



The Influence and Significance of Informal Social Networks in the Management of Irregular Migration: Georgian Migrants in Italy (2017–2020)

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ABSTRACT

The relationships and interactions between social actors shape the structure and function of social systems. Informal social networks—homogeneous spaces based on shared social and cultural characteristic—play a crucial role in the emergence and persistence of irregular migration, particularly among Georgian migrants in Italy.

This study employs a qualitative case study approach focusing on the years 2017–2020. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with irregular Georgian migrants residing in Italy. Content analysis was applied within the theoretical framework of network theory and symbolic interactionism. The research demonstrates that the idea and practices of irregular migration are primarily generated and transmitted within informal social networks composed of individuals connected by similarities in age, class, and social background. These networks are characterized by tight bonds, mutual trust, and strong norms of reciprocity—often encapsulated in the Georgian idiom, “a hand washes a hand.” The data also support Mark Granovetter’s theory on the strength of weak ties, as the diffusion of diverse and updated information is enabled by more expansive and loosely connected networks (Granovetter, 1973). Such networks serve as vital mechanisms for adaptation and social integration within host countries. In addition, formal institutional supports—such as Georgian Orthodox churches, clergy, and diaspora associations—were found to supplement informal networks in facilitating irregular migration and social support.

Informal social networks not only facilitate the decision-making and implementation processes of irregular migration but also create a parallel system of migration management. Their legitimacy and capacity for resource exchange make them a foundational component in sustaining irregular migration as an institutionalized practice.

Keywords: *Informal social networks, Irregular migration, Social interaction patterns, Migration institutions, Georgia–Italy Migration Context.*

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არაფორმალური ქსელების გავლენა და მნიშვნელობა არარეგულარული მიგრაციის მართვაში: საქართველოს მოქალაქეები იტალიაში (2017–2020)

თამარ ჩარკვიანი
სოციოლოგიის დოქტორი, ასოცირებული პროფესორი,
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სოციალური აქტორების ურთიერთობები და მათ შორის არსებული ურთიერთქმედება განსაზღვრავს სოციალური სტრუქტურების ფორმასა და შინაარსს. არაფორმალური სოციალური ქსელები, როგორც ჰომოგენური სოციალურ-კულტურული სივრცეები, მნიშვნელოვან როლს თამაშობენ არარეგულარული მიგრაციის პროცესების წარმოქმნასა და განმტკიცებაში. ეს განსაკუთრებით თვალსაჩინოა საქართველოს მოქალაქეების არაღებულ მიგრაციასთან დაკავშირებით იტალიაში.

კვლევა ეფუძნება 2017–2020 წლებში ჩატარებულ თვისბერივ კვლევას, რომლის ფარგლებშიც ჩატარდა ნახევრადსტრუქტურირებული ინტერვიუები იტალიაში მცხოვრებ საქართველოს მოქალაქე არარეგულარულ მიგრანტებთან. მონაცემების ანალიზი განხორციელდა კონტენტ-ანალიზის მეთოდით, ქსელური თეორიისა და სიმბოლური ინტერაქციონიზმის თეორიულ ჩარჩოში.

მიგრაციის პრაქტიკების გენეზისი და ტრანსმისია აქტიურად ხორციელდება არაფორმალურ სოციალურ ქსელებში, რომელთა წევრებს აერთიანებთ ასაკობრივი, კლასობრივი და კულტურული სიახლოვე. ეს ქსელები ავლენენ მჭიდრო კავშირებს, ღირებულებითი თანხვედრის პრინციპზე აგებულ ურთიერთობებს და რესურსების გაცვლის სისტემას („ხელი ხელს ბანს“). განსაკუთრებული როლი ენიჭება სუსტი კავშირების სიმძლიერეს მარკ გრანოვეტერთან, რაც ხელს უწყობს ინფორმაციის ეფექტურ ცირკულაციასა და მიგრანტთა ადაპტაციას ახალ გარემოში (Granovetter, 1973). დამატებით, აღმოჩნდა, რომ ქართული დიასპორის ფორმალური სტრუქტურებიც (ეკლესია, სათემო ორგანიზაციები) ასრულებენ არაფორმალური მხარდაჭერის ფუნქციას.

არაფორმალური სოციალური ქსელები არა მხოლოდ უწყობენ ხელს არარეგულარული მიგრაციის წარმოქმნას, არამედ მიგრაციის მენეჯმენტის ალტერნატიულ ფორმას ქმნიან. მათი ლეგიტიმაცია და რესურსთა გაცვლის მექანიზმი საფუძველს ქმნის არარეგულარული მიგრაციის, როგორც ინსტიტუციური პრაქტიკის მდგრადობისთვის.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: არაფორმალური სოციალური ქსელები, არარეგულარული მიგრაცია, სოციალური ურთიერთქმედების ნიმუშები, მიგრაციის ინსტიტუტები, საქართველო-იტალიის მიგრაციის კონტექსტი.

1. Introduction

1.1. Management of Illegal Migration Flows in Post-Soviet Georgia

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia gradually became part of the global migration system. Over the last two decades, the characteristics, volume, and directions of migration from Georgia have significantly changed. Today, Georgian migrant groups can be found in various countries, with migration flows directed toward different destinations. The declining population trend in Georgia is one of the most significant challenges that must be considered in the prioritization of migration strategies, especially in terms of promoting the return and reintegration policies for Georgian citizens living abroad.

Studying migration trends from Georgia is complicated due to the lack of reliable statistical data and differences in data collection methodologies. Therefore, caution is required when using and comparing data gathered through various methods.

While the exact volume of labor migration from Georgia is unknown, researchers agree that a substantial portion of Georgia's population resides abroad. According to World Bank data, by 2010, this figure reached 1,057,000 people, meaning that one in four Georgian citizens was living abroad (see Data 1). A report published in 2012 indicated that between 350,000 and 500,000 Georgian citizens were employed abroad in 2011, representing 8 to 11 percent of the country's total population.

The 2014 national census preliminary data confirmed a significant decline in population compared to the 2002 census, with a decrease of approximately 600,000 people. As of January 1, 2015, Georgia's population stood at 3,729,500 people.

Research indicates that interest in emigration among Georgians remains a growing trend. Despite the sizable Georgian diaspora, only a small portion of survey respondents expressed a desire to leave the country permanently. However, a significant portion, around 42%, expressed the desire to emigrate.

When analyzing migration attitudes, it is particularly noticeable that the desire to leave Georgia is more pronounced among young people. Only 18% of respondents over the age of 55 express a desire to leave the country, while two-thirds of those under 35 have the same desire. This data indicates that young people are more interested in finding work or better opportunities abroad, especially students (87%) and those currently unemployed but actively seeking work (59%).

The 2016 "Georgian Youth Study" by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation reveals that part of the youth sees their future abroad, but the majority still prefers to stay in Georgia for study and work. The primary motivation for going abroad is often tourism, although some individuals also wish to pursue their studies

at foreign higher education institutions. A small number of respondents openly express in focus group discussions that they want to go abroad for employment and better wages.

The "Transition in Life" study shows an interesting link between life satisfaction and optimism. It is worth noting that a higher percentage of young people, who desire more independence and freedom, are found among those wishing for internal mobility within the country. However, ultimately, the reasons stimulating both emigration and internal migration are primarily related to material factors.

This data emphasizes the need to increase opportunities for young people in Georgia, which would contribute to improving their qualifications and employment prospects, thereby reducing migration tendencies.

