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Attitudes Towards Immigrants in Georgia: Myths of Tolerance and Empirical Evidence

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Abstract

This paper is based on CRRC's 2015 Caucasus Barometer survey findings and analyzes attitudes reported by the population of Georgia towards immigrants. The authors argue that behind the manifested tolerance, there is empirical evidence of rather ambivalent attitudes towards immigrants. Immigration is becoming increasingly visible in Georgia's social, economic and cultural life, and attitudes towards immigrants may serve as a proxy for attitudes towards "others" in general. Specifically, negative attitudes towards immigrants may indicate a specific manifestation of a deeper fear of "others".

As little academic or policy work has been done in this direction in Georgia, the conclusions the authors derive, beyond their academic importance, may have highly important practical policy implications, as they may help to shape policies addressing tolerance among the population of Georgia in general.

Introduction

Stereotypically, Georgians are portrayed as overly hospitable, friendly, respectful and open towards their guests from abroad. However, existing studies of the situation of immigrants in Georgia and attitudes towards them¹ suggest that this hospitality and openness towards foreigners could be selective, i.e., it could differ across representatives of different nationalities. It is also sometimes the case that the attitudes are positive towards those who are believed to be short-term visitors, i.e., proper "guests", but not towards long-term residents, i.e., those who choose to stay in Georgia for a long time, or even forever.

There is still no definitive answer to the question of what factors condition attitudes of the Georgian population towards foreigners. Based on CRRC's 2015 Caucasus Barometer survey findings, this paper attempts to fill this gap, identifying an important factor that may influence the attitudes that the population of Georgia reports having towards immigrants, defined in the questionnaire as "foreigners who come to Georgia and stay here for longer than three months".

Generally, three major theoretical approaches are used to explain what determines the attitudes of local populations towards "others"—be they representatives of different ethnic, religious, racial or sexual groups. These are contact theory, group conflict theory and economic competition theory.² In the present paper, we will focus only on the first, contact theory, as the CRRC's Caucasus Barometer survey provides relevant indicators

to test it. "Contact theory holds that sustained positive contact (i.e. friendships) with members of other ethnic, religious, racial, or national groups produce more positive attitudes toward members of that group."³ Although we will not be able to specifically assess friendship, we will attempt to obtain empirical evidence regarding whether the fact of personally knowing an immigrant(s) does or does not have an impact on reported attitudes towards immigrants. Before we do so, however, we will provide an overview of reported attitudes towards immigrants in Georgia.

General Attitudes Towards Immigrants in Georgia

Overall, the reported attitudes of the Georgian population towards immigrants lean towards "neutral" (61%), with only 5% defining their attitudes as "very bad" or "bad" (Table 1), compared to almost 25% who characterize their attitudes towards immigrants as "very good" or "good".

Table 1: How Would You Characterize Your Attitude Towards the Foreigners Who Come to Georgia and Stay Here For Longer Than 3 Months? Is It ... (%)

Very bad	1
Bad	4
Neutral	61
Good	20
Very good	4
Don't know / refuse to answer	10

Source: CRRC 2015 Caucasus Barometer Survey

3 Ibid.

1 Innovations and Reforms Center. 2015. *Immigration to Georgia: Current State and Challenges*. Study Report.

2 The Migration Observatory. 2011. "UK Public Opinion towards Migration: Determinants and Attitudes" <<http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-migration-determinants-attitudes>>

Among those who report positive attitudes towards immigrants (sum of responses “very good” and “good”) there are larger shares of urban residents, representatives of households with relatively secure economic status (i.e., those reporting having enough money for food and clothes but not for expensive durables), and individuals with higher education. Among those who tend to report negative attitudes (sum of “very bad” and “bad”) towards immigrants, there is a larger share of individuals living in rural settlements and more people with secondary or secondary technical education. No manifested gender difference could be observed between the two groups. However, people’s attitudes tend to become more negative with age.

We presumed that it would have been logical to expect that those reporting a willingness to emigrate from Georgia “for a certain period of time” (51%) would hold more positive attitudes towards immigrants because they would be more open and tend to consider themselves “in the shoes” of the immigrants. As could be expected, this is a relatively young segment of the population, with men reporting such intentions slightly more often than women, as are those who have completed higher education. Those who report being interested in temporary emigration from Georgia indeed tend to report slightly more positive attitudes towards immigrants coming to their country.

