

## RETURN IN TIMES OF COVID-19

### SITUATION AND NEEDS OF MIGRANTS WHO RETURNED TO GEORGIA DURING OR DUE TO THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC

As international mobility came to standstill and nations restricted movement across their borders, 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. In face of the insecurity or inability to afford staying abroad during the 2020 global pandemic, many Georgian migrants decided to return to their home country of origin. Precise figures capturing returns inspired by COVID-19 are unavailable in Georgia but expected to be in the count of hundreds of thousands, considering returns on formal repatriation flights chartered by the Government of Georgia, returns by land, and returns realized independently via limited commercial airline flights. Migrants who returned to Georgia are actively looking for reintegration opportunities, but reintegration in the economic, social, and psychosocial dimensions has proven difficult during a protracted crisis. Issues experienced by returnees are similar to those experienced by local non-migrant population, but the returnees' ability to re-establish economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and psychosocial wellbeing is also greatly impacted by their absence, lacking awareness of support programmes and services available, and the present sense of crisis. IOM has conducted research among Georgian migrants who returned to Georgia during or due to the COVID-19 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 reintegration support available amidst the crisis and in its aftermath.



Maia (51, *pictured on the left*), returned to Georgia after sixteen years of working in Greece in bakeries, cafes, and cleaning private houses. She supported her family from abroad and only returned in 2020, once her two children grew up, got married and had children of their own. Photo by IOM Georgia.

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 migrants abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## REMITTANCE DEPENDENCY IN GEORGIA

Reliance on remittances and international mobility is a common livelihood practice across Georgia – emigration is widely seen as a means of securing income for families in communities marked by depopulation and lack of local livelihood opportunities. In 2019, remittances to Georgia amounted to an estimated 10.5 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As the National Bank of Georgia reports, personal remittances sent to Georgia grow each year, mostly wired from the Russian Federation, countries of the European Union (Italy and Greece with the largest shares), Israel, Turkey, the USA, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and others. Similar sending countries were reported in 2020. Unplanned return of Georgian bread winners thus represents a dramatic interruption to a long-standing lifestyle and threatens remittance-dependent households with a sudden drop into poverty for unless they are able to reintegrate and find alternative sources of income locally.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted Georgian migrants presently undergoing their reintegration process following a return before the pandemic and migrants who returned to Georgia during

and/or due to the pandemic. The reintegration process of earlier returnees was disrupted in significant ways as a result of the pandemic and related restrictions on public and economic life. Those who returned during or due to the global health crisis have arrived in a context unfavorable for reintegration as many travelled spontaneously in the face of an emergency without prior planning or preparation. **This brief is focused on the latter group's experiences and needs – those who returned during or due to the pandemic.**

## Methodology

In November 2020, IOM commissioned a survey among Georgian migrants who have returned during or due to the pandemic (between 1 March and 1 November 2020), conducted by the GORBI polling agency. Anonymous respondents were selected by simple random sampling from databases maintained by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Tourism Administration Agency<sup>1</sup> of the Government of Georgia and contacted via telephone. The databases included Georgian citizens who registered for and travelled on Government-chartered repatriation flights and those who underwent a mandatory post-arrival quarantine in Georgia following a return from abroad (regardless of the mode of arrival). The polling company surveyed those Georgian citizens registered in either of the databases who have returned to Georgia following a period of stay abroad longer than one month, whose travel abroad was motivated by any purpose other than tourism or short term business stay conducted for a Georgian employer. A sample of 527 eligible, anonymous respondents<sup>2</sup> completed a **structured phone survey**, capturing personal and migration profiles, return decision-making, access to information prior to return, situation and needs following return, and perceptions and experiences in accessing support services. The survey also contained questions regarding future intentions, including considerations of re-migration. Respondents who stayed abroad for longer than three months and who were not students prior to their return (183 from 527 respondents) also completed an additional survey – the IOM's **Reintegration Sustainability survey**. The Reintegration Sustainability survey serves as a baseline indicator of returnees' outlook for reintegration and captures their needs and sustainable reintegration prospects across the economic, social, and psychosocial dimensions. Additionally, two **virtual focus group discussions** were organized with long-term migrants whose primary purpose for travel abroad was to seek employment abroad and send remittances back to Georgia to provide in-depth insights into the survey results.

