

The Role of the Georgian Orthodox Church and Diasporas in the Formation of Informal Social Networks and the Resocialization Process (The Case of Illegal Migrants from Georgia to Italy)

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Abstract

This paper examines the role and influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) in Georgian society from the post-Soviet period to 2020. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the GOC emerged as a significant cultural, moral, and political force in Georgia. It actively contributed to the re-establishment of national identity by preserving Georgian traditions and language, and positioned itself as a guardian of Georgian values amidst Western influences. The GOC's influence extended into politics through its alignment with successive Georgian governments, securing legal privileges and a prominent role in public education. Its conservative stance, shaped public discourse and policy. The Church's growing influence in social, political, and educational sectors highlights its central role in Georgian society. The research also explores the Georgian diaspora, focusing on the role of religious institutions in Italy, and their impact on community cohesion and cultural preservation.

Keywords: Georgian Orthodox Church, national identity, post-Soviet Georgia, political influence, diaspora, religious institutions.

Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the beginning of major migration waves from Georgia, motivated by economic decline, political instability, and regional conflicts. During this period, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) emerged as a social and moral stabiliser, playing a vital role in maintaining national identity and supporting individuals amid socio-economic upheaval. This analysis explores the interaction between migration processes and the role of the GOC as a social institution, examining how the Church provided both spiritual guidance and socio-cultural continuity for migrants and those remaining in Georgia.

The exact scale of labour migration from Georgia remains unclear, but researchers generally agree that a significant portion of the Georgian population resides abroad. According to data from the World Bank, by 2010, the number of Georgians living overseas reached 1,057,001, meaning that one in every four citizens of Georgia resides abroad. According to a report published in 2012, it was estimated that in 2011, between 350,000 and 500,000 Georgian citizens were employed abroad, accounting for approximately 8 to 11 percent of the country's total population. Review of statistical and quantitative data: Preliminary data from the 2014 National Census confirms that, compared to the 2002 census, the population of Georgia had decreased by approximately 600,000 individuals, reaching 3,729,500 on January 1, 2015.¹

Research indicates that the interest of Georgians in emigration is steadily increasing. It is noteworthy that despite the relatively large Georgian diaspora, only a small portion of respondents express a desire to leave the country permanently. However, a significant proportion, 42%, of the respondents expressed a wish to emigrate.²

¹ World Bank. Georgia and migration. 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org> [L.s. 24. 02. 2025].

² Badurashvili, I., Determinants and trends of internal and external migration in Georgia. Caucasus Journal of Social Sciences, 1(1). 2004.

1. Migration Processes in Georgian Society: Post-Soviet Period to 2020 and Parallels with the Georgian Orthodox Church - Economic and Social Drivers of Migration

The 1990s witnessed a surge in migration as Georgia faced severe economic recession, hyperinflation, and high unemployment rates following the collapse of its Soviet-era economy. The civil war in 1991-1992 and the subsequent conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia led to internal displacement and pushed many Georgians to seek stability abroad. According to the 2002 census data, over 300,000 Georgians had migrated by the early 2000s, primarily to Russia, Turkey, and Europe.³ By 2020, the number of emigrants had significantly increased, with remittances from the Georgian diaspora contributing nearly 13% of the national GDP, highlighting the extent to which migration became a critical economic lifeline.

1.1 Role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Migration Context

As a central element of Georgian identity, the Georgian Orthodox Church sought to provide continuity for the diaspora and stability for those remaining within the country. Post-Soviet Georgia experienced a religious revival, with the GOC re-establishing its influence as a moral authority and social institution.⁴ The Church filled the void left by the Soviet state, offering a source of unity and resilience for Georgians faced with economic and social uncertainties. Its emphasis on cultural and spiritual continuity became crucial in reinforcing Georgian identity, both domestically and abroad.⁵

The Church also established connections with diaspora communities, providing spiritual services in migration hubs and supporting Georgian-language religious materials to help maintain cultural ties.⁶ By reinforcing religious and cultural practices, the Church mitigated some of the isolation and cultural dislocation felt by Georgian migrants in foreign countries, facilitating social networks that enhanced both solidarity and resilience.

1.2 Migration Patterns and the Church's Influence on Social Integration

Migration processes have had a profound impact on Georgian society, reshaping social structures and family dynamics. The Georgian Orthodox Church has often addressed issues of migration by providing a moral framework for those impacted, including addressing the challenges of family separation and the social vulnerabilities associated with prolonged absence from home. As studies indicate, the Church has encouraged migrants to maintain cultural practices and familial bonds as integral to the Georgian way of life.⁷

Furthermore, the Church's outreach in migrant-populated areas created informal support networks, where Church-led communities offered spiritual guidance and social support, mirroring the Church's stabilising influence within Georgia itself.⁸ These networks provided not only a continuation of religious practice but also facilitated economic and social integration for migrants, allowing them to retain a Georgian identity while adjusting to foreign social structures.⁹

1.3 Resilience and Identity Preservation in Diaspora Communities

The Georgian Orthodox Church has played an essential role in preserving national identity among diaspora communities by acting as a symbol of cultural continuity. Georgian Orthodox parishes abroad often become centres for cultural gatherings, where migrants connect with their heritage through

³ Trier, T., & Khanzhin, A., Migration in Georgia: Socio-economic and demographic impacts. Caucasus Policy Institute. 2007.

