

REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF STATE POLICY ON ECOMIGRATION: THE CASE OF AJARA[†]

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Abstract: The paper presents a regional-level analysis of the state policy on ecomigration using the example of Adjara. Both the historical context of the state policy on ecomigration and the goals and strategy of the state policy on ecomigration in the modern period are examined. The research results indicate that, using the example of the Adjara region, the institutional development of the state policy on ecomigration has gone through different stages.

At the modern stage, the government has developed relevant policies in the direction of ecomigration processes; however, the research showed that it is necessary for the state to form a systematic strategy towards ecomigration and resettlement. The research showed that the interests of families displaced from the Adjara region as a result of natural disasters were either poorly considered or not considered at all when selecting the place of residence.

They were mainly settled in local communities in mixed settlements, where there were different cultural, economic, and living conditions for them. From the point of view of integration and adaptation, it was further complicated by the fact that the ecomigrants displaced from the Adjara region had a different historical religious heritage. Considering this reality, adapting and integrating with the local environment was hindered. Migration processes that disregard the cultural, every day, and economic characteristics of a particular group are difficult to manage in terms of intercultural relations.

To this was added the fact that the state did not conduct appropriate preliminary communication activities with the families to be resettled, as a result of which they had a serious information deficit about the situation in the settlement areas and were unable to realize what kind of new reality they would have to live in.

This significantly hindered the adaptation process after resettlement, which in turn became a stimulating factor for remigration processes and conflict situations with local communities – and there are many examples of this even today.

Keywords: Region, Ecomigration, State Policy, State Program.

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Introduction. In the Adjara region, natural processes caused by geographical factors periodically bring to the agenda the necessity of intensive, permanent migration, which requires institutional support

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for ecomigration processes from the state. Migration processes from the Adjara region to various regions of Georgia have been taking place with periodic intensity since the second half of the 1920s. At the first stage, it had an intraregional character. But from the second half of the 20th century, especially in its final period, with the support of the state, compact interregional resettlement of populations from disaster-affected or ecologically unstable zones began.

Despite the fact that natural disasters and the issue of families affected by them are well-known problems for the Georgian government and there is almost a century of accumulated experience in this direction, state policy has not yet formed a unified approach to this issue. Moreover, to this day, the issues of ecomigration and ecomigrants have not become the subject of comprehensive research in academic circles.

Therefore, the study of this issue is of utmost theoretical and practical importance for both state and academic purposes.

The goal of the research is to assess the state policy on ecomigration using the example of the Adjara region, in order to show what improvements and changes could be considered in the coming years in this direction.

Methods. The empirical basis of the research consists of the study and analysis of the state strategy and legal-normative documents concerning ecomigration.

Accordingly, the empirical study was conducted using document analysis and interview methods.

Through the method of document analysis, we studied archival documents, which we obtained from the relevant funds of the State Archives of Georgia of Modern History and the Adjara State Archives.

The analysis of archival documents helped us to study the historical context of the state policy on ecomigration.

In particular, we described the ecomigration process fully during both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, identified its specific characteristics, and revealed the problems.

For the study of the evolution and examination of ecomigration as a process, it was also important to analyze public information requested from state agencies, which was based on the analysis of information obtained from public institutions.

Specifically, we requested information from the Ministry of Labor, Health, and Social Affairs of Georgia and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara.

The requested public information covered:

State policy documents on ecomigration, including projects, reports, and statistical data.

A list of state agencies involved in the implementation of the state ecomigration policy.

Legal documents regulating ecomigration processes, specifically laws, resolutions, and decrees.

The use of qualitative methods made it possible to gain in-depth knowledge about the state strategy of ecomigration and the legislative framework regulating it, through which we described the state strategy in detail and identified its shortcomings.

One of the important methodological tools of the research was interviewing. Within the framework of interviews, 12 representatives of public agencies implementing the state policy on ecomigration were surveyed.

The primary scientific information and data obtained by us were studied using the methods of content and event analysis with an inductive approach.

The research also reflected secondary scientific information in the form of existing studies conducted on the topic of interest. In this regard, we would like to highlight a study conducted with the support of the European Centre for Minority Issues (Thierry, 2007), a study conducted within the framework of the Institute for Democracy (Ecomigration in Georgia, 2017), a special report prepared by the public Defender of Georgia (Report, 2013), and the works of Prof. Tamaz Futkaradze (Futkaradze, 2005; Futkaradze, 2006). Based on the scientific information obtained as a result of the research, within the framework of desk research, we used document analysis and monographic research methods.

Discussion. In Soviet-era Georgia, the state policy on ecomigration had a systematic, planned, and purposeful character. Accordingly, the state carried out organized resettlement, and it had the form of interregional agricultural resettlement. During this period, ecomigrants displaced from the Adjara region were settled both in compact (without local populations) and mixed settlements with local residents, where ecomigrants were either in the minority or equally represented.

