



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs



**SOCIETAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS FOREIGN MIGRANTS AND MEDIA DISCOURSE
ON IMMIGRATION IN GEORGIA AND ARMENIA**

COUNTRY BRIEF - GEORGIA



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Objectives and methods

With an aim to better understand and examine attitudes of the people in Georgia towards migrants, including media coverage of migration issues, and plan targeted interventions and project activities, IOM conducted the study within the framework of the project “Enhancing Migrants’ Rights and Good Governance in Armenia and Georgia” (EMERGE). Implemented in Georgia and Armenia simultaneously between June 2020 and May 2021 by two national research teams under supervision of the international consultant and the International Organization for Migration, the study aimed to achieve several general objectives:

- Reveal the differences of opinion among various segments of population, taking into account such variables as place of residence, own experience of migration, personal contacts with foreign migrants, socioeconomic status, age and gender;
- Identify the sources of information used by the respondents, analyse the reporting and understand the role that they play in forming public attitudes – indicating the patterns of media usage, extent to which various channels are found trustworthy and how balanced their reporting is;
- Detect and analyse the factors determining the different attitudes and develop recommendations for addressing negative attitudes through various measures.

The research into attitudes on immigration in Georgia was implemented by employing qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative method included 13 focus groups, which were conducted in three large cities of Georgia: Tbilisi, Batumi and Kutaisi. Quantitative research included surveys of the population in four large cities of Georgia: Tbilisi (25.2% or 290 respondents), Batumi, Kutaisi, Rustavi (24.9% or 287 respondents each). In total, 1151 individuals participated in the survey. Nearly a quarter of those surveyed (24.8%) were in the 25-34 age category and another 21.8% were between 35 and 44 years of age. The majority of study participants (54.9%) were male and 45.1% were female.

What follows are summarized main findings of the study and proposed interventions to further promote benefits of safe and orderly migration, countering any negative attitudes and xenophobia to the benefit of all.

Key findings

Media as source of information on migration

While on the whole awareness of migration topics in the media coverage was limited among the surveyed Georgians, it increased among the younger respondents. This disparity reflected the variation in media consumption across age groups and the different emphasis on migration and treatment of the topic in various media outlets. The youngest participants tended to receive their information from social media rather than from television, which continued to be the medium of choice among persons 45 years and above. At the same time,

analysis of media contents showed that television rarely featured migration issues, and when it did, the focus was on either short-term arrivals (tourists/visitors) or on incidents, involving migrants.

Media coverage differed in the dominant tone on migration, ranging from rather factual and until 2020, either neutral or positive, in television and the press, to negative in the comments to online news stories or to social media posts. Only one quarter of the respondents found the tone of the media coverage of migration to be positive, while others considered the tone to be either neutral or negative.

Exposure to migration-related media coverage. A large share of respondents (45.2%) encountered information on migration in the media less than once a month and 17% never did. 87.4% of the respondents could not recall a story about foreign migrants in Georgia over the previous year. **Social media and television were the sources of information for the largest number of respondents** (48.1% and 33.9% respectively). 70.8% of those under 25 selected social media while 69.8% of persons 65 years and older used television as the main source. Television and the Internet were also alongside the family members and colleagues the main sources, declared by focus group participants.

According to 39.3% of the respondents the tone of the coverage on foreign migrants was neutral, 37.2% assessed the tone as negative and only 23.4% recalled positive coverage. Focus group participants in particular found that television broadcasts and “viral” social media messages made different associations when referring to the migrants from various geographic areas, with negative coverage stressing the conflicts between persons arriving from African and Asian countries with local residents.

When asked, focus group participants stated that they would like to acquire more information regarding foreign migrants’ experience of living in Georgia. Some topics they expressed interest in included: reasons for arrival (especially of migrants from more democratic and economically developed countries), profession, everyday life, leisure time, integration, relationship with local population, etc. Additionally, focus group participants were also interested in the terms under which migrants may buy real estate and land as well as in the scale of migrants’ investments, by country of origin, into various economic sectors.

Dominant themes and tone in the media. A total of 341 news items, related to immigration, were identified in printed press, TV media, online media (news media and social media) and other sources in the period 2018-2020 which was examined within this study (Table 1). **The largest number of references focused on events, involving individual foreign visitors (accidents and incidents involving migrants) while a smaller number examined immigration as a trend** by considering statistics and making forecasts. **Human interest stories** were also used to illustrate integration experience in Georgia of beneficiaries of international protection as well as various aspects of daily life of foreign nationals, ranging from employment and education to relations with the local population.

