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Azerbaijan's Impending Migration Challenge

How to Get Prepared and What to Expect

Tamilla Mammadova, Aynur Rahimli, and Parviz Sunatulloev

Azerbaijan's migration policy framework has seen major developments in recent years, including the consolidation of migration-relevant legislation in its State Migration Code. Moreover, close cooperation with the UNHCR on asylum status determination is resulting in overall recognition rates comparable to those found in some EU member states. All this is to be welcomed.

In April 2018, an EU-funded study published by the Vienna-based International Centre for Migration Policy Development

titled "Baseline Study in Migration in Azerbaijan," confirmed that the country is home to a large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), refugees, and other similar categories of people, due to the at-the-time ongoing conflict over Karabakh and surrounding territories with Armenia.

Official statistics provided by the State Committee for Refugees and IDPs in 2017 put the number of IDPs at 789,000 and the number of refugees at 420,000—of these, 350,000 are identified as originating in Armenia and are,

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presumably, ethnic-Azerbaijanis. The 2016 figures provided by the UNHCR indicate 613,129 IDPs (this UN agency does not classify ethnic-Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia as "refugees" for methodological reasons). The numbers have not changed dramatically in the interim—in June 2022, that UNHCR's IDP number was 654,839, although Azerbaijan's flagship "Great Return to Karabakh" strategy aims to reverse the tragedy and hardship of displacement in the years to come, as discussed inter alia in several Analytic Policy Papers published by ADA University's Institute for Development and Diplomacy as well as in essays appearing in the pages of *Baku Dialogues* by the likes of Nazrin Baghirova, Fariz Ismailzade, Aybaniz Ismayilova, Ruslan Suleymanov, and others.

The UNHCR's June 2022 report indicated that the number of registered refugees in Azerbaijan was 6,466, with most coming from Ukraine; another 3,585 persons were classified as stateless. Moreover, the number of asylum seekers from abroad has been very low. According to UNHCR data, a total of 2,277 foreigners applied for asylum in Azerbaijan between 2005 and 2015. Also according to the June 2022 UNHCR document, at the time

of its publication there were 121 asylum seekers in the country, which is slightly below the annual average and may be a result of the fact that all of Azerbaijan's land borders are presently closed (as part of a package of anti-coronavirus quarantine measures). Lastly, legal migrant inflows from foreign countries have considerably increased in the past several years, with tens of thousands of temporary and permanent residency permits being issued annually (the numbers decreased as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting worldwide lockdowns). Forecasts suggest those numbers will rise in the years to come.

For reasons that will be elaborated below, it is becoming increasingly important to examine how Azerbaijan generally deals with the growing presence of foreigners in the country. This is at least partly due to the fact that it has become an increasingly attractive destination for people from across the Silk Road region and farther afield. And by this we mean not just for tourists (those numbers have also been on the upswing, too) but for highly-skilled professionals and, yes, those with less-in-demand job skills as well as for people who are attracted to its political stability, economic

prospects, tolerant and secular social environment, and linguistic makeup—especially when compared to many of its neighbors and its neighbors’ neighbors. Be that as it may, we wish to note that for reasons having to do with terminological ease, this essay will in most cases refer to them all as “migrants” and their journey as one of “migration.”

With this in mind, the foregoing question can be reformulated more precisely along these lines: is Azerbaijan ready for heightened immigration—and not just in the political and economic sense, but mainly from the human perspective?

Before we delve into the country’s specific circumstances and address this question directly, however, we need to understand what drives migration in general, its impact on recipient countries, and the opportunities and key challenges that migration is likely to cause in the time ahead. In doing so, we will have occasion to say something about the future and importance of human mobility as a phenomenon.

Migration and its Impacts

There are dozens of factors that drive and formalize migration. Among the key factors that make people leave one place for another are uprising and conflicts, genocide, the outbreak of war, poverty, lack of safety, high crime, and some others. Positive factors include employability, accessibility to education, and even marriages and domestic partnerships. It is no secret that those who migrate do so mainly in the quest for economic, social, political, and environmental stability. No one willingly migrates somewhere worse. And even those who are forced to migrate try their best to move somewhere better.