After the restoration of Georgia's state independence, a new stage of ecomigration policy began. The national government used ecomigrants as a tool necessary for the „demographic balancing“ on the national agenda and started settling them in regions populated by minorities and in border regions, which aimed to politically „strengthen“ the state's border areas. In addition to state actors, influential political organizations such as the „Kostava Fund“ and the „Rustaveli Society“ purchased houses abandoned by minorities, which were later distributed to ethnically Georgian ecomigrants.

Relations between the newly settled ecomigrants and the local population often became extremely tense, which in most cases ended with the sale or abandonment of the received houses and the return of the ecomigrants to their native regions (Laili, 2012:6).

During Shevardnadze's administration, the issue of ecomigrants was almost ignored. In the process of privatizing agricultural lands in Georgia between 1992-1998, ecomigrants received land plots on equal terms with the rest of the resident population. The funds allocated by Shevardnadze's administration between 1997-2002 for the purchase of houses became a source of extreme corruption. In 1998, for the first time by decree, ecomigration monitoring procedures were defined, although no effective actions followed the initial monitoring of ecological migration trends (Laili, 2012:7).

In 2003-2004, the issue of ecomigrants again came to the fore in Adjara. During the Saakashvili administration, several important steps were taken regarding ecomigrants. Specifically, in 2004, the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation, and Refugees of Georgia carried out a study on the housing conditions in the highland regions and developed new initiatives for housing ecomigrants. However, during this period as well, a sustainable, systematic state policy with adequate resources was not created (Laili, 2012:3).

The state bought houses in the resettlement areas from the local population and handed them over to ecomigrants without granting property rights, to prevent them from selling and returning to their original homes. The state organized the relocation of ecomigrants.

Since 2012, the state's strategy regarding the relocation of ecomigrants has changed. The government refused to continue organized resettlement and location selection and instead financially supported ecomigrants, who independently searched for and acquired housing. In the Adjara region, the autonomous government began constructing residential buildings for ecomigrants locally. The process of organized resettlement from Adjara stopped after 2012 due to the difficulties of adaptation and integration of ecomigrants into the local Georgian population and the frequent remigration trends, especially in cases where ecomigrants were in the minority or equally represented in settlements.

As a result, the state's attitude towards the issue of ecomigration differed significantly in the post-independence periods of the Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, and Saakashvili administrations, as well as in the policies of the present period.

Based on the analysis of documents requested from archives and public institutions and the interviews conducted with responsible officials, it can be concluded that the state's support measures for ecomigrants have also varied across different periods. A study of the state policy and programs on ecomigration using the example of the Adjara region makes it clear that the approaches of the governments of Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia towards the issue of ecomigration were different.

The study of archival documents and field research in ecomigrant-settled areas showed that the issue of ecomigration became a subject of state attention in a systematic form in the second half of the 1920s. Field ethnographic research revealed that, apart from natural disasters, economic factors were an important cause of migration.

This type of migration was practically equivalent to labor migration and was linked to the targeted policy of the Soviet government. Ecomigration during this period had the character of internal republican interregional agricultural resettlement (ACSA: Fund R-356. Inv. 1. Case 104. P. 107).

During the Soviet period, the resettlement of ecomigrants from the Adjara region was conducted in a targeted, systematic, and organized manner, using appropriate material and administrative resources. Archival documents confirm that in the Soviet period, three stages of ecomigration can be distinguished in Adjara, caused by both economic and ecological reasons:

- The first stage (1920–1940s) mostly had the character of labor migration within the same region.
- The second stage (1950–1970s) combined ecological and labor migration and acquired interregional characteristics.
- The third stage (especially from the 1980s) became exclusively ecological in nature, caused by the intensification of natural disasters and coinciding with the collapse of Soviet structures and the beginning of the independent state formation process in Georgia.
- In the Soviet period, migration plans were systematically organized. The government had prospective settlement plans for the kolkhozes and sovkhozes, within which the transfer of families from ecologically deteriorated highland areas of Adjara was carried out, as well as the filling of vacancies in agricultural enterprises in other regions. Alongside organized resettlement, unauthorized migration also took place – against the background of the state's declared policy.

According to the established rules, unauthorized migrants had to report to the state agency in their place of origin and receive permission for relocation. Otherwise, they would not be entitled to any assistance from the state and would be obliged to return to their original residence (ACSA: Fund R-356. Inv. 1. Case 118. P. 66, 68). State assistance programs provided for the allocation of land plots and material support for house construction.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, ecomigration from Adjara occurred in both organized and spontaneous (self-resettlement/purchase) forms. The state's attitude towards these two forms differed significantly. In the first case, it supported the resettlement of ecomigrants and provided financial assistance for the construction of houses, while in the second case, the ecomigrants who purchased houses with their own funds were provided with state loans for property purchase (ACSA: Fund R-356. Inv. 1. Case 388. P. 13).

