

THE REFUGEE ISSUE IN THE SUPREME COUNCIL OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA IN THE CONTEXT OF STATE BUILDING IN 1990-1991

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Abstract

In July 1990, the newly elected Supreme Council of the Armenian SSR began state building by adopting the Declaration of Independence. In the context of the enormous problems of state-building, the Karabakh issue was sometimes relegated to the background. However, the intensification of the policy of persecution of Armenians in Azerbaijan, new manifestations of the mass deportation of Armenians with the consent and participation of the power structures of the agonizing Soviet empire forced the Supreme Council to bring it back to the agenda. The article deals with the discussion of the issues of mass deportation of Armenians in the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia and the forced change of the policy vector in the context of state-building.

Keywords: Mass displacement, refugees, deportation, Supreme Council, state-building.

Introduction

The Karabakh movement that began in 1988 shocked Armenian society, brought it out of a long slumber, awakened national aspirations, gave rise to new ideas, and formed a new reality. The initiator group, the “Karabakh” Committee, hoped that the issue could be resolved in the context of the democratization processes that had begun in the USSR under the “Perestroika” policy. The first blow to that belief was the Sumgait tragedy, when the words “massacre,” “refugees,” and “deportation” reappeared in the discourse of Armenian history. This not only led to a loss of faith in “Perestroika,” but also the Soviet authorities’ tendency to cover up that grave crime and the ethnic cleansing carried out in Azerbaijan and immigration of refugees shattered the myth of protection and security within the Soviet Union and the struggle for independence began.

As a result of the parliamentary elections held in May and June 1990, a new political elite formed in the squares of the republic’s cities and hardened by struggle, entered the parliament of the Armenian SSR. This broke the monopoly of the Communist Party in the parliament, and 45% of the parliamentary mandates were received by the members of the Armenian National Movement (ANM), and one mandate

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by the National Self-Determination Union (NSU). At the beginning of its work, the Supreme Council of the Armenian SSR approved the agenda for the coming months, which in terms of its content was an agenda for independence from the USSR. The Karabakh issue was relegated to the background and reduced to developing a program package on the socio-economic development of Artsakh. The leaders of the ANM who came to power were convinced that it was impossible to solve two very complex problems - state-building and the Artsakh issue - in the same period, and the issue of the return of national territories could be solved only by a powerful state. As a result of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on August 23, 1990, Armenia officially took the path of independence, preparatory work began for an independence referendum, and in parallel, a legislative framework for the transitional period was being developed. However, the anti-Armenian policy in the Azerbaijani SSR was gaining new momentum. Soon, a new wave of displacements of Armenians began, which forced the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia to return to the problems of the Artsakh and seek ways out of the existing situation.

The article covers the period from mid-1990 to the end of 1991, which represents the initial, breakthrough stage in the formation of the new state system of the Republic of Armenia. During this period, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia began to function not as a structure of the USSR union republic, but as the highest body of power creating the legislative foundations of the state building of Armenia in the process of gaining independence. During this period, the Supreme Council played a key role in making political decisions, defining foreign and domestic policy directions, as well as in resolving urgent problems facing the newly created state, including the refugee crisis. This period ends with the collapse of the USSR. Another feature of this period is that the displacement was carried out by Soviet military units and the Azerbaijani OMON (Special purpose mobile unit, the riot police) and is characterized as the implementation of the Soviet State's policy of terror against its own citizens. The topic of the article is relevant since the refugee problem continues to remain one of the key issues of Armenia's domestic and foreign policy, especially in the conditions of regional instability and new waves of displacements. In this context, the political perception of the 1990–1991 refugee crisis and the activities of the Supreme Council in responding to it are being reinterpreted as an attempt by the highest representative body of the newly formed state to provide political and legal solutions to refugee problems in unpredictable conditions.

The scientific source of the article is the materials of the 207 fund of the National Archives of Armenia, which include the minutes of the sessions of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia in 1990-1991. They include the ideas and positions expressed by the deputies, debates, as well as discussions and decisions made regarding the refugee issue. The analysis of the archival materials was carried out through content analysis appropriate for the topic, aiming to reveal the role of the Supreme Council in the process of policy formation towards refugees. In addition, in order to reveal the events, cases and issues addressed in the article, some scientific works were consulted, which contributed to the comprehensive study of the issue.

State terrorism in Getashen and the displacement of the Armenian population

The main concept of Armenia's independence and state building was reflected in the Declaration of Independence adopted on August 23, 1990. There were many problems: to gain independence from the USSR¹ as carefully and smoothly as possible over the next five years, to transform and democratize the political system, to gradually liberalize and decentralize economic management, to solve the accumulated problems in the disaster zone, etc. The Artsakh issue was temporarily overshadowed, although the Declaration of Independence stated that it was based on the joint decision of the Supreme Council of the Armenian SSR and the National Council of Nagorno-Karabakh of December 1, 1989 "On the Reunification of the Armenian SSR and Nagorno-Karabakh."