<sup>1</sup> The Tourism Administration Agency has been responsible for organizing mandatory post-arrival quarantine in Georgia throughout COVID-19

<sup>2</sup> The total number of individuals registered in the databases at time of sampling was 11 636 in the database managed by the Tourism Administration and 302 individuals in the database managed by the MFA. These numbers however also include persons who fall outside the target population of the study and do not include all persons from the target population (not everyone was registered) – the precise size of the target population is therefore unknown.

## RETURN TRENDS IN GEORGIA

Mirroring the accelerated rate of emigration from Georgia, the scale of returns to Georgia has been growing significantly in the last five years. The vast majority of Georgian asylum seekers in Europe (over 20,000 in 2019) receive negative decisions on their claims and subsequently depart spontaneously, face departure orders, or register in assisted voluntary return programmes (AVR). In 2019, IOM assisted 2 592 Georgians with AVR to Georgia (41% female, 59% male)<sup>3</sup>, and additional returnees travelled with the assistance of the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII), and Caritas. In addition to those assisted, others have returned spontaneously or independently without the Government's, international organizations', or NGOs' support. Of all regions in the country, Tbilisi (urban), Imereti (rural) and Kakheti (rural) have experienced the highest rates of international returns, while Guria (rural) and Adjara (rural) are among the regions experiencing the highest rates of seasonal, circular migration dependency. Each year, a decreasing share of Georgian returnees are eligible for reintegration assistance as part of assisted voluntary return programmes. Post-arrival reintegration assistance is available from the Government of Georgia to returnees who apply independently and fulfill eligibility criteria (including irregular status abroad).

In addition to the above trends, many Georgian migrants decided to return to their country of origin in the face of insecurity or inability to afford staying abroad during the 2020 global pandemic. According to official statistics, capturing COVID-19 repatriation channels under the Government of Georgia's auspices, more than 23,300 Georgian migrants are known to have returned to Georgia on formal repatriation flights between March and August 2020 (no flights took place after August). Complete figures capturing returns inspired by COVID-19 are believed to be higher, considering returns by land and returns realized independently via limited commercial airline flights.

Capturing data on return migration is notoriously difficult even without the global pandemic. Data available capture returns of assisted nature – those facilitated through voluntary return programmes and those capturing numbers of deportations. Data on spontaneous (non-assisted) return movements that form most of the return migration dynamic are not recorded<sup>4</sup>.

### Personal and migration profile of returnees

A decision to return is a complex phenomenon caused by different social, economic or political conditions. Many of those who returned during the pandemic returned earlier than planned (42% of the sampled respondents), on average by six months, citing the pandemic (38%), insecurity of life abroad during a global crisis (15.6%), loss of employment abroad (11.6%) and wish to be with family (10.7%) as primary motivations to return. Those who reported staying longer than initially planned (26% of the sampled respondents) cited difficulties in securing transport tickets (26.6%), flight cancellations (17.3%) and border closures (8%) as primary reasons delaying their return. In comparison, prior to the pandemic, migrants most frequently cited family obligations as one of the reasons for return (36%), followed by receipt of a negative asylum decision in the host country (23.4%) or even a formal departure order (15%)<sup>5</sup>. A majority of returnees surveyed reported documented (regular) stay abroad (on a legal basis) – 51 per cent reported visa-free status, some holding student visas (12%), valid residence permit or a short term work permit (7%), and long-term residence permit (4.7%). Nearly 8 per cent reported having an expired visa or having had their asylum application rejected.

Those who returned to Georgia in an unplanned fashion during or due to the global pandemic show similarities with the demographic profile of those who typically return to Georgia via AVRR programmes. The gender ratio is balanced (48% female, 52% male), and the average age at return is 36 years (younger than AVRR beneficiaries). Pandemic returnees spent on average 15 months abroad before return (a significantly shorter period than among returnees who returned prior to the pandemic). The “feminization of migration” is visible in this sample, though less pronounced compared to Georgia's general migration trends: Women in this group of returnees spent a long time abroad than men (19 months average for women compared to 11 months for men). Women also returned at a later age – 39 years old on average compared to 35 years of age among men. The group is more educated than returnees from AVRR programmes – 51 per cent of the respondents are completing or have completed university degrees (bachelor or masters), and an additional 35 per cent reported to have completed secondary education.

<sup>3</sup> IOM has been implementing Assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes worldwide since 1979 and has provided humane and dignified support for the return and reintegration of over 1.6 million people throughout the world.

<sup>4</sup> IOM Georgia (2020) Report on Reintegration System of Returning migrants: challenges and recommendations, available upon request.

