



ევროკავშირი
საქართველოსთვის
The European Union for Georgia

ISSUE BRIEF



IOM MISSION TO GEORGIA

March 2021

ABROAD IN TIMES OF COVID-19

SITUATION AND NEEDS OF GEORGIAN MIGRANTS ABROAD IN TIMES OF GLOBAL PANDEMIC

The Government of Georgia has rightfully been lauded as a global success story for its significant and early efforts to assist Georgian citizens stranded outside of their country during the pandemic. Georgian consular offices across the world provided diverse assistance to Georgian migrants abroad, ranging from counselling and material assistance to facilitating repatriation on Government-chartered flights. However, evidence shows that despite the comprehensive Government efforts, and similarly to third country migrants of other nationalities, Georgian migrants in Europe have been severely affected in many respects. IOM has conducted research among Georgian migrants who remained in countries of the European Economic Area (EEA) during the pandemic in order to highlight their situation and continued needs, to document the efforts of the Government of Georgia during this unprecedented crisis, and to provide recommendations on further opportunities to strengthen protection of citizens stranded abroad in times of a global crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been referred to as the most consequential crisis since the World Wars, putting millions of people at risk and causing profound health and economic consequences. As international mobility came to a standstill and nations restricted movement across their borders, it has been widely accepted that the COVID-19 pandemic has put international migrants, those temporarily outside their country of origin, as well as populations dependent on mobility in a uniquely vulnerable position. For [Georgian migrants abroad](#) during the global pandemic, immigration status and integration level in host societies have determined the severity of the situation. Those Georgian migrants abroad with regular immigration status or work permits have been far less exposed to the pandemic and its impacts than those who have remained abroad in an irregular fashion. Georgian migrants without a valid immigration status have typically experienced severe humanitarian needs, facing a stronger pressure to return to their country of origin.



In the time of COVID-19 IOM works jointly with the Government of Georgia to ensure information provision and support with return and reintegration for Georgian nationals stranded abroad; many of them have lost their jobs, are returning home with minors or are in need of medical services.

This brief is part of a research series produced by IOM Georgia. Please see parallel briefs highlighting the experiences and needs of foreign migrants in Georgia and Georgian returnees during the COVID-19 pandemic. This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of IOM and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

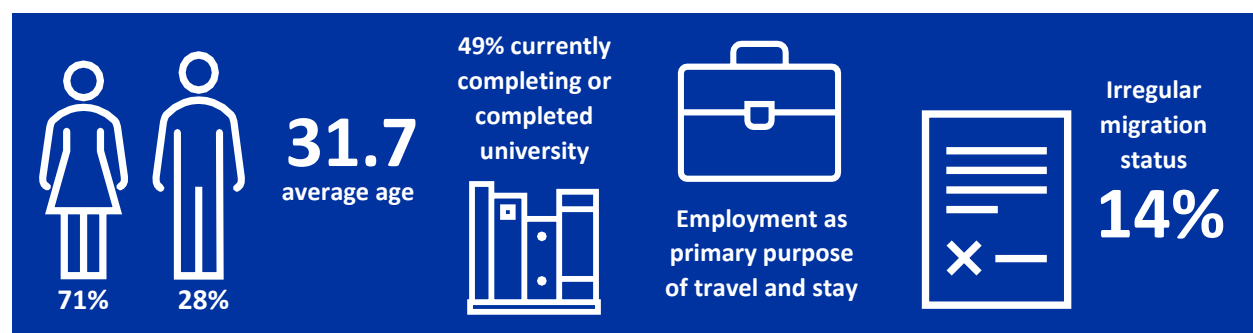
EMIGRATION DYNAMICS IN GEORGIA

Migration dynamics of Georgia are dominated by emigration. Net immigration has been significantly negative for the past decade, showing that emigration from Georgia systematically exceeds immigration¹. A large proportion of the population in Georgia today relies on income facilitated by mobility, propelling the continued emigration. In the early 1990's, migration from Georgia was directed toward the Russian Federation, where Georgian migrant workers, predominantly males, were mostly occupied in construction and petty trade. Increased demand for female labour in developed countries triggered 'feminization of migration' in later decades and turned Georgian emigrants into 'transnational mothers', taking care of other people's children and leaving their own children in the care of husbands and/or other family members, such as grandparents¹. The 2017 Visa Liberalization with the European Union opened doors towards the West: Greece, Italy, Germany, Poland and France are among top destination countries for Georgian migrants who typically travel under the visa-free entry regime to seek employment abroad. To IOM's knowledge, many Georgian migrants overstay their visa and remain in the EU in an irregular fashion or pursue international protection as a means of prolonging their stay or accessing social and healthcare systems. Reflecting this trend, in 2019 alone, over 20,000 Georgian citizens applied for asylum in the European Union (nearly 0.7% of the country's population) and hundreds of thousands made use of visa-free travel (Eurostat).