1.2. Employment and Working Conditions of Georgian Migrants Abroad

The majority of Georgian citizens employed abroad do not have their labor rights protected. A survey of returned migrants revealed that only 36.6% of respondents had formal employment contracts. Two-thirds of the respondents admitted that they worked more than 8 hours a day, and one-third said they spent more than 10 hours per day at work.

Another concerning issue is the limited access to healthcare: only a third of respondents said they received hospital or home-based treatment, while 20% stated that they could not afford any medical treatment, and 42% admitted they resorted to self-treatment.

What prevents Georgian migrants from protecting their rights is their irregular legal status. According to official statistics, in 2008, one-quarter of migrants returned from EU countries did not have official status in the country of emigration, and 30% were living on temporary permits without the right to work. Only 28% of returned migrants reported that they had the right to work in the destination country.

The limited regulation of labor relations is due to the fact that Georgian migrants often use informal channels to find work abroad. After the dissolution of the state employment service in 2006, private intermediaries and other individuals became the only agents connecting job seekers with employment opportunities. According to the International Labor Organization's 2007 study on intermediaries, there were no official employment agencies in Georgia, and this situation has not changed since. Instead, potential migrants mainly rely on unregistered intermediary organizations or individuals and pay significant amounts (between \$1,500 and \$5,000) to find work.

The average length of stay for Georgian migrants abroad is three years, which is the longest among Eastern Partnership countries. Armenian migrants spend an average of two years abroad, while Ukrainian migrants stay for an average of seven months. The difference is especially notable with Moldovan citizens: 49% of Moldovan migrants return home within 12 months or less, while for Georgians, the return rate within this period does not exceed 32%. A significant portion of Georgian migrants spends more than three years abroad, with 18% staying up to four years, and 22% remaining even longer.

2. Methodology - Research Aim, Subject, Object, and Questions

The primary aim of the research project is to identify social practices related to illegal migration, the influence and significance of informal networks in managing illegal migratory flows; to obtain empirical data and analyze the current situation. The results of the research are valuable for the state, enhancing the effectiveness of migration policy and management strategies.

Subject of the Research: Identifying the boundaries of the role, significance, and influences of informal social networks on the adaptation and resocialization processes of Georgian illegal migrants.

Research Questions:

- How do informal social networks influence the decision-making, adaptation, and survival strategies of undocumented Georgian migrants in Italy?
- What structural and social factors contribute to the formation, maintenance, and functional significance of these informal networks in the context of irregular migration?

Object of the Research: Georgian citizens who have migration experience—those currently residing or who have lived in migration in Italy. It is noteworthy that the migration issue is also a significant concern for Italy itself.

What factors contribute to the "resilience" of illegal migrants?

- **Hypothesis:** Georgian migrants are integrated into informal networks, which are one of their strong resources for adaptation.
- **Hypothesis:** The strength of Georgian religious institutions abroad and the integration of migrants within them.
- **Hypothesis:** Negative expectations regarding return to Georgia, which are likely associated with a sense of hopelessness.

The analysis of the model of informal social networks of migrants will allow us to draw certain conclusions.

2.1. Empirical Research Methodology

The methodological strategy is based on exploratory and descriptive research types, aimed at identifying factual data—how thoroughly the problem has been studied in previous research, collecting primary data around the issue, and conducting a "scouting" of the situation. This involves obtaining extensive information about the problem or the group of people, which will subsequently allow the research to determine whether there is any connection between different elements of the problem.

To achieve the goals and objectives of the research and to obtain the most complete/objective information about the issues being studied, the research primarily relied on qualitative research methods.

In addition to qualitative interviews, the study also employed **content analysis of migrant social media pages** and thematic review of user-generated posts.

Desk Research: At the initial stage of the project, an analysis of documents related to the topic of study was conducted, reviewing relevant written sources (such as state strategic documents, statistical data, and interpretations of trends in state migration policy, etc.). This also included an analysis of relevant press coverage and a review of the social networks of migrants.

Using this method, the main problems in the study area were highlighted, and the direction of the topic and questions were more precisely defined for developing the interview instrument—a questionnaire/guide.

2.2. Empirical Sociological Research Instruments (Fieldwork)

Within the framework of the research, two types of interviews were utilized: biographical narrative and postal interviews. Both types of interviews were based on a semi-structured research questionnaire, which involves discussions without strict detailing of questions, but following a unified plan. The questionnaires were thematically structured, isolating relevant blocks of research questions. Respondents were selected using the so-called snowball sampling principle and included 25 respondents.

Organizing and conducting fieldwork for empirical research presents significant challenges when studying migratory processes. The project, based on its objectives, focused on respondents with varying migratory experiences. The selection model allowed for highlighting the conditions and attitudes present in different groups of migrants. When selecting respondents, various characteristics were taken into account based on the objectives and goals of the research: period of migration, duration, work experience abroad, gender, and age.

2.3. Data Processing and Analysis of the Research

The primary sociological research materials obtained (documentary sources and interview transcripts) were processed using traditional content analysis approaches. The analysis of the research data primarily relied on descriptive procedures; however, methods such as interpretation, data categorization, typology, and others were also utilized.

2.4. Novelty and Contribution of the Study

The present study makes a **novel contribution** by integrating informal network theory with empirical evidence gathered from undocumented Georgian migrants in Italy. Unlike previous research that treats informal networks primarily as side phenomena, this study conceptualizes them as **parallel structures of migration governance**. The dual focus on both **face-to-face reciprocity** and **online social media group dynamics** offers a comprehensive view of informal support systems. Moreover, the study highlights **the informal role of religious institutions** and **migrant-led digital platforms** as underexplored, yet crucial, actors in migration management.

3. Theoretical Context

3.1. Review of Theories of Informal Networks

An important approach to describing informal practices is Ulrich Beck's "Risk Society Theory" (1992). The "shadow" informal society, as a risk society, has its own laws to which everyone ultimately conforms. In the shadow market, concepts such as ensuring safety or putting it at risk can relate to the activities of a single subject—the state. In democratic societies, the market is an element of universal social order; in a risk society, it is replaced by a network of personal connections aimed at satisfying private or corporate interests.

Modern informality is not about intellectual capital for individual and societal development but about individual survival in conditions of widespread uncertainty and fear. Beck wrote that the negative logic of the risk society is motivated by the fear of uncertainty and is expressed in the formula "I am afraid!"

The entire activity of informal networks is aimed at transforming official-anonymous relationships into trust-based, personal ones, which implies a return to traditional forms of social communication. Social networks that provide access to opportunities in the analysis of informal practices represent a relatively young theoretical construct that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. As an approach, it was later formulated within European and American research schools in the 1970s and 1980s.

The analysis of informal practices can be viewed through the prism of three related theories: exchange theory, reciprocity (Homans 1974), rational choice theory (Blau 1964), and network theory (Emerson 1972).

Many works suggest that the structure of social relationships creates informational flows and shapes different opportunities at various job positions. Proponents of the network approach argue that the network ensures access to information, and these networks significantly influence employment prospects, resource mobilization, and the dissemination of ideas and strategies (Powell and Smith-Doerr 2003).

3.2. Charles Horton Cooley's Theory of Primary and Secondary Groups

According to Charles Horton Cooley's theory (1905/1956), the structure of social interaction is primarily constructed from two types of groups: primary and secondary groups.