There were already refugees in the republic from Sumgait, Kirovabad, Baku and other settlements of Azerbaijan, who were in a rather difficult mental, material, and social state. Taking into account the presence of a disaster zone in the republic and the numerous problems associated with it, there was no hope that the situation of the refugees would improve in the near future. In March 1990, with the active support of the Soviet army and internal troops, the population of the Armenian-populated villages of Azat and Kamo in the Khanlar region was forcibly displaced. This was followed by violent actions in the Shahumyan region and the Getashen sub-region, and the Armenians were presented with an ultimatum to leave their homeland.² On September 3, 1990, at a closed session of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia, deputies Vladimir Aghajanyan and Arkady Manucharov presented a report on the events taking place in Artsakh, Getashen, and Shahumyan.³ On September 5, 1990, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia made a special statement, which, in particular, stated that "unprecedentedly cruel and widespread human rights violations in Nagorno-Karabakh have already become a common phenomenon. Mass anti-Armenian massacres and pogroms carried out by mobs, the constant blockade of the province and all of Armenia, the state of emergency, periodic military operations against the civilian population, displacements, persecution of the pioneers of the national movement and people's deputies, strict censorship, mass falsification of information - all these are links in the chain of activities of the union authorities, which directed the entire military power of the empire against a people striving to manage their own destiny."⁴

On October 1, 1990, the Supreme Council adopted a decision to instruct the RA Council of Ministers to form a relevant body dealing with the issues of forcibly displaced persons, and in December 1990, the Committee on Refugee Issues under the RA

¹ The transition period of up to five years was envisaged by the USSR Law "On the Procedure for Resolving Issues Related to the Secession of a Union Republic from the USSR", adopted on April 3, 1990.

² National Archive of Armenia (hereinafter referred to as NAA), F. (fund) 207, c. (catalogue) 62, f. (file) 16, p.(page) 120-121:

³ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.16, p. 34.

⁴ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.17, p. 15.

Council of Ministers was established on the basis of the State Committee for the Reception and Settlement of Armenians Returning to the Armenian SSR.

Thanks to Moscow's support, the policy of deporting Armenians from Azerbaijan was taking on new shades. On January 14, 1991, the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Azerbaijani SSR adopted a decision to dissolve the Shahumyan region, it was annexed to the Kasum-Ismaïlov (Geranboy) region.⁵ In response, the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia announced that the Republic of Armenia would take measures to ensure the safety of the life and property of the Armenian population. The statement noted that, taking advantage of the fact that the attention of the world community and the peoples living in the Soviet Union was focused on the events taking place in the Persian Gulf and Lithuania, the Azerbaijani authorities were aggravating the already tense situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Shahumyan region and the Getashen sub-region, and the Armenian Shahumyan administrative unit was being dissolved into a larger Azerbaijani region. This step had the same goal as the illegal actions against the Armenian-populated regions of Hadrut, Martuni, and Askeran in the Nagorno-Karabagh Autonomous Region (NKAO).⁶ Murders of Armenians, burning of houses, and destruction of Armenian-populated villages had become commonplace in the NKAO and the Armenian-populated territories of Azerbaijan. A rather difficult socio-economic situation had been created in the Armenian-populated regions. In order to obtain more detailed information, the Chairman of the Special Commission on Artsakh Issues of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia, Seyran Baghdasaryan, was sent to Martunashen and Getashen. The agenda of the second session of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia was also changed and a discussion was planned on "Work with the forcibly displaced persons", regarding which the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Armenia Supreme Council Standing Committee on the Disaster Zone and the Forcibly Displaced Persons were instructed to develop proposals.

The independence of Armenia created favorable conditions for Azerbaijan, whose leadership, relying on the support of the USSR power structures, planned to deport Armenians. This policy became especially active after the All-Union referendum of March 17, 1991, when Azerbaijan, along with eight other Soviet republics, voted in favor of preserving the USSR. The Supreme Council of Armenia had decided to hold the referendum on September 21, but it was already clear that public opinion would be in favor of independence. Moreover, the policy pursued by the Center contributed to the strengthening of independence sentiments. The Center adopted a very hostile attitude towards those republics that did not hold a referendum on March 17. The democratic movement in Russia was experiencing a temporary decline and it was impossible to confront the Center in these conditions. Many of the deputies also linked the intensification of the policy of deporting Armenians from Azerbaijan to the Ozal⁷-

⁵ Ghahramanyan 1993: 64.

⁶ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.2, p. 106.

⁷ T. Ozal was the President of the Republic of Turkey from 1989 to 1993.

Gorbachev meeting held in March of 1991, assuming that it was possible that there was a secret clause regarding Armenia in the signed document. In other words, if the massacres and forced deportations organized before were linked to the actions of nationalist elements in Azerbaijan, which operated with the consent of the Azerbaijani authorities and their covert support, the policy implemented in Getashen and the Shahumyan region could already be qualified as state terrorism with the participation of some high-ranking representatives of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs. The beginning of the operation "Getashen" is presented as follows by Thomas de Waal: "On 10 April 1991, the decision was made to launch the operation against Getashen and Martunashen, and in the last two weeks of the month the three thousand villagers were gradually sealed off from the outside world. A cordon of troops surrounded the villages, and its telephone lines and electricity supply were cut".⁸ On April 25, 1991, an extraordinary plenary session of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia was convened on this issue. On April 30, 1991, a telegram was broadcast from the Getashen radio station, starting with the distress signal 'SOS! SOS! SOS!' and stating that 'The Soviet army is destroying Soviet citizens. They are firing from the ground, from the air, from artillery, and automatic weapons... We cannot stand against the army with hunting rifles'.⁹

