

Revival and Resilience: Social-Psychological Dimensions of the Return to Liberated Karabakh

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Keywords	Abstract
Repopulation Post-Liberation Recovery Social Cohesion Psychological Resilience National Identity	This study examines the multidimensional impact of repopulation in the territories liberated following the 2020 conflict. It analyzes the transformation of community structures and the psychological well-being of forcibly displaced Azerbaijanis. The investigation reviews the historical legacy of occupation, detailing the hardships experienced during periods of displacement, and contrasts these with the post-liberation resurgence marked by community reunification, infrastructural rehabilitation, and cultural revival. Through a comparative analysis of conditions under occupation versus the renewed phase, the study highlights how state policies, grassroots initiatives, and targeted support programs have facilitated both social cohesion and emotional recovery. Emphasis is placed on the integrated approach that combines the rebuilding of physical infrastructures—such as roads, schools, and public facilities—with efforts to restore familial bonds and cultural identity. The findings suggest that these dual dimensions of recovery are crucial for fostering long-term stability, national pride, and economic progress. This work contributes to the understanding of post-conflict recovery processes and offers insights into strategies for sustainable development and psychological healing in regions emerging from prolonged conflict.

I. Introduction

The 2020 conflict in Karabakh resulted in significant territorial changes and initiated a complex process of repopulation and social reintegration in the region. Following the cessation of military hostilities and the subsequent transfer of administrative control, a large number of forcibly displaced Azerbaijanis have begun returning to these areas. This return process has not only logistical and economic dimensions but also profound social and psychological implications that merit rigorous examination.

This article aims to explore the social and psychological aspects of the repatriation process in the liberated territories from an Azerbaijani perspective. It investigates how the return of displaced persons contributes to the reconstruction of community networks, restoration of cultural identity, and psychological well-being among individuals and groups. By employing a multidisciplinary approach that integrates insights from



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sociology, psychology, and regional studies, this work seeks to provide an objective analysis of the challenges and opportunities inherent in the resettlement process.

In reviewing the existing literature and recent empirical studies (Ismayilov, 2024; Musayev et al., 2022; Mehdizadeh, 2022), the article examines critical issues such as the rebuilding of social infrastructures, the reestablishment of family and community bonds, and the emotional impacts of displacement and subsequent return. The analysis is situated within the broader context of post-conflict recovery and nation-building, emphasizing the role of state policies, local initiatives, and international perspectives in facilitating a sustainable and inclusive reintegration process.

The central thesis of this study is that the return of forcibly displaced Azerbaijanis to the liberated territories constitutes a multidimensional transformation—one that extends beyond physical relocation to encompass the restoration of social cohesion and the healing of psychological wounds. By providing a balanced and empirically grounded assessment, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the repatriation process and offers insights for policymakers, community leaders, and scholars engaged in post-conflict reconstruction and social development.

II. Historical and Political Context

Occupation and Liberation:

The region of Karabakh experienced a long period during which Azerbaijani communities faced significant challenges and disruptions to daily life. During this time, essential services and infrastructure—including transportation routes, schools, and community centers—were adversely affected, impacting both the economy and social cohesion. The events of 2020 marked a critical turning point when Azerbaijani forces reestablished control over the region. This development has opened the path toward a comprehensive revitalization program focused on rebuilding and modernizing the area.

Impact on National Consciousness:

The prolonged period of hardship has left an enduring impact on the collective memory and cultural heritage of Azerbaijanis. Beyond commemorating the historical challenges, there is now a strong national commitment to restoring and enhancing the region. Revitalization efforts are centered on practical development projects—such as constructing new road networks, upgrading public utilities, and developing community facilities—that are expected to drive economic growth and improve the quality of life for local residents. These initiatives are seen as essential steps in fostering a renewed sense of community and ensuring that the region's future is built on solid, modern infrastructure.

III. Social Impact on Returnees

Rebuilding Communities:

The process of re-establishing community ties in the liberated regions is a multifaceted endeavor that involves both physical reconstruction and social rejuvenation. As people return, local authorities, community organizations, and non-governmental agencies are working in tandem to reopen critical public institutions such as schools, healthcare centers, and community halls. These establishments, which had been either neglected or repurposed during the period of occupation, are now being restored to serve as hubs for social interaction and local governance. Additionally, infrastructure projects—such as the repair and expansion of road networks, the enhancement of public transportation systems, and the modernization of utility services—are vital to facilitate mobility and accessibility. This reinvestment in infrastructure not only makes daily life more manageable for returnees but also acts as a catalyst for economic revival, enabling local businesses to flourish and encouraging further investments in the region.



At the community level, there is a strong emphasis on reviving suppressed local traditions and cultural practices. Initiatives to organize festivals, cultural workshops, and traditional craft fairs are being introduced to reawaken practices that once formed the backbone of communal life. These events provide a much-needed platform for storytelling, traditional music, dance, and cuisine, which help reconnect individuals with their heritage. Social networks, both formal and informal, are gradually being rebuilt through neighborhood associations and community-driven projects that foster mutual support and collaboration. In this way, the act of rebuilding communities transcends mere physical reconstruction—it is also a renewal of the social fabric that holds the region together.

