

POLICY BRIEF

Factors Influencing Georgian Asylum Seekers' Choice of Destination

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Executive Summary

Since March 2017, when the European Commission (EC) allowed visa-free travel to the Schengen area for Georgian citizens, member states warned about the sharp and continuous rise in the number of unfounded asylum seekers from Georgia. The destination countries have varied during the last three years, but the top two countries have always been France and Germany. This brief examines the attractiveness of France and Germany as destinations for Georgian asylum seekers, including the factors influencing their choice.

While Georgian asylum seekers are active agents in their decision-making, their destination choices are influenced by several factors, such as visa-free travel, immigration and asylum policy measures, social networks, and their knowledge of the destination countries. After discussing these factors from the viewpoint of the asylum seekers themselves, the brief recommends the government and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) implement international best practices on managing asylum flows, elaborate a research-based strategy to tackle the root causes of asylum flows, and implement information campaigns about the risks of irregular migration and violations of the EU-Georgia visa-free regulations.

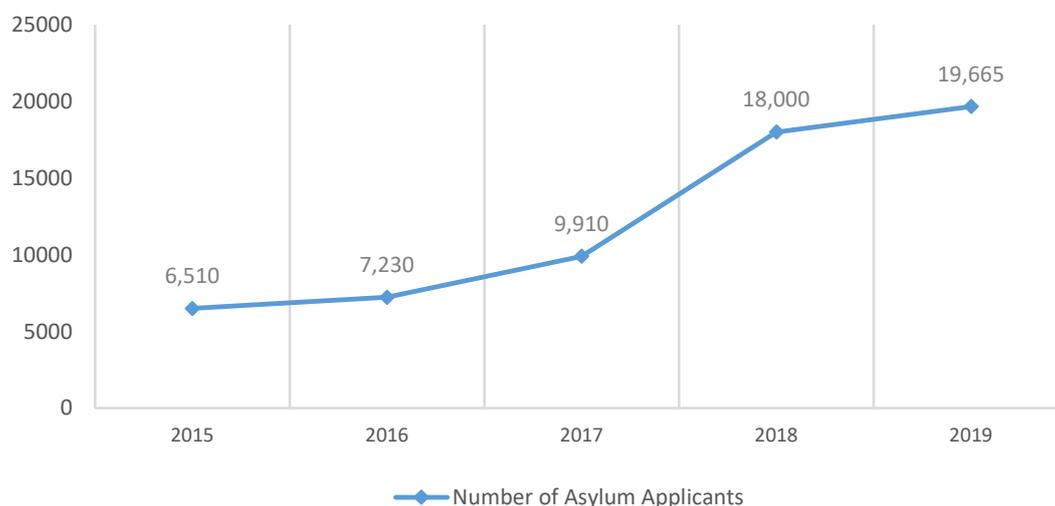
Keywords: Georgian asylum seekers, EU, visa liberalization, destination choice, pull factors, social networks, asylum policy.

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Introduction

After many years of negotiations, the EC allowed visa-free travel to the Schengen area for Georgian citizens in March 2017. Since then, the number of asylum seekers from Georgia rose at a rapid pace, with 18,000 applications in 2018 and 19,665 in 2019 (Figure 1). Georgia has now been listed among the top ten countries of origin for asylum seekers in the EU-27² (Eurostat 2020). The list of the top destination countries has varied during the last three years, but the first two places have always been taken by France and Germany. In 2019, 7,735 Georgian first-time asylum applicants were registered in France and 3,330 in Germany (Eurostat. n.d.).

Figure 1: Georgian First-time Asylum Applicants in the EU-27



Source of data: Eurostat

Due to the fact that rising numbers of asylum claims from Georgian citizens were combined with very low acceptance rates (between 3% and 5%), the member states issued a warning about unfounded asylum applications and undocumented migrants from Georgia. This is the legal basis for triggering the visa-free travel suspension mechanism. As German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière at the 54th Munich Security Conference said: “if the number of asylum seekers from Georgia further increases, the suspension mechanism might be activated” (Morrison 2018).

² EU-27: member states (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden (Eurostat 2020).