⁴ World Bank. Georgia and migration. 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org> [L.s. 24. 02. 2025].

⁵ Kukhianidze, A., Georgian Orthodox Church's role in post-Soviet Georgia. Caucasus Analytical Digest, 30. 2011.

⁶ Tabatadze, S., & Gorgadze, N., The role of the Orthodox Church in education in Georgia. European Journal of Education Studies, 3(2), 112-124. 2016.

⁷ Kiknadze, N., Religion and politics in Georgia: An analysis of the relations between church and state. Journal of Social Research, 12(1). 2018.

⁸ Rimple, P., The church and modernity: A brief history of Georgian Orthodox influence. Caucasus Survey, 7(2). 2019.

⁹ Papava, V., The role of the Orthodox Church in Georgian society and the state. Caucasus Analytical Digest, 34. 2012.

religious festivals, language classes, and community events.¹⁰ For many Georgian migrants, the Church represents an anchor in a foreign land, helping them navigate the cultural and moral challenges they face while residing outside of Georgia.

Furthermore, by emphasising the spiritual dimensions of migration, the Church offers a perspective that frames migration as a test of faith and resilience. According to Kiknadze this approach helps many Georgian migrants interpret their experiences within a broader spiritual narrative, which enhances their ability to cope with the hardships of migration and retain a sense of purpose.

The Georgian Orthodox Church has played an integral role in shaping migration experiences and maintaining a sense of Georgian identity both within the country and among diaspora communities. Through its outreach efforts and cultural influence, the Church has provided stability and resilience for migrants, helping them navigate the complex realities of life abroad while fostering cultural continuity. The role of the Church remains central in supporting the socio-cultural dimensions of migration, and as migration patterns continue to evolve, the Georgian Orthodox Church is likely to remain a fundamental institution for Georgians worldwide.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Aim, Subject, Object, and Questions

Main Aim of the Research Project: The role of the Georgian Orthodox Church and diaspora in the formation of informal social networks and the process of resocialisation: A case study of illegal migrants from Georgia to Italy (2017–2020). The identification of social practices related to illegal migration, the influence and significance of Georgian religious institutions and informal networks in managing illegal migration flows; empirical data collection and analysis of the existing situation. The findings of the study are valuable to the state in improving the effectiveness of migration policy/management strategies.

Research Subject: The identification of the boundaries of the role, significance, and influence of Georgian religious institutions and informal social networks on the adaptation and resocialisation processes of Georgian illegal migrants.

Research Questions:

- What is the strength of Georgian religious institutions abroad (in Italy), and how integrated are migrants within them?
- What types of information circulate within informal groups, and how is integration into these groups achieved?
- What effect do informal groups have on "survival" in the case of illegal migration?
- What barriers do emigrants face in the process of finding employment?
- What types of legal violations are common, and so on?

Research Object: This refers to Georgian citizens who have migration experience – currently residing or having previously resided in Italy. What factors contribute to the ‘resilience’ of illegal migrants?

Hypothesis: Georgian migrants are integrated into informal networks, which serve as a key resource for their adaptation. The strength of Georgian religious institutions abroad and the integration of migrants into these institutions. Negative expectations about returning to Georgia, likely linked to a sense of hopelessness.

The analysis of the model of informal social networks among migrants will allow for the formulation of certain conclusions.

¹⁰ Smith, G., *The post-Soviet states: Mapping the politics of transition*. Edward Arnold Publishers. 2002.

2.2 Empirical Research Methodology

The methodological strategy relies on exploratory and descriptive types of investigation – identifying factual data regarding whether the problem has been studied through previous research, and collecting primary data on the issue at hand, ‘exploring’ the situation. It aims to obtain extensive information about the problem or the group of individuals, which will subsequently enable the study to determine whether there is any connection between the different elements of the issue. To achieve the research goals and tasks and to obtain the most complete and objective information on the subject matter, the research will primarily rely on qualitative research methods.

Desk Research – At the initial stage of the project, an analysis of documents related to the topic under study was conducted. This involved reviewing any relevant written sources (such as strategic state documents, statistical data, trends in state migration policies, etc.), analysis of Georgian press, and reviewing the social networks of emigrants.

Through this method, the main issues within the subject area were identified, and the direction and questions of the topic were more precisely determined in order to develop an interview instrument – a questionnaire/guide.

To investigate the role of religious organisations in shaping informal social networks and facilitating the resocialisation of undocumented Georgian migrants in Italy between 2017 and 2020, a mixed-methods approach was selected. This methodology combines quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, aiming to ensure comprehensive insights and high validity in the data. Such a design is well-suited to understanding the complex social dynamics, informal networks, and resocialisation processes within religious organisations. The use of multiple data sources and methods serves to triangulate findings, thus enhancing the reliability and robustness of the results.

