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ASSESSMENT OF PSYCHOSOCIAL NEEDS OF MEDIA CONTENT CREATORS
FROM NAGORNO KARABAKH
(REPORT SUMMARY)

YEREVAN 2024



The research is conducted by the Armenian Scientific Association of Psychologists NGO.



This summary is based on the report of the same title, which was prepared by the Armenian Scientific Association of Psychologists NGO in cooperation with the Public Journalism Club NGO within the framework of the "Professional Media and Civil Society Join Forces for Dialogue" project.

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We are grateful to everyone who participated in the study for their time and valuable thoughts and opinions.

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INTRODUCTION

From September 2023¹, more than 100,000 people were displaced from Nagorno Karabakh² and found refuge in Armenia. Among them were many media workers, including editors, media managers, reporters, photographers, cameramen, presenters, and other media professionals.

Within the framework of the research, we aimed to identify the psychosocial and professional needs of media content creators displaced from Nagorno Karabakh to Armenia, so that they can be self-fulfilled in the professional field and have better hardiness and greater resilience in their new environment.

The research should help to understand the psychosocial problems created as a result of displacement, the strength of their impact – what mark they have left and how deep it is – the scope of the needs to be addressed, and the available tools. These findings should help local organizations in the media sector, the international donor community, and government structures to develop and implement the most effective steps to fill the identified needs and gaps.

Research work included:

¹ There were 223 victims in Nagorno Karabakh as a result of the Azerbaijani aggression on September 19-20, 2023, Radio Liberty, 2024, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32761668.html>

² More than 100,000 forcibly displaced persons from Nagorno Karabakh arrived in Armenia in 2023, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32617179.html>

1. **Development of methodology.** This was an information-gathering mission that included meetings and discussions with the organizers of work already being done with the target group, as well as developing questionnaires and discussing them with experts in the field.

2. **Individual interviews.** Information for the study was collected via individual interviews using the specially developed questionnaire. The interviews were conducted online.

3. **Expert interviews.** During the research, expert meetings were also conducted using the format of structured interviews. The experts were selected for their connection with the media sector – either as representatives of organizations implementing relevant projects or as independent researchers and experts in the public sector.

4. **Participation in public events and discussions.** During the research period, the research team participated in activities related to the problems and issues of displaced Nagorno Karabakh residents initiated by various organizations.

5. **Meetings with other actors.** The research team met and got acquainted with teams and programs implementing initiatives aimed at supporting displaced persons from Nagorno Karabakh.

6. **Quantitative online survey.** A questionnaire was prepared and distributed among media content creators displaced from Nagorno Karabakh, who filled it out anonymously.

MAIN FINDINGS

The results of the research outlined below were summarized on the basis of the thoughts, opinions, ideas, emotions, and feelings expressed during the interviews. The logic of the presentation reflects the structure of the interview and refers to the person's mental state, physical and health state, psychosocial manifestations, adaptation to new conditions, interpersonal relations, and attitude towards the future. These situational analyses allow us to present some proposals for future programs and actions.

MENTAL HEALTH

- The mental state of Nagorno Karabakh media content creators displaced to Armenia has been formed by great loss and strong trauma on the individual, family, and societal levels.
- The mental state of media content creators from Nagorno Karabakh is generally characterized by depression, manifested both in behavior (decrease in motivation, uncertainty about goals, lack of a positive vision of the future) and in the emotional sphere (sadness, indifference, high sense of uncertainty, desolation, feeling of powerlessness, anxiety). This is accompanied not only by collective trauma and challenges in everyday life, but also by difficulties in adapting and pursuing their professions. In such a state of mind, the issues of mental health, mental well-being, and mental hygiene can hardly be their primary focus and are put on one side, together with physical health issues, as less important.

- Almost all the participants mentioned personal psychological problems and the lack of their own resources to overcome difficulties. At the same time, they emphasized the importance and necessity of having access to a psychologist. However, several circumstances militate against them actively looking for psychological counseling: their state of depression; the importance of other, more pressing problems; lack of time; and, to some extent, general reluctance to seek psychological help, or, in some cases, distrust of it.
- The interview participants believed that they were in a better state than most of their relatives, friends, and colleagues. They viewed their mental state in comparison with other losses: material loss had become secondary to loss of life, even when it was a loss of home. According to interviewees, relatives and friends who lost family members during the September war needed more support, and they felt that they had to give priority to them.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

- Nagorno Karabakh media content creators have experienced an obvious deterioration of their physical condition and/or new negative developments regarding their state of health, which are directly related to the displacement and its consequences. Negative changes in health are manifested by headaches, sleep quality deterioration, blood pressure fluctuations, fatigue, and pains in the musculoskeletal system.

