

Looming Emigration from Georgia – Run, Forrest, Run!

Since gaining independence, Georgia has experienced several waves of emigration. The first major outflow occurred between 1990 and 1995, largely triggered by armed conflicts and severe economic hardship. A second wave followed between 1996 and 2004, driven by continued instability and financial difficulties. After the 2003 Rose Revolution, a modest return of migrants, particularly skilled professionals, took place, reflecting renewed optimism. The introduction of visa-free travel to the EU and the Schengen area in 2017 prompted another surge as many Georgians took advantage of the opportunity to seek better prospects abroad.

Today, there are strong indications that Georgia may be on the verge of yet another emigration wave, this time rooted in the country's democratic backsliding. This new outflow is likely to be characterized by selective migration with highly educated and civically engaged individuals choosing to leave. As a result, those who remain may be less

involved in democratic processes, potentially enabling the ruling Georgian Dream party to further entrench authoritarian rule.

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The dual phenomenon of rising authoritarianism under the Georgian Dream government and the intensifying wave of emigration is deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. As the Georgian Dream steadily consolidates its grip on power, large numbers of citizens, particularly the young and educated, are leaving the country, reshaping its demographic and political landscape



VANO CHKHIKVADZE
Contributor

Vano Chkhikvadze is based in Brussels, Belgium and heads the EU Policy of Araminta, a human rights organization operating in Germany. He used to work as the EU Integration Programme Manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia for 13 years. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation in various areas. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.



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Despite promising macroeconomic indicators, including periods of double-digit growth, the benefits of development remain unevenly distributed. Growing economic hardship, inadequate social protections, a dysfunctional healthcare system, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness are prompting more and more Georgians to seek opportunities abroad. Nearly [45%](#) of the population—mostly young people aged 18 to 34 years—express a desire to emigrate temporarily. This demographic is particularly hard-hit, with youth unemployment [hovering](#) at 35%.

Migration figures reflect this trend starkly: while 74,000 people [left](#) Georgia in 2020, that number soared to 245,000 by 2023. At the same time, the country's birthrate plummeted from 56,000 in

2016 to just 39,000 in 2023, accelerating the demographic decline.

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This exodus plays directly into the Georgian Dream's hands. On one side, the departure of politically active and potentially reform-minded citizens reduces domestic resistance to authoritarianism. On the other hand, emigrants contribute significantly to the economy through remittances, supporting relatives back home while remaining excluded from the political process. To further neutralize their influence, the ruling party has imposed artificial obstacles—such as limiting the number of polling stations abroad—to suppress

diaspora voting. In effect, the government treats migrants as sources of income, not as citizens with political agency. It is a strategy designed to extract economic benefit while silencing potential dissent—a model where emigrants are seen as “cash machines” rather than stakeholders in the nation’s future.

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In global terms, Georgia [ranked](#) ninth in the world in 2023 for remittances per capita, receiving an average of USD 1,121 per person in 2022. The total inflow of remittances reached USD 4.18 billion in 2023 and remained substantial at USD 3.4 billion in 2024, highlighting the enduring economic significance of the Georgian diaspora.

The United States [has emerged](#) as the top source of remittances in 2024, contributing USD 573 million. Among EU countries, the leading senders were Italy (USD 567 million), Germany (USD 267 million), and Greece (USD 263 million). All three countries have seen a steady rise in remittance volumes: Italy’s contribution grew from USD 386 million in 2021 to USD 432 million in 2022; Germany’s rose from USD 113 million to USD 164 million in the same period; Greece, while showing some fluctuation, remained consistently high.

Transfers from Russia also remained significant, amounting to USD 541 million in 2024. However, a considerable portion of this may reflect the spending of Russian nationals who relocated to Georgia after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, rather than remittances in the traditional sense.

The core destinations for Georgian economic migrants remain the USA, Italy, Greece, and Germany. Due to stringent visa requirements, migration to the United States often occurred through irregular routes—particularly via the U.S.-Mexico border. In contrast, travel to the EU and Schengen countries has been more accessible since the introduction of visa-free travel in 2017. Nevertheless, the United States still remains a more attractive destination for many due to better-paying job opportunities. How Trump’s new stance on illegal immigration will affect this mood remains to be seen.

There is also a gendered aspect to this migration pattern. Women more commonly find employment in domestic and care work in Italy and Greece, where demand for such labor remains high, while men often face greater difficulty securing stable employment, particularly in the EU job market.