2.3 Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was deemed most appropriate due to the dual need for statistical data to examine patterns and in-depth qualitative data to understand migrants’ personal experiences and social interactions within religious communities. The primary research instruments included a quantitative survey and semi-structured interviews. The survey focused on demographic information, frequency and type of involvement with religious organisations, social support received, and perceived influence of religious communities on adaptation. The semi-structured interviews aimed to capture personal narratives, cultural integration experiences, and insights into the social networks formed through religious organisations.

2.4 Data Analysis - Qualitative Analysis

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants selected from the survey respondents. The interviews explored themes such as motivations for joining religious communities, types of social networks formed, perceived benefits and challenges, and the role of religious practices in their resocialisation. Interview data were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo software to facilitate thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurrent themes in the interview data. Initial coding was based on theoretical frameworks of social capital, network theory, and resocialisation, but open coding allowed new themes to emerge directly from the data. Key themes included emotional support, cultural continuity, adaptive behaviours, and challenges of integration. This qualitative analysis provided rich, contextualised insights into the personal and social implications of religious community involvement for undocumented Georgian migrants.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the research population, particular attention was paid to ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, and data security. Participants were fully briefed on the study's aims, assured of their voluntary participation, and guaranteed anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in reporting findings, and all data were stored securely, accessible only to the research team.

This methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of the ways in which religious organisations contribute to informal social networks and the resocialisation process among undocumented Georgian migrants in Italy. The mixed-methods design ensures that quantitative findings are substantiated by rich qualitative insights, thereby providing a comprehensive analysis that addresses both the structural and individual-level dimensions of this phenomenon.

3. The Role and Influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian Society: Post-Soviet Period to 2020

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the role of religious institutions in former Soviet republics, including Georgia, gained new sociopolitical significance. The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), historically central to Georgian national identity, regained prominence in the public sphere, where it became a potent social and moral authority. Over the three decades leading to 2020, the Church's influence permeated Georgian politics, social life, and cultural identity, becoming an instrument for both social cohesion and political mobilisation. This review examines the GOC's growing authority and the socio-political impacts of its activities in Georgian society during this period.

3.1 Re-Emergence of the Georgian Orthodox Church and Church and National Identity

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a period characterised by systematic suppression of religious institutions, the Georgian Orthodox Church emerged as a powerful cultural and moral force. During Soviet times, the Church faced severe repression, as religious practices were discouraged and, often, outright prohibited¹¹. After independence, however, religious revivalism became an integral part of the Georgian national consciousness. The GOC took an active role in restoring Georgian cultural identity, a role it saw as inseparable from its mission. The Georgian constitution of 1995, in Article 9, explicitly recognises the Church's 'special role' in Georgian history, signalling a formal acknowledgement of its societal importance.¹²

Throughout the post-Soviet era, the Georgian Orthodox Church has promoted itself as a guardian of national identity and moral values. It has contributed to the preservation of Georgian language, traditions, and historical consciousness, especially at a time when post-Soviet society grappled with Western influences and modernisation pressures. According to Nodia,¹³ the GOC's influence has been instrumental in shaping a Georgian national identity that distinguishes itself from its Soviet past and aligns closely with Orthodox Christian values. This identity formation is particularly important given Georgia's geopolitical position between the West and Russia, with the GOC often positioning itself as a bulwark against perceived moral and cultural threats.¹⁴

¹¹ Smith, G., *The post-Soviet states: Mapping the politics of transition*. Edward Arnold Publishers. 2002.

¹² Kiknadze, N., Religion and politics in Georgia: An analysis of the relations between church and state. *Journal of Social Research*, 12(1). 2018.

¹³ Jones, S., *Georgia: A political history since independence*. I.B. Tauris. 2013.

¹⁴ Kiknadze, N., Religion and migration: The role of the Georgian Orthodox Church. *Journal of Social Research*, 12(1). 2018.

3.2 Political Influence and Church-State Relations and Social and Educational Influence

The Georgian Orthodox Church has also been a major political actor since the early 1990s. Successive Georgian governments have leveraged the Church's support to bolster legitimacy, often granting it significant political and legal privileges. The concordat of 2002, a formal agreement between the Georgian government and the GOC, grants the Church privileges such as immunity from property taxes and a role in public education, establishing it as a quasi-official state religion.¹⁵

Moreover, the Church has been involved in numerous social policy debates, particularly concerning LGBTQ+ rights and the role of Western influence in Georgia. Church leaders have frequently spoken out against LGBTQ+ events and advocated for what they perceive as traditional values, sometimes aligning with conservative political factions within Georgia. During the anti-LGBTQ+ protests in 2013, for instance, the Church's rhetoric significantly influenced public opinion and further reinforced the Church's role as a moral authority (Grdzeldze, 2010).¹⁶

The Georgian Orthodox Church has expanded its influence in educational settings, promoting curricula that integrate Orthodox values into public education. This integration has received government support, with religious instruction in schools becoming common after the 2002 concordat, despite secular constitutional principles. According to a study by Tabatadze and Gorgadze (2016), religious teaching in Georgian schools largely reflects Orthodox teachings, which shapes the cultural and moral development of young Georgians. The role of the Church in education underscores its influence on socialisation processes and the transmission of cultural values across generations.