The low prospects of a steady and well-paid job prevent them from attending to their health consistently. Not having their own house, lack of financial means, low mood, and low expectations for the future make them indifferent to their own physical and mental health.

ADAPTING TO NEW CONDITIONS

Armenian conditions are not entirely new, according to the displaced population's own assessment, but adaptation is a problem. Almost all respondents disagreed with the term "integration", stressing that Armenia is their homeland. All of them had been to Yerevan and other places in Armenia many times; some had even studied there and knew Yerevan and Armenia very well. However, they noted various circumstances to which those displaced from Nagorno Karabakh must adapt, particularly those who live in urban environments. The predominant issues are the greater size of Yerevan compared to Stepanakert, noise, air pollution, the need to travel long distances, an overcrowded city, tense and nervous people, and the absence of forest and greenery.

- The adaptation process among media content creators is more complicated due to the conditions of their professional activity; the qualities and skills required; and competition in the journalistic field; as well as the substantially larger volume of work and comparatively much lower pay.
- Another obstacle to smooth adaptation is the ambiguous attitude of some parts of

Armenian society toward the displaced population, who found their salvation in Armenia. Some of those displaced from Nagorno Karabakh had personally experienced, or heard from other displaced persons, cases of discriminatory labeling or treatment (in some cases people refused to rent out an apartment to people displaced from Nagorno Karabakh), or blame for the situation around Karabakh and in Armenia. Some people saw the provision of financial aid to displaced persons by the Armenian government as unfair. The verbal manifestations of such attitudes depressed and discouraged many of those displaced, creating the impression that a part of the Armenian public does not understand the degree of grief and loss, and the burden of the survivors. This can further deepen feelings of being blamed and misunderstood, as well as of alienation.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

- The traumatic situations in which Nagorno Karabakh media content creators have found themselves have had an impact on their social relations and social life. By their own assessment, they have faced unexpected intolerance, and their grief and pain, loss and bitterness have not been properly understood by at least part of Armenian society. As a result, they have built, deepened, and strengthened their relationships and social ties with other former residents of Nagorno Karabakh – former colleagues, business partners, acquaintances, and close friends. This provides a feeling of empathy, of being listened to and understood, which is necessary for them in this situation; it is an important psychological-behavioral mechanism that satisfies the basic need for attachment. A further important element in this interaction is that they don't blame each other for what

happened. Attention should be paid to further adapting this mechanism and creating opportunities to expand the circle of contacts.

- When talking about social connections and new relations, it is necessary to single out the events that various media organizations, such as the Center for Media Initiatives, Public Journalism Club, and Yerevan Press Club, have implemented for their partners from Karabakh. Those were events aimed at developing professional relationships and initiatives encouraging personal growth and overcoming psychosocial problems, as well as discussions on various issues. All these events helped media content creators from Nagorno Karabakh to find and establish new relationships with colleagues in their field, enriching their social relations from the point of view of both professional and personal contacts.
- Family relations were not spared the impact of what happened. However, they have mostly changed for the better. Emotional ties between family members have strengthened; mutual perceptions have changed qualitatively; mutual understanding and tolerance towards each other have become predominant. In children, there is a sharp and significant increase in a sense of responsibility towards parents and younger siblings. When considering these positive changes, we should note that in Armenia, particularly in Yerevan, most displaced people live as large families in small apartments, unlike the conditions in Karabakh. For many, this situation initially had positive aspects. However, over time, it can become a problem and have a negative impact on family relationships.
- Participation in public events, such as going to the theater, cinema, concerts, as well as

sports venues and other similar places, is also an important part of social life. Very few of the media professionals from Nagorno Karabakh attend cultural events with any regularity. The main reason for the lack of interest in such activities is low mood, prevailing depression, as well as a wish to avoid big crowds.

ATTITUDE TO FUTURE

- One of the most serious effects of loss and trauma is the grave and negative impact on a person's vision of the future. The situation described above, as well as the evaluation of reality in that state of mind, has created for many displaced people a feeling of indifference, hopelessness, and meaninglessness towards the future. Longing for the past and regret for what was lost, alienation from everyday life, work, finance, and society do not allow them to look at the future from a more realistic angle in order to adapt to the new situation and implement changes. Their vision of the future is often narrow, connected and identified exclusively with the desire to return to Nagorno Karabakh.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations were based on the main conclusions drawn from the interviews with the Nagorno Karabakh media content creators, which generally focused on their psychological well-being and mental health. Since the media content creators from Nagorno Karabakh had a certain resistance to turning to psychological counseling, we believe that, while

maintaining access to individual psychological work, the recommendations should address the issue of mental health in a mediated way, creating alternatives to maintain and improve it. With that in mind, three groups of recommendations are proposed: the first is aimed at the media content creators from Nagorno Karabakh; the second is aimed at highlighting the wider issue of mental health and psychological well-being in the media sphere since the work of media content creators itself contains challenges for mental health; and the third is aimed at implementation of changes at the public level – the creation of new narratives and advocacy for them. The latter will enable media content creators from Nagorno Karabakh to approach the issue of mental health from the perspective of professional development. All recommendations can be equally accepted and implemented by both the donor community and local non-governmental organizations.