<sup>5</sup> IOM Georgia (forthcoming 2021) National study of Reintegration Outcomes among returned migrants in Georgia

## Situation and needs following return

Based on operational experience in counselling migrants following return to Georgia in 2020, IOM observed that reintegration conditions have become exceptionally difficult. The challenges were attributed primarily to the ongoing economic downturn, the often unplanned, crisis-motivated nature of the migrants' return, closure of service points and social distancing recommendations which increase migrants' post-arrival isolation. Expressed in the words of a recent returnee – a focus group participant in November 2020, *"In a country where almost everything is closed and stopped, we have no hope of finding jobs and a source of income."*

Of 527 Georgian migrants surveyed who returned to Georgia during the pandemic, 38 per cent expressed an urgent need for immediate cash assistance or employment support, health care, social services, banking services, housing support and psychological assistance sought after as secondary priorities.

### Access to pandemic information and health services

Nearly 70 per cent of those who returned during the pandemic indicated that health information on COVID-19 and prevention measures was very accessible and understandable to them while abroad, most frequently channeled through the Georgian embassies and consulates, social media, MFA website, family and friends. As 95 per cent of respondents report, the information received prior to arrival concerning the post-arrival COVID-19 measures (quarantine, testing, etc.) was correct.

The majority (78.6%) of recent returnees indicated they are informed on how to access COVID-19 related health care in Georgia. Among the minority of respondents who are not well informed, approximately one third indicated they would not know where to seek this information, and another third reported they had so far had no interest or need to search for this information. Returnees assessed the quality of healthcare available to them positively.

Alarming, however, 35 per cent of those who returned recently reported experiencing signs of depression (loneliness, anger, fear) often or very often, indicating that the psychological impact of the crisis on this group may be severe.

### Access to social services and basic needs

Returnees were overwhelmingly not aware of existing support measures available from the Government of Georgia, with 86 per cent indicating that information about access to services and support available would be useful to them. As certain types of COVID-19 assistance and reintegration support are available upon request only, information provision is key to facilitate access to crisis assistance for recently returned migrants.

Upon arrival during the pandemic, only 25.2 per cent of returnees received information on how to access services and support available to them. The majority (54.8%) indicated that they did not receive the support

they needed due to a lack of knowledge of the services available or how to access them.

Housing poses a challenge to those who returned recently – only 36.1 per cent rated their access to housing as good or very good, and 50.8 per cent reported the standard of their housing is poor or very poor. Access to justice and law, as well as to documentation, was rated as very good by most respondents.

### Access to education

Only a tiny proportion of recent returnees (3%) indicated that they returned to Georgia with school-aged children. Of those, the majority has entered the education system in Georgia and began participating in online classes. IOM is aware of two instances where children had not re-enrolled in education following their family's return due to eligibility concerns.

#### KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY RETURNEES:

- Loss of employment
- Loss or significant reduction of income
- Terminating economic activity, such as enterprise and trade
- Difficulties in accessing social services
- Need for social assistance
- Challenges related to mobility restrictions (inability to re-migrate)
- Difficulties to pay service bills
- Difficulties to pay bank loans
- Housing
- Limited opportunities to re-migrate
- Access to education
- Stress and psychological well-being
- Limited social contact