3.3 Georgian Orthodox Church's Responses to Westernisation

In the face of Westernisation, the Church has frequently positioned itself as a defender of Georgian values and has opposed certain Western initiatives. EU integration, while broadly supported among the Georgian public, has been met with scepticism by Church leaders who express concerns about its influence on national morals and sovereignty (Kiknadze, 2018). This position highlights a complex relationship between modernisation and traditionalism in Georgia, with the GOC acting as a mediator between external pressures and internal cultural identity (Rimple, 2019).¹⁷

The Georgian Orthodox Church has played an increasingly influential role in Georgia's social, political, and cultural landscapes from the post-Soviet era to 2020. Acting as a stabilising and identity-shaping institution, the GOC has embedded itself deeply in Georgian society, influencing national identity, political discourse, and social policy. The Church's conservative stance on moral and cultural issues, particularly in opposition to Westernisation and secular values, underscores its enduring role as a moral compass for many Georgians. The continued evolution of Georgia's national identity and its relationship with the West will likely further impact the GOC's role in Georgian society, with its influence expected to persist in shaping social and political dynamics.¹⁸

4. Theoretical Context

4.1 Overview of Theories on Informal Networks

The role of informal social networks has been of significant interest in sociological research, particularly in contexts of migration. Religious communities often function as key social institutions, providing not only spiritual guidance but also fostering social integration and mutual support in diaspora settings.

¹⁵ Tabatadze, S., & Gorgadze, N., The role of the Orthodox Church in education in Georgia. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 3(2), 2016.

¹⁶ Papava, V., Diaspora relations and the Georgian Orthodox Church. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 34, 2012.

¹⁷ Grdzeldze, T., The Orthodox Church in Georgia in relation to other churches and nations. In V. Makrides & V. Roudometof (Eds.), *Orthodox Christianity in 21st century Western Europe*. Ashgate, 2010.

¹⁸ Migrant Return and Reintegration Assistance System in Georgia Consultant's Guide.

<https://georgia.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11311/files/documents/REINT%2520REPORT.pdf> [L.s. 24. 02. 2025].

This section reviews theoretical perspectives relevant to understanding the social functions of religious organisations within the migration experience, particularly in the formation of informal social networks and their impact on the resocialisation processes of undocumented migrants.

Social capital theory, widely attributed to the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1986), James Coleman (1988), and Robert Putnam (2000),¹⁹ conceptualises social networks as essential resources that individuals leverage to gain access to various types of support and information. According to this perspective, religious organisations are pivotal in creating 'bonding social capital' among migrants who share a common ethnicity or faith, facilitating trust and solidarity within the group.²⁰ This bonding social capital is particularly important for undocumented migrants, who often experience isolation due to their legal status and linguistic or cultural barriers. Religious organisations can thus play a crucial role in providing emotional support and a sense of community, which are essential components in the initial phases of resocialisation.

Network theory is central to understanding how religious organisations can create and sustain informal social networks. Within the framework established by Granovetter's (1973) 'strength of weak ties' theory,²¹ religious communities can enable the formation of both strong and weak ties among migrants. Strong ties within religious communities offer emotional and practical support, while weak ties—those forged with more distant connections—are often instrumental in providing new information, resources, or opportunities for work. For undocumented migrants, these weak ties are critical, as they often provide connections that extend beyond their immediate ethnic or cultural community, facilitating access to resources they might not otherwise reach in a new social environment.

The concept of resocialisation—originally developed within the context of institutional sociology—refers to the process through which individuals adapt and integrate into new social environments (Goffman, 1961).²² For migrants, resocialisation encompasses both psychological adaptation and behavioural adjustment to new social norms and cultural contexts. Within the resocialisation process, religious organisations can serve as stabilising institutions that support migrants in navigating new socio-cultural landscapes. Through religious practices, shared rituals, and community events, migrants often find a space that bridges familiar cultural values and the norms of their host society, thereby fostering a smoother transition and contributing to their social integration.

4.2 Role of Religious Organisations in Migration Research

Research on religious organisations in the context of migration, such as studies by Levitt (2003)²³ and Hirschman (2004)²⁴, reveals that these institutions often serve multifaceted roles, functioning as sites for both social and economic resources and as spaces of cultural preservation and adaptation. In the case of Georgian migrants in Italy, religious organisations can provide more than spiritual comfort. They frequently act as centres for gathering, language learning, job referrals, and even legal advice, helping migrants integrate within the constraints of their undocumented status.²⁵

Religious organisations also offer an important sense of continuity for migrants, allowing them to maintain cultural identity while adapting to a new societal structure.²⁶ By facilitating informal social networks, religious organisations enable migrants to negotiate the challenges of their undocumented status, particularly by connecting them to broader migrant networks that can offer assistance and advice based on shared experiences.²⁷

¹⁹ Coleman, J., S., Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(Supplement). 1988.