Characteristics of Primary Groups (family, close friends):

- Continuous face-to-face interactions;
- Strong personal identification with the group;
- Strong connections among group members;

- Multidimensional relationships;
- A tendency towards stability.

Characteristics of Secondary Groups (distant acquaintances, colleagues):

- Limited face-to-face interactions;
- Reserved or weak personal identification with the group;
- Weak connections among group members;
- Limited, secondary relationships;
- A tendency towards instability and temporariness.

Primary and secondary groups are based on different types of relationships and interaction models. In primary groups (such as family or close friends), people are closely connected to one another; they are aware of many aspects of each other's lives; interactions are emotionally charged; identities are closely tied together; relationships are viewed as long-term and permanent, regardless of whether they live in the same area or see each other often.

In contrast, secondary relationships are temporary and superficial. People have limited information about each other's lives (for example, they are confined to work-related matters); interactions are more formal and conditional (polite, friendly conversations tend to dominate trivial issues); relationships are usually not emotional; if they move elsewhere or change jobs, they quickly lose interest, and as a result, there is no expectation of maintaining contact afterward.

Cooley emphasizes two aspects:

1. The interaction characteristic of secondary groups is increasing in modern society. Interactions and relationships qualitatively differ from one another.
2. Modern society and secondary relationships are significantly dependent on norms of etiquette, or cultural norms, which regulate interactions among strangers in urban areas. Individuals adhere to these norms because they have personal connections with other people or expect some benefit in return for this behavior.

3.3. Mark Granovetter: 'The Strength of Weak and Strong Ties'

According to Mark Granovetter, a prominent figure in network theory and the structuralist school at Harvard, a network is an expanded group of individuals with similar (common) interests who interact through informal contacts for mutual support. Granovetter published a paper in 1985 titled "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness." Based on the anthropologist Karl Polanyi's concept of "embeddedness," he interprets this notion as the social structure's involvement in the

economy. With this approach, Granovetter develops a concept stating that any economic action is socially conditioned, and its study and understanding are impossible without examining the motivations of individual actors. He emphasizes the involvement of personal networks, which implies regular individual or group social contacts among network members (Granovetter 1992).

One of the key concepts in sociology for understanding networks is structural equivalence (Mizruchi 2001). According to the concept of structural equivalence, a network is a set of connections among social actors. Within this network, social agents cluster based on the types of positions held and the resources they possess. It is the structure that determines the configuration of actors, while the configuration defines the connections among them. Various types of resource exchanges occur between differentiated positions.

Closely related to structural equivalence is James S. Coleman's definition of social capital: social capital is productive—it facilitates goal achievement and makes it easier for social agents to act within the structure (Coleman 1986).

In the process of studying the adaptation strategies of illegal migrants, network theory gains significance in the context of employment and labor relations. We will begin this discussion with a brief overview of research conducted in the area of job search.

Job searching is the "matching process," which involves the meeting of a job seeker and an employer. Both types of social actors are broadly represented in this process. Reality shows that every meeting with a candidate, interview, and reading each job seeker's application or resume often represents an ineffective use of time. Typically, both the employer and job seeker have some information about each other prior to the meeting. The "matching process" mostly ends successfully in such cases (Powell and Smith-Doerr 2003). This phenomenon is referred to as the "strength of weak ties" (Granovetter 1973, 1974).

Granovetter formulated empirical arguments regarding the "strength of weak ties" in network theory (Granovetter 1973, 1974, 1995). People naturally seek contacts with similar individuals (with similar resources and information). Weak and rare ties exist with individuals who are different from us. Observing the logic of this relationship aspiration and analyzing empirical data, Granovetter concludes that such weak informal connections can be the most effective, as they provide access to new types of resources.

In his classic work "Getting a Job" published in 1974, Granovetter described and analyzed how several thousand professionals and workers from Newton, a suburb of Boston, sought employment; the detailed investigation focused on how they received information about job vacancies. It turned out that 56% of respondents found jobs through personal connections rather than through specialized employment agencies or advertisements. Only 19% used formal means (such as advertisements and employment agencies), and approximately 20% approached employers directly.

Most respondents received information about job vacancies through random acquaintances or other weak ties. Among those who found employment through personal contacts, 16.7% met the necessary person

or contact "often" (as is the case with close friends); 55.6% met them "occasionally"; and 28% did so "rarely" (Granovetter 1974).

In this study, the strength of connections is considered in conjunction with time, emotional intensity, trust, and reciprocal relationships. Granovetter explained the results by stating that strong ties are informationally exhausted. Relatives and close friends convey essentially similar information to each other. In contrast, acquaintances belong to different social circles that are not interconnected, and thus they have access to diverse sources of information.

Weak ties are significant sources of information that contribute to an individual's advancement (in a career or a company's market position). At the same time, weak ties become powerful mechanisms for social mobility. Unlike weak ties, strong connections offer information that is not much different from what the individual already possesses (for example, job search practices through acquaintances and former colleagues, etc.) (Powell and Smith-Doerr 2003). Friends largely operate in the same field. They may work together, live nearby, attend the same churches, schools, or parties.

How different can the information they hold be? Acquaintances, on the other hand, navigate in different spaces and environments. They are much more likely to know something that you do not. In other words, acquaintances represent a powerful resource for information acquisition; the larger the social circle, the stronger the sources of information. Consequently, when it comes to job searching (or information or ideas), "weak ties" are more important than close or "strong ties." The advantage in job searching belongs to those with a broader network of non-overlapping contacts.

Networks play a significant role in balancing supply and demand; during personal communication, information is transmitted that does not circulate through public channels. Furthermore, there is data supporting the notion that jobs found through networks are more promising and better-paying; they are likely to be newly created positions for which there are no competing candidates (Granovetter 1974, pp. 14–16).

Connections have different functional implications across various labor markets. At this stage, this is one of the most significant research questions facing both sociology and economic theory (Montgomery 1991, 1992; Granovetter 1986).

John Montgomery discovered that the configuration of a candidate's personal social network (network composition) influences their chances in the labor market. Activating weak ties does not necessarily lead to higher-paying jobs (Montgomery 1992). These results should be viewed in a broader context. Campbell et al. (1986) argue that networks are a resource, and like other types of resources, they are unevenly distributed in society. Research on friendship and acquaintance networks yields the same results: the more educated a person is, the broader their network is, and the higher the likelihood that it includes distant acquaintances, i.e., "weak ties" (Fischer 1982; Marsden 1987; Burt 1990). Less educated individuals are more likely to limit their circles to relationships with relatives, i.e., "strong ties" (Burt 1990). Individuals with a higher socio-economic status have more opportunities (both in employment and social circles) to establish weak ties with those in influential positions. People with lower socio-economic status and narrower social networks have fewer such opportunities, and consequently, their

access to various resources is more limited. Differences in network composition do not determine its significance for an individual.

4. The Influence of Informal Networks on Migration Processes

4.1. Identifying the Key Informants of Informal Migration

Social networks, in which various social agents are involved, are one of the main informational resources regarding migration processes. The emphasis on social networks increases in the context of material difficulties, and strategies for finding solutions are shaped through the communication process among actors within the network. Interest in migration and traveling abroad for employment and family material support is typically a decisive motivator for the exchange of relevant information and the discovery of experienced migrants' practices and supportive individuals within the social network.