Not so long ago, developed countries like Germany, France, Canada, the Netherlands, the United States, and some others were among the most in-demand countries for potential migrants. And they still are. However, a high influx of migrants to those countries has made them choose to apply more restrictions, which, in turn, opens new horizons—new destination countries, as it

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were—to those who may or must leave their homelands.

In previous writings, bestselling author Parag Khanna made the case for two axioms that define the past and present “arc of global civilization,” as he puts it: “geography is destiny” and “demography is destiny.” This largely deterministic outlook has been supplemented more recently in two of his recent books in which he focused more on forecasting the future of humanity. In the first, titled *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization* (2016), Khanna argues that “connectivity is destiny” and makes the case that “our vast infrastructure networks—a mechanical exoskeleton of railways, electricity grids, internet cables, and more—[are] enable[ing] the rapid movement of people, goods, services, capital, technology, and ideas on a planetary scale.” In his latest book, titled *Move: Where People Are Going for a Better Future* (2021), Khanna puts the concept of connectivity alongside the concept of mobility, arguing that

that the two are “complementary, two sides of the same coin, and together they give rise to a fourth axiom that will define our future: *mobility is destiny*.”

Khanna’s basic argument is that the “coming age of mass migrations won’t just be a continuation but an acceleration. The swirl of humanity will only get more intense as each of the forces shaping our human geography gathers steam.” He identifies five accelerating forces: demographic imbalances, political upheaval, economic dislocation, technological disruption, and climate change. Each amplifies each of the others. When these five forces are put alongside the continued rise of connectivity, Khanna argues, the “future of human mobility points in just one direction: *more*.” Like all other states on the planet, Azerbaijan is going to be affected by this human drive for “more mobility.” In fact, Khanna argues, Azerbaijan is likely to be particularly affected by this “axiom that will define our future.”

Azerbaijan is in the midst of a comprehensive transformation whose effects are likely to see it becoming an increasingly attractive destination for a significant number of foreigners.

With its fast-growing economy and effective management, which in turn indicates a realistic chance to achieve sustainable development, Azerbaijan is in the midst of a comprehensive transformation whose effects are likely to see it becoming an increasingly attractive destination for a significant number of foreigners, i.e., migrants. In *Move*, Khanna describes the country's strategic potential to serve as a migration hub thusly:

Azerbaijan presents an even more interesting case [than Türkiye, the states of the Fertile Crescent, Georgia, Armenia, etc.] of how economic and environmental trends may drive large numbers of migrants to a forgotten corner of the world. [...] Spanning the snowy Caucasus Mountains to the deserts outside its capital of Baku, Azerbaijan is home to the full planetary array of micro-climates, including dense forests and wetlands. To ward off the encroachment of its deserts, it launched a tree planting binge and pipes cool water down from the Caucasus for irrigation and urban cooling.

In fact, Khanna has particular praise for the cosmopolitan character of Baku. He underlines that Azerbaijan has branded its capital city as the “Caspian region's diplomatic hub,” adding that it

“would not be the first time” it has performed this vital function. He explains:

The oil boom of the 1870s brought large numbers of Europeans to Baku, giving its Caspian corniche a glittering Victorian facade that has been impeccably refurbished to cater to today's delegations of Arab and Turkic, French and German, Indian and Chinese traders and contractors. Listening to them all mingle and bicker in Baku's medieval old city is a reminder that the Caucasus [in general, and Azerbaijan in particular] are once again claiming their role as a corridor of both the east-west and north-south silk roads—though in the nineteenth century these various nationals all spoke one another's languages with far greater felicity.

One of the maps Khanna produced for *Move* goes so far as to identify Baku and all of Azerbaijan as belonging to one of the world's 15 or so zones and corridors “likely to emerge as [ever-larger clusters or climate oases] as population shifts accelerate.” The foregoing forecast adds salience to our below analysis of Azerbaijan's state of readiness to face the real possibility of an increasing influx of migrants in the next few years.