On May 2, 1991, the "Text of the Letter of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia and the Presidium of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Armenia on the Violence Committed in the Villages of Getashen and Martunashen"¹⁰ was approved. In it, the armed forces of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs and the OMON (Special purpose mobile unit, the riot police) of Azerbaijan were accused of organizing violence and conducting military operations against the population of the villages of Getashen and Martunashen. The scheme of the atrocities had already been elaborated: to keep the population under a long siege, to deprive them of any contact with the outside world, to create an atmosphere of fear by various means, and then to conduct a "passport regime" check ostensibly to identify Armenian militants, in reality resorting to atrocities and deporting or creating such conditions that people would be forced to leave. Those who were leaving were forced to sign documents stating that they were leaving voluntarily.¹¹

Referring to these events, the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan noted with regret "We are confronted by such an empire, a fascist regime, and here we can say that we lost this battle," we lost Getashen¹². Unlike the massacres of the previous period, the Soviet internal troops and the army were used here, which, naturally, could not be resisted for long.

⁸ Thomas de Waal 2003: 116.

⁹ Abrahamyan 2007: 269.

¹⁰ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.3, p. 101-102.

¹¹ Thomas de Waal 2003: 117.

¹² NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.107, p. 18.

Attacks on the Border Villages of the Republic of Armenia

The leadership of the USSR power structures also tried to create an atmosphere of fear for the population of Armenia. Along with the bloody displacements in Getashen and Martunashen, on May 8, 1991, the Soviet army and the Azerbaijani OMON launched an aggression against the border settlements of the Republic of Armenia. The list of villages subjected to violence and destruction increased: Voskepar, Kirants, Tegh, Kornidzor, Shurnukh, Khoznavar, Artsvashen and other settlements of Armenia. The bombing and shelling of peaceful villages from the air and land was again described by the Soviet authorities as a “check of the passport regime”. “Four Russian parliamentary deputies arrived on the scene and one, Anatoly Shabad, stayed in the village.... Shabad says that he later realized the bombardment was meant to intimidate the civilians into submission rather than to hit the fighters”.¹³ Anatoly Shabad stayed in Voskepar for several days.

Later, he noted that he had the impression that “the problem is obviously clear for Azerbaijan. The village needs to be deported, the Armenian population needs to leave and that wedge needs to join Azerbaijan. In the current case, we are talking about direct aggression by the army against the territory of Armenia”.¹⁴ In other words, there was a suspicion that population displacements could also occur from the villages of Armenia, which worried the deputies of the Supreme Council.

According to the statement of the Supreme Council¹⁵, the Soviet army and internal troops did not even consider it necessary to observe international obligations related to a state of war, for example, the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, and carried out actions that were incompatible with the conditions of the state of emergency. The use of modern military equipment and firearms against the civilian population of the occupied territories, violence against and brutal murders of women and children, the elderly and the disabled, illegal arrests of leaders and ordinary employees of local government bodies, economic leaders, and police officers without any sanctions became the daily routine of the border settlements of Armenia, and false testimonies were extracted from Armenian prisoners of war called “hostages” through inhuman torture in order to substantiate the hypothesis defended by the country's president about the so-called “Armenian militants”.¹⁶

On May 12-13, 1991, a group of deputies of the Supreme Council headed by the acting chairman of the Standing Committee on the Establishment of Independent Statehood and National Policy, a member of the Presidium of the Supreme Council E.Yegoryan was sent to the Taush region. The group included members of the standing committees of the Supreme Council Kh.Bezirjanyan and A.Chakhoyan. The group was joined by Doctor of Law, Professor, and well-known human rights defender B.L.

¹³ Thomas de Waal 2003: 117-118.

¹⁴ Arevshatyan 1991.

¹⁵ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.3, p. 112-114.

¹⁶ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.3, p. 113.

Nazarov, who arrived from Moscow. They were fired upon from military helicopters between the villages of Paravakar and Tsaghkavan in the Taush region. The Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia qualified this as "another brazen manifestation of the policy of state terrorism unleashed by the center against the Armenian people and the Republic of Armenia"¹⁷. The Presidium of the Supreme Council demanded that the USSR Minister of Defense immediately put an end to the bandit attacks carried out by army units on the territory of the Republic of Armenia, and the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Armenia initiated a criminal case.

Discussions on the issue of Artsakh and independence in the Supreme Council

The results of the state terrorism were worrying and frightening. In addition to the fact that the number of refugees was increasing, the possible loss of homeland was becoming more and more alarming. For centuries, Nagorno-Karabakh, the territory of Shahumyan region, and Getashen sub-region was the homeland of Armenians, and now they were forced to emigrate. Their homes were either completely demolished or settled by Azerbaijanis. The Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia was looking for ways out. The Primakov-Nishanov plan proposed in the USSR was also discussed¹⁸. The program was proposed by the Chairman of the Council of Unions of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR E. Primakov. On November 10, 1990, it was discussed in Moscow with L. Ter-Petrosyan and the president of Azerbaijan SSR A. Mutalibov.¹⁹ According to the program, first of all, all decisions regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region that had been adopted in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the USSR after February 20, 1988, were to be abolished, the dissolved Soviet authorities in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region were to be restored, and elections to the regional council and local councils were to be held. Azerbaijan was to adopt a special law that would guarantee the autonomy of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region within its territory. A five-kilometer zone was to be established between Armenia and Azerbaijan on each side, where units of the Soviet army and internal troops were to be temporarily stationed. Any type of blockade was to be lifted. The authorities of the two republics were to compensate for the losses of all refugees and forcibly displaced persons and normalize relations with each other.²⁰ Negotiations with the parliamentary groups of the two republics were to be conducted by R. Nishanov, Chairman of the Council of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Naturally, recent events did not inspire confidence in either Azerbaijan's security guarantees or the Soviet army.

