

STRANDED AND VULNERABLE IN TIMES OF COVID-19

SITUATION AND NEEDS OF VULNERABLE FOREIGN MIGRANTS IN GEORGIA

As international mobility came to standstill and nations restricted movement across their borders, it has been widely accepted that the Covid-19 has put international migrants, those temporarily outside their country of origin as well as populations dependent on mobility in a particularly vulnerable position. Critical needs prevail among foreign migrants in Georgia during the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, deriving from the health risks associated with the disease, barriers in access to medical care and Covid-19 vaccination, but are also strongly exacerbated by the socio-economic consequences of preventive measures implemented by the Government and lack of access to mitigating support measures.

Evidence from Georgia shows that stranded migrants, migrants in irregular situation, migrants working in precarious conditions, and migrant workers in the informal sectors of economy have experienced higher vulnerability than foreign migrants with regular immigration status and those more integrated in local society. Vulnerable migrants are reluctant and/or unable to access health assistance and social protection services, unable to afford health insurance and health services, and experience livelihood insecurity and inability to follow social distancing and sanitary rules. As of spring 2021, migrants without residence status remain ineligible for Covid-19 vaccination in Georgia. IOM reiterates that the effectiveness of national vaccination efforts in Georgia will be enhanced significantly if all foreign migrants in the country are actively included, regardless of residence status. The Covid-19 pandemic cannot be used as an excuse to rollback commitments to promote and protect the rights of migrants.



Khushhali (20), Milis (20) and Muskan (20) are Indian students of medicine enrolled at a university in Tbilisi. They chose to come to Georgia because of affordable quality education and low crime rates. They are very focused on their studies, but also managed to learn the basics of the Georgian language and enjoy opportunities to practice it. At the time of their meeting with IOM, Muskan was planning to volunteer in the fight against Covid-19 in Georgia.

Immigration dynamics in Georgia

Primarily a country of origin and transit, Georgia has in the last decade also become a country of immigration. Estimating the full scale of immigration to Georgia is far from easy given the country's liberal immigration policy in which nationals of a large number of countries may enter Georgia for up to one year without a visa¹. Citizens of 94 countries may enter, reside, work and study in Georgia without the necessity to obtain either visa or residence permit², and citizens and residence permit holders of further 50 countries may enter Georgia without a visa for a limited period, rendering the compilation of data on international immigration to Georgia difficult.³ Nevertheless, all existing sources indicate increase in migration in-flows to Georgia over the last years: UN DESA estimates the total number of international migrants in Georgia at about 79 000 at mid-year 2019 (an increased number compared to 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015). Georgia's national statistics office (Geostat), on the other hand, bases its immigration estimates on border crossing and entry data. In 2019, Geostat reported 96 864 immigrants in Georgia, including returning Georgian nationals. Discrepancies between the data sources call for harmonized definitions and development of meaningful ways to measure the number of long-term foreign migrants in Georgia (distinguished from tourists and short-term business travelers).

Countries from the South Caucasus (14%) and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (31%) – mainly the Russian Federation itself and Ukraine – still account for the largest share of migrants' stock. Flows from new countries are increasing for the purpose of education (universities are increasingly enrolling students from India, Nigeria, Kenya and Iraq)⁴ or work (work permits are increasingly granted to nationals of People's Republic of China, India, Iraq, and the Philippines). Other notable countries of origin of foreign migrants, confirmed also by residence permit statistics and census, appear to be Turkey, the Islamic Republic of Iran, India, People's Republic of China, Greece, Israel, Egypt and the USA.⁵ The majority of persons holding humanitarian status in Georgia are citizens of Iraq and Ukraine.⁶ Recent migrant arrivals tend to be more geographically distant from their countries of origin – which makes communication with their families, including receiving or sending remittances, more arduous. They also often share linguistic and legal barriers which makes them more vulnerable, especially in the context of deteriorated socio-economic conditions due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This brief focuses on the situation and needs of vulnerable migrants in Georgia, specifically irregular and undocumented migrants, low-skilled or low-income migrant workers, foreign students, and rejected asylum seekers. Findings presented are extracted from a regional survey conducted by IOM among vulnerable foreign migrants in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in October and November 2020. In Georgia, 439 migrants were surveyed,⁷ in addition to interviews with key informants and government stakeholders. The research conducted within the framework of IOM's Response to the needs of vulnerable migrants in the South Caucasus in the aftermath of Covid-19 (funded by PRM) built upon the findings collected in spring 2020 through a Rapid Needs Assessment⁶ and aimed to generate a comprehensive evidence-basis on the vulnerable groups' status and Covid-19 related needs in the whole South Caucasus region. With the support of PRM, IOM provided humanitarian assistance to vulnerable migrant families in Georgia in 2020. For most, this aid constituted the only source of support.