²⁰ Goffman, E., *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Anchor Books. 1961.

²¹ Bourdieu, P., The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. p. 241-258. Greenwood. 1986.

²² Coleman, J., S., Social theory, social research, and a theory of action. *American Journal of Sociology*, 91. 1986.

²³ Geddes, B., What do we know about democratization after twenty years? *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2. 1999.

²⁴ Granovetter, M., S., The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6). 1973.

²⁵ Granovetter, M., S., *Getting a job: A study of contacts and careers*. Harvard University Press. 1974.

²⁶ Granovetter, M., S., The sociological and economic approaches to labor market analysis: A social structural view. In G. Farkas & P. England (Eds.), *Industries, firms and jobs*. p. 187-216. New York: Plenum. 1986.

²⁷ Granovetter, M., S., Job search and network composition: The strength of weak ties. *American Sociological Review*, 57. 1992.

Conclusion In sum, social capital theory, network theory, and resocialisation theories provide a comprehensive framework for analysing how religious organisations function within the broader context of migration.²⁸ These theories highlight the importance of religious communities as hubs for social support, integration, and identity preservation among undocumented migrants. For Georgian migrants in Italy, religious organisations serve as essential resources for building informal networks and for the resocialisation process, addressing both the structural challenges they face and their need for social inclusion in a foreign environment. This theoretical framework will guide the empirical analysis of how religious organisations impact the lives of undocumented Georgian migrants, specifically in terms of social network formation and resocialisation within the Italian context.²⁹

5. Overview of Georgian Religious Institutions Abroad: The Case of Italy

Georgian religious institutions play a crucial role in preserving the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Georgian diaspora, particularly in countries like Italy. The presence of these institutions not only facilitates the religious needs of the community but also strengthens cultural identity and provides support for new immigrants. This review examines the activities, demographic statistics, and overall impact of Georgian religious institutions in Italy.

5.1 Historical and Demographics Context

The establishment of Georgian religious institutions abroad can be traced back to significant waves of emigration, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many Georgians sought refuge and better opportunities in Italy, leading to the formation of churches, cultural centers, and other religious organizations. The first official Georgian Orthodox Church in Italy was established in the early 2000s, catering to the growing number of expatriates.

According to the 2021 census data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), the Georgian community in Italy consists of approximately 50,000 individuals. This figure includes a mix of long-term residents, temporary workers, and students. The majority of Georgians reside in metropolitan areas such as Rome, Milan, and Florence, where they have access to cultural and religious services (ISTAT, 2022).

5.2 Religious Institutions and Activities

The Georgian Orthodox Church is the primary religious institution serving the community in Italy. Key churches include:

1. St. George's Church in Rome: Established in 2005, this church serves as a spiritual center and hosts regular services, community events, and cultural programs.
2. St. Nino's Church in Milan: This church not only provides religious services but also organizes language courses, cultural celebrations, and social gatherings to promote Georgian culture.

In addition to these churches, various cultural organizations, such as the Georgian Cultural Association, work in tandem with religious institutions to organize events that celebrate Georgian heritage, including traditional music and dance performances, art exhibitions, and educational seminars (Georgian Cultural Association, 2023).

²⁸ Hirschman, C., The role of religion in the origins and adaptation of immigrant groups in the United States. *International Migration Review*, 38(3). 2004.

²⁹ Levitt, P., "You know, Abraham was really the first immigrant": Religion and transnational migration. *International Migration Review*, 37(3). 2003.

5.3 Statistical Overview

Recent surveys indicate that about 70% of Georgians in Italy identify as members of the Georgian Orthodox Church, with approximately 60% attending services regularly.³⁰ The church plays a vital role in community cohesion, providing not only spiritual guidance but also social support systems, including assistance for newcomers in navigating life in Italy.

Georgian religious institutions in Italy serve as crucial anchors for the diaspora, providing spiritual guidance, cultural preservation, and social support. As the community continues to grow, these institutions must evolve to meet the changing needs of their members while fostering a strong sense of identity and belonging.

6. Informal Networks, the Georgian Orthodox Church, Diasporas, and Ethnic Communities

Diaspora organizations are primarily community-based associations established to preserve the Georgian language and culture among Georgians living abroad. Some well-established organizations provide scholarships for Georgian students or offer various forms of assistance to local communities, both in host countries and in Georgia. During times of crisis—such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the 2015 Tbilisi flood—many diaspora organizations played a crucial role in providing aid to those affected, either through food supplies or financial support.

The term diaspora, as defined by the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Diaspora Issues, encompasses all communities of Georgian migrants abroad. This includes members of the historical diaspora, short-term migrants, long-term emigrants, expatriates, and Georgians who have acquired citizenship in their host countries.