Contact Theory: Explanations

CB does not ask a question specifically about friendship with immigrants; hence, to test the contact theory hypothesis, a more general question: “Have you had any form of contact with foreigners in Georgia who have stayed here for longer than 3 months?” will be used (Table 2). Slightly more than two-thirds reported never having had any form of contact with immigrants—indicating that, presumably, they form their attitudes towards immigrants based on indirect or secondary information, provided either by mass media or “word of mouth”. There is an above-average share of Tbilisi residents among those who tend to have had contact with foreigners; more often than on average, these are people with higher education and a relatively secure economic situation. Conversely, among those who report never having had any contact with foreigners, the share of the rural population is slightly higher, as is the share of those who are 65 years old and older.

Only approximately one-quarter of the population of Georgia has had some form of contact with immigrants. Nine percent state that they come into contact with them “often”, while 17% report such contact to take place “rarely”. As a simple cross-tabulation (Figure 1 below) demonstrates, such contact could indeed be a fac-

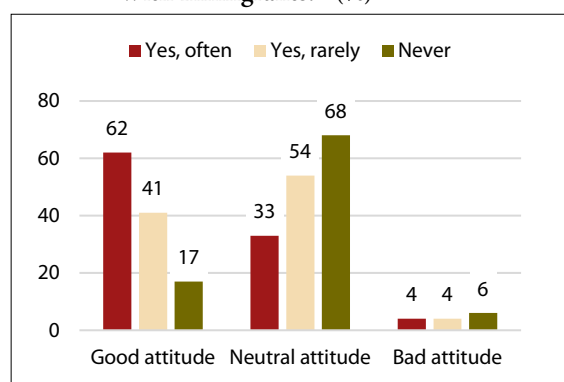
Table 2: Have You Had Any Form of Contact With Foreigners In Georgia Who Have Stayed Here For Longer Than 3 Months? (%)

Yes, often	9
Yes, rarely	17
Never	72
Don't know	2

Source: CRRC 2015 Caucasus Barometer Survey

tor contributing to more positive attitudes towards immigrants—and vice versa. Those who report having had contact with immigrants “often” exhibit the most positive attitudes (62%—sum of “good” and “very good”)⁴, while those who had never had any contact exhibit the least positive attitudes (17%—sum of “good” and “very good”). Spearman’s correlation between these variables is statistically significant, with negative value of $-.301$, confirming that there is statistical evidence that having contacts with foreigners is associated with better attitudes towards them.

Figure 1: “Reported Attitudes Towards Immigrants” By “Have You Had Any Form Of Contact With Immigrants?” (%)



Source: CRRC 2015 Caucasus Barometer Survey

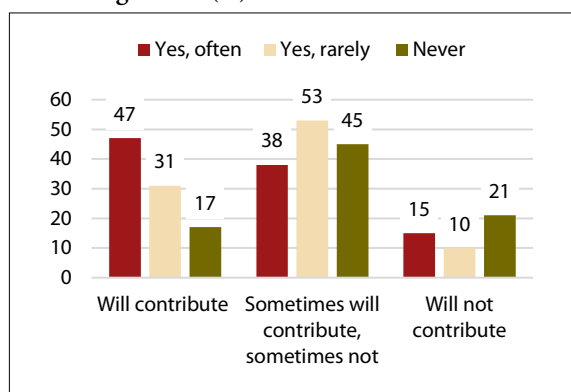
Note: Response options “Very good” and “Good” were combined to form the option “Good attitude”, and response options “Very bad” and “Bad” were combined to form the option “Bad attitude”.

Unsurprisingly, having or not having contact with immigrants is also statistically correlated with opinions on whether the latter will contribute to the economic development of Georgia (Spearman’s correlation coefficient is $-.267$; Figure 2 overleaf).

Hence, the empirical data support the contact theory hypothesis, suggesting that any form of contact with immigrants is correlated with positive attitudes towards them.

4 The margin of error is relatively higher for this group, due to its small size.

Figure 2: “Will the Immigrants Contribute To Economic Development Of Georgia?” By “Have You Had Any Form Of Contact With Immigrants?” (%)



Source: CRRG 2015 Caucasus Barometer Survey

If, again, we more closely examine potential temporary emigrants, their expectations regarding whether immigrants will contribute to the economic development of Georgia are quite similar to the average. Interestingly, however, those who are interested in temporary emigration from Georgia are also more likely to report having contact with immigrants, compared with the rest of the population (Table 3).