¹ In 2014, a Law on Legal Status of Aliens and Stateless Persons revised the country's visa regime and introduced visa categories for study, work, other activities, contributing to data collection and understanding migration flows in Georgia. Nevertheless, large number of visitors are allowed to enter without visa or registration.

² SCMI, Visa Free Countries, list available [online](#) (accessed December 20, 2020)

³ Georgian Consulates, Georgian visa information, available [online](#) (accessed December 20, 2020)

⁴ The reputation of Georgia as a safe country with qualified academic staff, low tuition fees and courses in English plays a decisive role in attracting foreign students. In 2016, there were over 9,000 foreign students in Georgia, coming from 87 different countries, among which Azerbaijan, India, Iraq, Nigeria, Turkey or the Russian Federation Brief migration profile, foreign students in Georgia, State Commission on Migration Issues, Tbilisi 2015. Available online: http://migration.commission.ge/files/migraciis_profili_a5_eng.pdf

⁵ The State of Migration in Georgia Report developed in the framework of the EU-funded Enhancing Georgia's Migration Management (ENIGMMA) project, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, ICMPD, Vienna 2015.

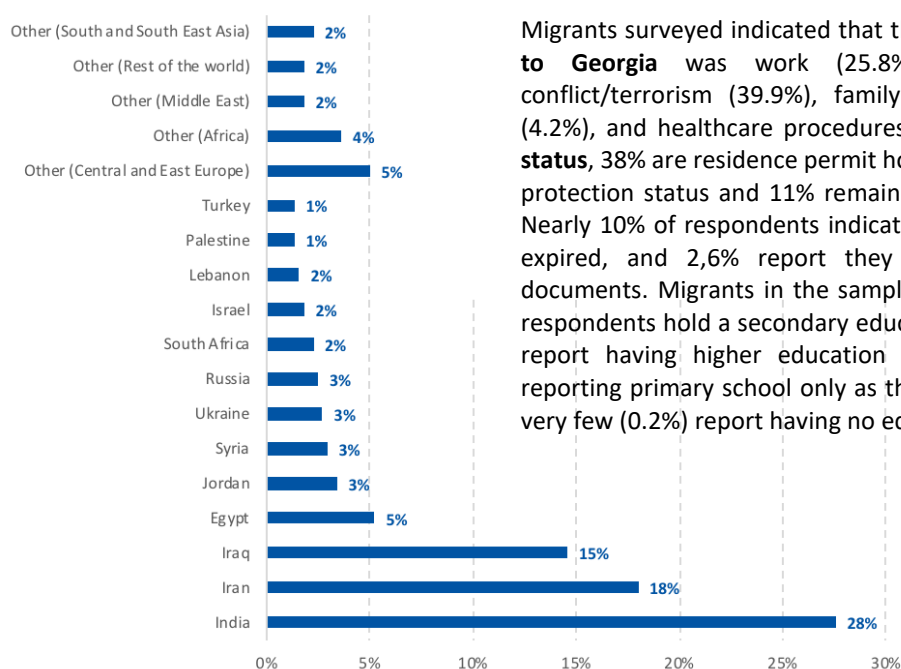
⁶ IOM Georgia (2020), Rapid Needs Assessment on Covid-19 related vulnerabilities, risks and needs among third country migrants in Georgia.