The formation and effectiveness of diaspora organizations offer valuable insights into the level of self-organization among Georgian emigrants across different countries. It also highlights which diaspora communities are more active, the extent to which they engage with institutions and government bodies in Georgia, and how effectively they foster cooperation.

In analyzing diaspora organizations, it is essential to consider several key aspects: the level of awareness among migrants about these organizations, the types of activities they undertake, their modes of interaction with migrants, and whether they provide any form of support. Migrants who are affiliated with diaspora organizations often gain access to valuable information and opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals. However, reliable and precise statistical data on migration processes remain scarce. Similarly, statistical indicators regarding the Georgian diaspora and diaspora organizations are characterized by low validity. According to the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Diaspora Issues, more than 300 Georgian diaspora organizations exist worldwide. However, available data primarily reflect only those organizations that actively maintain regular contact with the state apparatus responsible for diaspora affairs.

The accuracy of this data is further affected by the exclusion of certain countries with high migration flows from Georgia, where diaspora organizations exist but are not officially listed. For instance, this study focuses on Italy, as it serves as the primary context of our research. Multiple diaspora organizations operate in Italy, as confirmed by our collected data. The number of these organizations—though likely incomplete—may suggest a degree of fragmentation within Georgian communities in the country. For example, in the city of Bari, which is not among Italy's largest urban centers yet has a significant Georgian emigrant population, two organizations with similar profiles operate independently. Respondents demonstrate varying levels of awareness regarding diaspora organizations in Italy. According to their accounts, such organizations are active in Milan and other cities with significant Georgian populations, including Reggio Emilia and Florence. Some of these organizations, such as Georgian folklore ensembles, cater to the cultural interests of the diaspora. For instance, many Georgian migrants in Reggio Emilia enroll their children in Georgian dance classes. However, some

³⁰ Mgeladze, I., Georgian diaspora in Italy: Religious and cultural dynamics. *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 45(2). 2023.

parents have expressed dissatisfaction, withdrawing their children due to high participation fees. Additionally, internal conflicts have emerged among members of the Georgian diaspora, as one respondent noted:

"Gossip, rumors, and disputes... In my opinion, it resembles a miniature version of Georgia. Just as internal conflicts exist within Georgia, similar issues arise here, but they appear more intensified abroad. Perhaps emigrants change under different conditions. Friendships and hostilities, trust and mistrust—all seem to be heightened."

Some Georgian migrants are dissatisfied with the activities of community organizations, while others discuss challenges that prevent these organizations from providing assistance effectively. According to respondents, certain community organizations allegedly exploit migrants for financial gain rather than aiding them:

"Under the guise of community organizations, some individuals engage in various illicit activities, including the production of forged documents. Even when it comes to repatriating deceased Georgians, we are forced to collect funds from door to door. No one assists us in this matter. Last year, I organized a Georgian cultural evening, but we had to rehearse for the dance concert on the beach because one of the community organizations refused to provide us with a venue. For us, the best refuge remains the church communities."

Nonetheless, some diaspora organizations have offered substantial support:

"The community organization in Kalamata functions exceptionally well. They have assisted numerous struggling migrants, including myself, even providing financial aid. They also supported my participation in art exhibitions in Corinth alongside other Georgian artists. Unfortunately, I cannot speak about the effectiveness of other organizations."

A leader of one diaspora organization described their daily activities as follows:

"Responding to phone calls from migrants, corresponding with fellow Georgians dispersed across Italy, assisting with document completion, providing guidance, translating medical forms, birth certificates, and prescriptions, accompanying individuals to educational institutions or court hearings, offering moral and emotional support, listening to concerns for hours, showing empathy, and providing encouragement and assistance."

Leaders of diaspora organizations emphasize the limited financial contributions they receive, citing the lack of consistent funding sources as a major impediment to their operations.

Meeting the needs of emigrants requires additional financial resources. Newly arrived emigrants often require support and guidance, which should be provided by diaspora organizations. I would like to see the state take responsibility for funding and establishing such organizations. According to the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, diaspora organizations mainly rely on self-financing.

The typical scheme for securing financial resources is as follows:

"What we do is entirely self-funded, relying on our own expenses and the limited donations of our community members. The primary challenge is precisely the lack of financial resources, which prevents us from renting a permanent space to establish a Sunday school for emigrant children and to offer free Italian language courses. However, we strive to involve emigrants as much as possible in our activities" (Respondent, head of a diaspora organization).

Research findings suggest that quantifying the extent of investments made in Georgia by diaspora groups remains challenging. Temporary migrants who successfully save money typically invest in small-scale retail businesses or service-oriented sectors, such as beauty salons. These micro and small enterprises can provide a stable source of income for emigrants and their families upon their return. However, the majority of emigrants are unable to accumulate substantial financial capital, and their businesses rarely develop into large-scale enterprises with national significance.