According to respondents, the largest concentration of Georgians is in the city of Bari, in the Puglia region of Italy. Bari is a city where Georgians first began to arrive in the early 2000s, primarily through illegal means, 'i.e., when the 'path' to Italy was opened.' This phenomenon is influenced by geographical factors, such as Bari's proximity to Greece, where many Georgian migrants are present. For those wishing to migrate from Greece to Italy, this route is characterized by relatively easy access to paths.

Additionally, many Georgians are present in cities like Reggio Emilia, Rome, Naples, Florence, Milan, etc. Illegal Georgian migrants in Italy do not only arrive from Greece. A significant flow of those wishing to migrate from Georgia to Italy is influenced by the relatively successful adaptation strategies of Georgian illegal migrants already in Italy. Information primarily circulates among potential illegal migrants through friends and relatives who work abroad or live in Georgia and have acquaintances overseas. Based on this information, many potential illegal migrants make decisions about travelling to Italy, hoping for assistance from relatives regarding the details of departure or employment.

'My neighbor, whom I relied on when I came to Italy, met me at the airport, and I lived in her rented apartment until I found a job. She has been in Italy for 10 years. She helped me get a job within two weeks.'

In several cases, the promise of assistance in living and working as an illegal migrant in a foreign country is unrealistic, and there are many instances where individuals end up deceived and left to their own devices.

'I've heard from many that they promised to meet them at the airport, and then those who were left without help were begging for assistance from others.'

'The woman who was supposed to help me met me in the hospital. So I was left in the hands of fate. However, a former colleague helped me get a job in her employer's sister's family. I barely survived for a year and a half. After that, I changed jobs five times in five months.'

‘People find it easy to think about living in Italy from Georgia; when you tell them, they don't believe it. They think we sit here and get paid twice a month; some say it like this - you went, and you don't want anyone else to go.’

The practice of deception is one of the most widespread and established methods. The plans made before leaving the homeland are completely altered after the denial of assistance. In many cases, finding a solution is very challenging.

‘My husband and I were students. Due to our financial situation, my husband decided to go abroad. A year later, I also traveled with our two young children and a cousin. We were supposed to stay in a hotel for a few days to meet the person who would illegally take us across the border to join my husband. However, as it often happens, this person turned out to be a scammer. We met Georgians there, who were in a similar situation.’

Most illegal Georgian migrants in Italy have managed to resolve their visa issues, buy tickets, and, as respondents noted, ‘they left the country on a whim and stayed in a stressful environment.’

4.2. Problems Faced by Those Seeking Employment Abroad

Adapting to a new country, environment, and society presents numerous challenges that require a strong moral and psychological readiness from illegal migrants. The ability to overcome difficulties and cope with them varies among individual social actors. Some illegal migrants, who have relatively realistic expectations, show greater readiness and resolve conflicts rationally. In contrast, others have expectations that are less aligned or sharply disconnected from reality, resulting in lower readiness, increased tension, and confusion. For them, overcoming difficulties occurs against a backdrop of significant emotional and psychological stress.

‘Before coming here, I had already been to Europe several times due to my profession. I was fully prepared, both morally and psychologically, to endure any bad family, any difficult job, or challenging moments if I encountered them.’

Informal migrants consider a compassionate employer and ‘humane’ working conditions as indicators of successful employment. It implies that the migrant is not living in unbearable conditions, does not lead a confined life, does not have to care for a demanding, severely ill elderly person, and can endure less humiliation due to timely salary payments.

‘I was lucky, and after a long wait, I found a good family. They welcomed me wonderfully, like a child, like a sister. I no longer work for them, but I still have contact. Many of my friends are struggling with life here. Many are in unbearable working conditions, leading confined lives with demanding, severely ill people. However, they have no solution. There are good and bad everywhere. It's the same here. Many of us have to endure humiliation because of salary issues.’

The first stage of adaptation occurs with the support of acquaintances and other illegal Georgians. Information and the sharing of experiences about job-seeking strategies circulate within this circle. This

network is characterized by what is known as reciprocity, or the principle of mutual benefit, where there is an exchange of information and assistance among network members.

'Five months later, the 'grandmother' passed away. Her daughter left me for four months and kept my salary. After that, I started temporary jobs, again with the help of acquaintances. There was a time when I was unemployed for four months. However, it was my fault. I didn't know that there were websites where you could post an advertisement with a photo about what type of job you were looking for; it's impossible for someone not to respond.'

4.3. Risks Associated with Illegal Migration: Level of Awareness and Sources

According to illegal migrants, there are different attitudes toward employment and illegal migrants in southern and northern Italy. In the northern regions of Italy, there are more instances of police control and deportations compared to the south. The south also shows more willingness regarding the employment of illegal migrants, while in northern Italy, illegal migrants are more likely to encounter raids, street checks, stops, and requests for documentation.

'It's hard to find a job in the north for an illegal migrant, especially if you don't know the language. The best option in this case is the south. There are Georgian employers in this region, and the chances of finding a job are higher. It's really difficult for men to find work.'

'If a man isn't coming to steal and is willing to work, it's better to go to southern Italy, where complications with being undocumented are less. In the north, they are more afraid of the law and know that the chances of finding a job will be zero.'

For illegal migrants, a successful strategy for finding work is considered to be diligence and the realization of achieving success gradually.

'For a hardworking and motivated person, there's work everywhere. Once you arrive here, you shouldn't just sit at home and cry about your bad luck. You need to disturb everyone and ask around! Such a person will always find something. In the north, I think it's not worth it until you learn the language. If you're not a burden for the first stage, you need to get everywhere; this way, you'll also practice the language.'

Where is it better to start working? *"Come to Reggio Calabria; here, undocumented migrants come, contact Nana, the employer, and she will help you. There's less work for men here; maybe a woman can find something if she tries."*

Illegal migrants use notable terms: having a "patron" (employer) and justification, risk, "whoever seeks finds"; these are prerequisites for the job search process.

'I'll give you one piece of advice... It's better to go where you have a patron... at least you'll have someone to help you; if someone promises you a job, it's more feasible; go where you have good friends.'

The increase in the number of illegal migrants correlates (cause-and-effect relationship) with growing competition in the job market, which negatively impacts salaries and the quality of working conditions.

Importantly, the increase is also driven by family reunification. Georgians who have lived in Italy for years and have the right to live and work legally bring their spouses and children, as Italian legislation allows this.

It is noteworthy that the job market is somewhat regulated by so-called employers, primarily Georgians, who assist illegal migrants in their job search process in exchange for a fee.

‘Every day, migrants arrive; do you think the situation wouldn’t change? They already have a choice of big Italians, either temporary jobs or those with low salaries. There are 30-40 women sitting with the employer for months. Everything is based on justification.’

In the employment process, migrants, especially illegal ones, face additional challenges, primarily that their diplomas and qualifications are not recognized in Europe. Therefore, they mainly accept unskilled, heavy labor. Consequently, there are cases where the work abilities, potential, and professionalism of migrants are not utilized appropriately.

4.5 Adaptation Strategies of Illegal Migrants

Some illegal migrants have an illusory, irrational perception of adaptation in a new country, which complicates the resocialization process and increases psychological stress. Overcoming difficulties often requires them to rely either on themselves or mainly on the assistance of relatively experienced compatriots in similar situations. The lack of support from relatives is acute and often unbearable.