⁷ Due to a substantial lack of accurate sample frames, a non-probability sampling approach was adopted, and respondents were selected through a snowball method, i.e. they were reached through the established local network of research partners and key informants and/or based on the recommendation of surveyed migrants. This approach is often used when interviewing hard-to-reach population, such as undocumented migrants. researchers were advised to diversify as much as possible the typology of respondents in order to provide a comprehensive representation of the most vulnerable groups. Depending on the situation on the ground, face to face interviews were the preferred mode of administration, although mixed modes were occasionally employed due to Covid-19 measures.

Profile of vulnerable foreign migrants in Georgia

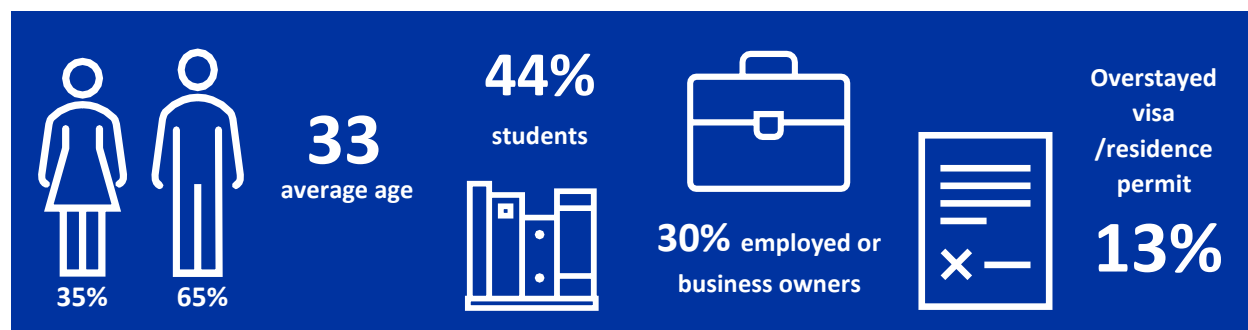
IOM's assessment focused on generating insight into the experiences of communities of foreign migrants with a special focus on stranded and most vulnerable individuals – irregular and undocumented migrants, low-skilled or low-income migrant workers, foreign students, and rejected asylum seekers. As precise population characteristics of vulnerable foreign migrants in Georgia have not previously been mapped, the sample provides an indication of the characteristics of vulnerable and stranded migrants in Georgia informing this inquiry.

The **main regions of origin** among surveyed vulnerable foreign migrants are the Middle East and the Gulf (nearly 50% of sample), with Iranians and Iraqis representing the largest share, followed by Egypt, Syrian Arab Republic, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen. South and South-East Asia accounts for roughly 30% of migrants, nearly all of which are Indians. The profiles of the two main groups are very different, with the former mainly middle-aged individuals who entered the country more than three years ago fleeing conflict together with their families, and the latter relatively younger students who entered the country alone. Other smaller communities are made by nationals from Eastern Europe and Central Asia (11%, most of which from Russian Federation and Ukraine) and Africa (6%, most of which from South Africa).



Migrants surveyed indicated that their **key motivation for moving to Georgia** was work (25.8%), study (38.1%), avoiding conflict/terrorism (39.9%), family reunification (2.3%), tourism (4.2%), and healthcare procedures (0.2%). In terms of **migration status**, 38% are residence permit holders, 15% hold a humanitarian protection status and 11% remain in Georgia on short-term visa. Nearly 10% of respondents indicated that their permit or visa are expired, and 2,6% report they never held any immigration documents. Migrants in the sample are well **educated** - a half of respondents hold a secondary education degree (49%), and others report having higher education (48%), with as little as 2.8% reporting primary school only as their highest education level and very few (0.2%) report having no education.

Only half of the survey respondents hold a regular contract or formal **working agreement** while conducting activities in Georgia, while 33.3% report they have no formal work agreement or contract. The **languages** that the survey respondents understand and speak are Arabic (36.7%), Azerbaijani (1.7%), English (36.7%), Farsi (16.1%), and Russian (8.7%). The vast majority (70,2%) of respondents reside in Tbilisi, followed by Imereti and Adjara regions. Nearly 60% of the sample have lived in Georgia for three years or longer.



Impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable migrants in Georgia

Survey conducted by IOM at the onset of the 2nd wave of the pandemic reveals that given the sudden disruption in international mobility and uncertainty caused by Covid-19 outbreak, many foreign migrants have become stranded in Georgia, lost their income, and born significant health risks. Nevertheless, a large majority of those surveyed reported feeling comfortable staying in Georgia during the Covid-19 pandemic (88%). Different groups of migrants experience different levels of vulnerabilities. IOM is aware of a number of profiles of migrants residing in particular geographic locations in Georgia who face elevated levels of risk during the pandemic. Among particularly vulnerable are sex industry employees, typically female migrants from Central Asia residing in Adjara. Due to the nature of their work, these migrant women and their children experience high levels of violence and are especially exposed to the socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 due to the disruptions of their business during the pandemic.

Access to Information and Health Services

It is commonly recognized that barriers in accessing information on health measures as well as barriers in accessing local health care assistance can increase the vulnerability of migrants and puts them at an increased risk of contracting Covid-19. The vast majority of foreign migrant respondents surveyed (92%) indicated that they are able to update themselves regularly on protocols and restrictions related to Covid-19. While well informed, migrants face issues of affordability, mistrust in doctors' competencies, language barriers, and fears related to legal status. In an earlier rapid needs assessment⁸, 67% of migrants indicated not having health insurance in Georgia. Two thirds of respondents reported unwillingness to go to the hospital when facing health issues. These migrants prefer to seek advice from the doctors they know personally (23.7%), and nearly 15% of the respondents reported they do nothing in case of health problems. This is especially alarming as 11.3% of respondents also reported having been diagnosed with serious health condition. By October-November 2020, more than 7% of respondents report having developed Covid-19-like symptoms in the past, but only half of them reported having been tested for the disease.

Those respondents who have attempted to access health services reported having faced different types of challenges, such as being unaware where to go, being unable to afford healthcare services, not having insurance, experiencing language barriers, limited availability of facilities, challenges of accessing the 112 hotline and feeling discriminated in the hospital due to their foreign nationality.

Special attention should also be drawn to the need for counselling in case of incidents and abuse, as well as in response to the anxieties experienced by foreign migrants due to the pandemic. Anxiety linked to being

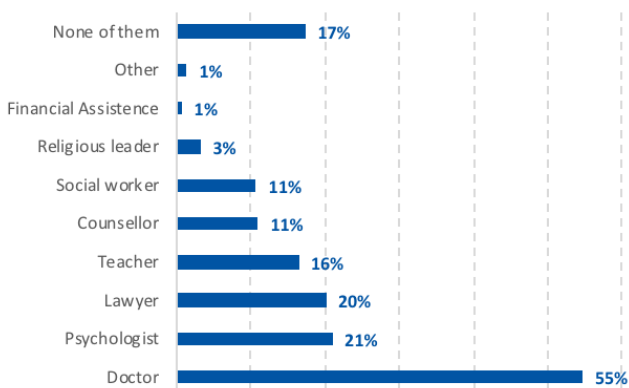
stranded and life with an irregular migration status is also commonly reported by foreign migrants in Georgia.

Access to services

The vast majority of respondents live in shared space with other people, most commonly residing in shared apartments. Consequently, the majority of foreign migrants reported they would not be able to self-isolate if they developed symptoms of Covid-19. Inability to respect social distancing in crowded homes and student dormitories was also highlighted in consultations with community leaders and in focus groups.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has changed the housing situation of nearly 23% of respondents in October-November. These foreign migrants had to move to a cheaper accommodation or have switched to shared accommodation. More than half of the sample population believed they would be able to stay in the present accommodation for the coming 6 months, but 32.2% were unsure, and 7.8% reported they could not afford remaining in the same accommodation in the future.

Professional services needed: (From whom would you seek help if it were available for free?)