➤ **Recommendations regarding media content creators from Nagorno Karabakh**

1. Development of psychosocial skills:

- psychoeducational meetings aimed at strengthening hardiness, personal resilience, and mental health skills, as a result of which behavioral strategies and skills for coping with uncertainty will be formed
- development of communication abilities, emotional intelligence (social-emotional learning), goal-setting, and decision-making skills.

Such meetings can be planned and targeted specifically for the persons from Nagorno Karabakh or together with other media workers.

2. Individual psychotherapeutic and psychoconsultative work, if necessary, aimed at alleviating symptoms of psychotrauma and stress and overcoming loss.

3. Development and implementation of a model for mutual aid and supportive group work, which does not involve professional intervention but is carried out through the initiative and self-organization of peer counselors and affected people. Such work provides an opportunity to overcome stigmatization and isolation and creates a more natural environment for verbalizing problems and empathy.

4. Individual and group activities for understanding and empathizing with collective trauma by working with personal and collective narratives. This will provide an opportunity to develop empathy and a sense of connection, as well as to work with people's core beliefs and sense of meaning. It will also stimulate personal and collective healing mechanisms and promote post-traumatic growth.

➤ **Recommendations for maintaining mental health and psychological well-being of all media workers**

To highlight and develop the discourse of mental health and psychological well-being in the field of media content creators:

1. Develop and distribute self-help guidelines for media workers aimed at developing self-care skills: meditation practices, coping behaviors, managing emotions, etc.

2. Organize psychoeducational meetings on various topics: emotional burnout, depression, mobbing, personal growth, resilience skills, etc.
3. Introduce practices of honest, open conversations about successful and unsuccessful attempts by media workers to overcome their psychological problems.
4. Develop specific guidelines for media managers focused on primary symptoms of emotional burnout, development of communication skills, and facilitation of group dynamics.
5. Develop behavioral emergency reporting protocols, as well as psychological preparedness skills before emergency news and self-regulation skills after such news.
6. Develop partnerships with organizations providing psychological services for possible individual and group work.

➤ **Recommendations for public advocacy, building a healing discourse, capacity building**

1. Promote the discourse of post-traumatic personal and collective growth in public and professional fields by engaging interdisciplinary teams, conducting studies, and publicizing different stories.
2. Counter false narratives by leveraging opportunities and advantages:
 - absence of a language problem

- cultural commonalities, traditions
- uniqueness of the NK cuisine and positive attitudes towards it
- generalization (reduced distinction between Armenians from Armenia and from Karabakh).

3. Consolidate the work of interested bodies:

- to increase confidence in psychological science and practice
- to reduce – and eventually eliminate – discrimination through state-sponsored interdisciplinary scientific studies, where psychologists, sociologists, historians, culturalists, ethnographers, and representatives of other sciences participate in studying and developing narratives that, with the help of effective communication, will become important for society.

SUMMARY

The assessment of the psychosocial needs of media content creators who were displaced from Nagorno Karabakh and moved to Armenia demonstrated in real time the extent, the type, and the depth of psychosocial problems faced by our compatriots, as well as different problems with their adaptation to change and new realities, and with their personal and professional development and flexibility. It also showed that these processes are related and should always be at the center of attention of the state, private and public actors, the donor community, and local self-government bodies. A few ideas can be summarized for future reference:

- There is a need for a more in-depth study of the perceptions, expectations, and assessments of the reality of people forcibly displaced from Nagorno Karabakh and the different layers of Armenian society.
- There should be a deeper study of the narratives and the ways of their communication that have been conditioned by the influence of past years and have an impact on Armenian society.
- There is a need for more extensive, in-depth research on the problem of intergenerational trauma, including Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh, Armenians of Armenia, and representatives of the diaspora, including representatives of different ages.
- It is of great importance to study the narratives in the Armenian media for the past six years from the point of view of speculation, fake news, and fearmongering about the Karabakh issue and the developments around it.
- A study is needed of the impact of the September 2023 displacement on the people of Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh, and the diaspora from the point of view of mental health protection and development.
- There is a need, together with state bodies, to develop approaches for solving the problems of people displaced from Nagorno Karabakh, based on tolerance, inclusiveness, and accessibility to all.