Indeed, emigration and remittance-dependency are widely practiced as a means of ensuring livelihood for many households in Georgia. In 2019, remittances to Georgia amounted to an estimated 10.5 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)¹. As the National Bank of Georgia reports¹, personal remittances sent to Georgia grow each year, mostly sent from the Russian Federation, EU countries (Italy and Greece with the largest shares), Israel, Turkey, the USA, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and others. Similar sending countries were reported in 2019 and 2020.

Social media spaces managed by IOM have over the last years witnessed increasing interest and intensifying discussion of routes available to Georgian citizens attempting to reach destination countries. However, discussions among Georgians interested in (r)emigration continue to be marked by confusion and chaotic spread of misleading information. IOM and its projects and channels (in particular, the Safe Migration Campaign) systematically address false information and convey straightforward messages which aim to correct any misleading information and provide referrals to relevant resources and recommendations. Those migrants who are already abroad actively share advice for those considering emigration.

In November 2020, IOM commissioned a survey among Georgian migrants residing in the EEA at the time of a severe second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, conducted by the GORBI polling agency. Anonymous respondents were selected randomly from a database maintained by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Georgia and contacted via telephone. The database included Georgian citizens residing abroad long term and Georgian citizens who have requested assistance and/or registered with Embassies and Consular Offices in the context of the crisis. A total of 255 migrants provided anonymous information to a structured survey. While no profile of the Georgian migrant population can reasonably be extrapolated from this data, the survey and parallel focus group discussions delivered valuable findings on the experiences of Georgian migrants who have remained abroad during the global pandemic. The incidents included their access to services provided by the Government of Georgia and decision making on a potential return to their country of origin. Similar topics were discussed in depth during a virtual focus group discussion organized with a representative sub-sample of respondents.



The survey sample provides an approximate profile of Georgian migrants residing in the EEA, though further research would be needed to deliver a representative mapping. Survey respondents were 71 per cent female and 28 per cent male, and 31.7 years old on average. In terms of the highest achieved education, 18 per cent of respondents reported complete high school education, 22 per cent vocational education, and 49 per cent have reached or are currently completing a university degree or higher. The largest numbers of respondents were residing in Germany, Italy, and Spain. For 43.6 per cent, the original purpose for travel abroad was employment, and 26.7 per cent travelled to complete education or training. Nearly 6 per cent (15 respondents) left Georgia specifically to seek asylum abroad, and 2.7 per cent (7 persons) have gone abroad for medical treatment. When asked for the current purpose of stay abroad, 58.4 per cent indicated employment, and 12.5 per cent reported having started a family abroad, indicating that the original purpose of travel has changed for some Georgian migrants. Nearly 5 per cent indicated having an expired immigration permit, with an additional 9 per cent showing other forms of irregular status (rejected application for asylum, new residence application in preparation, etc.).

The focus group discussions revealed that Georgian citizens residing abroad mobilize each other's support not only in times of pandemic. Diaspora organizations and weekend schools help Georgian nationals to maintain ties to each other and engage in educational activities.

Impact of COVID-19 on Georgian Migrants Abroad¹

All respondents in IOM's survey and focus group discussions in November 2020 have remained abroad throughout the pandemic, reporting diverse levels of integration and security in their host societies. Those in irregular situations were significantly more likely to suffer severe consequences of the pandemic, experience immediate material emergencies due to loss of irregular employment, lack of savings, closure of affordable informal migrant accommodation centers, and difficulties accessing support and seeking repatriation.

Access to information and health services

Georgian migrants abroad reported having good access to information about COVID-19, with 68.2 per cent stating that information is very accessible and understandable. Language barriers and struggles to find complete and reliable information were highlighted by 21.2 per cent of respondents who said that relevant information is somewhat accessible, and 7.1 per cent who stated that information is not at all or not very accessible. If needed, 84.3 per cent of Georgian migrants abroad surveyed claimed to know how to access COVID-19 related health care abroad.