Three-quarters of media references to immigration were concentrated in two media types: online news media and printed press. **Online news media** had a more balanced thematic coverage, largely preoccupied with the opportunities that short-term movement (tourist or

for other purposes) brought. **Printed press** was most concerned with incidents involving migrants, but it also featured a variety of topics, for instance uniquely covering the role that foreigners played as investors in Georgia’s economy. **Television** ran relatively few stories with over half of the references on tourists or foreign visitors and nearly a quarter on incidents involving migrants.

Table 1. Top keywords, associated with immigration in investigated media in Georgia

Keyword	Printed Press	TV Media	Online news media	Other sources	TOTAL
Tourists/Foreign Visitors	11	28	57		96
Incidents involving migrants	42	12	18	2	74
International Protection	13	1	39	6	59
Life of Foreign Nationals in Georgia	7	4	7	10	28
Racism and Xenophobia	6	1	10	10	27
Other	33	9	15	1	58
TOTAL	112	54	146	29	341

The tone varied by media type. Overall, **the tone in the press and TV coverage was positive as success stories of cultural integration and of valuable contribution to local communities were featured.** However, the press and TV, which were predominantly consulted by older media users, also played a role in potentially contributing to raising anxieties among these groups. For instance, in 2020 concerns over the spread of COVID-19 were associated in some press articles with the presence of Asian migrants. Online news media covered issues faced by tourists and visitors in various circumstances (including emergencies but also overcoming administrative barriers) often with empathy, providing migrants’ first-person observations. At the same time, analysis of comments to online news revealed dominance of negative attitudes, both directed against migrants and critical towards admission of migrants or granting of asylum.

Interactions with and attitudes towards different migrant groups

The survey revealed limited scope and frequency of interaction between migrants and the local population but it indicated overall harmonious relations with very few respondents offering negative self-evaluation of those contacts. Foreign workers were the most commonly encountered group of migrants, and the workplace, alongside marketplaces and service premises, were among the locations of most frequent contact and communication. Focus group participants came across migrants in the cities in certain districts with greater concentration of foreign residents, and younger discussants met them at the university. Survey respondents named spontaneously India and Iran most often as countries of migrants’ origin, followed by China and Turkey.

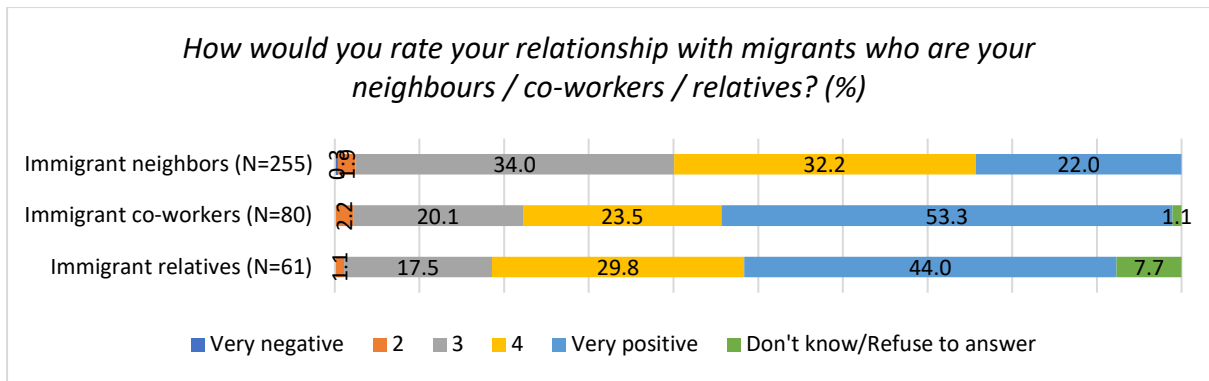
The respondents were most willing to accept migrants coming from outside the Western world or the post-Soviet area, as short-term visitors. In terms of accepting migrant neighbours, difference in religion was identified as the most common concern, followed by different language, nationality and race. However, participants who had gone abroad themselves were less likely to name any criteria that would matter to them in opening toward migrant neighbours. Most respondents tended to only be in favour of admission into the family of foreign migrants from Europe or America. However, younger respondents were less likely to oppose marriage to a migrant from an Asian country. At the same time, many participants expressed strong appreciation of migrants' efforts towards cultural integration, as expressed through foreign residents' willingness to learn the Georgian language, history and customs. Among respondents, immigration was associated with both positive and negative impact. However, if arguments in favour and against were balanced in terms of economic contribution, certain concerns appeared over the preservation of social and cultural cohesion.