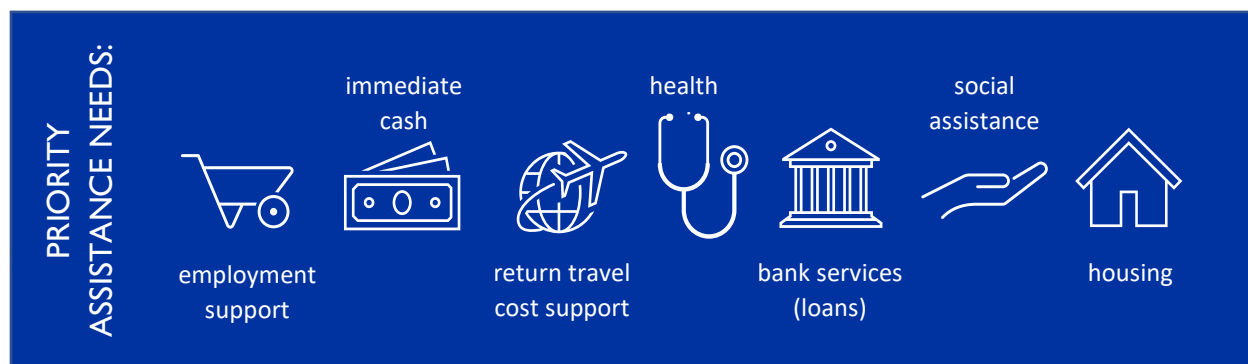


### Access to work and income

Securing a new source of income was a top concern for most (78.8% of the sample). More than 70 per cent reported that the pandemic directly affected their ability to establish a sustainable livelihood upon arrival, and a similar share of respondents (70%) said that they are unable to provide income to their families after the return. For those who returned during the pandemic, COVID-19 has drastically changed their chances of accessing employment opportunities following return and establishing a new livelihood source in Georgia. Less than half (45.5%) of the 527 recent returnees surveyed arrived in Georgia with a specific plan to secure livelihood following arrival. Many had travelled without preparation due to the sudden nature of their decision to travel back to Georgia. These plans consisted most frequently of plans to rely on income from a business (33.8%), specific plans to get a permanent job (20.8%), reliance on another member of a household (13.8%), and reliance on income from providing small services to others (10.8%). Of those who had a specific plan, however, 64.2 per cent reported not being able to materialize it, indicating the pandemic and related restrictions as a cause of failure in 53.2 per cent of cases.

On average returnees used to send 488 Euro monthly to their families while still abroad. These resources were typically allocated to cover the costs of food and daily necessities for the household. Following return, the vast majority of remittance-sending migrants (70.7%) are no longer able to support their families.

Loss of household income directly attributable to the pandemic affected 79.1 per cent of the recent returnees – with an average loss of 67 per cent of the household income. Loss of remittance income mainly affected 38.9 per cent of households of those who returned during the pandemic. On average, returnees used to send 488 Euro to their families each month while still abroad. These resources were typically allocated to cover the costs of food and daily necessities for the household (64.9% of remittance-receiving households in the sample), family debt (10.7%) and education expenses (9.3%). Following return, the vast majority of remittance-sending migrants (70.7%) are no longer able to support their families.



As part of IOM's survey, migrants who returned during or due to the pandemic have been asked to identify their priority needs. Nearly every fifth respondent (21.8%) stated that employment support would be the most useful type of support for them, closely followed by immediate cash assistance (21.3%), which would help respondents cover basic needs in the aftermath of their return. Returnees also shared that the cost of the return trip itself constituted an issue for them. Twelve per cent of respondents would most welcome support in covering the cost of return travel, often amounting to hundreds of Euro (a standardized price of a flight ticket on one of the Government of Georgia chartered flights was set at 199 Euro). Health services were chosen as a priority needs by 4.4 per cent of the respondents, and bank services, social assistance, housing or accommodation assistance, or psychological support were among other common priorities. On the other hand, nearly a third of the returnees surveyed stated that they did not need any assistance.

## Reintegration prospects in times of global pandemic

A successful reintegration process requires re-inclusion across the economic, social and psychosocial dimension and is impacted by factors at the individual, community and structural levels<sup>6</sup>. **IOM considers reintegration to be sustainable when returnees have reached a level of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their community and psychosocial well-being that enables them to cope with (re)migration drivers**<sup>7</sup>. Upon return, migrants face conditions similar to those which motivated their original decision to leave Georgia. Reintegration is thus a process impacted not only by individual characteristics, education, or skills but one strongly influenced by the conditions of return.

The returnees' perception of their ability to stay in Georgia is key to sustainable reintegration, demonstrating the strong role of community and structural level conditions in migrants' decision-making. Those who returned to Georgia due to or during the pandemic are facing conditions more unfavorable to reintegration than many generations of returnees before them. In this sample, and shortly after their return, 40 per cent expressed that they are not sure that they will be able to remain in Georgia in the long term, with a majority stating that they feel they will need to leave (as opposed to wish to leave) due to the same reasons as those who had returned before the pandemic: lack of jobs, lack of security, low earnings, lack of essential services, or family pressure.

IOM Georgia applied IOM's standardized **Reintegration Sustainable Survey (RSS) methodology**<sup>8</sup> to assess reintegration baselines among migrants who returned during the pandemic. The tool is designed to determine to what extent the reintegration process of a migrant has been sustainable overall (composite score), and to what extent a migrant has achieved economic self-sufficiency (economic dimension score), social stability (social dimension score) and psychosocial well-being (psychosocial dimension score). Score values collected shortly following return set out a baseline measure for monitoring reintegration progress among returnees and indicate areas of largest needs for each beneficiary, for example, through personalized reintegration plans or through referrals.

Returnees to Georgia surveyed achieved an average composite reintegration score of 0.58 (on a scale between 0 minimum and 1 maximum), with scores varying between individuals and across dimensions. The results confirm that Georgian returnees struggle most with reintegration in the economic dimension and indicate that scores in the psychosocial dimension tend to be highest on average.

