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Chinese and Indian immigrants in Georgia: what attracts them to the country and what impact do they have on Georgian society?

Abstract

Since 1991, when Georgia became independent, the country has experienced substantial emigration. While Georgian citizens moved abroad, citizens of other countries moved to Georgia, taking advantage of a relatively liberal migration regime. Increasingly, Tbilisi became the host for citizens of China, India and Turkey as well as from several African countries. Among these immigrants, only some, mainly youths from India, came to Georgia to study. The rest came mainly to work as labour migrants. Traditionally, immigrants from Turkey have been the dominant group. It has been fairly easy for people to move from Turkey which is located close to Georgia. Turkish businessmen became well-integrated into Georgia's commercial life, owning many businesses and much real estate. Georgians have been well accustomed to dine in Turkish restaurants, stay in Turkish hotels and shop in Turkish shops. Increasingly, however, the immigration debate has been focused on relatively new arrivals from China and India. The fear of Chinese expansion has fed into societal debates on migration. The debate in Georgia has also focused on increasing numbers of immigrants from India and their subsequent ownership of agricultural resources. This policy brief assesses the evidence of current immigration debates in Georgia especially as they apply to immigrants from China and India.

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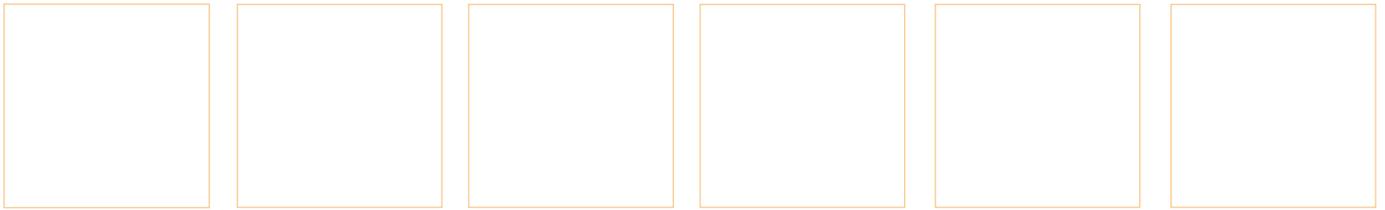
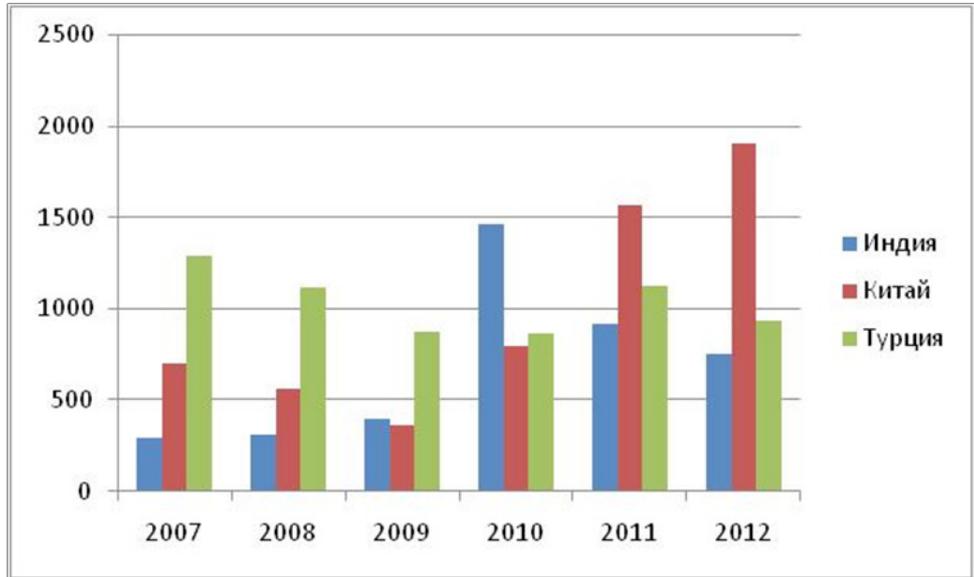


Figure 1. Residence permits issued in Georgia in 2007-2012 to citizens of India, China and Turkey increased



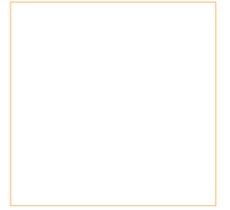
Source: Author's calculations based on data from the State Services Development Agency.

Georgian liberal migration policy increases encourages immigration of Chinese and Indian citizens

Since 2007, the number of citizens from China and India who have been granted residency rights has increased (see Figure 1). While the number of Indian citizens who received residency peaked in 2007, the number of Chinese immigrants with such status has been steadily going up. Most immigrants (97-98%), especially those from China, are economic migrants.

Intensification of migration processes are supported by a very liberal migration policy. Though, according to Georgian legislation, citizens of more than 80 states are not required to have a visa for entering and staying in Georgia, neither China nor India are among these countries. However, there are provisions in the Georgian legislation which, under certain circumstances, indirectly allow Chinese and Indian citizens to enjoy visa-free visits to Georgia. In

particular, according to the law on the Legal Status of Aliens and Stateless Persons, foreign nationals who permanently reside in countries citizens of which, in accordance with the same law, do not need visas, are also not required to have a visa for entering and staying in Georgia. Furthermore, according to the Decree of the President of Georgia of 28 June 2006, No 399, foreign citizens, who have temporary residence documents and reside on the territory of the State of Kuwait, State of Qatar, Kingdom of Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates do not need a visa to enter and stay on the territory of Georgia for up to 360 days. Besides, foreign nationals who have a multiple entry US, EU or Schengen member states visas, which have validity for one year or more and had been used once at least, may enter or stay on the territory of Georgia without a visa for up to 90 days, within the validity term of the visa.



