

## Study Sheds Light on Armenian Migrants in Turkey

They are a thorn in the side of Armenia's government and the favorite target of Turkish politicians furious with Armenian genocide bills put before foreign parliaments. Hidden away from the public eye, the thousands of Armenian nationals believed to be illegally working in Turkey form the most low-key and obscure Armenian migrant community abroad.

Successive Turkish governments have for years tolerated their existence to embarrass Yerevan in the international arena and showcase Ankara's declared good will towards Armenians. Turkish leaders have at various times spoken of between 30,000 and 100,000 citizens of Armenia allegedly residing in their country.



The findings of a newly publicized study conducted by an Istanbul-born Armenian researcher, Alin Ozinian, and commissioned by the Yerevan-based Eurasia Partnership Foundation are a further indication that these figures are wide of the mark. They also give valuable insights into the plight of the mainly female workers scraping a living with housekeeping and other menial jobs.

The 130-page research, the first of its kind, is based on Ozinian's interviews with 150 Armenians conducted in the course of last year. It essentially bears out the widely held belief that the vast majority of the Armenian immigrants (over 90 percent) are women from areas outside Yerevan who are aged between 40 and 60 and work in Istanbul without Turkish residency and employment permits.

"Generally, they introduce themselves as widowed or divorced," says the study. "Some of the married women have had no contact with their husbands since they came to Turkey."

When asked about their occupation, nine in ten interviewees said they clean houses or look after elderly persons or children. Most of them claimed to work for and live with affluent Turkish-Armenian families. Many of those lacking such free accommodation rent rooms in Istanbul's blue-collar Kumkapi district, which is home to the Istanbul Patriarchate of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The study, mostly funded by the Norwegian government, describes their living conditions as "very bad."

The migrant workers' relationship with their ethnic Armenian em-

ployers seems less cordial than one might think. "They look down on us," one 46-year-old woman, identified as A.B., told Ozinian. "In their opinion, we are ignorant villagers."

Three-quarters of the respondents said they earn between \$500 and \$600 a month. The sum, although about twice higher than the current official average wage in Armenia, is significantly below the monthly income of hundreds of thousands of Armenian migrants working in Russia, Europe and the United States. Many of the interviewed women said that they would not agree to work as housecleaners, maids or baby-sitters in Armenia because of what they claimed is a stigma attached to these

jobs there. "I have kids and I don't want them to hear words like 'their mother is a cleaner, she is cleaning toilets,'" said A.B.

Some of the irregular workers have had children, including out of wedlock, in Turkey. Ozinian estimated their number at between 600 and 800 as she presented her report at the Global Political Trends Center (GPOT) of Istanbul's Kultur University last week. The illegal status of their mothers and the latter's fear of exposing themselves to any Turkish state authority mean that those children are growing up uneducated after reaching school age. The best they can hope for is to get some primary education at an underground school reportedly operated by local Armenians.

Ozinian's research also tries to answer the politically touchy question of just how many Armenians have taken up residence in Turkey since the early 1990s. Unable to receive any concrete information from government bodies in Ankara, Ozinian relied on government data on foreign tourists that entered and left Turkey from 2000-2007. It shows that the number of Armenian citizens arriving in the country (virtually all of them with 30-day tourist visas) exceeded those returning home during this period by just over 5,800. (By comparison, the arrival-departure difference for neighboring Georgia and Azerbaijan stands at around 53,800 and 99,300 respectively.)

Gagik Yeghanyan, head of Armenia's State Migration Agency, came up with a similar figure at a news conference held in Yerevan last De-

## Armenian Churches in Van to be Restored



Varagavank

Armenian churches in the eastern province of Van will be restored, deputy governor said on Monday.

Speaking to the A.A correspondent, Van deputy governor Halil Berk said that Armenian churches in Carpanak Island and Yukaribakracli village in the province would be restored within the scope of a project prepared by the governor's office.

Berk said they were conducting projects to boost tourism potential of the province.

"There are four islands including Akdamar Island in Lake Van. Every island has a church. Only Akdamar Church was restored. Churches in Carpanak Island and Yukaribakracli village will also be restored with the project prepared by us," Berk said.

Varagavank Monastery includes seven churches in Yukari Bakracli village. The oldest church is St. Sophia Church built in the 8th century.

Carpanak Church which was built in the 6th century was restored in 1462. After an earthquake in 1703, the church was restored between 1712 and 1720.

ember. "We can speak about roughly 5,200 migrants that are citizens of Armenia and work in Turkey," he said, accusing the Turks of grossly inflating their number.

"I personally think that the real number does not exceed 10,000," Ozinian said, for her part. Aris Nalci, a journalist from the Turkish-Armenian newspaper "Agos" present at the discussion, gave a slightly higher estimate: between 12,000 and 14,000.

These estimates pale in comparison with the ever growing number of illegal Armenian migrants cited by Turkish government officials and politicians. They spoke of 30,000 such workers as the issue first came under spotlight in late 2000, when the U.S. Congress was close to adopting a resolution describing the 1915 massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as genocide.

Hrant Dink, the prominent "Agos" editor assassinated in 2007, claimed responsibility for that figure in a 2004 article cited in Ozinian's report. Dink said the figure gained currency in Turkish political circles after he had sarcastically advised a Turkish journalist that

"30,000 would be a better number if you want to exaggerate things." The journalist, he said, wondered if the number of those immigrants exceeds 10,000 and took the answer seriously. "The number of Armenian citizens [in Turkey] has never reached 30,000; in fact, it has never surpassed 3,000-5,000," wrote Dink.

Still, Turkish policy-makers claimed by 2006 that there are as many as 70,000 illegal immigrants from Armenia. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan put their number at a whopping 100,000 in televised remarks aired late last month. The Turkish government does not deport them because "we do not want any tension," Erdogan said, complaining that the Armenian government has not appreciated that stance with "reciprocal steps" on the genocide issue and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

"The figure is apparently inflated for political purposes. I don't think it's that high," Ozinian told RFE/RL after a panel discussion on her study hosted by another, Ankara-based think-tank,

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