The study of the state strategy of ecomigration in Adjara during the Soviet period shows that although ecomigration was a new issue in those years, quite serious measures were taken by the state over time, and this problem was not left without regulatory norms.

The problem of families displaced due to natural disasters coincided with the shortage of labor in the agricultural enterprises of the Soviet republic, threatening the implementation of economic plans. Therefore, special legal acts were adopted periodically, mainly in connection with labor needs in kolkhozes and sovkhozes. Receiving settlement space and state material support was conditioned on the fact that at least two able-bodied members of the family worked in those enterprises (Zoidze, 2022:6-7).

Archival documents show that, in essence, ecomigration in the Soviet period was perceived as labor migration, as it had the characteristics of an internal republican agricultural resettlement. As a result, it was managed by the state agency of the Georgian SSR Council of Ministers – the State Committee for the Use of Labor Resources from 1967, which later became the State Committee for Labor and Social Affairs, operating until 1991, when a new structure – the Department of Emergency Situations – was established. In 1993, this department was transformed into the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation.

After its abolition in 2004, the issues of migration, repatriation, and refugees were managed by a department created within the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation, and Refugees of Georgia. In 2013, its functions were transferred to the Livelihood Agency and the Social Service Agency. In 2019, these agencies merged into one legal entity under public law – the Agency for Internally Displaced Persons, Ecomigrants, and Livelihood Provision.

During the Soviet period, the ecomigration policy in Adjara was managed by the central authority, with the institutions of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara playing a supporting role. For example, in Adjara, the policy of ecomigration was managed by the representative of the State Committee for the Use of Labor Resources. After Georgia's independence, the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation was created in Adjara, which managed ecomigration issues. After its abolition in 2004, these functions were transferred to the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Adjara.

Until 2012, a strategy was maintained that implied the organized resettlement of ecomigrants from Adjara to various regions of Georgia. The government transferred houses purchased from private owners in different regions to ecomigrants, although no additional support was provided. In 2003-2012, during the period of active compact resettlement, there were no programs at the local, regional, or national levels for the integration and strengthening of the capacity of families settled in new areas (Ecomigration in Georgia, 2017:12).

Field research confirmed that until 2013, the opinion of families affected by natural disasters was either not considered at all or minimally taken into account when choosing a new place of residence. They were compactly settled in a new and unfamiliar environment. Many families did not have legal ownership rights to the houses and land plots „transferred“ to them many years ago. Moreover, the state never offered them targeted programs for integration, local settlement, or livelihood creation.

Before 2014, legal documentation (orders, protocols, contracts) for the resettlement of ecomigrants existed in rare cases. In most cases, resettlements took place without any legal basis, and various state institutions only covered the costs of transporting the families and their belongings. The policy of compact resettlement led to the formation of municipalities with ecomigrant villages and neighborhoods (Ecomigration in Georgia, 2017:11).

At the national level, no program was implemented to facilitate the integration and strengthening of resettled families, which the central government attributed to the fact that no agency directly held these competencies. Field research in several municipalities revealed numerous social problems and proved that neither local nor central government had ever prioritized the integration of ecomigrants into their new environment, which caused social conflicts.

After the 2012 electoral victory of Ivanishvili's team, the state's policy on ecomigration changed – the compact resettlement of families affected by natural disasters stopped. A new system was introduced, in which disaster-affected families could independently select and purchase housing within specific financial limits. A new state program was launched, providing financial support for displaced and disaster-affected families to buy housing. This marked a radical departure from previous practices. However, the research showed that interregional resettlement no longer occurred, and ecomigration processes continued within the same regions.

Conclusions. The research revealed that ecomigration from Adjara during the Soviet period took place in three different stages, each of which was characterized by different state objectives. The first two stages of ecomigration had the nature of internal republican agricultural resettlement and were of a labor migration character. This served to fill the labor deficit in the kolkhozes and sovkhozes. In the third stage, the relocation of ecomigrants acquired a new goal – the resettlement of ecomigrants in minority-populated and border regions, which carried a special political purpose. The state maintained this goal in the early years of independence (1990s) as well.

It is necessary to develop a systematic and transparent state approach toward ecomigration and resettlement, which should be the prerogative of both the central and municipal governments. This will allow the state to prevent social conflicts, reduce financial costs in the long term, and ensure the integration and development of ecomigrants in the local environment.

It is recommended that the government develop and implement a state strategy for ecological migration, which should define clear, political-level mechanisms and procedures for temporary or permanent relocation, adaptation–integration, and the provision of proper social conditions.

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