⁸ IOM Georgia (4/2020) Rapid Needs Assessment among Vulnerable Foreign Migrants in Georgia in times of Covid-19 (available [online](#))

Due to the closure of international borders and continuing expiration of visa and residence permits, migrants reported high need for legal assistance, especially counselling on visa, work permits, and access to public services. Both surveys reveal high reliance on public transport, bike or walking among foreign migrants. Very few respondents indicate that they own a car/scooter.

Access to Education

The assessment shows that 32% of respondents have children and 10.9% have other dependents. A large proportion of respondents are also themselves students of higher education institutions in Georgia. Foreign migrants and their children have faced a number of challenges in accessing education during the pandemic. Among the most common challenges identified are lack of access to computers or internet for online education purposes, lack of language support, drop in quality of education, inability to physically reach the school/university, difficulties with accessing distance learning (such as lack of access to the internet) and lack of practical classes, as well as lack of access to special education for those children who need it.

The majority of foreign students in Georgia are enrolled in medical programmes of study, including predominantly citizens of India and Azerbaijan. Containment measures and lockdown have affected them similarly to other international students worldwide. Since medical faculty curricula include the type of trainings that cannot be performed online, students need to be physically present at labs and other training venues. Therefore, it has been essential for foreign students of medicine to be able to return to Georgia. Timely and effective arrangements related to logistics, providing accurate and comprehensive information to foreign students requires efforts from the state as well as from the public and private institutions of higher education.

Access to work and income

During any economic crisis migrant workers are identified as a highly vulnerable group (especially those working informally, those undocumented and those who lack legal authorization of stay). In comparison to

the local population, migrants are more likely to experience weak socio-economic integration and higher stress of working under uncertain conditions. Covid-19 has indeed severely affected the income and work situation of foreign migrants in Georgia. Over 60% of employed migrants witnessed a reduction of pay, 33% of lost their job/closed their business, 46% of those living with family reported that at least one member suffered a similar impact. The worst hit sectors were tourism and hospitality. In addition, around 40% of those who were financially supported experienced issues in receiving funds. Nearly half of the survey respondents indicate that they were not financially supported by others, leaving them vulnerable to loss of housing and inability to cover essential life expenses in case of loss of all income.

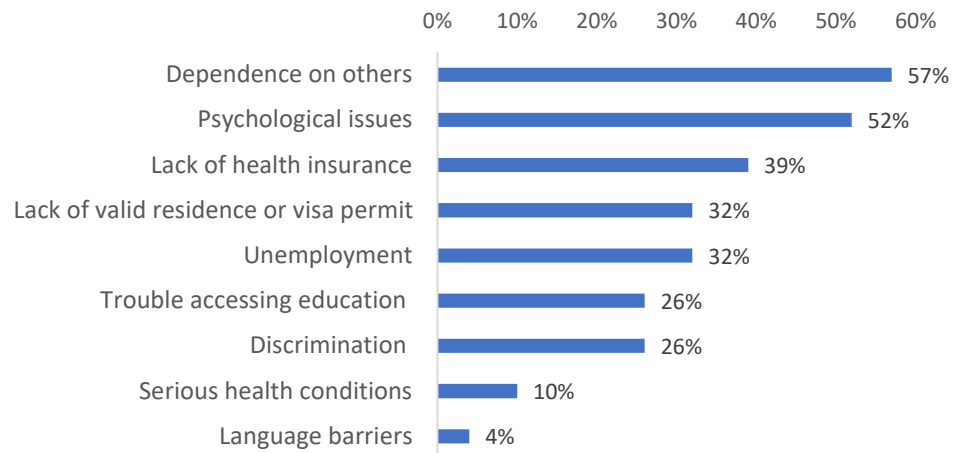
Uncertainty about migratory status and vague perspectives on travel

Foreign migrants face additional vulnerabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic related to immigration status. Restrictions on freedom of movement coupled with suspensions or delays in immigration proceedings have increased the risks of falling into an irregular situation for foreign migrants in Georgia. In this context, the Government of Georgia extended the period of tolerated stay for foreigners whose visa has expired until July 1, 2021 (valid for foreign citizens without a residence permit who were in the country legally on March 14, 2020, have been in the country for more than 365 days, and were not able to leave the country due to the closure of borders). Immigration status insecurities have posed a heavy psychological burden on foreign migrants stranded in Georgia, however.