¹ In addition to the survey and focus group discussions, IOM's findings are underpinned by lessons learned through contact with Georgian population presently abroad through social media outreach (12,000 members in IOM's Georgian-language Facebook group on safe migration to Europe) and private counselling for Georgian citizens (8,512 counselling sessions provided by IOM's Migrant Resource Centers via telephones and social media in 2020).

SPECIAL FOCUS: Georgian asylum seekers in the European Union

The migrant survey reached a number of respondents who declared having traveled to the European Union (EU) with the explicit purpose of seeking international protection (8%). At the time of the survey, these asylum seekers were located in seven different EU countries, with Germany and Greece as the most frequent destinations (sample is not representative). The vast majority of respondents in this category had spent between one to three years abroad, and resided in their host country with an irregular immigration status – having withdrawn their asylum application or having been rejected. Only one respondent indicated having received humanitarian status (unverified). More than half of respondents in this group indicated that they reside abroad with children under the age of 18.

The respondents were diverse in their strategies for securing livelihood while abroad, however, income from provision of informal services and salary from employment of one or multiple household members seem most common. Only one respondent indicated dependency on State support for asylum seekers. The majority of respondents in this category indicated having had their income or salary decreased or lost due to the pandemic.

The respondents were not uniform in their wish to remain abroad – the majority indicated they did not know how long they will remain in the European Union. Only a small number of respondents in this group indicated that they hoped to “stay forever”. Those respondents who stated they wish to stay in the EU for a longer period than originally planned indicated that their family back in Georgia depends on remittance income sent from abroad. Those who declared an interest in return, cited a wish to be with their family in Georgia as primary motivation. Those who were considering return overwhelmingly anticipated that they would not be able to stay in Georgia long term due to perceived lack of jobs, lack of opportunities, and family pressure.

Many of the recent emigrants abroad now face disillusion regarding the reality of emigration, exacerbated by the hardships brought upon by the pandemic.

IOM's social media outreach to the Georgian population abroad continually shows lack of awareness of travel regulations and other key types of information among Georgian migrants abroad. Georgian migrants in host countries have often travelled on the basis of misinformation regarding emigration and work abroad. Many of the recent emigrants abroad now face disillusion regarding the reality of emigration, exacerbated by the hardships brought upon by the pandemic. Among topics of highest interest in information requests submitted to IOM by this group are information regarding access to international protection schemes abroad, return to Georgia, and inquiries about reintegration support available following return.

Access to services

While economic insecurities are the critical challenge for Georgian nationals abroad, more than 70 per cent of respondents also reported difficulties accessing services such as education and social services. Challenges related to housing, limited social life and psychological distress are also common among Georgian migrants surveyed. Additionally, due to the global pandemic, Georgian migrants have faced administrative delays related to securing their migration status and work permits, exacerbating their vulnerability and psychosocial struggles.

Access to education

Over one-third of migrants surveyed indicated they are abroad together with their children. While access to education differed across host countries, the majority of migrants reported that their children were able to continue their studies in person or through online classes throughout the pandemic. Even so, 18.3 per cent of respondents with children indicated that their children could not continue their education or not participate entirely.

Access to work and income

More than half of the survey population (60%) reported income loss in their household due to the pandemic, and 58 per cent stated that the pandemic had affected their ability to establish a sustainable livelihood abroad. The top reasons for income loss were loss of employment, decreased salary from employment, and decreased income from running businesses. Those with short-term or irregular immigration status report significantly higher levels of the pandemic's negative impact on their ability to establish a livelihood abroad compared to those with long-term residency, second citizenship, or students. Reliance on the income of a household member or relatives abroad is also more common among those with a regular and long-term immigration status abroad, while those with irregular status report having to rely on their means for survival and basic needs.

355 EUR

average monthly
transfer to family
in Georgia among
Georgian migrants
in the EEA

Approximately one-third of respondents indicated a wish to remain abroad longer or forever due to the pandemic, highlighting that family dependency on their income from abroad (remittance) has been their key motivation for staying abroad. Despite the economic struggles

described above, over half (52.9%) of respondents indicated that they continue to send money to their family in Georgia with an average value of 355 Euro per month. This money is primarily used by their families in Georgia to cover food and daily household necessities (63%), to repay family debt (14.8%), and to cover the cost of health care (8%). Over a half of remittance-sending migrants indicated that they send less money home than they used to before the pandemic. On the other hand, 12 per cent indicate they send amounts higher than before the pandemic to alleviate their families' increased economic struggles in Georgia. Access to banking in host countries determines the cost at which migrants can transfer money to their families in Georgia – informal money sending businesses to charge large fees for small amount transfers. The extent to which these fees are deducted from remittances arriving in Georgia ought to be further explored.