According to the Founding Chairman of the "Constitutional Rights Union" party, Member of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia H. Khachatryan, this

¹⁷ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.3, p. 122.

¹⁸ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.108, p.25.

¹⁹ Primakov 2015:111.

²⁰ "Iravunk", November 30, 1990.

program became known in the republic in February 1991. Analyzing the situation, he noted that the state interest of Azerbaijan is to unite with Nakhichevan. He again voiced the opinion prevailing in political circles that it is possible that the new Soviet-Turkish treaty signed on March 12, 1991, may contain annexes that “provide for the Union to cede another part of the territories of Armenia to the allied side at this time. In particular, recent events have shown that through the Soviet army, the Azerbaijanis have occupied the most important strategic positions in the southern and northeastern regions of Armenia”.²¹ Attacks on Armenian border villages increased the alarm.

Two approaches were formed in the Supreme Council:

1. To reject the decision of the Supreme Council of the Armenian SSR of December 1 and agree to the inclusion of Artsakh within Azerbaijan, perhaps with a higher status.
2. Remain faithful to the decision of December 1 and pursue a more proactive policy, being prepared for a war.

The first approach was very painful for the participants of the Karabakh movement, as the question of the expediency of the movement and the mistakes made were raised. In addition, the issue of the demands of the Armenians of Artsakh was included in the Declaration of Independence, on the basis of which independence and state building were underway. The second approach also had many question marks: with whom to fight, and if the fight against Azerbaijan was understandable, opposing the Soviet army appeared futile.

On May 16, 1991, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia held a closed session on the Artsakh issue. The session was dedicated to new deportations and new flows of refugees. This time, more than 1,000 people from the Hadrut region and Berdadzor sub-region of the NKAO, the majority of whom were elderly people, women and children, were forcibly displaced. They were received in temporary camps located near the villages of Khndzoresk and Tegh in the Goris region of Armenia²². On May 17, 1991, the commandant of Artsakh Zhukov managed to prevent a new deportation by the OMON from Berdzor, but a small group of children was transferred to Stepanakert. A conflict arose between Zhukov and the OMON in Hadrut. But Zhukov was soon to hand over his authority to the 4th Army, which included many Azerbaijanis and new ethnic cleansing was becoming inevitable.²³

The Soviet forces and Azerbaijan were trying to disrupt the demographic picture of the NKAO and in this way solve the Artsakh issue. The displaced people were in a disastrous state. The deportations were accompanied by atrocities, thousands of old people, women and children were forcibly displaced from their homes, and young men were arrested. The homes of the displaced people were destroyed, their property was looted. The Supreme Council decided to send its representatives to get acquainted with

²¹ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.108, p. 26.

²² NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.3, p. 130.

²³ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.109, p. 17.

the situation on the ground²⁴. There were rumors that the Second Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan Polyanichko had sent a bus to take the displaced people back to Hadrut, but the people were afraid of a new massacre and asked to be transferred to Armenia. Igor Muradyan, a deputy of the RA Supreme Council, asked to be sent to these people to convince them to return to Hadrut and go with them, but there was a danger that he could fall into the hands of the Azerbaijanis of the 4th Army. The Supreme Council sent deputy Shahen Petrosyan there.

The illegal flights of military helicopters from the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region to a number of regions of the Republic of Armenia had become frequent, turning into a unique form of forced displacement of Armenians.

In light of these circumstances, some deputies raised the issue of revising the decision of December 1, 1989. Deputy Ashot Bleyan once again voiced the thesis that two major issues, the resolution of the Karabakh issue and the restoration of Armenian statehood, are incompatible.²⁵ Arkady Manucharov, the chairman of the "Artsakh" Compatriot Union, Supreme Council Member, agreed that December 1 was an ill-considered step, since it was impossible to fight against a great empire. He saw the way out in participating in the union treaty and negotiating with the Center. Later, he even confessed that one of the two people who abstained when voting on the Declaration of Independence was himself, because he believed that if Armenia seceded from the USSR, Artsakh would be lost. The Republic of Armenia Supreme Council Member Artashes Tumanyan was not against renouncing December 1, but called for discussing the "pluses and minuses of renouncing," and believed that renouncing should be used as a political card.