Under the present set of rules, permission to enter the country has been limited to Georgian nationals and the nationals of select countries. These circumstances have practically excluded Georgian residents of foreign nationality from entry into the country. The rules have had severe implications for Georgian residents of foreign nationality as well as for their families, many of whom remain separated on different sides of the border.⁹

⁹ Sections *f.a.a.*, *f.b.a.* of Government of Georgia Decree # 164, issued on January 28, 2020, available [online](#).

KEY CONCERNS AMONG VULNERABLE MIGRANTS (frequency of reported concerns within sample)



IMPLICATIONS

IOM anticipates a continued deterioration of living conditions for foreign migrants amid the protracted pandemic crisis in Georgia and a growth in need for humanitarian and return assistance among this group. Global economic consequences of the pandemic will likely deprive additional migrants in Georgia of financial support from their families in countries of origin – especially foreign students at Georgian universities. Locally, any emerging employment opportunities are unlikely to be available to foreign migrants due to high demand for employment by the domestic workforce. The need for safe housing will become even more critical among foreign migrants struggling to cover living expenses. Due to the ongoing epidemiological situation, some international travel routes remain limited, rendering independent returns or departures complicated and very costly, further increasing needs for Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) and flexible immigration policies. IOM also strongly recommends the inclusion of foreign migrants in Coronavirus vaccination plans in Georgia, regardless of residence status. Inclusion of migrants with irregular status is particularly important given the high levels of vulnerability among this population.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The coronavirus does not discriminate, but the level of risk faced by individuals in face of a global pandemic is highly dependent on the extent of their inclusion in society, as well as in their access to economic, social and health measures implemented by Governments to ease the negative impacts of the pandemic. Migrants ought not to be left behind in society-wide measures. In fact, explicit targeting by special measures is needed to address their specific vulnerabilities. It is important to ensure that health systems are sensitive to the needs of migrants and deliver affordable and accessible services regardless of immigration status. Georgia can strengthen support measures in response to Covid-19 pandemic through well-coordinated, holistic and equitable approach, when no one is left behind, including foreign migrants in Georgia. 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.

- Review the opportunities for inclusion of foreign migrants residing in Georgia in social and economic support schemes planned and implemented by Georgian state agencies (such as support to those who lost their jobs or income, those living in crowded living conditions, those unable to self-isolate, encouraging employers of foreign migrants to seek job retention schemes).
- Explore options for targeted inclusion of vulnerable migrants in Covid-19 response measures, including of those who are in an irregular situation and those undocumented to prevent further exclusion of those most at risk.
- Reach out to migrant communities to inform individuals about assistance and counselling opportunities available to them and neutralize misconceptions about their legal rights.
- Facilitate access to legal counselling and referrals, such as counselling on visa, work permits, access to public services, language assistance and assistance on other legal issues. Special attention should be paid to cases of incidents and abuse, ensuring migrant access to relevant reporting platforms.
- Explore options for facilitating access to psychosocial counselling among vulnerable migrants population experiencing high levels of psychological distress due to the present crisis, in particular for victims of abuse and xenophobic incidents.
- Promote access to and encourage uptake of assistance and services to which foreign migrants are eligible to neutralize fears and misconceptions preventing access, including especially health care services.
- Inclusion of migrants and other hard to reach populations in national vaccination programming should be based on risk rather than nationality, irrespective of legal status or residence. The broader public health impacts of a vaccination programme can only be realized through an inclusive approach. Vaccination campaigns and services ought to be carried out in a culturally appropriate manner and offered in languages that are understandable by migrant communities (presently only available in Georgian).
- Review options for residence-permit holders and their family members to (re)enter Georgia.
- Consider social tensions and possible discrimination towards foreign migrants through communication campaigns on promotion of human solidarity and diversity. Accentuate that we are all in this together and everyone should be included - crucial strategy for combating the virus.

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