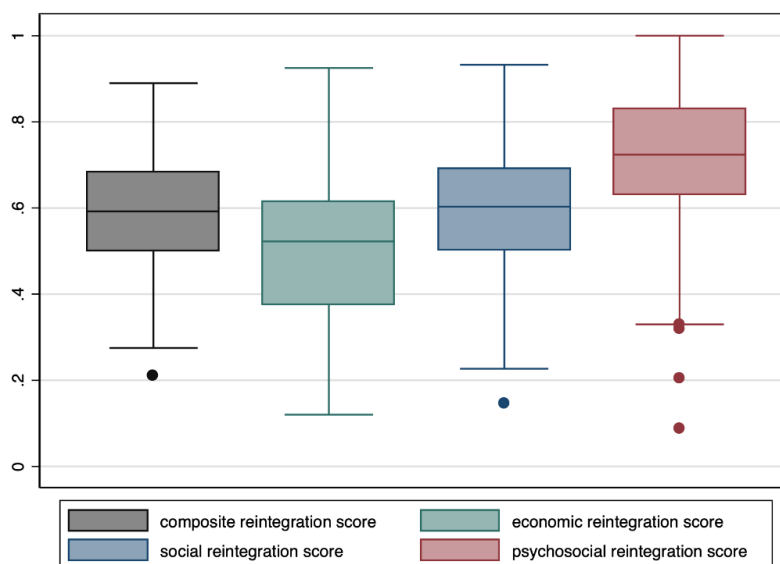


Figure 1. Box plot distribution of reintegration scores in a sample of Georgian migrants who returned to Georgia during or due to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> IOM Reintegration handbook (2019:12)

<sup>7</sup> IOM (2017) Towards an Integrated Approach to Reintegration in the context of Return

<sup>8</sup> See IOM (2019) Reintegration Handbook, IOM Reintegration Sustainability Survey, p.311

The RSS methodology has three principal purposes: Firstly, reintegration sustainability scores can be used to facilitate comparison between reintegration pathways and outcomes of different groups of returnees or returnees arriving in diverse contexts. However, due to the novelty of the methodology, IOM Georgia does not yet have a set of baseline scores collected among a comparable group of returnees before the pandemic to enable a meaningful comparison (see illustration in the footnote<sup>9</sup>).

The baseline scores are valuable nevertheless, as they enable tracking of individuals' reintegration process through time. A repeat survey among those who returned during the COVID-19 pandemic is planned to follow up on their baseline scores and assess the progress and outcomes of their unique reintegration efforts in each dimension during and after the crisis.

Thirdly, and most interestingly, the RSS survey is used to identify differences in reintegration prospects, experiences, and challenges in a single group of returnees, highlighting profiles that may be uniquely vulnerable and in need of enhanced reintegration assistance. The baseline scores collected in this sample indeed provide an **insight into the differences between different sub-groups in the study sample and their starting positions for sustainable reintegration in Georgia**.<sup>10</sup>

For example, men and women surveyed show similar baseline reintegration scores – no significant difference due to **gender** is observed in the data. On the other hand, a difference between **age groups** can be noted. Respondents between the ages of 18 and 30 (40.5% of the respondents) have achieved reintegration baseline scores that are slightly higher than respondents aged 31-50 (41.3%) and respondents older than 51 (17.8%). The difference in scores between age groups is the largest in the economic dimension, where the youngest age group scores higher than both older groups. This finding is particularly interesting because, in the population of migrants who returned to Georgia as beneficiaries of assisted voluntary return programmes, older migrants have been shown to achieve higher reintegration scores than younger beneficiaries. However, in the psychosocial dimension, even among returnees who returned during or due to the pandemic, more senior returnees (30-50, 50+) have achieved slightly higher scores than the youngest group, suggesting that return may be more challenging for the mental health of younger returnees.

Scores also differ in relation to **immigration status in the host country prior to return**. As illustrated in Figure 2, returnees who had their asylum claim rejected, returnees who benefited from the visa-free entry regime with the European Union, and those whose visa expired before the date of their return scored lower than other groups of returnees – except for long-term work permit holders. Further exploration of the relationship between migration profiles and reintegration outlook may be warranted.