Run, Forrest, Run!

Georgia is racing headlong into a demographic crisis. Already one of the countries with a rapidly aging population, it is now also grappling with large-scale emigration that is hollowing out its youth base. According to UN DESA, by 2020, some 861,000 people had left Georgia—an astonishing 23% of the total population—with women accounting for 51% of the emigrants. Meanwhile, the share of citizens aged 65 years and older has [surged](#) from 10.9% in 2000 to 17.5% in 2023, reflecting a dangerous imbalance between the working-age population and dependents.

GEOSTAT data from 2023 [reveals](#) that 245,000 people emigrated from Georgia in just one year. Of these, 30% were between the ages of 20 and 39

years—prime working and reproductive age—and a striking 60% were women. This trend not only accelerates demographic decline but also undermines Georgia's future labor force, economic sustainability, and social cohesion.

The outlook among young people is particularly grim. A 2023 [study](#) shows that 73% of Georgian youth either strongly or somewhat support emigrating abroad for up to ten years. Their motivations are clear and alarming: 38% cite the desire to improve living conditions, 17% seek better education, and 13% aim to find more stable employment.

The economic pressures driving this migration are stark. Sixty-five percent of young Georgians report that their families cannot afford basic necessities like food, clothing, and shoes. Two-thirds are financially dependent on others and lack any stable income of their own.

When it comes to destinations, the top choices reflect where they believe opportunity lies: 30% wish to emigrate to the United States while 17% prefer Germany. These aspirations highlight both the desperation for better prospects and the persistent failure of Georgia's political leadership to create a future of which young people want to be a part.

Unless reversed, this flight of the young and able will not only drain the country's economic potential but leave it demographically imbalanced and politically stagnant—an aging, hollowed-out nation where the best and brightest have long since run.

Beneath Georgia's celebrated macroeconomic growth lies a stark social and regional reality: the country's prosperity is neither broad-based nor inclusive. As of 2024, 671,337 citizens—18.1% of the population—were [receiving](#) social assistance. While poverty rates have slightly decreased in recent years, absolute poverty still [affected](#) 11.8% of the population, with the burden falling disproportionately on rural regions, where every sixth person lives in dire conditions.

Despite [sustained](#) economic expansion—10.6% in 2021, 11% in 2022, 7.8% in 2023, and 9.4% in 2024—unemployment remains persistently high. Official figures [show](#) some improvement, from 20.6% in 2021 to 14.2% in 2024, yet these numbers conceal deeper structural problems. A quarter of Georgia's employed population works in the public sector, reflecting a stagnant private economy. In 2022, public sector employment reached 308,000, while private sector jobs remained static at around 975,000.

On the ground, the situation is bleaker than government data suggests. According to a recent [CRRS survey](#), 50% of respondents say they are unemployed, and one in three [report](#) that no one in their household is employed. Forty percent of households are [burdened](#) with debt, reflecting chronic economic insecurity.

Education, often seen as a long-term solution to poverty and unemployment, is also in crisis. The 2022 PISA [report](#) places Georgia near the bottom of the global rankings: 60th out of 81 countries in math, 67th in reading, and 66th in science. Academic performance is declining, compounding the country's human capital deficit and further dimming prospects for youth.

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paigns on promises of reform, these promises rarely materialize beyond pre-election slogans.

Instead of addressing structural issues, the Georgian Dream focuses on entrenching power, often invoking conspiratorial threats like the so-called “Deep State” to deflect attention from real governance failures. Meanwhile, for many Georgians, especially the young and educated, the European Union remains the only accessible escape hatch—at least for as long as visa-free travel is still available. Unless the country breaks this cycle, another wave of large-scale emigration is not just likely—it is inevitable.

Migrating West

The United States, France, Italy, and Germany have emerged as the primary destinations for Georgian migrants. According to Georgia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an estimated 1.5 million Georgians now [live abroad](#). Of these, 700,000 reside in Russia, 200,000 in Greece, 120,000 in the United States, and around 50,000 each in Italy and Germany. However, official statistics often understate the actual numbers, particularly in Italy, where, according to 2024 [data](#), 33,674 Georgian citizens are legally registered, although the real figure is likely much higher due to undocumented migration. Notably, 85% of the Georgian residents in Italy are women.