Concluding Remarks

With a rather limited share of the population having personal contact with foreigners, the attitudes of the majority of the population of Georgia towards immigrants are presumed to be formed based on secondary information about them. A lack of contact, according to contact theory, could be the reason that the majority tends to exhibit reserved, neutral attitudes towards immigrants.

The empirical data do not support the stereotypical image of Georgians being very hospitable and welcoming towards the foreigners who chose to remain in

Table 3: “Have You Had Any Form Of Contact With Foreigners In Georgia Who Have Stayed Here For Longer Than 3 Months?” By “If You Had A Chance, Would You Leave Georgia For a Certain Period Of Time To Live Somewhere Else?” (%)

Contact:	Interest in temporary emigration:		
	Yes	No	Don't know
Yes, often	11	7	5
Yes, rarely	21	12	31
Never	68	81	61

Source: CRRG 2015 Caucasus Barometer Survey

the country for the long term. Attitudes towards immigrants are, however, clearly more positive for the relatively small share of the population who has had any type of contact with them, thus supporting the contact theory hypothesis, even without controlling for whether the contact with the immigrants was positive or negative. Knowing an immigrant personally, even if this is just a superficial acquaintance, is an important factor contributing to positive attitudes.

Preliminary analysis also suggests that those willing to emigrate from Georgia temporarily are more open towards immigrants coming to their country, compared with the rest of the population.

Based on the presented data, obvious policy recommendations would be as follows:

1. create a welcoming environment contributing to direct contact between the local population and immigrants, as such contact tends to improve attitudes towards immigrants and both parties benefit from cooperation with one another; and
2. promote more balanced coverage of immigration-related stories in the media and, especially, TV, as the latter serves as a major source of information for the absolute majority of the population of Georgia.

About the Authors

Mariam Chumburidze holds a Masters' Degree in International Relations and International Management from London Metropolitan University and King's College London. She has been working on migration issues since 2011 in the capacity of government agency adviser on migration issues, as well as being expert in various migration-related projects led by a non-governmental organization. Currently, Mariam teaches a course in research methods at Tbilisi State University and a Georgian Institute of Public Affairs joint MA course in Migration Management and leads an EU-funded project related to linking Migration and Development effectively to one another at the NGO Innovations and Reforms Center.

Dr. *Tamar Zurabishvili* currently works as a researcher at the ICMPD ENIGMMA project's analytical unit. Tamar has MA degrees in Media Studies from the New School University, NY, and in Sociology from Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences and Manchester University, and PhD in Sociology from Ilia State University. Along with teaching at various Georgian higher educational institutions, Tamar has been involved in several studies of emi-

gration from Georgia and returnee reintegration. She served as a consultant for the IOM, the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD), European University Institute (Florence, Italy), Europe Foundation (former Eurasia Partnership Foundation), Heinrich Boell Foundation South Caucasus office and Innovations and Reforms Center. Her research interests are primarily related to studying various aspects of migratory movements, migration networks, the feminization of migration, and immigrant integration.

Dr. *Tinatin Zurabishvili* holds a PhD in Sociology of Journalism from Moscow M. Lomonosov State University. From 1994 to 1999, Tinatin worked for the Levada Center in Moscow. After returning to Georgia in 1999, she has taught various courses in sociology, particularly focusing on research methodology, for BA and MA programs at Telavi State University and Tbilisi State University Center for Social Sciences. From 2001 to 2003, she was a Civic Education Project Local Faculty Fellow; from 2010 to 2012, she was a professor at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA). In 2007, she joined the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) as the Caucasus Barometer survey regional coordinator. Since 2012, she has worked as the CRRC-Georgia research director. Her research interests are focused on post-Soviet transformation, the sociology of migration, media studies, and social research methodology.

Recommended Readings:

- Innovations and Reforms Center. 2015. *Immigration to Georgia: Current State and Challenges*. Study Report. <http://irc.ge/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Immigration-to-Georgia_ENG.pdf>
- The Migration Observatory. 2011. "UK Public Opinion towards Migration: Determinants and Attitudes" <<http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-migration-determinants-attitudes>>