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<sup>9</sup> Those who returned during the pandemic score on average 0.031 points lower than returnees who returned to Georgia between 1 and 3.5 years ago (IOM 2021, National study of reintegration outcomes in Georgia), for example (comparison between baseline scores and mid-reintegration scores). The comparison is not appropriate, however. Firstly, due to the difference in timing of the surveys relative to return in each group, and secondly, because the two respondent groups are different in composition. The assisted returnees (AVRR beneficiaries) are typically more vulnerable, possess lower skills and education, and return following a longer, more frequently irregular stay abroad. Their reintegration is expected to be more challenging than reintegration of the on average more skilled, educated group of independent, unsupported returnees which IOM has surveyed during their pandemic return.

<sup>10</sup> The baseline scores suggest whether relevant individual-level factors (objective and self-reported) are supportive of sustainable reintegration

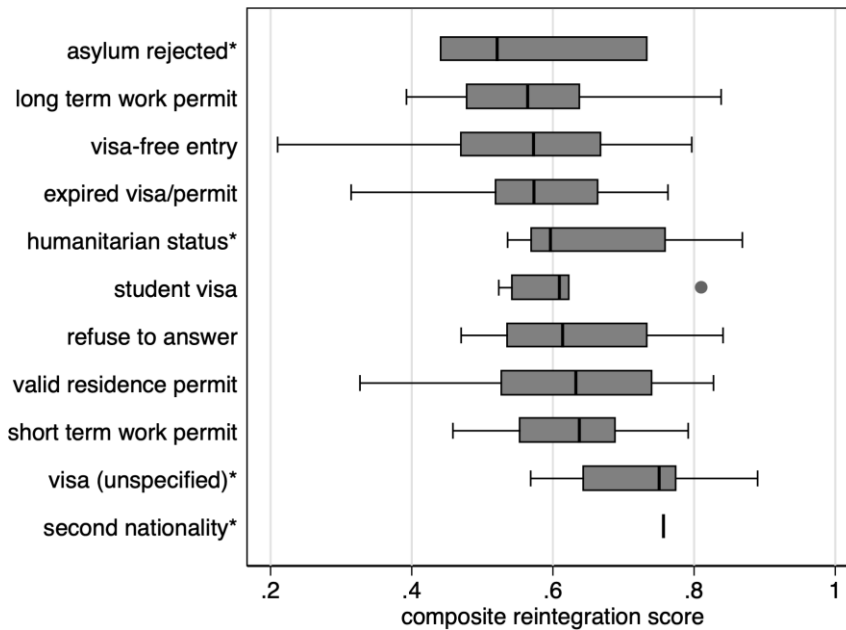


Figure 2.<sup>11</sup> Box plot distribution of composite reintegration scores by immigration status in last host country prior to return. Please note sample is indicative rather than representative, and results may be due to the small sample size for specific immigration status categories – especially those marked with “\*”.

Typically, a significant difference in reintegration outcomes is observed between returnees who arrived in rural/urban contexts (before the COVID-19 pandemic). Interestingly, in the sample of COVID-19 returnee scores, there is little or no difference between the returnees' baseline scores who have returned to **rural and urban contexts**. There are also only minimal differences between different **regions of origin in Georgia**. These results are likely due to the baseline nature of scores, as differences in reintegration outcomes are yet to develop among these returnees due to the influence of the context of return.

Region	Composite reintegration score (mean)	Number of respondents in sample
Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti	0.630	47
<b>Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti</b>	0.610 *	1
Shida Kartli	0.609	28
Tbilisi	0.602	238
Kvemo Kartli	0.592	31
Imereti	0.585	94
Guria	0.585 *	8
Kakheti	0.577	20
Mtskheta-Mtianeti	0.558 *	6
Autonomous Republic of Adjara	0.532	44
Samtskhe-Javakheti	0.463 *	10

Table 1. Mean composite reintegration scores per region of return in the sample. Please note that the sample is indicative rather than representative, and results may be due to the small sample size for certain regions – especially those marked with “\*”.

<sup>11</sup> The graph demonstrates the overall range of scores as well as mean score in each category of respondents. For further guidance on interpretation of box plot graphs see [“Understanding boxplots”](#)



### Considering re-migration

When asked, 33.4 per cent of all respondents indicate they believe they will *not be able* to stay in Georgia for the long term, nearly unanimously (97.2%) pointing to lack of jobs; lack of security; low earnings; lack of essential services or family pressure to re-migrate.

Among those who returned during the pandemic, a more significant proportion (60.3%) indicated that they have already considered going back abroad since their return, most often to the same country from which they departed. Among those who have considered going abroad again, 59.2 per cent indicate they would travel for the purpose of employment, 14.8 per cent would seek further training or education, and 6 per cent have considered re-migrating to seek medical care.