A study conducted by the International School of Economics at Tbilisi State University (ISET) highlights that diaspora investments not only serve as successful business ventures but also contribute

to reshaping local food markets. Several well-documented cases of diaspora investment in agriculture and the food sector illustrate this trend. For instance, the Georgian-Turkish company Geolive, established in 2009, has developed olive plantations in four regions of Georgia, with the ambition of becoming a leading supplier both domestically and internationally. Similarly, the poultry company Biu-Biu and its subsidiary Pomono were founded between 2011 and 2013 by a member of the Georgian-Russian diaspora.

Beyond the presence of Georgian Orthodox churches in Italy, diplomatic relations between Georgia and the Vatican have been actively developing since the 1990s. The historic visits of Pope John Paul II in 1999 and Pope Francis from September 30 to October 2, 2016, underscored the Vatican's support for Georgia. Collaboration between the two states has progressed successfully in education, science, and philanthropy, with the Holy See placing particular emphasis on the preservation and restoration of Georgia's historical heritage.

Georgians in northern Italy predominantly gather in Milan, while those in central Italy tend to congregate in Perugia, Florence, or the Russian Orthodox churches in Rome. In Rome, Georgian priests occasionally conduct prayer services, and a Georgian priest also serves in Bari, where a significant Georgian community resides.

For this study, several key questions arise: What role does the church play in the lives of Georgian migrants? What kind of relationships exist between clergy members and migrants? What forms of assistance do clergy provide to migrants, and what are some concrete examples?

Addressing the significance of Georgian Orthodox churches abroad for Georgian migrants, Archimandrite Andria Latsabidze, the head priest of the St. Nino Parish Church in Florence under the Western European Diocese of the Georgian Patriarchate, states:

"Our church is the only place where Georgians living in the Tuscany region can meet, share their love, pain, and sorrow. These parish churches serve as both a spiritual center and a second home for local Georgians. We gather to glorify God and to express love for one another. The church prevents us from losing our faith and love for our homeland. It does not allow us to become complacent."

According to the clergyman, the belief that European freedoms and lifestyles have a detrimental effect on emigrants is misguided. Many Georgian emigrants maintain a deep love for their families, a strong sense of national identity, unwavering faith, and personal integrity. A significant number of them are highly educated individuals who hold substantial value for Georgia. These emigrants are predominantly mothers who have left their homeland to secure better prospects for their families and children. Their daily lives are marked by hard work, leaving them with neither the time nor the financial means to fully adopt a European way of life.

The Georgian Orthodox Church abroad continues to experience steady growth in its congregation. From a clerical perspective, witnessing a large and active congregation is a source of joy, as it reflects an increasing desire for spiritual connection. However, on deeper reflection, this expansion also underscores the reality that the church's growth is occurring at the expense of those who have left Georgia. While the congregation flourishes, it would be far more desirable for this spiritual revival to take place within Georgia itself. Clergy members serving abroad are committed to supporting Georgian emigrants in their pursuit of spiritual peace, offering guidance and solace with the help of God.

Some respondents suggest that Orthodox churches abroad primarily serve undocumented migrants, for whom the church functions as a crucial institution of support. Additionally, it is important to recognize that members of these congregations engage in mutual assistance, fostering a sense of solidarity and communal support.

"Georgian emigrants maintain a close connection with the church. For undocumented migrants, in particular, the church is often a last hope—but not only for them. Clergy and parishioners genuinely assist Georgian emigrants, as they have an extensive network of contacts. This kind of support is entirely selfless, which makes it especially appealing to those in financial distress. I know of many such cases, particularly in Perugia and Florence."

Respondents recall numerous specific instances of church support. These examples provide valuable insight into the role of the church:

"The clergy primarily help people find jobs as caregivers for the elderly, and not only for women. I was surprised to learn that a priest helped two desperate, undocumented Georgian men secure jobs as caregivers. One of them told me that he had been detained twice by the police for theft. After that, he turned to the church, where the priest provided moral guidance and, with the help of the congregation, found him a position as a caregiver for an elderly person. He has now been working for the same family for two years."

This case is particularly noteworthy because an undocumented migrant with a history of legal troubles found support in the church. The priest's authority and connections with the congregation enhanced the effectiveness of an informal support network.

"There was a Georgian couple who had recently arrived, were unemployed, and the wife was pregnant. They were also undocumented. They turned to the church, and the congregation sought assistance and advice from an Italian friend of mine. He was deeply concerned about their situation, but in the end, they were helped."

The church does not merely provide material assistance to migrants, particularly undocumented ones—it also facilitates their adaptation.

"In my view, many emigrants who gather around the church struggle to integrate into a new culture. They seek the company of fellow Georgians instead. There are also those who maintain a dual standard: they want to appear respectable, and attending church is seen as a way of affirming their Georgian identity."

"There is a church named after Saint Panteleimon near my home. Every week, Georgians gather there. Even though my financial situation has improved, I still feel like a lost and helpless child, detached from my homeland. Many places remind me of Georgia. You cannot imagine the longing, nostalgia, and pain that overwhelm you in such moments... Even scents can bring back memories of my country."