IMPLICATIONS and continued needs

Evidence shows that the pandemic has exacerbated existing differences between groups of Georgian migrants abroad with regular/long-term and irregular/short term migration status.

As a result of life in clandestinity, irregular migrants are unable to access existing systems of social protection in host countries. Their willingness to seek support from local authorities, service providers and even Georgian embassies and Consular departments abroad is low due to fear of ineligibility for support and fear of deportation. Georgian irregular migrants have faced high humanitarian needs and have been more likely to seek repatriation to Georgia throughout the year. Those who remain abroad may experience continued humanitarian needs, pending the development of the pandemic situation and its impact on local economic markets in their host countries. Similarly, vulnerable Georgian migrants may continue seeking support with immigration-related issues as well as support with repatriation to Georgia.

Georgian emigrants who have already been relatively integrated in the receiving state prior to the pandemic have considered return to Georgia only for short period of time (for vacations or to visit family and friends). Their prevailing aim is to continue efforts in their host country in order to create a sustainable livelihood abroad and continue supporting their families in Georgia with remittances. Focus group participants perceive economic hardship, lack of employment opportunities, lack of high quality education for their children and lack of development opportunities as key factors preventing them from seriously considering long term return to Georgia.

RESPONSE MEASURES BY THE GOVERNMENT OF GEORGIA

To ensure an effective and coordinated response to the pandemic, the Government of Georgia created the Interagency Coordination Council on COVID-19. The Prime Minister of Georgia, head of the Interagency Coordination Council, presented an Anti-crisis Economic Plan as the State's assistance to citizens, entrepreneurs, and business in Georgia. An analysis of measures implemented by the Government of Georgia reveals that targeted responses have reached and been highly relevant to Georgian migrants residing abroad and Georgian nationals who returned home during the pandemic. This is especially relevant to the support provided by Georgian Consulates abroad and in the organization of the logistics of return itself amid a haul to international commercial air travel for those seeking to return. In this regard, the efforts of the Government of Georgia have stood out as truly exceptional in the international arena. Collection of good practices and lessons learned from COVID-19 management as implemented by the Government of Georgia regarding mobile populations is essential.

Response targeting Georgian communities abroad, including repatriation

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, a Consular hotline has been available for Georgian citizens residing abroad. Georgian diplomatic representations have been key providers of assistance and information on Georgia's current situation and opportunities for repatriation. As reported by MFA, by 26 August 2020, assistance had been provided to 23,296 Georgian migrants abroad. Assistance included shelter, food and medicine, other essential products and services, financial assistance, legal and technical assistance, on-site consultations about medical insurance or other medical services, as well as online doctor consultations. Citizens were exempt from consular fees related to return to Georgia. The Government of Georgia held regular negotiations with flight operators and host country Governments to organize safe transportation and repatriate Georgian citizens during the COVID-19 outbreak. By the decision of the inter-agency coordination council, chartered flights to Georgia were operated by Georgian Airways, with a fixed flight rate of 199 Euros. Georgian Consulates supported the most vulnerable Georgian citizens in securing transportation between countries and cities and supported their efforts to secure travel tickets for repatriation.

To address the needs of the Georgian communities abroad during the outbreak of COVID-19, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia additionally implemented a special initiative – 'Supporting Diaspora Initiatives' through a comparative grant scheme for the Georgian diaspora representatives. The grant competition supported 45 initiatives in 19 countries worldwide, aiming to tackle the negative impacts of the global pandemic within Georgian communities residing abroad by providing assistance to individuals and engaging them in support and awareness-raising actions. The grant scheme encouraged diaspora organizations to unite their efforts and commitment in times

of uncertainty and unprecedented damage. Additionally, an information campaign on the State Reintegration Programme was conducted by the Ministry of IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia via social media, reaching migrants presently abroad with information on support available to them after arrival, pending eligibility.

Among Georgian migrants surveyed who are presently abroad, 16.5 per cent indicated having received some type of service from a Georgian Consulate abroad concerning COVID-19, and those who have received some kind of service reported being very satisfied or satisfied with the support provided. The low engagement and reach may result partly from lack of need or interest from the migrants' side, as 56 per cent indicated they had no interest in receiving return support, and 18.2 per cent stated they did not need any assistance from the Government of Georgia while abroad. On the other hand, 37.6 per cent of migrants surveyed indicated they were not aware that the Consulate in the host country provided support to Georgian citizens. Only 3 of the 255 respondents indicated having approached a Georgian Consulate and not receiving any assistance (*"they were not able to help me"*).