IOM's social media outreach and contact with the Georgian population with a history of or interest in migration indicate that in the second half of 2020, motivated primarily by socio-economic difficulties, Georgians began actively seeking ways to return to or reach host country destinations, especially those in the European Union. Indeed, online fora have shown a rapid increase in interest and discussion of routes presently available to Georgian citizens attempting to reach destination countries. IOM's operational experience and direct contact with the population confirm that Georgian migrants are predisposed to make rushed travel plans to destinations in the EU in spite of the global pandemic situation due to the severity of their and their families' economic situation. High prices on flight tickets are at present moment a factor recognized as a barrier limiting Georgians' desired travel to the EU. Discussions among Georgians interested in (re)migration have been and are likely to continue being marked by confusion and chaotic spread of misleading information. IOM reacts to false claims and conveys straightforward messages to correct any misleading information and provide referrals to relevant resources and recommendations. Intensified awareness-raising on safe and regular migration from Georgia will be key in 2021.

Among pandemic returnees, 33.4 per cent expressed that they feel they will need to leave again once feasible due to reasons similar to those which compelled them to leave in the first place: lack of jobs, lack of security, low earnings, lack of essential services, or family pressure.



Jambuli (57, on the right) returned to Poti in Georgia together with his wife and son in 2020, following an unsuccessful application for asylum in the Netherlands. IOM supported the family with accommodation and medical assistance. Photo by IOM Georgia.

## NATIONAL STRUCTURES SUPPORTING RETURNING GEORGIAN MIGRANTS

In recent years, the Government of Georgia has demonstrated a strong commitment to accelerate efforts to address the needs of returning migrants. In 2010, the country signed a readmission agreement with the European Union, coming into force in 2011. Since then, Georgia facilitates forced and voluntary returns as part of the EU-Georgia Agreement on the Readmission of Persons Residing without Authorization.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the Action Plan on Visa Liberalization and the EU-Georgia Association agreement call for consolidated efforts in the reintegration of Georgian returning migrants. The country has been administering state programs for returning migrants reintegration since 2015.

Georgia has a support system for reintegration in place<sup>1</sup> and the country has experience of administering relevant programs, largely due to the involvement and practices of international and local civil society organizations (CSOs) working in the field. Until July 2020, Georgian CSOs were implementers of the Reintegration assistance programme for Georgian returnees, but following a recent reform of the institutional setting, the programme is now firmly anchored within the Ministry of IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs and implemented by the Agency of IDPs, Eco-migrants and Livelihood Provision. As indicated by the agency, the program envisages issuing grants for income-generating and employment purpose, support to vocational education, provision of health care services and temporary accommodation to migrants who returned from abroad following a minimum of one year on irregular stay.

Although the program commenced in July 2020, when the first wave of COVID-19 had already swept over Georgia, the program has not been specifically adapted to address pandemic-related needs among those who have returned to Georgia during or due to the pandemic or scaled up to respond to the new scale of returns. Only a small proportion of the pandemic returnees would qualify for the assistance under the present eligibility criteria. However, it ought to be recognized that the Agency of IDPs, Eco-Migrants and Livelihood Provision of Georgia introduced online applications as a means of adapting the programme to existing mobility restrictions and implemented a wide-reaching communication campaign to alert potential beneficiaries of the existence of the State Reintegration programme.

An analysis of measures implemented by the Government of Georgia reveals that targeted pandemic responses have reached and been highly relevant to Georgian migrants residing abroad as well as Georgian nationals who returned home during the pandemic. The result is credited to the support provided by Georgian Consulates abroad, and in the organization of the logistics of the return amid a halt to international commercial air-travel for those seeking to return. The Government of Georgia should be praised for the timely mobilization of efforts, cooperation with a wide spectrum of actors across the world (airlines, state authorities in receiving states, hostels and hotels for shelters abroad, etc.) and provision of diversified assistance and repatriation flights to Georgian nationals residing abroad and wishing to return to Georgia amid the pandemic.