Two Sides of the Same Coin

Any movement of human beings is also a movement of their language and culture. As people move, they naturally take something of their old ‘place’ with them to the new one. Most developed countries with a strong migration policy have been culturally and linguistically affected by this phenomenon to one extent or another. A vivid example is Germany, which has recently reshaped its cultural values as a result of a further influx of people from what has been called the Greater Middle East—i.e., from Türkiye and Afghanistan and everywhere in between. A newly-mainstreamed hybrid language spoken by migrants—the German term is *Kiezdeutsch*—has emerged among adolescents in multiethnic urban neighborhoods of Germany. In some parts of cities spanning the German-speaking world, it may even gradually become a rival language to the standard spoken and perhaps even written language. This has sparked fears in some quarters of the native population that *Kiezdeutsch* could one day become the country's principal mode of communication.

Evidently, mass migration has positive and negative impacts on host countries' locals. Positive impacts include an enriched and more diverse culture, the establishment of material conditions conducive to benefit from lower costs, the promotion of development, and the bringing forth of fresh viewpoints, experiences, and ideas. When migrants arrive in a new-to-them country, the demand for new workers tends to rise. From this it generally follows that the prices for goods and services are reduced, allowing all inhabitants to benefit from lower costs. Migrants build businesses, earn money, and support recipients in their local communities. All this creates an opportunity for the recipients to strengthen their own material standing. Likewise, migration may also produce negative effects, including the disruption of “traditional” ways of life in the host country and, in some cases, an increase in crime rates. To this end, countries newly introduced to large migration flow should initially take serious steps to minimize the risks of migration's negative impact. This last will be discussed immediately below and in a later section.

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Migration's Key Challenges

Migration in itself is a challenge, both for the migrants themselves and those who were there before them (i.e., the more established locals or what previous paragraphs called “recipients” or “natives”). In developed countries, challenges mainly include local views described as prejudice, employability, cultural issues, and housing. Biased attitudes held by locals toward migrants is the most common problem they face. Anti-migrant attitudes in many parts of the developed world are widespread among recipients in the host countries, whether due to racism, extreme patriotism, or what have you. On the other hand, various studies demonstrate that migrants experience a more welcoming and courteous attitude from local communities characterized by an already high percentage of other migrants. Migrants are more tolerant and accepting of other migrants—more or less irrespective of their respective countries of origin—because people who inhabit high-migration areas have had more interactions with migrants compared to those who inhabit in non-migrant majority areas. In other words, the welcoming atmosphere that comes with preexisting multiculturalism

is more likely to welcome more multiculturalism.

Employability is another obvious challenge. Statistical data shows that the majority of migrants come from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, implying that their educational attainment is also low. This, in turn, indicates that there is a lack of available employment for migrants, since most of the labor demand for regular employment is supplied by middle- or working-class locals—certainly this tends to be the case in the immediate period following the influx of migrants as well as in times of economic downturn. Apart from that, one might argue that because job criteria and formal qualifications vary from country to country, the process of acquiring gainful employment will be more difficult for migrants searching for a new niche.

Other than tolerance and employment issues, the tangible and intangible manifestations of cultural differences pose another set of challenges to migrants. People who move from one country to another bring their cultural values with them (e.g., language, religion), as noted above. When they come into contact with the predominant host country's culture as well as with the cultures of other migrant communities, this may cause all

Migration Then and Now

these cultures to simply blend into one another, making it difficult to distinguish one culture from another. This phenomenon is called acculturation: the process of mutual influence of different cultures whereby one nation adopts the cultural values and beliefs of another. This suggests that the process could have irreparable consequences in that the cultural distinctiveness of migrant communities' cultures could end up being swallowed up by the host country's dominant culture. The process of acculturation is key to understanding the American concept of the “melting pot,” which in more recent times has become less prevalent for various reasons. This is also manifest in other developed countries. In some ways, admittedly, this is more advantageous than some of the alternatives.

Parallel to culture-related problems, another challenge posed by migration is the housing issue. The lack of affordable housing, overcrowding, and substandard housing are the most common problems. This seems to be a growing concern in many countries, as the demand for housing far exceeds its supply. This can lead to a further increase in economic inequality as well as increased social exclusion and greater marginalization.