Emigration and asylum-seeking has never been the subject of such active political debates as it is today. A wide range of policy papers has discussed the negative consequences of the cancellation of the visa-free regime, including losing the EU's political trust, damaging Georgia's image internationally, and reducing the number of supporters for Georgia's European future (Grigalashvili and Sarjveladze 2018). However, the reasons why Georgian asylum seekers leave the country and factors behind their decisions to choose certain destination countries over others have not been adequately assessed, especially from the perspectives of those people who experience it.

Furthermore, it is often assumed that a substantial number of Georgian asylum seekers are driven by socio-economic factors. For example, that asylum seekers are attracted to certain countries' favorable policies relating to the asylum process and financial support available for asylum seekers (Dolidze, Rusu and Grigoryan 2019). However, different country-specific studies into pull factors show that the decision-making process is not so straightforward (Spinks 2013).

Utilizing a qualitative method, study has found that the reasons behind Georgian asylum seekers' decisions to leave their home country went beyond their immediate needs of protection and safety. Their departure was not urgent and they were able to exercise choice in determining their destination countries, finding resources, and planning their journeys (Chachava 2020).

This brief will summarize the above-mentioned study and discuss the attractiveness of France and Germany as destination countries for Georgian asylum seekers and the role of visa liberalization in their decision-making. The findings are based on well-established qualitative methods, including semi-structured in-depth interviews with Georgian asylum seekers, refugee consultants, and representatives of the Georgian diaspora organizations. The study includes 20 participants in total³. The fieldwork took place in January 2020 in France and Germany.

Asylum Destination Choice

Traditionally, asylum-seekers are seen as "passive pawns", who have no choice but to flee without considering a specific destination (Böcker and Havinga 1997, 4). Migration scholars argued that the decision to leave one's home country may be based on rational choice theory, but their choice of destination is limited and constrained by different factors, such as geography, the ease of movement, visa restrictions, social and financial capitals, etc. (Crawley 2010, 5). There is a growing body of research into the issue of asylum destination choice and their reasons for choosing certain countries. Based on country-specific studies, scholars have discussed the attractiveness of western European countries as a destination for asylum-seekers and identified the main pull factors, such as security, future opportunities, country

³ See Appendix 1 for the full list of participants.

reputation, asylum policy, former colonial ties, the sharing of a common language and religion (EASO 2016).

In line with the above-mentioned factors, a travel visa is seen as an important component of immigration policy instruments. It is often discussed in terms of *border diplomacy*, controlling “unwanted” migration flows and building external relations (Laube 2019, 18). Studies have shown that visa restrictions significantly reduce both inflows and outflows of asylum-seekers. After the introduction of a visa requirement, levels of immigration go down gradually, while removing visa barriers increases immigration almost immediately. This is explained by the “inter-temporal substitution effect,” which suggests that people see migration as a *now or never* possibility because of the fear of reintroduction of restrictions (Czaika and de Haas 2017, 900).

The Role of Visa Liberalization

The visa liberalization agreement removed the need for the short-term Type C visas and allowed Georgian citizens who hold a biometric passport to travel for the following purposes: tourism, family issues, business, short-term educational courses, etc. However, travel is still subject to some requirements, such as the provision of clear information about the journey, hotel booking or address where the person will live, financial means, health insurance (Schengen visa info 2017). Despite all of these requirements, the removal of visa restrictions influenced Georgian asylum seekers’ decisions in the following ways:

First, visa-free travel influenced asylum seekers’ decisions by reducing the risks and costs of migration. According to the study participants, before visa liberalization it was difficult and costly to obtain a visa and to travel. In addition to the visa cost, Georgians needed to hire agents or smugglers to navigate the bureaucratic challenges that existed to get a visa. As some research participants mentioned, due to the visa-free regime it has become easier to plan the journey and get to Europe without external services.

Second, in line with visa-free travel, the cost of traveling and easy access to transportation was also identified as a key factor in the decision-making. Nowadays, two low-cost airlines with around 40 direct flights to the EU operate in Georgia. However, to reduce the risk of being refused entry, in some cases (especially in the case of France) transit flights have been used. This shows that asylum seekers are well-informed about the requirements and risks of visa-free travel.