The debate grew heated, with mutual accusations exchanged among deputies. Thus, accusations were made that time had been missed, that for eight months nothing had been done to strengthen the borders and for the security of Berdadzor and Getashen. The Republic of Armenia Supreme Council Member Mekhak Gabrielyan reminded that when the issue of assisting in the defense of Getashen was raised at the Supreme Council, only 20-25 people voted in favor. He noted that after the surrender of Artsakh, the Turks' goal would be to unite Nakhichevan through Zangezur. "Instead of talking to Gorbachev, who is our master today, we have been creating international opinion for 10-15 days".²⁶ He proposed holding a general mobilization and entering into a dialogue with Gorbachev to prevent the exodus of Armenians from Artsakh. Meanwhile, as long as Armenia was part of the USSR, the mobilization and the creation of armed forces could become a new occasion for Soviet troops to enter Armenia, and in that case, even talking about independence would become impossible.

Supporters of independence were against the defeatist policy, reminding that they imagined the possible dangers when going for independence. Addressing the issue,

²⁴ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.3, p. 131.

²⁵ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.108, p. 23.

²⁶ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.108, p. 30.

Founding Chairman of the Republican Party of Armenia, Member of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia Ashot Navasardyan noted, "Two-three villages have been captured and we are already refusing independence. ... I am sure that the next government will hand over Armenia. It will hand it over to the Russians, or to another enemy... We must choose the path of liberation and it is not worth wagging the tail on that path. Selling this land... giving that land... keeping this much... and so on, and so on. Artsakh is ours, just like Yerevan, just like Ijevan. We must fight for every inch of the land for the sake of independent Armenia... We have one way. War is our way".²⁷

On May 20, 1991, the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia addressed the Presidiums of the Supreme Councils of the USSR Union Republics and the Presidiums of the Supreme Councils of the Autonomous Republics, stating that under the pretext of the passport regime, the Azerbaijani OMON, with the support of the Soviet Army and the internal troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs, unleashed a new wave of terrorism and forced deportations in Armenian settlements, accompanied by looting, rape, and murder of civilians. Almost all the men of the Armenian villages of the Nagorno-Karabakh region were being arrested and transferred to the territory of Azerbaijan, and the elderly, women, and children were being subjected to humiliation and mockery²⁸. A separate letter was sent to the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the RSFSR on May 22, requesting that the kidnapped people against whom criminal cases had been initiated be transferred to Russia. On May 31, a letter was also written to the President of the USSR, M.S. Gorbachev, noting that no measures were being taken to return the displaced Armenian population of the villages of Getashen, Martunashen, Berdadzor and the Hadrut region of the NKAO to their permanent places of residence, and the hostages had not been released. It was warned that, as a result of these events, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia had decided that Levon Ter-Petrosyan should not participate in the sessions of the preparatory committee for the union treaty in Moscow.

A draft resolution "On measures to improve the socio-economic situation of forcibly displaced persons in the Republic" was submitted to the Supreme Council, which stated that, taking into account the need to resolve a number of urgent socio-economic issues of the forcibly displaced persons, the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia decides:

1. To propose to the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Armenia:

- To submit a comprehensive program for resolving the socio-economic issues of forcibly displaced persons by the beginning of September of this year.

- Based on the need for collective settlement of forcibly displaced persons, to examine the issue of allocating the necessary land for organizing the design work and construction of two-three urban-type settlements in the territory of the Republic of Armenia.

²⁷ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.108, p. 30-31.

²⁸ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.3, p. 130.

2. To instruct the Republic of Armenia Supreme Council's Standing Committee on Issues of the Disaster Zone and Forcibly Displaced Persons to prepare and submit a proposal on the law on the status of forcibly displaced persons.²⁹

The first deportations had also awakened the Armenians of the Diaspora and they had begun to put pressure on the governments of their countries. On May 25, 1991, a forum was to be held and 250 major Armenian businessmen from all over the world came to Armenia. It was during this period that Prime Minister V. Manukyan proposed to the Supreme Council establishing the post of president for more efficient governance of the country. After the fall of Getashen, he believed that «there should be one person responsible as the head of state... I called for the transition to a presidential system of governance».³⁰

The Shahumyan events and the discussion of the political concept on Artsakh in the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia

In July 1991, the situation in the Shahumyan region became extremely tense. The Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia was informed about these events by the Acting Minister of Internal Affairs A. Manucharyan. At 6 pm on July 6, 1991, an extraordinary session of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia was convened regarding the situation in the Shahumyan region. Vezirov, who had previously been the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, and the USSR Minister of Internal Affairs Pugo spoke at the session of the Supreme Council of the USSR and assured that there were no residents in those villages, only militants who needed to be neutralized. The deportations from Manashid and Bozglukh marked the beginning of the deportation in the Shahumyan region. All this caused serious concern. Even extremist speeches were heard in the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia. Thus, S. Baghdasaryan, on behalf of the "Artsakh" parliamentary group, proposed to apply the same policy towards Nakhichevan, forgetting that this would give the USSR leadership a new opportunity to take revenge on the Armenian independentists.³¹ It was proposed to the Prosecutor General of the Republic of Armenia to initiate a criminal case against Pugo, on charges of officially misleading state bodies and inciting interethnic clashes.³² And MP Igor Muradyan, unable to restrain his agitation, declared that Pugo was a criminal and he should be killed. He addressed the Armenian youth with the call "Pugo must be killed."³³

Z. Balayan noted that 1,420 children and their mothers had been removed from Shahumyan in 39 helicopters, and when he pointed out this fact during a meeting with Pugo, the latter still insisted that there were only militants there. In November 1990,

²⁹ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.4, p. 17.