The collapse of the Soviet Union is sometimes understood as having been a major geopolitical disaster of the past century that resulted in the movement, migration, and displacement of millions of former Soviet citizens within the former Soviet space (and, of course, beyond). This has included around one million ethnic-Azerbaijanis from Armenia and Armenian-occupied Karabakh, most of whom ended up in Azerbaijan just as it was regaining its independence. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani citizens were choosing to emigrate from the country, mostly due to political instability and economic hardship: the period before Heydar Aliyev's return to Baku in June 1993 was truly a chaotic one: ethnic-Armenian secessionist forces were gaining ground in and around Karabakh as Azerbaijan came close to becoming a failed state. Consequently, the country's GDP was in seemingly terminal decline—it stabilized in 1994 and 1995 and began to grow for the first time only in 1996 (and it was only in 2005 that Azerbaijan's GDP, in real terms, reached the level of 1990, thanks in part to an increase in oil exports and the

rising price of petroleum and effective politics of the head of the country).

In the first few years of Heydar Aliyev’s presidency, Azerbaijan began adopting a series of laws dealing with various aspects of the migration issue. Soon after his death in October 2003, his presidential successor, Ilham Aliyev, spearheaded the adoption of a series of new migration framework policy documents, laws, and regulatory acts as well as the establishment of the new national institutions, including the State Migration Code and the State Migration Service. As a consequence, the material and psychological conditions of IDPs and refugees vastly improved over time. It certainly helped that a vast majority of these migrants (i.e., ethnic-Azerbaijanis) spoke the same language and shared the same traditional and cultural values of the host country’s locals, which made the adaptation process easier than it might otherwise have been.

Other sectors of the country have also been affected by migration trends, with university education being an obvious one. The transition from a Soviet system

to one that now largely aligns itself with the EU-led Bologna Accord (Azerbaijan signed it in 2005) and the European Higher Education Area (established in 2010) has largely been completed. Azerbaijan now participates in various mobility and exchange schemes financed by the European Union, including Erasmus Mundus, Erasmus+ (including TEMPUS), as well as numerous student and faculty exchange, scholarship, and fellowship programs in cooperation with other developed countries like the United States and South Korea, as well as CIS member states. In addition, the Ministry of Science and Education oversees several state programs that subsidize the graduate education of meritorious Azerbaijani students at prestigious universities abroad. At the same time, the Azerbaijan International Development Agency (AIDA), as well as some of the country’s universities, including ADA University, offer a growing number of scholarships, fellowships, and executive education programs for foreigners to study in the country.

Lastly, in the pursuit of educational and job training opportunities, Azerbaijanis are going

More than ever, migration and education are going increasingly hand-in-hand.

abroad and foreigners are coming to Azerbaijan in increasingly larger numbers. More than ever, migration and education are going increasingly hand-in-hand.

Present Challenges

A series of ongoing geopolitical and geo-economic tectonic shifts have also had an impact on migration across the globe. Civil wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and Ethiopia (to name but a few); destabilizing waves of internal unrest in Iran and in countries like Venezuela and Myanmar; the worsening effects of climate change in the most at-risk countries of the developing world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa; and, of course, the conflict over Ukraine—all have contributed to the forced migration of tens of millions of people around the globe. Indeed, the UNHCR estimates that at the end of 2021, the figure was 89,3 million—and that does not count the more than one-third of Ukraine’s citizens that are thought to be internally displaced or have fled abroad due to the fighting since those statistics were released. By early 2023,

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Directly or indirectly, Azerbaijan has been negatively impacted by the multiplying consequences of an increasingly insecure world. For instance, its economy has been adversely affected by the consequences of the extraterritorial application of the West-led sanctions and export restrictions regimes imposed on its two largest neighbors: Russia and Iran. Azerbaijan also hosts thousands of forced migrants (i.e., refugees), as noted above. This number does not include the growing number of temporary resident permits issued to Russians, Ukrainians, and other “highly-qualified specialists” who have relocated to Azerbaijan from various warzones and conflict areas.

Whatever the formal classification of the status of such migrants under the law, their ability and willingness to adapt to the linguistic milieu and integrate into the cultural mainstream of the host country will play a not unimportant role in determining their future status in this country and, by extension, that of the acceptability by Azerbaijan of

an anticipated increase in the rate of migration to its territory in the time ahead.