It is also interesting to note that Georgian asylum seekers expressed fear that restrictions may be reintroduced. Study participants mentioned that the rules and regulations regarding the asylum-seeking process in France and Germany change day-by-day, which suggests that they see migration *as a now or never* possibility.

Expectations and Knowledge of Destination Countries

Generally, studies on asylum destination choice have revealed contrary results regarding asylum seekers' knowledge about the destination countries and how this knowledge influences their decision-making process (Spinks 2013).

The case of Georgian asylum seekers found that expectations had a significant impact on their decision-making process. Georgian asylum seekers' expectations were based on the perceived image of the destination countries and characteristics of the local societies, such as democratic governance, respect for human rights, safety, a stable political situation, and a strong economy, etc. All of which created hopes for a better life and increased their motivation to migrate. However, it is interesting that not only France and Germany, but most European countries have been identified as democratic and tolerant. Hence, there might be more specific factors behind their decisions.

The study also shows that before leaving Georgia they were generally aware of the asylum process, housing, welfare benefits, and chances of employment in the destination country. Information on the number of asylum applications and their outcomes was also discussed as a key aspect of the decision-making process. However, this information was mostly provided by social networks and based on personal experiences. It may not always have been accurate as different personal factors affect each asylum case differently. Moreover, not all information had the same effect. For example, information about the ability to get free access to quality health care was the most cited factor to lodge asylum applications in France and Germany. Participants suggested that France's "open-handed" social welfare system made the country attractive for Georgian asylum seekers.

Lastly, the study's findings showed that Georgian asylum seekers lacked specific knowledge of immigration policy and, the political and social climate of the destination countries. In addition, their knowledge of regular migration opportunities was very limited.

The Presence of Social Networks

It has long been understood that social networks play an important role in influencing different migration flows. According to Tilly (1990, 79), "it is not people who migrate but networks".

In the case of Georgian asylum seekers, social networks were presented at every stage of the decision-making process and emerged consistently in the data as a key pull factor in determining where to go. The majority of the interviewees reported having close family members, relatives, friends, or just acquaintances in France and Germany, which shaped their decision-making process in two ways:

First, in several cases, the desire to be near to family members was the primary reason to travel to France and Germany. Second, and more importantly, just knowing someone in these countries made these places more attractive than other possible destinations where asylum seekers would be alone. Social networks in the destination countries facilitated the asylum-seeking process by providing support on arrival, such as housing, food, job opportunities, language assistance, information regarding asylum procedures, etc. This kind of support was significant, especially for those who had complex barriers, did not know the language, or had never been abroad before and had limited knowledge of new technologies.

Moreover, social networks were identified as an important source of information for asylum seekers. Not surprisingly, social media and specifically Facebook groups, have been mentioned as the most useful social networking platforms where asylum seekers from different parts of the destination countries share their personal experiences regarding the asylum-seeking process. Also, existing social networks in Germany and France were mentioned in the form of diaspora, refugee organizations, and religious communities. Furthermore, it included not only Georgians but also Russian-speaking immigrants from other post-soviet countries.

Studies into asylum seekers' destination choice, and those conducted in the context of Europe in particular, have found that along with family members and friends, agents and smugglers play key roles in directing asylum seekers to certain countries (Robinson and Segrott 2002; Spinks 2013). The findings of the study on the case of Georgian asylum seekers do not, however, correspond to these findings, which makes this case different from other studies on asylum seekers. Georgian asylum seekers also showed the need for facilitation to cope with the various difficulties in the asylum-seeking process, however the roles of agents and smugglers were replaced by personal networks and social media.

Conclusion

This brief overview of key pull factors behind Georgian asylum seekers' decisions shows the complexities of migration and also challenges the current academic discourse about chance versus choice when determining a destination country. The findings illustrate that while visa liberalization increased Georgians capacity to migrate, they could make choices only within a very narrow range of possibilities. Moreover, the lifting of visa restrictions might not affect the decision-making process alone, as it is strongly interlinked with the cost of traveling, transportation, and the image of the destination country (human rights, democracy, access to employment, education, etc.).