³⁰ Manukyan 2002: 177.

³¹ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.123, p 34.

³² NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.123, p. 87-88.

³³ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.123, p. 81. It should be noted that one month after these events, on August 22, after the suppression of the uprising in the USSR, Pugo committed suicide.

Pugo was provided with classified materials by a Soviet operational intelligence group, indicating that the Azerbaijani leadership had developed a plan for the deportation of the Armenian population from the Khanlar and Shahumyan regions³⁴, in other words, the Soviet Minister of Internal Affairs was aware of all this. The Russians had left one battalion near the village of Rus Boris, where the Malakans lived, and left the village of Hay Boris, located three kilometers away from that village, unprotected. The attack began on the villages of Manashid, Buzlukh, and Erkez. The deputies suggested that Levon Ter-Petrosyan urgently leave for Moscow and somehow take Kryuchkov, Pugo, and Yazov to Shahumyan so that they could see the displacement of the civilian population, see that there were mothers and children in those villages and no men. Moreover, the “passport regime” check in those villages was carried out by the Kirovabad police, the so-called “Baku Regiment”, which consisted of Russians, but was subordinate to Azerbaijan’s Minister of Internal Affairs Mamedov and Polyanchko, who led the entire operation. About 10,000 armed Azerbaijanis entered the villages with the riot police.³⁵ The policy of Armenian depopulation and its geography was gradually expanding.

On July 9, 1991, the session of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia discussed a document developed by Supreme Council Members Vigen Shirinyan and Igor Muradyan, which proposed the following:

1. To qualify the actions of the USSR and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh as a genocidal policy against the Armenian people.
2. To consider self-defense in Nagorno-Karabakh as a forced measure aimed at preventing the threat of the USSR and Azerbaijan, considering armed self-defense participants as combatants, whose rights are protected by the 1949 Geneva Convention and the 1977 Additional Protocol thereto.
3. To recognize the struggle of the Armenian people in Nagorno-Karabakh for their sovereign rights as a national liberation movement.
4. To appeal to international organizations, union republics, states and the UN to recognize the national liberation struggle of the Armenian people in Nagorno-Karabakh, and to recognize its governing body, the Nagorno-Karabakh National Council, as a subject of international law and to provide appropriate assistance and support.³⁶

Levon Ter-Petrosyan opposed the adoption of the document, noting that although the document was good, it was useless, since so far the UN had not interfered and would not interfere in the internal affairs of the USSR, and this application would give the USSR a new opportunity to strangle Karabakh by force. He drew a parallel with Slovenia and Croatia, when the UN declared their non-recognition and the Yugoslav authorities sent troops the next day. Slovenia and Croatia had armies and resisted. But

³⁴ Krivopuskov 2007: 201.

³⁵ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.123, p. 46.

³⁶ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.123, p.57-58.

if a regular army entered Karabakh, it would be a matter of days. "It is true, after that the international community can raise an uproar, defend our cause, protect our orphans, create funds for refugees. The world is very used to this, but the land will already be cleansed".³⁷ In addition, he believed that the document could not be adopted without the consent of the representatives of Artsakh.

On July 15, 1991, MP Albert Baghdasaryan, who had returned from Shahumyan, presented the situation at the Supreme Council session. He noted that the Azerbaijani OMON and the Kirovabad "police battalion" surrounded three villages of the Shahumyan region: Erkej, Bujlugh and Manashid. They had information that there were no outsiders in those villages, only locals who could not resist. But they received a worthy rebuff and fled³⁸. A few days later, the powerfully-equipped 23rd division surrounded those three villages. They began to make announcements over loudspeakers and promised in Erkej that the passport regime check would be carried out by the decision of the central authorities and only internal affairs units would participate, and the Azerbaijani OMON would not enter the village. But they broke their promise. There was no passport check; tanks, armored vehicles, armored personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles, surrounded the village and took it under gunfire, including the use of two Mi-24 helicopters. They began the operation of "combing" settlements and forests. The subtext was that either you would be deported or the fate of Getashen would be repeated. Manashid and Buzglukh could not stand, the people came out.³⁹ As of July 1991, 318,000 people had moved to Armenia from various regions of Azerbaijan.⁴⁰ After this information was provided, an oppressive atmosphere arose in the Supreme Council, accusations were again voiced for inaction, for not systematically dealing with the Karabakh issue. About 500 Armenians were arrested and were in various Azerbaijani prisons. One of the deputies, Hamlet Grigoryan, was imprisoned for ten months and upon his return was in a terrible psychological and physical state - he could not walk or speak.⁴¹ Such was the condition of the Armenian prisoners in Baku prisons.⁴² The Armenian authorities were unable to get them to be transferred at least to Moscow. Researchers later assessed the forced migration and dispossession of the Armenian population from their settlements, noting that the main reasons were the political crisis in the USSR, the haste of the newly elected authorities of Armenia, and their open and premature approach to confrontation. Additionally, Azerbaijan's exploitation of these factors led to the consequences of the "Ring" operation.⁴³ Foreign authors have also addressed the "Ring" operation.⁴⁴

³⁷ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.123, p. 58.

³⁸ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.124, p.1.

³⁹ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.124, p.2.

⁴⁰ Arutiunyan 1994: 48.

⁴¹ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.124, p. 43.