National structures supporting Georgian citizens abroad

Besides diplomatic representations and the consular offices, one of the communication channels with the Georgian transnational communities is through the MFA Department for Relations with Diaspora. The department keeps the record of Georgian diaspora organizations and communicates with individuals to strengthen relationships and cooperative ties between diaspora and the State. With the support of the IOM Mission in Georgia, the department has developed a Georgian Diaspora Abroad Portal (www.gda.ge) that functions as a platform for conveying information to the Georgian transnational community worldwide¹.

Strengthening ties and building cooperative links with the Georgian communities residing abroad is highly acknowledged on national level:

- The recently amended Constitution of Georgia includes a special paragraph (Article 5, point 8) that reads: *'The State shall take care of maintaining and developing connections with the homeland for Georgian compatriots residing abroad.'* Article 32 reads: *'Georgia shall protect its citizens regardless of his/her location'.*
- The Migration Strategy of Georgia (2016-2020) identifies citizens of Georgia residing abroad and the diaspora representatives as a target group for the strategy; and the subsequent Migration Strategy (2021-2030) views engagement of diaspora as a distinct priority for the country's development.
- The MFA has elaborated a special program 'United and Strong Diaspora' – 'Which aims to ensure that Georgian Diaspora is invigorated, its ties with Georgia are strengthened and its contribution to the development of our country is duly appreciated'.

The government of Georgia mobilized efforts in a timely manner, cooperating with a wide spectrum of actors across the world (airlines, state authorities in host states, hostels, and hotels abroad etc.), and providing diversified assistance and repatriation flights to Georgian nationals residing abroad and wishing to return to Georgia amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The level of risk faced by individuals in the face of a global pandemic is highly dependent on the extent of their inclusion in society and their access to economic, social and health measures implemented by Governments to ease the negative impacts of the pandemic. Migrants and mobility dependent households ought not to be left behind in society-wide actions. In fact, explicit targeting by special measures is needed to address their specific vulnerabilities. Failure to include these populations in early detection, testing, diagnosis, contact tracing and access to health care or vaccination for COVID-19 may make it difficult to control the spread of the disease. It is essential to ensure that health systems are sensitive to the needs of migrants and deliver affordable and accessible services regardless of immigration status.

A broad range of factors will affect the characteristics and scale of migration in and out of Georgia in the future. The decisions made in the face of today's unparalleled challenge to global mobility will affect the national social and economic landscape for years to come. Targeted measures addressing the disproportionate socio-economic impacts on mobility dependent populations are crucial to facilitating responsible migration and mobility of people in the long term.

Georgia can strengthen support measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic through a well-coordinated, holistic and equitable approach when no one is left behind, including foreign migrants in Georgia, Georgian returnees and Georgian migrants residing abroad. The recommendations below target the Government of Georgia, but their implementation will likely require coordination with a multitude of State and non-State actors, private and public institutions, and international partners.

- Use and further develop the potential and networks of Georgian Diaspora to engage in COVID-19 response and mitigation measures, especially in facilitating links to assistance to those migrants who avoid communication with authorities. Increase and further expand the State program on supporting Diaspora Initiatives in response to the global pandemic.
- Acknowledge and strengthen the contribution and efforts of Georgia's diplomatic missions and consular offices by establishing a system for assistance to vulnerable Georgian migrants abroad, especially at times of crisis and on the basis of lessons learned throughout 2020, including by setting up functional referral mechanisms to local State and NGO assistance providers.
- Strengthen the availability of pre-departure counselling for migrants considering returning to Georgia and facilitating referrals to the existing GoG economic recovery programs and reintegration support schemes.
- Analyze lessons learned from repatriations efforts and COVID-19 crisis management and create a knowledge platform for recording and sharing successes and experiences in the fight against the pandemic.
- Extend access to virtual education to children presently unable to enrol in educational programmes abroad.
- Analyze the use of remittances as a significant driver of local livelihoods with the potential to enhance local development and promote post-pandemic recovery in communities of origin in Georgia.

This brief has been published without formal editing by IOM.

For additional information on this Brief please contact: kkrelinova@iom.int or iomtbilisi@iom.int