What to Expect?

As a relatively inexperienced migration recipient country (at least when it comes to absorbing large numbers of non-Azerbaijanis into its political and socio-economic fabric), Azerbaijan is very likely to face many new challenges as a result of the larger immigration wave that Parag Khanna and others have predicted is around the corner.

The linguistic factor is one of the determinants of effective integration by migrants into a new community. Put plainly: to stand a good chance of being accepted, migrants need to acquire proficiency in the local language. As is the case with many other newly-independent states, Azerbaijani society is particularly approving of outsiders who embrace the national language as opposed to exclusively relying on one or more of the *linguae francae* on offer (in the case at issue, Azerbaijani as opposed to Russian or, to a much lesser extent, English).

Clearly, some accommodation and a process of give-and-take will be forthcoming, but ultimately the migrants ought to be expected and encouraged to make the greater sacrifice. There is at least one instance in which Azerbaijani law already speaks to this point: an Azerbaijani language proficiency test is an integral part of

In Azerbaijan, the authority of the state is unchallenged by the influence of any religion.

the process of granting permanent residency (as opposed to temporary residency) to migrants. This serves to make a broader one: the Azerbaijani language is a central component of Azerbaijan's national identity and is not likely to change fundamentally as a result of an increase in migration.

The second factor is clustered around the topic of religious issues. Religion is largely a private affair in Azerbaijan, which like many other post-Soviet republics has adopted an official policy of neutrality—even *laïcité*—which is enshrined in its constitution. Islam is the religious tradition observed by the majority in one way or another, with Shiism statistically outweighing Sunnism. Judaism and traditional forms of Christianity like Orthodoxy are present and freely exercised, too.

By and large, the practice of religion is understood to be more a matter of family tradition, cultural affinity, and personal preference rather than anything else. Moreover, secularism or the “lay principle” is a doctrine that it upheld both by law and public practice: in Azerbaijan, the authority of the state is unchallenged by the influence of any religion. Building on centuries of tolerance for and acceptance of religious differences, the country continues to be largely welcoming of an individual's religious preferences so long as they do not infringe on those of others, including those who do not manifest any such preferences. Prejudice and discrimination, including antisemitism, is not tolerated by the state; enforcement of applicable laws is rigorous.

The foregoing indicates that Azerbaijan is thus well-placed to greet migrants from all over the world with a set of “liberal” norms when it comes to religious practice; in return, the state would naturally expect adherence to the foregoing from all who wish to become a part of its diverse

The state should carefully study international best practices wherever they may be found whilst taking care not to replicate the failed or failing immigration policies and practices of some developed countries.

political, socio-economic, and cultural fabric.

Relatedly, cultural diversity is encouraged in Azerbaijan and is manifested in various domains like the arts, cuisine, media, and sport: the cultural rights of minorities are enshrined in both law and everyday practice. This, surely, will be extended to new migrant communities as they increase in size, so long as they remain dedicated to enrich or enhance, as oppose to seek to transform, the existing social contract and cultural practices of the host (recipient) country.

Again, this is a question of balance: the migration process can impact positively on both locals and migrants. However, ineffective or ill-considered policies to instill aspects of mainstream culture among a migrant population may cause misunderstanding and communication breakdown. At the same time, unethical behavior on the part of migrant communities may also become manifest, which could be interpreted a sign of their unwillingness to adapt sufficiently to their new surroundings. In

short, all relevant actors will need to demonstrate both goodwill and understanding to maintain the successful balance that has characterized Azerbaijan's success in this sensitive domain in the time ahead.

Obviously, questions of access to employment and educational opportunities are also challenging factors, as is the danger of migrants engaging in various sorts of nefarious and even criminal activities that affect public safety and the confidence of the citizenry in the ability of the state to deal with them effectively. On such and similar issues, adjustments and accommodations of various sorts will also need to be taken, requiring careful treatment and consideration by migrant communities, the authorities, and the citizenry—albeit the latter two to a lesser extent than the former.