A large part of focus group participants estimated the number of migrants in Georgia to be from 50, 000 to 100, 000, which coincides with the Geostat's official figure of close to 90,000. **When asked spontaneously, the respondents named most frequently four countries of origin of migrants in Georgia: India (59.4% of all responses), Iran (43.6%), China (35.6%) and Turkey (34%).**

Vast majority of survey respondents did not report knowing personally any foreign migrants as contacts with migrant workers either at work, in the neighbourhood or in the family setting were declared by 21.4% of the respondents and merely 15.1% knew any foreign students. **Frequency of contacts was quite limited** as monthly or more frequent interactions were declared by 22.1% of the surveyed persons with foreign students and by 25.6% respondents who came across migrant workers as often. Frequency of interaction with foreign migrants was significantly higher among persons with either migration or tourism experience than among those who have never been abroad.

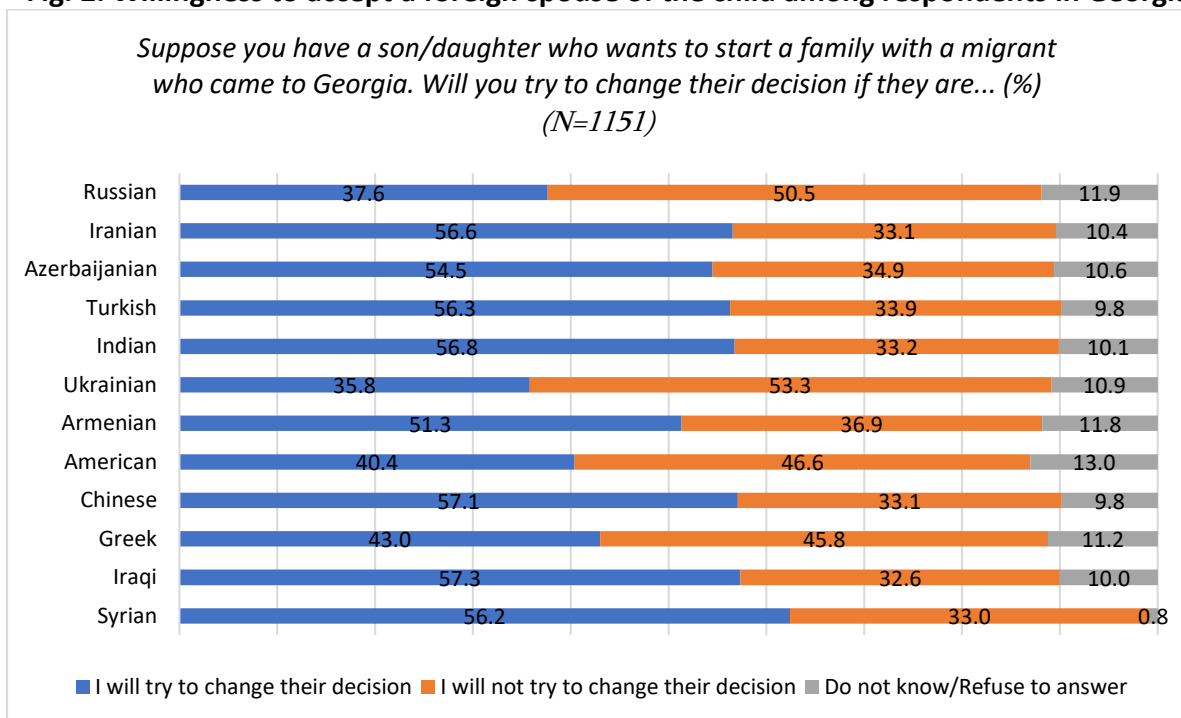
Focus group participants remarked that foreign migrants tended to be greeted with initial mistrust when moving into the area. **The language barrier was the most important reported obstacle in the interactions with foreign migrants.** It is significant to note that relations in closer settings (workplace, family) tended to be evaluated more positively. **Relations with migrants in the workplace and family were assessed as positive by around three-quarters of the respondents** while migrant neighbours were viewed positively or neutrally by nearly all participants (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Self-assessment of relationships with migrants in various spaces