The European Union remains a major destination not only for labor migrants but also for asylum seekers. In 2024 alone, Georgian nationals filed 15,509 asylum applications in EU member states, with 82% submitted in just three countries: Italy, France, and Germany. Historical trends reinforce this concentration. In 2020, 6,870 asylum applications were [lodged](#) by Georgians, 63% of which were filed in these same countries. In 2021, 12,440 applications were submitted, with 77% going to France, Germany, and Italy. A record was set in 2022 with 25,940 asylum requests—again, 77% directed to these three states. While the number slightly de-

creased to 21,815 in 2023, their share rose to 80%, underscoring the persistent attractiveness of these destinations.

The United States, once a top choice for Georgian migrants, has now become more difficult for migration. Although 120,000 Georgians currently reside in the U.S., access remains restricted due to high visa refusal rates. Between 2020 and 2024, the refusal rate for B-category visas fluctuated between 41% and 66%. As a result, many Georgian migrants have taken irregular routes, including dangerous journeys through Latin America to cross the U.S.-Mexico border.

In contrast, visa-free travel with the EU since 2017 has made European countries more [accessible](#), particularly for labor migration. Yet the migration wave also has a humanitarian dimension. In France, many Georgians have sought asylum due to political persecution, domestic violence, and ethnic discrimination, particularly for those displaced from occupied Abkhazia. In 2021, health concerns also became a leading factor, with 1,178 Georgians applying for asylum in France due to untreated or poorly covered chronic illnesses under Georgia’s inadequate healthcare system. That year, Georgians ranked [fourth](#) among asylum seekers in France, applying on health grounds.

A less discussed, but politically sensitive issue is the involvement of some Georgian nationals in organized crime across Europe. Europol’s [report](#), *Decoding the EU’s Most Threatening Criminal Networks*, lists Georgian groups among the active players in burglaries and robberies across Greece, Italy, Malta, Poland, Spain, and Portugal. In France, Italy, Malta, and Spain, these networks have become a significant concern. In Poland, Georgian criminal activity is particularly [notable](#): in 2023, police reported 2,714 Georgian nationals committing crimes, while the legal Georgian resident population stood at just over 27,000. In 2024, Polish police detained 1,895 Georgian citizens, prompting a [wave](#) of deportations.

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In sum, Georgian migration to the West is multi-layered, driven by economic desperation, political instability, systemic poverty, and weak public services. While many seek dignity, opportunity, or refuge, others have fallen into criminal networks, adding to the growing policy and perception challenges Georgia faces abroad. Without meaningful reform at home, this complex migration trend is unlikely to abate—and may even intensify.

Visa Liberalization Suspension Mechanism: A Ticking Clock for Georgian Migrants

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Georgia's potential migrants are facing mounting pressure from two converging forces: growing domestic authoritarianism and impending changes to EU visa policy. While repression under the Georgian Dream government continues to intensify—marked by attacks on civil society, political opposition, and independent media—external avenues of escape may soon narrow. The European Union is in the final stages of amending its visa liberalization [suspension mechanism](#), which allows the temporary revocation of visa-free travel for third countries that fail to meet specific benchmarks. Currently, the

suspension can be triggered by four factors: a sharp increase in irregular migration or asylum applications (over 50%), particularly from countries with low recognition rates (3–4%); reduced cooperation on readmission of deported nationals, and rising security threats to EU member states.

The proposed amendments will significantly broaden the scope of this mechanism. Four new criteria are expected to be added: misalignment of a third country's visa policy with that of the EU, the emergence of hybrid threats, the operation of investor citizenship (or “golden passport”) schemes, and serious and abrupt deterioration in diplomatic relations with the EU. Georgia's growing divergence from EU standards—visible in its foreign policy leanings, increasing hybrid threat perceptions, democratic backsliding, and tensions with Brussels—means that it may fall afoul of several of these new criteria. Once the changes are adopted, Georgia's visa-free regime with the EU will become far more fragile, exposing Georgian citizens to the risk of losing one of their most valuable avenues of mobility and opportunity.

Ironically, the prospect of losing visa-free travel may accelerate the very migration the EU aims to regulate. Fearful that the window to Europe is closing, many Georgians—especially young people, professionals, and politically disillusioned citizens—may rush to leave before new restrictions are enforced. This urgency is compounded by a deteriorating domestic context in which hope for change is fading. The combination of authoritarian consolidation at home and looming external constraints abroad is likely to trigger a new wave of strategic emigration—further draining the country's democratic potential and deepening its demographic crisis. If unaddressed, the EU's well-intentioned policy shift could paradoxically hasten the exodus it seeks to manage ■