Restoration of National Pride:

The return of displaced persons to their ancestral lands is a deeply symbolic act that serves to reaffirm national identity and sovereignty. For many, the physical act of repopulating these regions is intertwined with a broader narrative of resilience and renewal—a narrative that is being actively promoted through public commemorations and cultural initiatives. Grassroots movements have emerged as powerful agents of change, organizing local events that celebrate the region's history, arts, and traditions. These community-driven projects are complemented by state-supported programs designed to provide practical support to returnees, such as financial assistance, vocational training, and housing subsidies. Such initiatives are critical in helping individuals and families reintegrate into society and rebuild their livelihoods, thereby strengthening their connection to their homeland.

Moreover, the restoration of national pride is also being bolstered by a renewed emphasis on collective memory and cultural heritage. Local museums, heritage centers, and public archives are receiving attention as repositories of the region's history, ensuring that the lessons of the past are not forgotten. This collective effort to document and celebrate cultural identity helps create a sense of belonging and continuity, reinforcing the idea that the return is not just a demographic shift, but a meaningful step toward healing and growth. As families are reunited and communities are rebuilt, the revitalization of these areas is seen as a tangible expression of national unity—a commitment to a future where economic development and cultural richness go hand in hand.

Together, these efforts in rebuilding communities and restoring national pride are central to creating an environment where the legacy of past hardships is transformed into a foundation for future prosperity. The focus remains on sustainable development that not only addresses the immediate needs of returnees but also sets the stage for long-term social and economic advancement in the region.

IV. Psychological Impact on Returnees

Trauma and Recovery:

Years of forced displacement and the hardships experienced during the period of occupation have left enduring psychological scars among many returnees. The disruption of daily life, separation from loved ones, and the uncertainty that pervaded during the occupation have contributed to chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. Many individuals exhibit symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including sleep disturbances, flashbacks, and difficulty establishing trust in new social environments. These emotional wounds are compounded by the loss of familiar community networks and cultural environments, which previously provided a sense of belonging and security. Research by Sipahi, Özsoy, and Qasımlı (2022) highlights how these long-term stressors can significantly impair mental health and overall quality of life.

Likewise, studies such as those by Shamilov and Kara (2021) document the pervasive nature of trauma in displaced communities, underscoring the importance of timely psychological intervention to mitigate these adverse effects.



In response to these challenges, a range of community-based and professional psychological support initiatives has begun to emerge. Counseling programs, peer support groups, and trauma recovery workshops are being established across the region. These initiatives aim to provide structured avenues for individuals to process their experiences and gradually rebuild their emotional resilience. The focus is on creating safe spaces where returnees can share their stories, validate each other's feelings, and learn coping strategies. Mental health professionals are working closely with local authorities to integrate psychological support within broader community rehabilitation programs, ensuring that recovery efforts address both the individual and collective dimensions of trauma.

Renewed Hope and Resilience:

The dramatic events of 2020, marking the end of occupation, have not only catalyzed physical and infrastructural restoration but have also sparked a profound psychological turnaround among returnees. There is a growing sense of renewed hope and resilience as individuals begin to reframe their narratives from one of loss to one of recovery and future promise. The act of returning to ancestral lands and re-establishing communities has become a powerful symbol of national renewal and personal rebirth. According to Musayev, Aliyev, Maharramova, and Gazanfarli (2022), this process of resettlement is inherently tied to the reconstruction of self-identity and collective pride, serving as an emotional counterbalance to the years of displacement.

Grassroots initiatives and state-supported programs are playing a critical role in fostering this resurgence of hope. Local community centers, family reunification programs, and cultural revival projects are actively working to reestablish bonds that were disrupted by forced displacement. Additionally, vocational training and employment support, as discussed by Ismayilov (2024), not only contribute to economic revitalization but also reinforce the dignity and self-worth of returning citizens. These programs are designed to empower individuals with the tools needed to overcome past adversities and to build resilient communities that can thrive in a post-conflict environment.

Furthermore, the establishment of community support groups and ongoing counseling sessions has provided returnees with avenues to collectively process their experiences. By sharing personal stories and engaging in group discussions, individuals find validation and strength in their shared struggles, paving the way for a gradual but steady healing process. Such community-based recovery models are critical in transforming the long-term psychological impact of displacement into a narrative of recovery and future-oriented optimism.

V. Comparative Analysis: Social and Psychological Dimensions

Below is a comparative overview that outlines the key social and psychological dimensions before and after liberation. This table highlights the significant transformations in community life, family dynamics, emotional well-being, and cultural identity under two distinct phases—during occupation and following the liberation.