Surveyed persons were largely willing to interact with foreign migrants of different backgrounds in a variety of settings – only between 1% and 3% would want to exclude some migrants from the country. **Foreign migrants were accepted by the largest share of respondents as “non-citizens visitors” (20%) or “neighbours on the same street” (19%) with little difference in support based on migrants’ country of origin.** However, significantly more respondents would want to become close personal friends with ethnic Georgian returnees (14.8%) than with migrants or students from India, Turkey or Iran (10.1-10.5%). Another indicator of varying social distance was the preference for one’s child to marry a migrant from Ukraine, Russia, Greece or the United States (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Willingness to accept a foreign spouse of the child among respondents in Georgia



The focus group participants named some **factors, which in their view attracted foreign migrants into Georgia.** These included favourable environmental conditions (warm climate, access to nature), opportunities for personal advancement (liberal visa policy, access to higher education, good business environment), ease of integration (lack of language barrier, especially for Russian-language speakers) and (in case of beneficiaries of international protection) a high level of democracy and freedom.

The surveyed persons were **generally convinced of the newcomers’ positive economic contribution**, noting the skills and knowledge that they brought. However, **they were split on the social impact of immigration**. As many as 39.3% did not believe that greater racial and ethnic diversity would make Georgia “a better place to live”. **The concerns over immigration referred more to the long-term cultural trends, in particular weakening of old Georgian traditions and decline in religious activities.**

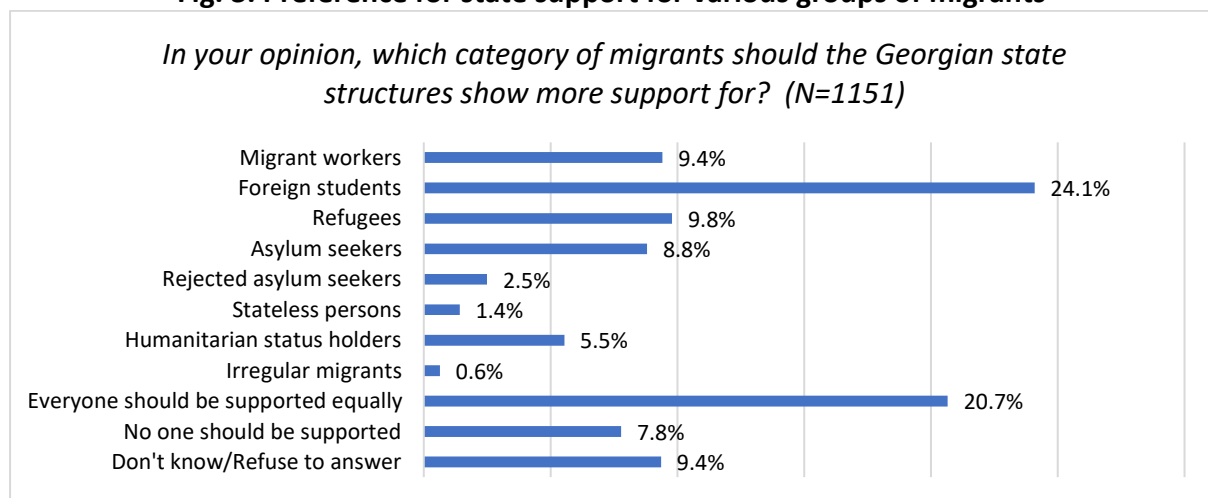
Support for immigration and integration policy options

Surveyed respondents and focus group participants, expressed a clear support for regulation of admission of migrants, and stressed that a **balance between openness** for economic investments and for the purpose of cultural enrichment, **and country’s strategic interests** (national security and cultural cohesion) should be maintained. **Strong support was expressed for admitting and supporting foreign students, and persons fleeing from violent conflicts.** A clear majority favoured the state’s active integration policy, in which the priorities of language learning and understanding local customs were highlighted.

Focus group participants expressed **preference for Georgia to receive migrants from economically developed democratic countries, while being concerned** that immigration from poor countries would increase the existing social tensions.

Many respondents were willing to admit and offer support to specific migrant groups. Foreign students were selected by the largest group of respondents as a priority group for support (Fig. 3). Of note is also very high support for taking in **refugees** “escaping from war and violence” – nearly two-thirds of the respondents considered it a priority group for admission. This reflected a **strong theme of empathy and compassion** for displaced persons expressed during focus group discussions.