Furthermore, the study's findings show that Georgian asylum seekers are active agents in their decision-making who have time to analyze possible destinations and plan the journey. However, their choices are influenced by several factors, such as asylum policy measures, availability and accessibility of welfare benefits, the presence of social networks, knowledge and expectations. This suggests that the destination country is not entirely up to the individual. It is important to highlight that some of these factors may be present in other EU

countries, however in the case of France and Germany all these pull factors are intertwined and this is what makes these destinations attractive to Georgian asylum seekers.

Recommendations

For the Government of Georgia:

While it is important to manage irregular migration flows, controlling movement might be legally problematic and lead to the violation of fundamental human rights. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum persecution” (UN 1948, art. 14). Therefore, it is key to implement international best practices on managing asylum flows and to establish reasonable and effective migration policies that meet the need of the right to freedom of movement and asylum persecution.

Moreover, focusing on economic reasons as the main push factors behind Georgian asylum seekers’ decisions might underestimate the extent of other factors, hence it is critically important to assess and address the reasons why Georgian asylum seekers leave the country and to elaborate a research-based strategy to tackle the root causes of asylum migration.

Further actions that should be taken:

- To strengthen cooperation in policy areas such as border, migration and asylum management, security, external relations and fundamental human rights;
- To build up collaboration on labor migration and other regular migration opportunities with EU countries;
- To implement information campaigns about the existing regular migration opportunities, the risks of irregular migration and the consequences of the violations of visa-free rules.

For Civil Society Organizations:

Due to the nature of the asylum process, asylum seekers usually try to avoid direct communication with governmental entities, therefore civil society organizations should take an active role in this process by:

- Conducting detailed research on the push factors behind Georgian asylum seekers’ decisions;
- Acting as a watchdog to monitor the human rights situation in Georgia and to raise alarm about violations;

- Organize information campaigns to raise public awareness of the risks of irregular movements and violations of the EU-Georgia visa-free regulations.

Media Organizations:

Lastly, it is clear that information sharing has an important role in influencing asylum flows by creating the expectations and images of the possible destination countries. Therefore, national and international media organizations should accurately report on Georgian asylum-seekers' cases, and focus on the risks and consequences of unfounded asylum applications in particular.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: List of Participants

#	Type	Name	Gender	Age	Place of resident	Position/Status
1	Face-to-face, individual; Semi-structured	(R) Respondent 1	Female	37	France, Nice	Asylum seeker/Negative decision is appealed
2	Face-to-face, group interview; Semi-structured	R 2 R 3 R 4	Female Female Male	29 42 45	France, Nice	Asylum seeker / Cases are pending
3	Face-to-face, individual; Semi-structured	R 5	Male	19	France, Paris	Asylum seeker / Negative decision is appealed
4	Face-to-face, individual; Semi-structured	R 6	Female	34	France, Paris	Asylum seeker/ Negative decision is appealed
5	Face-to-face, individual; Semi-structured	R 7	Female	24	France, Creil	Asylum seeker/ Negative decision is appealed
6	Face-to-face, individual; Semi-structured	R 8	Female	30	France, Paris	Georgian diaspora organization

7	Face-to-face, group interview; Semi-structured	R 9 R10	Female Female	37 65	France, Metz	Asylum seeker/ Case is pending
8	Face-to-face, individual; Semi- structured	R 11	Female	32	Germany, Munich	Georgian diaspora organization
9	Face-to-face, group interview; Semi-structured	R 12 R 13 R 14	Male Male Male	26 31 29	Germany, Berlin	Asylum seekers/ Negative decisions are appealed
10	Face-to-face, group interview; Semi-structured	R 15 R 16	Female Female	29 32	Germany, Dresden	NGO - Saxon Refugee Council
11	Face-to-face, group interview; Semi-structured	R 17 R 18	Male Male	63 34	Germany, Berlin	Asylum seekers/ Cases are pending
12	Individual, video Interview; Semi-structured	R 19	Female	31	France, Nice	Refugee status is granted
13	Individual, video interview; Semi-structured	R 20	Male	25	Georgia, Tbilisi	Refused asylum seeker / Deported to Georgia