‘At first, it seems very easy. You think everything will be ready for you there, but as soon as you arrive, you realize that you were wrong. Finding a job is associated with quite significant difficulties. To this, you add the fact that you don’t know the language, you are in a foreign country, and you don’t have documents. The salary is only enough to cover your living expenses and rent.’

‘For some reason, we think that by travelling abroad, our problems will be solved... that everything there is easy and comes naturally... but that’s not the case! No material well-being can outweigh the spiritual pain that an immigrant experiences. For those who have never carried the burden of being an immigrant, it’s hard to grasp the problems that someone in a foreign country faces from the moment they leave their homeland.’

According to some migrants, overcoming obstacles abroad is doubly challenging.

‘Basically, you find yourself in the same situation you were in Georgia. Moreover, the local conditions become something to yearn for. You can endure hardship more easily in your homeland because you have relatives and friends nearby who can at least verbally support and comfort you.’

The process of resocialization is individual and depends on various social and psychological factors. For some social actors, adapting to new conditions is challenging not only at the initial stage of illegal migration but also continues to be a source of stress for years.

‘I’ve been here for five years and still can’t get used to life here. Every night and morning begins with tearful prayers.’

For some social actors, adaptation is less complicated at the beginning; however, over time, nostalgia and the desire to visit loved ones increase. Moreover, being illegal effectively means a priori limitations on mobility.

‘After two years, nostalgia gradually started for me, and because of being undocumented, I couldn’t return. I’ve tried every possible way, but nothing worked. I feel that if I don’t return to Georgia at least once, I won’t be able to bear it. Besides, my relatives keep saying, if you come here, what will you do? Everyone is keeping an eye on Europe.’

The adaptation process in a foreign environment is also problematic for illegal family couples; in some cases, it is so difficult that they would not recommend sharing their experiences with anyone.

‘Even though I’m not alone and I endure life here with my spouse, I still find it psychologically challenging. To those who are looking towards this direction, I want to say: never wish to go to Europe. It’s better to have warm black bread in your homeland, your motherland, than here’s some food. It’s hard for men to start working in farms. Many are undocumented, and that’s why. Moreover, it’s hard labor, and there’s no corresponding compensation for the work. Therefore, for those of us who came with our husbands, we mostly have to support them.’

From the perspective of illegal migrants, the social environment and interaction with local citizens are generally assessed positively.

‘I can’t say anything bad about the locals. In the street, no one treats you poorly as a citizen. There is considerable assistance from the local government for immigrants. Free dining halls are available, and they distribute clothing to some extent. Undocumented migrants receive free medical assistance. Those with documents get discounts.’

4.6. The Process of Forming Informal Networks Abroad

One interesting and significant part of the structure of informal social networks is the online social networks created by migrants living abroad. Small groups of migrants who have experience living in Italy and are better adapted and integrated into society create and manage migrant internet pages. There is a considerable number of migrant online social networks, and they have a large number of users. For instance, one popular "Italian group" is substantial both quantitatively and thematically. According to the page's administration, the number of group members has reached 10,000.

'Dear members of our group! Congratulations! Today, our group has welcomed its 10,000th member. This is an emigrant lady from Milan. I hope she joins our big, loving, and warm family with great love and enthusiasm. It has only been half a year since our group was established. We couldn't have imagined that we would grow this much and accomplish so many things in such a short time.'

The group's declared goal is:

'Through joint efforts, by helping and supporting each other, we have done good. It is worth noting that we have come to know each other and helped each other find friends and relatives who had been lost and scattered for years. Whether we are struggling or enjoying ourselves, through this group, we share our joys and our pains.'

One Facebook page states that there was no strong local emigration page, which is why the group of emigrants decided to create a Facebook page for Georgian emigrants in Italy that would assist them in their local adaptation—providing information, legal and health consultations, literary statuses, discussing controversial topics, etc. The internet page's mission is to establish close contacts and constructive cooperation with the Embassy and Consulate of Georgia in Italy. The desire to cooperate was expressed by individuals and organizations involved in legal, consulting, and other types of activities, both Georgians and Italians. It is also noteworthy that the page is always open to other nationalities of migrants in Italy and even Italians themselves, which is why information is often posted in Italian as well.

The page prioritizes a business, creative, and humorous style. The internet page's administration criticizes other emigration pages that use terms such as "woe is me," prayers, and mediocre authorial poetry, stating that the social network page is a means of information, not a cemetery, church, or an anthology of mediocrity.

Posts are frequently shared in the internet social network that resemble lessons for learning the Italian language, aimed at improving grammatical and lexical competence. Additionally, posts reflecting nostalgic moods and cultural-educational content of a poetic, lyrical nature are also presented (see Appendix 1: Nostalgia in Posters).

Despite the presentation of these themes, one of the leading and pressing issues remains the assistance for job seekers. Both illegal and legal migrants share their experiences, offer advice, and provide specific assistance in finding jobs. It is difficult to say how effective this method of job searching is, but it is a fact that it does not require additional expenses or efforts. The exchange and circulation of information are important in terms of recognizing opportunities and expanding space, allowing us to observe the power of "weak ties" in practice.

'I'm undocumented, I know the language moderately, and I've been here for a year. I've also learned how to cook Italian. I'm in Tuscany, specifically in Pisa; if you can help me find a job.'

'Greetings, dear migrants. I need your help. I'm in Rome. I'm unemployed; I speak well, but I'm without a residence permit. I have four years of experience. If anyone can help me, please contact me; I would be grateful.'

'Dear emigrants, I'm looking for a job; I'm unemployed. If you have any job openings, please let me know; I'm all alone. Thank you in advance; God bless you.'

'This girl needs a job; her mother is unwell, and maybe we can help her find work, whatever it may be.'

Informal networks and "weak ties" are formed and established not only through interpersonal relationships in internet social networks but also through face-to-face interactions. Illegal Georgians mainly gather on days off (which are quite rare).

'We gather on our days off, talk together, and in the evening, we hurry back home, as if we are running back to our families. This way, we return to our jobs, tear-stained and frozen. The grace of being Georgian has not left us; we are children of one sky, and as best we can, we share our spiritual struggles and grief with each other. If anyone receives something from Georgia, we share it among ourselves.'

5. Working Conditions

5.1 Description of Working Conditions: Migrants' Experience

Working conditions are harsh for both genders. There is a pronounced segregation in labor. The majority of undocumented migrants are women, mainly aged between 30 and 50. It is more difficult for men to find jobs in Italy compared to women. The employment sectors for men are primarily construction and agriculture (even in construction, skilled labor is demanded). There are instances where men are hired for caregiver positions. The defining factor for employers is the male gender of the caregiver, which makes them feel less discomfort when interacting with a male assistant.

The issue of wage compensation is somewhat "regulated" and depends on the employer's goodwill, discretion, and financial capabilities.

'For example, there are migrants who are paid more for elderly care than for babysitting, and vice versa. For instance, my friend has been caring for twins since infancy, and her current salary is 800 euros. A Georgian in elderly care can earn a similar salary, but more often, similar services are compensated with 700 euros or less per month.'

'Salaries were approximately as follows: for an elderly person who was not bedridden, 500-800 euros per month were paid for care; for a bedridden elderly person, 700-800 euros; and for a babysitter, they usually paid 600 euros or more per month. It depends on the family's financial situation; some pay well and do not require excessive burdens.'

In the process of hiring assistants or caregivers, there are fewer restrictions from employers regarding age and medical education, even though undocumented migrants often lack even basic skills or training as nurses or caregivers. At the same time, they are responsible for taking care of severely ill patients.