⁴² The horrifying tortures of H. Grigoryan and other Armenian prisoners are presented in Soghomonyan 1994, Soghomonyan 1995. These books are based on the testimonies and interviews of survivors.

⁴³ Harutyunyan 2000: 25

Anyway, as a result of these events, in the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia the issue of developing a political concept on Artsakh was put up for discussion. Two documents were presented. The first expressed the idea that Artsakh was an integral part of Armenia, and Armenia was obliged to defend the idea of reunification of Artsakh and Armenia from the position of claims. The concept paper was called "On considering the struggle of the Armenian people in Nagorno-Karabakh as a national liberation struggle." It had been signed by 59 deputies and it had been discussed in committees.⁴⁵ A discourse on the second concept had been open for a long time, but it was not so popular. Its meaning was that the Artsakh issue could not be resolved in any other way under existing conditions than through negotiations, political dialogue and compromises.⁴⁶ According to Thomas de Waal "If Operation Ring had been planned as an act of intimidation against the Karabakh Armenians, it began to achieve results. After its first phase, with villagers from Getashen flooding into Stepanakert, the Karabakh Armenian movement showed its first serious cracks". The transition began to be considered "the course from a policy of confrontation to a policy of dialogue and negotiations".⁴⁷

In essence, both concepts were risky. In the case of the first, the imbalance of forces and Moscow's reaction were worrying. There was a risk of losing not only Artsakh, but also setill unattained independence. In the case of the second, it was unpredictable what the outcome of the negotiations would be and whether it would be possible to achieve an increase in the status of Artsakh. Many believed that the time for this had been missed. A suitable moment had arisen for this after the genocidal events in Sumgait.

A. Manucharov had been in Artsakh for the last ten months and, as he himself said, after his return he lived, thought, and reflected only on Artsakh, where he had witnessed the atrocities. He believed that the Supreme Council of Armenia should deal with the Artsakh issue every day, but there was no such political body in Artsakh, what there was in the hands of the party elite, which had been hindering the movement from the very beginning. The people of Artsakh were in danger of total annihilation. Manucharov believed that the only way out was for Artsakh to agree to be an autonomous republic within Azerbaijan. This was the compromise that would convince the center and help keep Artsakh. We should be flexible; if necessary, Armenia should reconsider its previous decisions. He believed that it was impossible to wage war "against the Center, Azerbaijan and 60 million Turks".⁴⁸ He believed that the approach should be as follows, "There is no Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan. There is an autonomous republic within the center of the renewed federation." All other options would lead to deportation, the fate of Nakhichevan. Member of the Supreme Council of

⁴⁴ Zhirohov 2012; Krivopuskov 2007; Babanov, Voyevodsky, Cox, Eibner 1993; Tranca 2008.

⁴⁵ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.124, p. 5.

⁴⁶ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.124, p.6.

⁴⁷ Thomas de Waal 2003: 118.

⁴⁸ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.124, p. 45.

the Republic of Armenia H. Khachatryan noted that the Artsakh movement became a national-liberation movement starting from Sumgait. He touched upon the new initiative to reject the December 1 decision and put the issue of leaving Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan on the agenda. At some point, the Presidium of the Supreme Council had begun to pursue this policy. He noted that he did not consider this policy anti-national, but he wanted evidence to convince himself that this path was more effective. Member of the Supreme Council A. Voskanyan noted that in reality nothing had changed: "Our strategy regarding the Artsakh issue has always been negotiations, and the tactics is to be ready for armed resistance".⁴⁹

No option was adopted at that session. The discussion continued on September 10. However, significant events occurred between those two sessions: from August 18 to 21, 1991, there was an attempted coup d'état in the USSR, which was suppressed and the collapse of the USSR was accelerated. In those days, the Armenian authorities were extremely cautious, because as Levon Ter-Petrosyan said, if the coup in the USSR had succeeded, the Armenian people would have been threatened with genocide. "A couple of hours were enough, a wrong behavior, and we could have lost another 20 villages in those two hours, which would not have been restored within 10 years. We would simply be facing a genocide, because the loss of each village is a genocide for us".⁵⁰ On August 30, 1991, the Supreme Council of the Azerbaijan SSR adopted a declaration on the restoration of the state independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and on September 2, at a joint session of the regional and Shahumyan councils of deputies held in Stepanakert, Artsakh declared its independence.

So, the September session of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia was held under different conditions. After the putsch was suppressed, the speeches of the deputies became bolder. The issue of Artsakh and the attitude towards the union treaty were discussed. In essence, some of the deputies believed that it was necessary to prepare for a war, while others believed that they should try to negotiate, although Azerbaijan did not show any tendency to make concessions.

Vazgen Manukyan, who was still the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia at that time, described the forced displacement of the Armenian population from Shahumyan and Getashen as a form of punishment imposed by Moscow⁵¹. In his speech in the National Assembly, he mentioned: "We understood that as we went for independence, we would be constantly hit and hit through Artsakh. And at that time we understood that without giving up on the Artsakh issue, we should still try to separate these two issues. Make the Artsakh issue a problem of the international community, of the democratic forces of the Soviet Union".⁵² In essence, that policy failed, that

⁴⁹ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.124, p. 35.

⁵⁰ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.134, p.55.

⁵¹ Manukyan 2002: 93.