Following a successful return to Georgia and completion of mandatory quarantine, recent returnees were not well informed of services and assistance available to them as part of special socio-economic relief measures. Nearly two thirds (70.4%) of those who returned during the pandemic indicated they had not received any information about services and support available to them. Of those who returned during the pandemic, 38 per cent were not aware of the different types of assistance offered by the Government to the citizens during the pandemic. Of all 527 respondents in IOM's survey of those who returned during the pandemic, 2.8 per cent were aware of the possibility to defer credit repayments by three months, for example. A quarter of returnees (24.6%) knew assistance was available to employees who had lost their jobs (200 GEL/month), 26 per cent were aware of assistance available to self-employed persons (300 GEL), and 20 per cent knew of the one-time assistance available for families with children. As many of these measures were available only upon request or registration, the vast majority of recent returnees reported not having benefited from measures that required registration or active request before the survey in November 2020. Measures applied universally, such as utility bills coverage by the State and key consumer item price fixation were enjoyed.

The additional vulnerability of mobility dependent population and returnees undergoing reintegration was not directly considered in State measures. Their access to further assistance facilitated by the Government in addressing the pandemic's socio-economic consequences among vulnerable populations is thus fully dependent on having access to the existing social welfare system, pending registration in social protection databases as a precondition for eligibility.



## Implications

The analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on returnees in Georgia suggests that not only migrants but also their households are at risk of sliding into severe poverty as a result of the pandemic, interruption of remittance flows, and lack of opportunities for reintegration in communities of origin or repeated migration abroad for labour purposes.

The pandemic and related restrictions have increased socio-economic vulnerabilities across Georgia, but especially in **communities of origin dependent on remittances** sent by Georgian migrants abroad. Since 2016 and until February 2020, remittances have been growing in Georgia, exceeding 10 per cent of the GDP<sup>12</sup>. Almost 20 per cent of Georgian households reported receiving money from relatives living abroad in 2019<sup>13</sup>. In 2020, however, remittance flows to households of returned migrants had been interrupted.

Local market recovery cannot be expected in the short term. In the absence of local livelihood opportunities in communities of origin, IOM expects those migrants who returned to Georgia during the pandemic to increasingly seek pathways for re-migration to resume financial support for their families from abroad. However, remaining constraints on international travel (including suspension of low-cost flights out of Georgia) will impede many Georgian households from relying on previously practiced mobility-based livelihood strategies. Scaling up of reintegration support to returnees and information provision to prospective labour migrants will be key to steer migrants towards regular and safe migration pathways, especially once restrictions on international mobility are lifted.



Ruslan (45, on the left) returned to the Kakheti region during the spring 2020, following a year and a half of working without a permit at construction sites in Greece. With IOM's support he managed to start a cattle breeding business, which he is now trying to expand. Photo by IOM Georgia.

<sup>12</sup> Remittances were reported at 12.7% of GDP in 2019 by [The World Bank](#), accessed 3 December 2020. The National Bank of Georgia reports remittances reached 10.5% of GDP.

<sup>13</sup> World Bank, [April 2020](#)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The level of risk faced by individuals during the global pandemic is highly dependent on the extent of their inclusion in society and their access to economic, social and health measures implemented by the Government to ease the negative impacts of the pandemic. Migrants and mobility dependent households ought not to be left behind in society-wide measures. However, explicit targeting through specialized interventions to address specific vulnerabilities is needed.

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 unprecedented and 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 therefore key 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 well-coordinated, holistic and equitable approach, where no one is left behind, including Georgian returnees.

- Facilitate a needs-based and integrated approach towards returning migrants to consider individual, community and structural factors affecting reintegration across the economic, social, and psychosocial dimensions in the time of and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider and explicitly account for challenges and vulnerabilities caused by COVID-19 in the State Reintegration Programs.
- Prepare information materials to facilitate referrals for existing programs and services in the country, outlining opportunities/services of healthcare, education, social support, small and medium-sized enterprise support schemes adapted to returnees' context and needs.
- Prepare and disseminate in targeted fashion information on enrolment into request-based COVID-19 relief measures among recent returnees.
- Strengthen the State Reintegration Programme offered by the Government of Georgia, including through institutional capacity building, introduction of specialized services, and establishment of programme access offices across the country.
- Strengthen the capacity of national and local self-government units and CSOs in different regions of Georgia to disseminate information among returnees on the Government of Georgia's measures, programs, and services in place in a systematic and targeted fashion.
- Enhance Georgian migrants and returnees' access to counselling and referrals to enhance their awareness and access to reintegration options for returnees before and following their return, including measures set in place specifically in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Implement information campaigns on safe and regular migration targeting mobility-dependent communities and recent returnees to counter misinformation regarding re-migration opportunities and promote safe, orderly, and regular migration, including the recently introduced legislation on exit controls from Georgia to the EEA.
- Urgently and proactively work on approaches to foster community revitalization and job creation in communities of return to address drivers of (re)migration and provide opportunities for reintegration.