No formal employment contracts are established with undocumented migrants. Job descriptions and functions are agreed upon verbally. It is common for employees' rights to be violated, and employers assign significantly more work than what was established during initial verbal agreements. The expansion or addition of responsibilities does not come with an increase in compensation, which naturally leads to dissatisfaction. However, the desperate situation of the undocumented migrant allows the employer to act dishonestly.

'Some are hired for one job but end up doing many others. For example, a woman is hired to care for an elderly person, and then a huge house needs to be cleaned, or children need to be cared for.'

'I care for an 87-year-old bedridden elderly person, and my salary is 650 euros a month. Besides caring for the elderly, my duties include cleaning the house and preparing meals. It's just the elderly person and me at home. Caring for a bedridden elderly person is much easier than for someone who can move. Once a week, his child comes to visit and leaves 60 euros for food, which I have to manage from Friday to Friday.'

Trafficking refers to the deception, violence, intimidation, and brutality experienced by undocumented migrants and is used for their forced adaptation to local conditions.

The most common promise used by Georgian traffickers to deceive young women is the offer of working abroad as babysitters. Such jobs are offered by firms to clients in the United States and Germany. A simple piece of information that disproves this promise is that there is no labor agreement between the United States and Georgia. At the same time, Germany does have a program for the legal employment of babysitters, and undocumented migration is not necessary at all.

As for men, the conditions offered are closer to reality, with the deception mainly lying in promised salaries being lower and working hours being longer. Most surveyed men expected to find work in construction abroad. Indeed, this was the case, but the working conditions turned out to be more challenging than they had imagined. Most trafficking victims had no right to receive their full salary.

5.2 Information Circulation in Informal Networks

In addition to the circulation of information regarding employment issues in informal social networks, data is also exchanged regarding legal documents and the process of legalization. The level of awareness among undocumented migrants concerning the arrangement of documents and legalization procedures is quite low. Informal social networks circulate information about non-legal pathways for the legalization process. The lack of information and the feeling of being in a deadlock increase the likelihood of resorting to illegal pathways for legalization.

Equally problematic is the misinterpretation of information regarding undocumented migrants by the Italian government. There are instances where the government's statements are distorted, leading to the spread of inaccurate information, which creates false hopes among groups of undocumented migrants and later becomes a source of serious frustration. This process followed the Italian government's statement regarding the 'Decreto - flusi - 2017', which was misinterpreted by undocumented migrants,

resulting in the dissemination of false information through social media. This decree only concerned seasonally employed undocumented migrants, as published annually by the Italian government. Subsequently, through social networks, clarification of this misinformation occurred.

'I want to address the topic of 'Decreto - flusi - 2017', which has caused unrest among undocumented migrants who have only been in Italy for two days. We have all gone through this path and know how much psychological stress it caused each of us when such rumors circulated. Unfortunately, I must tell you that this 'Decreto - flusi - 2017' does not concern you. I know these words are unpleasant for you to hear, but the group administration has decided to make an appropriate statement to relieve your 'false' anxiety and tension.'

'Indeed, in the last few years, the government has issued minor decrees. Similarly, it was done last year; those who read it will remember that Georgia was not mentioned. This 'flusi' issue is not new; discussions about the 'flusi decree' have been ongoing since 2016 when Matteo Renzi was in charge. The year 2017 has just begun, and the government has changed. Let's wait and see how the new government will start managing the country and what it will implement regarding migrants.'

The document arrangement process is a latent topic, and people do not want to discuss it openly. Questions arise, but there are no answers, or the response is: "Please don't elaborate on this topic."

'Some people are obtaining 6-month refugee documents with the help of lawyers. Does anyone know what this is?'

'I'm interested; I understand that this information indicates that they are doing something temporary with a lawyer. But after the expiration of this document, won't they deport you? I heard that you can only postpone it three times, and they might refuse you, so I don't want to ask based on assumption. Please, if anyone knows personally from a lawyer about this matter, I am already in a state of nervous euphoria; I just arrived... Please...'

In the process of legalizing undocumented migration documents, it seems that in some cases, employers are also involved, whom undocumented migrants refer to as "patrons." The patron-client relationship is a common pattern in the relationship between undocumented migrants and employers.

'My patron was here two weeks ago just to find out if he could arrange documents for me; there is no chance at all unless the government changes something and issues documents for our benefit.'

6. Informal Networks, Diasporas, and Communities

Diaspora organizations are primarily associations created on public grounds, aimed at preserving the Georgian language and culture among Georgians living outside of Georgia. Some well-established organizations abroad assist local communities by providing scholarships for Georgian students or other forms of support, both in the host countries and in Georgia. During crises (such as the 2008 Russia-

Georgia war and the 2015 Tbilisi flood), many diaspora associations provided assistance to those affected with food and/or financial support.

The term "diaspora," as used by the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Diaspora Affairs, encompasses all groups of Georgian migrants living abroad, including members of the historical diaspora, short-term emigrants, long-term emigrants, expatriates, and those Georgians who have already become citizens of the host country.

The formation and effectiveness of diasporas somewhat indicate in which countries Georgian emigrants are more self-organized, which diaspora communities are more active, and which collaborate with various institutions and the government in Georgia.

When analyzing the functioning of the diaspora, it is important to focus on the following issues: whether migrants are aware of diaspora organizations, what types of activities the diasporas engage in, how they interact with migrants, and whether there is any type of support from them.

Migrants affiliated with diaspora organizations receive interesting and useful information, and they have the opportunity to connect with people of interest to them.

There are virtually no completely reliable and accurate statistical data regarding migration processes in any field. The statistical indicators of the Georgian diaspora and diaspora organizations are also characterized by limited validity. According to data from the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Diaspora Affairs, there are over 300 Georgian diaspora organizations outside the country. It is noteworthy that the data largely reflects reality and includes only those active diaspora organizations that have regular connections with the state apparatus regarding diaspora affairs. The inaccuracy of the data is also influenced by the fact that the list does not include many countries where the migration flow from Georgia is high, and consequently, where the diasporas are represented. For example, we will focus on Italy, as Italy is the focal point of our research. Numerous diaspora organizations operate in Italy, as evidenced by the data we have collected.

The number of diaspora organizations (which is likely incomplete) may indicate the fragmentation of the Georgian communities living in these countries. For instance, in Bari, which is not notable for its size but stands out for the number of Georgian emigrants, about two organizations of a similar profile have been established. Respondents are somewhat informed about the existence of diaspora organizations in Italy. According to them, there are diasporas in Milan and other cities besides Milan, such as Reggio Emilia and Florence, where many Georgians reside. Various types of organizations exist, such as Georgian folklore groups. Several Georgian migrants, for example, enrol their emigrant children in circles that teach Georgian dances in Reggio Emilia. However, some parents expressed dissatisfaction and withdrew their children from these circles due to high fees.

Additionally, conflicts have arisen among Georgians. According to one respondent, the reasons for the conflicts are as follows:

‘Gossip, rumors, etc. In my opinion, this is a model of a small Georgia; just as there are problems among Georgians within Georgia, the same applies here, but everything is more intensified; probably because emigrants change under different conditions outside the borders. In my opinion, both friendship and enmity, as well as distrust, are more pronounced.’