Explanation:

This table serves as a clear, visual comparison between the detrimental effects experienced under occupation and the positive shifts occurring after liberation. Under occupation, the fabric of society was marked by fragmented communities, disrupted family bonds, widespread trauma, and a gradual erosion of cultural identity. These factors combined to create a pervasive sense of loss and disconnection among the population.

In contrast, the post-liberation phase is characterized by significant social and psychological transformation. The reunification of communities has allowed for the revival of traditional cultural practices and the strengthening of family and communal bonds. Additionally, the renewed sense of national pride has



contributed to the gradual healing of emotional wounds, reinforcing a collective resilience among returnees. This transformation is not merely symbolic but is also being supported by targeted grassroots initiatives and state-backed programs designed to facilitate both physical and psychological recovery (Ismayilov, 2024; Musayev et al., 2022; Sipahi, Özsoy, & Qasimli, 2022).

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Under Occupation</i>	<i>Post-Liberation</i>
Community Life	Fragmented communities; loss of traditional social structures	Reunification of communities; revival of cultural practices
Family Dynamics	Separation and disruption of family units	Reestablishment of family bonds and enhanced communal support
Emotional Well-being	Widespread trauma; feelings of suppression and injustice	Gradual healing fostered by national pride and robust support systems
Cultural Identity	Erosion of Azerbaijani cultural identity due to imposed foreign influences	Resurgence of national culture and heritage as communities reclaim their narrative

Together, the table and accompanying explanation illustrate how the social and psychological realms are being fundamentally reshaped under the renewed light of Azerbaijani sovereignty. The revitalization efforts reflect a holistic approach that addresses both the tangible aspects of community rebuilding and the intangible dimensions of emotional and cultural recovery.

VI. National Unity and Future Prospects

Solidarity and State Initiatives:

State policies and community organizations have been pivotal in supporting the return process and guiding the region's revitalization. In the post-liberation phase, coordinated government initiatives are actively focusing on reconstructing essential infrastructure such as roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and public utilities. These projects are designed not only to rebuild physical structures but also to reconnect isolated communities by improving transportation and communication networks. In parallel, community organizations and local leaders are spearheading grassroots projects that foster unity and preserve cultural heritage. Examples include the reopening of cultural centers, the organization of local festivals, and programs dedicated to restoring traditional crafts and practices that had been diminished during the years of occupation. Such initiatives serve to re-establish a sense of belonging and reinforce communal bonds, ensuring that economic recovery is accompanied by social and cultural renewal (Ismayilov, 2024; Məmmədov & Qasimli, 2024).

Vision for a Peaceful Future:

Looking ahead, there is a shared vision that the restoration of the liberated territories will contribute significantly to long-term peace, prosperity, and the flourishing of Azerbaijani identity. This vision emphasizes a future where sustainable development, cultural revival, and the lessons learned from past adversities combine to create a resilient society. Central to this forward-looking approach is the commitment to collective memory—ensuring that historical experiences, both painful and inspiring, are documented and integrated into future planning. State-supported policies, coupled with community-driven initiatives, are working to ensure that the rebuilt infrastructure not only meets immediate needs but also serves as the foundation for continuous economic growth and social cohesion. The focus is on building a peaceful future



where renewed national unity and proactive development strategies promote stability and inclusive progress, allowing every citizen to contribute to and benefit from the region's prosperity (Sipahi, Özsoy, & Qasimli, 2022; Musayev et al., 2022).

Together, these initiatives and visions underscore a holistic approach to regional revitalization—one that combines strategic infrastructure investments, cultural preservation, and the empowerment of local communities. This integrated strategy is designed to ensure that the post-liberation era marks the beginning of a sustained period of peace, growth, and renewed national pride.

Conclusion

The multifaceted process of repopulating the liberated territories encompasses not only the physical reconstruction of infrastructure but also the profound social and psychological rehabilitation of displaced communities. Throughout this analysis, it has been demonstrated that the restoration of roads, public facilities, and community centers is essential for reconnecting fragmented communities and catalyzing economic revival. Simultaneously, the reestablishment of cultural practices and family bonds plays a critical role in healing the emotional scars left by years of displacement and occupation.

The comparative examination of conditions before and after liberation highlights a dramatic shift: where occupation bred fragmentation, suppression, and trauma, the post-liberation era is now characterized by renewed hope, solidarity, and a resurgence of national pride. State policies and grassroots initiatives are proving to be indispensable in driving these transformations, fostering unity and facilitating the integration of support systems such as counseling and community-based recovery programs.

Looking forward, the integrated strategy of rebuilding physical infrastructure alongside emotional and cultural restoration provides a promising pathway toward long-term peace and prosperity. By embedding lessons learned from past adversities into current and future development plans, Azerbaijan is laying a strong foundation for a resilient society that honors its heritage while embracing modern progress. This holistic approach not only ensures the region's sustainable growth but also strengthens the collective identity and unity of its people, paving the way for a more stable and prosperous future.

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