Fig. 3. Preference for state support for various groups of migrants



Nearly two-thirds (63.8%) of the respondents agreed with **the need for the state to make efforts for integrating foreign migrants into the Georgian society.** Among various

expectations regarding migrants' integration, **learning the Georgian language was selected by the largest share of respondents (32%)**. This coincided with the focus group discussions: the participants invoked insufficient knowledge of the language as a source of difficulties in foreigners' use of public and private services. Cultural aspects of integration were stressed as well: 21.7% of those surveyed pointed to understanding and respecting local customs and 10.1% to familiarity with the national history and traditions as their top expectations.

Respondents' age, place of residence and experience of foreign travel and stay influenced the positions on admission and integration of foreign migrants. Youngest respondents (18-24 years old) were most enthusiastic regarding encouraging immigration. Restrictions on immigration were most favoured by those surveyed in the 45-64 age category. **Acceptance of foreign migrants**, was higher among **persons with migration or tourism experience from those who have not been abroad**. Migration experience also determined the priorities in migrant integration: language acquisition and sharing cultural traditions were of particular importance to persons lacking experience of staying abroad while former migrants stressed economic self-reliance and compliance with national laws as priorities.

Main conclusions and recommendations

Media coverage

1. **Television**, which remains the medium of choice for the largest share of persons above 50, who exhibit lowest levels of openness to immigration, **could help reduce social distance by carrying more human-interest stories, featuring immigrants in a variety of roles, in particular stressing their economic contribution** (investors, employers or employees) and drawing on cases of harmonious neighbourhood in the rural areas of Georgia.
2. The older citizens (especially residents of smaller towns and rural areas) are particularly concerned over non-material issues, such as the preservation of national language and culture and social cohesion. **Life stories of foreign migrant families and individuals striving to learn the national customs and traditions are highly appreciated** in this demographic group.
3. Youngest media users (under 35) who are the primary users of social media have occasionally been exposed to xenophobic and negative comments. They need to be targeted with **campaigns providing trustworthy information (including current statistics) and anti-xenophobia testimonies, shared by social media leaders of opinion**.
4. **Government websites, in particular State Commission for Migration Issues (SCMI) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA)'s online and social media presence could be used to promote benefits of orderly and regulated immigration which can benefit all sides in both economic and sociocultural terms.** This could be done through a variety of formats such as presentation of statistical trends, interviews with foreign migrants and local communities, life stories featuring immigrants, and summaries of relevant research.

5. **Students of journalism and beginner reporters would benefit from trainings in the use of correct migration terminology, use of official data available to back up their reporting, sensitive methods of interviewing and contextualizing personal stories involving migrants.** This is especially important for Internet news portals and local news media, which target those population segments that have limited personal contacts with foreigners, especially those included in smaller categories, such as beneficiaries of international protection.

Public campaigns

6. In order to help the local population make parallels and empathize with foreign migrants in Georgia, **testimonies of Georgian migrants abroad stressing the importance of the receptiveness of destination communities and government support for integration could help build recognition in the public of the responsibility that the Georgian society bears for the success of newcomers' integration,** especially in the sociocultural aspect, which remains a general concern.
7. While many respondents believe that Georgia's gradual shift from predominantly a country of origin toward also a destination for migrants is a sign of its growing economic attractiveness, concerns prevail in the Georgian public over the country's capacity for handling large-scale immigration. **Awareness-raising campaigns, organized by IOM, UNHCR and partner NGOs could therefore bring up cases of successful integration of migrants and benefits to local communities in various regions of the country, including smaller urban centers and rural areas.** Examples of successful initiatives by the local governments and NGOs, which enabled the newcomers to enter the local labour market, invest their resources (financial as well as skills) to benefit the local economy, could provide evidence of local integration capacities.
8. Sociocultural aspects of integration, especially learning the Georgian language and awareness of local cultural norms, have been acknowledged by the respondents, especially older ones and from smaller towns and rural areas, as top expectations from immigrants. As part of the campaigns, **interviews in Georgian with immigrants, especially coming from non-European countries of origin, stressing their cultural competence (appreciation for national culture, customs and traditions) could help overcome the initial mistrust, and demonstrate the viability of integration of newcomers.**
9. In order to counter negative stereotypes and discrimination, a **more vigorous presence in the social media of influential voices affirming respect for migrants' rights, presenting evidence and exposing biased or false statements through "fact-checking", would be beneficial.**