Some Georgian migrants are dissatisfied with the activities of the communities, while others discuss the problems that often prevent these communities from providing them with assistance. According to respondents, some communities attempt to “extort” money from emigrants rather than helping them.

‘Under the guise of the community's name, they engage in many bad deeds using various methods. Among them is the production of fake documents. For transporting deceased Georgians, we have to collect money street by street. Even in this matter, no one comes to our aid. Last year, I organized a Georgian evening; we held rehearsals for a dance concert on the beach because one of the communities did not provide us with a hall. Our best shelter is the church.’

Some communities and diasporas have provided considerable assistance:

‘The community in Kalamata works very well. They have helped many needy emigrants. They also helped me, including financially. They supported me in participating in exhibitions in Corinth along with other Georgian artists. Unfortunately, I cannot comment on the work of other organizations.’

The daily activities of the communities and diaspora organizations, as described by one of the leaders, are as follows:

‘Responding to migrants' phone calls, communicating with compatriots scattered all over Italy. Who needs help filling out documents, who needs guidance, translating a sick person's paper, birth certificate, or prescription; who needs someone to accompany them to school or court, who needs moral and spiritual support, someone to listen for hours, not to withhold empathy and solidarity, to comfort and assist.’

Leaders of diaspora organizations highlight the meager donations and cite the lack of a continuous funding source as a hindrance to the functioning of diaspora organizations.

‘More finances are needed to meet the needs of emigrants. The so-called new emigrants often require support and guidance. These communities should do this. I would like the state to take care of the funding and establishment of such organizations.’

According to the information from the State Minister of Georgia on Diaspora Affairs, diasporas and communities are mainly self-funded.

The typical scheme for sourcing financial resources is as follows:

‘What we do is solely at our own expense and through the meager donations from the community. The primary problem is precisely the lack of funds, which prevents us from renting a permanent facility to establish a Sunday school for emigrant children and to open free Italian language courses. However, we

strive to involve migrants as much as possible in our activities (respondent, head of one of the communities).

According to research data, it is not easy to determine the volume of investments made by Georgian diaspora groups in Georgia. Temporary migrants who manage to save are investing in small retail businesses or in service sectors such as beauty salons. Such micro and small businesses can become a significant source of income for the families of emigrants or returnees; however, most emigrants do not have the capacity to accumulate substantial financial capital, and their businesses rarely transform into large-scale enterprises of national significance.

According to a study prepared by the International School of Economics (ISET) at Tbilisi State University, diaspora investment not only represents a successful business example but also serves as a model for changing the rules of play in the local food market. There are several well-known cases of investment in agriculture and the food sector by the diaspora. The Georgian-Turkish company “Geolive,” established in 2009, has built olive plantations in four regions of Georgia and plans to become a key supplier of olives both in Georgia and on the international market. Similarly, the poultry company “Biu-Biu” and its subsidiary company “Pomono” were established by representatives of the Georgian-Russian diaspora between 2011 and 2013.

There are likely more cases of successful diaspora investments, but the relevant state agencies have yet to develop a mechanism for monitoring and recording these.

Diaspora organizations communicate with one another; however, the diaspora network is underdeveloped. Currently, a project is being implemented by the State Minister of Georgia for Diaspora Affairs with the support of the International Organization for Migration (the project is still in test mode). The goal of creating a new online space—Tanamemamule.ge—is to minimize the distance between compatriots living in Georgia and those living abroad. The network will also serve as an effective connector between the state and its emigrants.

7. Informal Networks and Georgian Religious Institutions Abroad

According to the Georgian Orthodox Church, thousands of citizens who have left Georgia have become estranged from the church and national culture. In response to these processes, a session of the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church was held on October 17, 2002, during which the decision was made to review the boundaries of the dioceses.

At the session of the Holy Synod of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia on October 17, 2002, His Holiness and Beatitude Ilia II, the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, initiated the necessity of establishing a diocese in Western Europe. The Patriarch emphasized that “many members of the Georgian church have moved to European countries over the last ten years. They regularly appeal to us with requests to establish a diocese of the Georgian Church in Europe and activate churches in areas populated by Georgians.” The creation of dioceses (exarchates) of the Georgian Apostolic Church abroad was decided.

Initially, the Diocese of Western Europe was established, which was later divided into several dioceses. By the decree of the Holy Synod of the Georgian Church on May 3, 2009, parishes in America and Canada were established. Subsequently, two dioceses were formed based on this. Currently, seven dioceses operate outside of Georgia, each with its parishes and a leader. The title of the bishop of the newly created diocese is the Bishop of Western Europe of the Georgian Patriarchate.

The center of the diocese is located in Brussels (Belgium), while the temporary residence of the bishop is in Regensburg (Germany). By the decree of the Holy Synod of the Georgian Patriarchate, the ruling bishop of the Diocese of Western Europe is Metropolitan Abraham Garmelia of Chiatura.

This decision united the congregation of the Georgian Orthodox Church, temporarily or permanently residing abroad, and the foreign citizens living in those countries who identify themselves with the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The focus of our research is Italy. There are numerous Georgian Orthodox churches in various cities in Italy, which operate under the jurisdiction of the Georgian Patriarchate. Their total number reaches 22 (see Appendix 2).

The Diocese of Western Europe of the Georgian Patriarchate encompasses the countries of Western Europe, including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland.

In addition to the presence of Georgian Orthodox churches in Italy, diplomatic relations between Georgia and the Vatican have entered an active phase since the 1990s. Significant for the activation and deepening of relations between the two states were the official visits of Pope John Paul II in 1999 and Pope Francis from September 30 to October 2, 2016. These two visits of historical significance clearly confirmed the Vatican's support for Georgia. Cooperation is ongoing successfully in the fields of education, science, and charity. The Holy See pays great attention to the preservation and restoration of Georgian antiquities.

Georgians in Northern Italy primarily gather in Milan, while the Georgian community in Central Italy congregates either in the Russian churches of Perugia, Florence, or even in the Eternal City, where a Georgian priest conducts occasional services. There is also a Georgian priest in Bari, where many Georgians gather.

Interesting questions for our research include the role of the church in the lives of Georgian migrants - what kind of relationship exists between clergy and migrants? What specific assistance do migrants receive from church officials, and what particular cases exist?

According to Archimandrite Andria Latsabidze, the head of the St. Nino Church of the Georgian Patriarchate in Florence, the presence of churches abroad is significant for migrant Georgians:

‘Our church is the only place for Georgians living in the Tuscany region to meet and share their love, pain, and sorrow. These parish churches serve as a family and a center of spirituality for locals. We

gather to worship God and to express our love for one another. The church helps us preserve our faith and love for our homeland. It doesn't allow us to relax.'

According to the cleric, it is a misconception that the European lifestyle negatively influences people who have moved abroad and provokes sin. Some individuals live out of love for their families, love for their Georgian identity, faith, and integrity. Most of them are highly educated, and these people are greatly needed in Georgia. Many are mothers who are here for the welfare of their families and children. They work honestly, often having neither the time nor the means for a European-style lifestyle.

The congregation of the Georgian Orthodox churches abroad is constantly growing.

'For me, as a priest, it is a joy to see a large congregation. On one hand, it reflects a strong desire to draw closer to God, but if we think about it, the increase in congregation numbers is at the expense of people leaving Georgia. The congregation is indeed constantly growing, and it is preferable for the congregation to flourish in Georgian churches rather than abroad. We, the fathers working abroad, do everything with God's help to assist Georgians who are far from their homeland in attaining spiritual peace.'

