russian and Russian-backed opposition forces to foster discontent among the refugees, although it is difficult to assess the scope for this.

Moreover, the relationship between Yerevan and Stepanakert was already [strained](#) before Azerbaijan's 2023 offensive. The Karabakh authorities saw Pashinyan as a lame duck who was unable or unwilling to withstand Azerbaijani demands. Yerevan's failure to prevent the final Azerbaijani takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh cemented the perception that Pashinyan was willing to sacrifice the Karabakh Armenians.

On the other hand, it is unlikely that a coordinated propaganda campaign is being waged against the refugees. Pashinyan is seeking to position himself ahead of the 2026 elections, and given the fragmented and poorly defined opposition, his chances of re-election are high despite his low level of popularity. Furthermore, just over [6,000](#) of the refugees had applied for Armenian citizenship as of November 2024, and around 4,400 of them had been granted. This means that only a small portion of Karabakh Armenians are currently able to vote. While there are naturally some tensions between Armenians from Armenia proper and those from Nagorno-Karabakh, the prevailing public sentiment is still welcoming and tolerant. Deliberately trying to drive a wedge between the two groups would therefore appear to be counterproductive.

Instead, the government lacks a strategic approach to communicating its objectives and motivations clearly, and is therefore unable to get the population "on board" with the normalization process. The loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and the displacement of its population represents yet another moment of collective trauma in Armenian memory. Hostile rhetoric directed at the refugees by members of the ruling party is therefore seen as an attack not only on that particular group, but on Armenians more broadly.

Conclusion

For many Armenians, Pashinyan's acceptance of Azerbaijani demands for a peace treaty signals yet another betrayal. Much of the criticism is exaggerated and rooted in unrealistic and nationalist narratives. However, the plight of the refugees and the frustration that has followed indicate that the government is failing to anchor its strategies in people's needs.

Given its experience with multiple waves of migration, the EU is well placed to offer lessons learned and practical guidance on long-term integration. The EU should continue to support Armenia's democratisation and reforms. Specifically, the EU must support Armenia's efforts to strengthen its institutional capacity and strategic communication, and – most importantly – to promote political pluralism and reduce polarisation.

As Armenia seeks to end its geopolitical isolation, balance its ties with the EU and regional powers, and heads towards parliamentary elections in 2026, the rights and needs of the Karabakh Armenians must not be neglected. The optimism of the 2018 Velvet Revolution is dissipating, along with the prospects of building a sustainable democracy. The situation of the Karabakh refugees serves as a stark reminder of the government's inability to develop coherent, strategic policies rooted in the realities of the population. Genuine steps towards normalisation will be fruitless in the long term if the population is not on board. Failure risks handing power to pro-Russian and corrupt elites – an outcome that would severely undermine Armenia's democratic aspirations and prospects for lasting peace.



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