⁵² NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.134, p. 4.

calculation turned out to be wrong, and as a result of the war that began later, a different reality was formed, with different problems.

Ashot Navasardyan reminded that the Armenian National Movement entered the parliament with an independence program. He noted with concern that many deputies had faith in the democratic forces that came to power in Russia and in improving the Union, and reminded that this was how Armenians believed in the Young Turks and were destroyed. He proposed another program:⁵³

1. Adopt a statement that Levon Ter-Petrosyan is not authorized to represent Armenia and that the parliament does not recognize his participation in the creation of a new union.
2. Before the referendum on September 21, declare the independence of Armenia, including Artsakh, through the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia.
3. Create a defense ministry and an Armenian army.
4. Hold a referendum and presidential elections in Artsakh.
5. Form a Constituent Assembly.
6. Hold new elections to a multi-party parliament within two months.

This proposal did not pass.

Many considered a large-scale war inevitable. Thus, in MP Yerjanik Abgaryan's opinion, it was necessary to be prepared for a major conflict for Karabakh, "after which states will recognize the status and the ruler of Karabakh will be the one who can truly take care of it".⁵⁴

Some of the deputies did not hide their disappointment. Thus, V. Petrosyan, assessing the three-year struggle, noted that we could have achieved at least an increase in the status of Karabakh, but we got complete isolation of Karabakh and Karabakh was facing an "eternal guerrilla warfare".⁵⁵

The main discussions were held around the union treaty, the document signed in Moscow. Discussed were also issues related to the loss of territories. The problems of refugees were left to the executive authorities.

On September 11, 1991, a closed session dedicated to Artsakh was held again. The discussions concerned not holding a referendum in Artsakh on September 21, due to its impossibility. David Vardanyan and Shavarsh Kocharyan proposed to suspend the joint decision of December 1 after the Karabakh declaration of independence. Vigen Shirinyan proposed to ignore the declaration of independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, since it was a step back from the decision of December 1.⁵⁶ I. Muradyan and S. Zolyan proposed to adopt a statement entitled "Declaration of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia on the Restoration of Independent Statehood of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Proclamation of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh", which expressed

⁵³ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.134, p.14.

⁵⁴ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.134, p. 17.

⁵⁵ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.134, p.37.

⁵⁶ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.135, p.81-82.

readiness to recognize the independence of Azerbaijan, but at the same time recognized the independence of the NKR, urged both parties to initiate multilateral negotiations, and called on all Soviet republics, especially Russia and Kazakhstan, as a union of sovereign states of the newly created confederation,⁵⁷ to recognize the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Levon Ter-Petrosyan proposed not to adopt any documents, since the self-defense of Artsakh had become, by his definition, a “state affair” that was being carried out at the state level, and suggested thinking not about documents, but understanding that the situation was favorable and that the Soviet army could no longer intervene.⁵⁸

After the independence referendum, several sessions were devoted to the events unfolding in Artsakh and the border regions of Armenia, from which it was already clear that an Armenian-Azerbaijani war was beginning.

Thus, after the above-mentioned events, about 450 thousand Armenians from the cities and villages of Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh became refugees, more than 700 people were taken hostage and the fate of many of them was never clarified. Armenia joined the UN Protocol “On Refugees” in 1993. In 1999, the RA Law “On Refugees” was adopted, in 2000 - “On the Housing Program for Persons Forcibly Displaced from Azerbaijan in 1988-1992”. Some of the refugees were accommodated in hostels, hotels, sanatoriums, rest houses, caravans, self-built shelters, the rest in rented houses or in the homes of relatives. Taking into account the war and the extremely difficult socio-economic situation in the republic in 1992-1994, especially during the winter months, many of them were left in dire straits and had to emigrate.

Conclusion

Referring to the raising and discussing of the refugee issue in the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia in 1990–1991, it can be concluded that it was located in the broad context of the state-building process. The supreme legislative body of the newly independent Armenia was engaged in the establishment of state institutions, the formation of the legal system, the development of the foundations of foreign policy, and issues of international recognition. Under these conditions, issues related to refugees and Artsakh initially occupied a secondary place on the agenda. However, the policy pursued by the Soviet and Azerbaijani authorities, the repressions carried out at the state level, which were accompanied by the forced displacement of the Armenian population and a mass refugee influx, influenced the change in the domestic political agenda. The Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia never developed a systematic and long-term strategy for solving refugee issues. The problem was recognized and included in the agendas, but practical steps were essentially limited to short-term responses: logistical support, the provision of temporary shelters, and

⁵⁷ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.135, p.82.

⁵⁸ NAA, F. 207, c.62, f.135, p.104.

some legal regulations. Refugees were often excluded from the social system or not properly integrated. At the same time, it should be taken into account that the population of the disaster zone, which also lived in temporary shelters, was also in a deplorable state. The idea that it was necessary to adopt a strategy for the integration of refugees was voiced several times in the Supreme Council, but in the context of the enormous problems of state building, this did not materialize.

This study shows that the refugee problem is not only a socio-humanitarian, but also a political and institutional issue, anchored in the process of statehood building. Therefore, a historical analysis of the issue is an important prerequisite for further study, both from the perspective of rethinking the processes of political development in Armenia and the mechanisms of socio-political integration of refugees.

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