Some respondents believe that illegal migrants dominate the congregations of Orthodox churches abroad, for whom the church is one of the important institutions of support. At the same time, it is noteworthy that members of the congregation also stand out for their mutual assistance.

'Georgian emigrants are closely connected with the church. For many undocumented immigrants, it is their last hope, and not just for them, as clergy and congregation members truly help Georgian emigrants. They have numerous contacts. The assistance is given selflessly, which greatly attracts distressed and financially troubled individuals. I know many such examples (specifically in the cities of Perugia and Florence).'

Respondents recall several specific examples of the church's support. To provide a clearer picture of the situation, these examples give significant information:

'Fathers mostly help with the employment of caregivers for the elderly, not only for women. I was surprised to learn that a priest assisted two desperate illegal Georgian men in finding a caregiver position. One of the boys told me that he had been arrested twice for theft, and after that, he turned to the church. The priest 'worked with him psychologically,' found a caregiver job through the congregation, and he has supposedly been working in the same family for two years now.'

This case is also significant in that the church became a support for an undocumented migrant with problems with law enforcement. The authority of the priest and connections with congregation members activate the effectiveness of the informal network.

'Fathers helped a Georgian couple, who were new arrivals and unemployed, and the wife became pregnant. At the same time, they were undocumented. They turned to the church, and the congregation

asked for help and advice from an Italian friend of mine, who tries to support Georgians. I know he was concerned about the situation. However, they were eventually assisted.'

The church not only provides support to migrants, mainly undocumented ones, in terms of improving their material situation, but also helps them with adaptation.

'In my opinion, immigrants gathered around the church mainly struggle to accept and integrate into a new culture, so they try to make friends with other Georgians. There are also Georgians with double standards who want to be seen as good people, and showing up at church is considered good manners, so as not to lose their identity, etc.'

'There is a church named after St. Panteleimon near my house. Every week, we gather there. Although I am currently in a relatively better financial situation, I feel lost and helpless, like a forsaken child. Many places remind me of Georgia. You cannot imagine the regret, longing, and pain that you experience during such times... I even remember my country by its scent.'

The mentioned facts demonstrate that the Georgian Orthodox Church abroad has a strong influence and plays a significant role in the lives of Georgian migrants. However, this process has a downside as well; the Patriarch of Georgia is skeptical about the increase in migration and calls on migrants to return home, which evokes strong reactions from them.

During one of his last Sunday sermons in 2015, His Holiness Ilia II, the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, referred to the emigration of women from Georgia for work as a vicious practice and urged Georgian mothers to return home. According to the Patriarch, no one should be unemployed in Georgia, and if one job does not work out, they should try another, a third, or even a tenth—in short, they should do everything to avoid leaving their families.

Upset women protested in front of the Patriarchate of Georgia, responding to the Patriarch's sermon with the following banners: “Women work, and priests preach from their SUVs”; “More than 29 million from the Patriarchate's budget is a vice”; “Migrant women are heroic women”; “My mother is a migrant, the Patriarch is a misogynist”; “Clergy on SUVs—this is a vice.”

Experts believe that similar statements regarding migrant women do not change the real situation, as the main value in society is the preservation of family and children. Furthermore, Georgia is not an exception; today, there is a global trend where people move to more developed countries for work because they can earn higher incomes and better provide for their families back home.

The Patriarch has put forward a new initiative to unite Georgians abroad, proposing that an “All-Georgian Congress” be held annually. In a subsequent sermon, the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia discussed the idea of holding this congress and expressed a desire to see a census of Georgians living abroad. The initiative was approved by the head of the Georgian government. According to the Patriarch, if the project is realized, the congress should be held in October during the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross.

‘What should we do so that our compatriots, our Georgians, do not lose their language, faith, or love for their homeland... so that they do not lose their identity? If the Georgian spirit is lost in them, these people are lost. What should we do to connect Georgians living abroad with their homeland? We wish to invite all Georgians to the congress in Georgia on October 14, the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross, and remind our blood and flesh that their ancestors are here and they should not lose their connection with their homeland. What should we do so that they do not forget the Georgian language? We believe that a Georgian person has such a strong gene that they will not be lost, but they need the help of their homeland, our reminders’ (Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II).

Migrants express interest in this initiative and hope that it will not remain merely an idea or a politically charged statement, and that the Patriarchate will provide real assistance to migrants:

‘When an immigrant arrives here, they first go to the Catholic Church. The church helps with clothing, food, and jobs. I have not seen a fat priest driving an SUV here. Everything is different here. I would happily return to Georgia, but here the police, hospitals, shops, transportation... everything is tailored to the interests of citizens. There, I can’t even find a basic job. I hope the situation in our country will change in the future, and I also hope that the Patriarch’s initiative will not remain just an idea but will lead to real steps toward improving the situation and recording the status of migrants.’

Some migrants express doubts that this initiative can be realized. The Patriarchate will find it challenging to mobilize migrants; a significant portion of Georgians abroad are undocumented; even if that weren’t the case, coming here poses certain problems, such as taking leave, finding transportation money, etc.

It was also suggested that the Patriarchate’s initiative gives the impression that they want to increase the number of congregation members, as it would be a good way to solve their financial problems by receiving more donations for the church.

8. Summary

The findings of this study clearly illustrate the pivotal role that informal social networks play not only in facilitating the processes of migration and employment but also in shaping the long-term adaptive strategies of undocumented Georgian migrants. These networks function as parallel systems of governance that compensate for the absence of formal institutional support, thereby creating alternative structures for survival, integration, and resource distribution. The research systematically addressed each of the initial research questions through rigorous qualitative analysis, and all hypotheses proposed at the outset were empirically substantiated.

In particular, the study identifies three central factors contributing to the resilience of undocumented Georgian migrants living in Italy:

- **Integration into Informal Networks:** Georgian migrants are deeply embedded in informal social networks, which provide crucial informational, emotional, and material support. These networks act as critical mechanisms for initial settlement, job-seeking, and long-term adaptation.

- **The Role of Religious Institutions:** The presence and active engagement of Georgian religious institutions abroad significantly enhance migrants' sense of community and moral support. These institutions often serve as key mediators between migrants and host societies, reinforcing social cohesion and psychological resilience.
- **Negative Expectations Regarding Return:** A pervasive sense of hopelessness and skepticism about reintegration into Georgian society discourages return migration. Migrants often perceive limited opportunities and social disillusionment in their country of origin, reinforcing their decision to remain abroad despite precarious legal status.

Additionally, each research question was explicitly addressed through participant narratives:

- The study revealed the types of information that circulate within informal networks, primarily related to employment, legalization procedures, and survival strategies.
- It explored how migrants integrate into these networks and how such integration enhances their capacity to adapt to adverse conditions.
- Legal and employment-related challenges were mapped and shown to be mitigated through network-based solutions and informal guidance.

The research hypotheses were all supported:

- Informal networks were confirmed as essential adaptive resources.
- Georgian religious institutions were shown to function as stabilizing forces and alternative support systems.
- Migrants' reluctance to return to Georgia, rooted in structural pessimism and socio-economic insecurity, emerged as a consistent and significant theme.

Taken together, these findings underscore the necessity of recognizing informal networks as influential actors in migration governance. Any comprehensive strategy for migrant support, integration, or return must take into account the pre-existing social infrastructures that migrants have constructed in host countries.

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