These accounts highlight the significant influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church abroad and its crucial role in the lives of Georgian migrants. However, this influence is accompanied by another dimension. The Patriarch of Georgia has expressed skepticism toward rising migration rates and has repeatedly urged emigrants to return home—a stance that has sparked strong reactions among the migrant community.

In one of his final Sunday sermons of 2015, the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, Ilia II, criticized the growing trend of Georgian women seeking employment abroad, labeling it a "harmful practice" and urging Georgian mothers to return home. According to him, unemployment should not be an issue in Georgia; if one opportunity fails, individuals should seek a second, third, or even tenth alternative rather than leaving their families behind.

These remarks provoked outrage among migrant women, leading to a protest in front of the Patriarchate of Georgia. Demonstrators carried banners with messages responding to his sermon, such as: "Women work while priests lecture from luxury cars"; "29 million GEL in the Patriarchate's budget—now that's a harmful practice"; "Migrant women are heroic women"; "My mother is a migrant, the Patriarch is a misogynist"; and "Priests riding in luxury SUVs—that's the real problem."

Experts argue that such statements targeting migrant women are unlikely to change the broader reality, as the primary concern for Georgian society remains the economic well-being of families and children. Moreover, Georgia is not an anomaly—people worldwide migrate to more developed countries in pursuit of better employment opportunities and higher incomes to support their families.

In response to this situation, the Patriarch proposed the establishment of an annual "Congress of All Georgians" as a way to unite Georgians living abroad. In a subsequent sermon, he elaborated on this initiative, suggesting a census of Georgian emigrants and the organization of an annual congress. The Prime Minister of Georgia later endorsed the idea. According to the Patriarch's vision, the congress

would take place in October, coinciding with the celebration of Svetitskhovloba, a major religious holiday in Georgia.

"What must we do to ensure that our compatriots, our fellow Georgians, do not lose their language, their faith, their love for their homeland... their Georgian identity? If the Georgian spirit is lost within them, these individuals are lost. How can we strengthen the connection between Georgians abroad and their homeland? We hope to invite the Congress of All Georgians to Georgia on October 14, the Feast of Svetitskhovloba, to remind our people that their ancestors are here and that they must not sever their ties to their homeland. What must we do to ensure that they do not forget the Georgian language? We believe that Georgians possess such a strong genetic identity that it will not disappear, but it still requires the homeland's support and our reminders." - Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, Ilia II.

Migrants express interest in this initiative and hope that it will not remain merely a proposal or a politically motivated statement but that the Patriarchate will provide real support to emigrants:

"When an emigrant arrives here, the first place they go is the Catholic Church. The Church helps with clothing, food, and employment. I have not seen priests here who are overweight and drive luxury SUVs. Things are different here. I would gladly return to Georgia, but here, the police, hospitals, shops, and transport—all serve the interests of the citizens. Back home, I could not even find a job. I hope that in the future, the situation in our country will change, and I also hope that the Patriarch's initiative will not remain just an initiative, but that real steps will be taken to register and improve the conditions of emigrants."³¹

Some migrants express skepticism about the feasibility of this initiative. The Patriarchate may struggle to mobilize emigrants, as a significant portion of Georgians abroad are undocumented. Even for those who are not, returning to Georgia involves challenges such as obtaining leave from work, securing travel expenses, and other logistical difficulties.

Additionally, some have suggested that this initiative by the Patriarchate gives the impression that it aims to increase the number of parishioners, as this would be a financially beneficial means for the Church to receive more donations.

Conclusions

Based on the study's findings, conclusions can be drawn regarding the factors that contribute to the resilience of Georgian irregular migrants living abroad, particularly in Italy. The research data indicate the following:

- Georgian migrants are integrated into informal social networks, which serve as a crucial resource for their adaptation.
- The strength of Georgian religious institutions abroad and migrants' integration into these institutions play a significant role in their resilience.

The concept of informal social networks is particularly relevant in the context of irregular migration, as the analysis of research data reveals that the interaction model within these networks and their social actors plays a key role in facilitating irregular migration processes.

Traditionally, the structure of Georgian social interactions is rooted in principles of mutual assistance and solidarity, which, to some extent, serve as a foundational support for the institution of irregular migration. The existence and functioning of such networks ensure the reproduction of migratory practices, which, in turn, rely on mechanisms that legitimize the network.

This process is accompanied by a high level of reciprocity among social actors, characterized by a reciprocal exchange of resources that further strengthens the connections among network members. This tendency is reflected in a well-known Georgian cultural expression - "one hand washes the other"

³¹ პატრიარქი: თუ ემიგრანტებში ქართული სული დაიკარგა, ეს ადამიანები დაკარგულია, ტაბულა, 2015. <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/576391-patriarki-tu-emigrantebshi-kartuli-suli-daikarga> [L.s. 24. 02. 2025].

- which effectively encapsulates one of the core binding principles of irregular migrants' social networks.

Moreover, the research data indicate that, in addition to informal social networks, formal institutions also serve as key pillars of irregular migration. These include Georgian Orthodox churches abroad, their clergy, congregations, as well as diaspora organizations and community associations.

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