Present-day Western European or North American models and attitudes towards integrating migrants are unlikely to be replicated by Azerbaijan; something more akin to the East Asian (e.g., Singaporean) ones can be expected to be emulated. The state should carefully study international best practices wherever they may be found whilst taking care not to replicate the failed or failing immigration

policies and practices of some developed countries.

Getting Ready

Having referred to some international examples regarding the treatment of immigration in an effective and healthy manner, we can now turn to concrete measures Azerbaijan may wish to take under advisement. For instance, specific labor and housing policies should be prepared for refugees and asylum seekers. As a general rule, migrants should be encouraged to intermingle with locals as much and as rapidly as possible upon arrival. Self-isolation and long-term segregation ought to be avoided, for this inhibits the capability of migrants to adapt to established rules, norms, and codes of conduct and behavior.

The participation of migrants in national festivals like Novruz is an illustrative example in this regard. Novruz is a holiday that is observed by all Azerbaijanis, irrespective of their particular culture, faith, or tradition. At the same time, providing public support to the manifestation of migrants' cultural celebrations should also be undertaken in such a manner that Azerbaijani society may experience and be enriched by these—including through

appropriate subsidies and their promotion via various media and other communication channels. The aim here would be to facilitate the intermingling process whilst helping migrants adapt to local conditions: after all, holidays and festivals—and the underlying values they are designed to promote—are connective events that can bring together locals and migrants.

The time has come for Azerbaijan's various state organs and branches to better coordinate the issues related to incoming or already settled migrants. The foregoing is not to imply that this process has not already begun in Azerbaijan. On the contrary: the adaptation and integration of migrants has already gained serious momentum not only in the country's domestic policy but also in the conduct of its foreign policy.

For instance, learning Azerbaijani is evidently one of the most important contributors to a new immigrant's successful integration into Azerbaijani society. One of the most successful programs of this kind is run in Israel. The concept of the *ulpan* (a Hebrew word meaning

study center or center of instruction) was designed and executed to intensively teach the modern Hebrew language to newly-arrived immigrants, together with instruction in the fundamentals of the country's history, culture, geography, and so on. Its primary purpose is to foster their integration as quickly and as easily as possible into the social, cultural, and economic life of the country. This immersion model of language learning has been adopted in various countries in both the developing and developed world (e.g., France, Russia, Switzerland). Most

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such programs are state-run or state-supported. A concrete example in an EU member state is the Centro Interculturale "Movimenti," which has operated in the Emilia-Romagna region

of Italy since 1998. A leader in the field of multilingual integration, it covers almost the entire spectrum of difficulties that migrants encounter—including the provision of Italian language courses to them. Thus, the establishment of specialized learning centers for migrants is one of the main ways of mitigating the challenges associated with an influx of migrants to Azerbaijan.

State involvement—although imperative—will not be enough. The role of Azerbaijani society is equally crucial. Luckily, a well-developed spirit of voluntarism exists throughout the country: today's students and young people carry on a longstanding tradition of giving their time and energy to various social-responsibility projects. There is no reason not to expect that volunteers would fail to take an active role in helping newcomers adapt to life in Azerbaijan.

There is evidently much more to say on this subject. Our intention has been to make a modest contribution to an ongoing policy discussion that surely is already taking place in certain circles. As Parag Khanna has argued, Azerbaijan finds itself in a rarified position of becoming one of the few countries that can truly benefit from the massive movement of people in the time ahead. We may even have the extraordinary

luxury of choosing the types of migrants we wish to welcome into our country. Squandering this opportunity by not planning for the optimal execution of the right sort of policies to encourage it would constitute an abrogation of responsibility, as would hoping against hope that the global trend towards game-changing migration and mobility will simply pass us by.

We choose to end this essay in much the same manner as Khanna's *Move*—with a citation from the 2019 *National Geographic* essay written by Lahore-born writer Mohsin Hamid:

Ours is a migratory species. Human have always moved. Our ancestors did [...]. Our contemporaries are moving [...]. And our descendants will move too. [...] [We are becoming] a species of migrants at last comfortable [with] being a species of migrants. That, for me, is a destination worth wandering to. **BD**

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