Even in the case when Chinese and Indian citizens may not take advantage from provisions of the visa-free regime, they can enjoy a very liberal visa regime. They do need to apply for a Georgian visa in the diplomatic and consular representations of Georgia. A visa/three-month entry permit may be issued at the border crossing points by the authorised body of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia.

For the purposes of entry into Georgia an alien should generally obtain an ordinary or study visa. According to the Law on Legal Status of Aliens and Stateless Persons, ordinary visas shall be issued to those foreigners who travel to Georgia on the invitation of legal and physical persons or with the purpose of tourism, medical treatment, visiting relatives or for another purpose. This description underlines the universal character of ordinary visa.

Ordinary visas allow entry to and stay in Georgia for a long period of time. Namely, they are issued a) with a validity of 360 days – with the right of multiple entry to Georgia; b) with a validity of 90 days - with the right of multiple or single entry to Georgia.

Here it should be also noted that the Georgian legislation does not prohibit a change of status. Therefore, it is allowed to obtain a visa for one purpose and after entry into the country apply for a residence permit on the grounds of another purpose.

What rights do Chinese and Indian immigrants have in Georgia?

The Civil Code of Georgia does not limit the ability of foreign citizens to buy or own movable and immovable property in Georgia. The provision of the Law on the Ownership of Agricultural Land which restricted the right of foreign citizens to own agricultural land has recently been declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Georgia. However, as a consequence of concerns felt by the

majority of Georgian society (as further explored in the sections below), upon enactment of amendments of 28 June 2013 to the Law on the Ownership of Agricultural Land, the sale of agricultural land to foreign citizens and legal entities was suspended until 31 December 2014. This moratorium does not apply to plots of land already owned by foreign citizens.

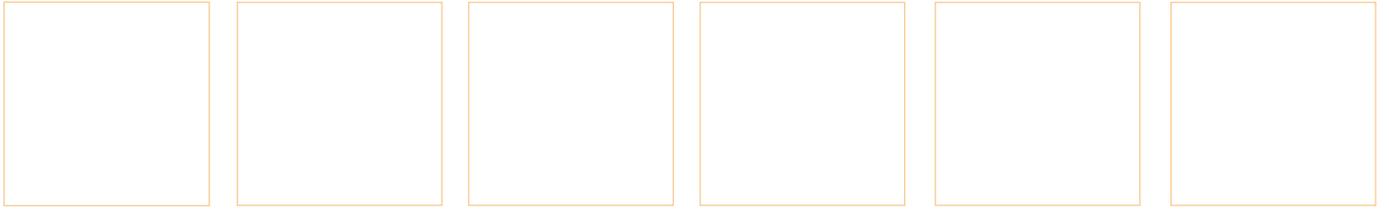
As to study possibilities in Georgia, according to the Law on Legal Status of Aliens and Stateless Persons, aliens residing in Georgia shall have the same rights to education as those of Georgian nationals in accordance with the rules established by Georgian legislation. According to the Law on Higher Education, foreign citizens may receive state financing for study at the MA level at Georgian universities within the 2% of annual funding for state study grants provided for masters' programs. As such funding is very limited, the great majority of foreign citizens finance their study in Georgia themselves.

Chinese immigrants in Georgia

According to the 2012 study¹ by the European Centre for Minority Issues, there are about 1,000 Chinese immigrants in Georgia. They comprise mainly five groups: high-skilled/specialists, entrepreneurs, shop owners, labour migrants and others who work for restaurant/catering businesses.

The first wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in the early 1990s and made investments into restaurant businesses. Such investments were made mostly by private individuals and immigrants in those times mainly worked in small businesses, pursuing local trade. In the 2000s, immigration continued to increase from China, further expanding small and medium enterprises. Chinese people began to

1 Jiayi Zhou, (2012): *Chinese in Georgia*, ECMI working paper N54. Available at: http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx_ifpubdb/Working_Paper_54_en_corrected.pdf (accessed 30/12/13).



immigrate in 2003, but their total numbers were still limited to around 100 people. Albeit, those whose businesses were successful began moving other family members from China to Georgia. By the end of 2007, the number of Chinese increased to 700 people.

While the economic crisis of 2008 slowed down and even decreased immigration from China, number of immigrants began to recover in 2010. In fact, the post-2010 period can be characterised as the next wave of Chinese immigration to Georgia. Increased rates of migration have been also accompanied by a substantial increase in the volume of trade. The Chinese Government's "Going Out" policy which encouraged Chinese investments abroad left its mark in Georgia. In fact, between 2000 and 2010, the volume of trade has increased a hundred-fold. Many observers have primarily focused on Chinese investments in Africa, but the case of Georgia also demonstrates the growing impact of China in the South Caucasus. The number of companies and immigrants from China in Georgia has significantly increased in 2010. New projects and investments from China in construction, infrastructure and several other sectors of the Georgian economy has further brought Chinese migrants who include entrepreneurs, specialists, construction workers and private sector employees. In 2011, China became Georgia's fourth major trading partner (the first three trading partners are Turkey, Azerbaijan and Ukraine).

Indian immigrants in Georgia

Unlike Chinese immigrants who primarily come to Georgia as labour migrants, immigrants from India also come to Georgia to study. In 2012, over half the immigrants from India (54%) came to Georgia as students (primarily to pursue medical degrees). The rest of the Indian citizens are in Georgia mainly

for work, particularly in the agricultural sector. Since 2010, the proportion of economic migrants has increased by 10% (from 36% in 2010 to 46% in 2012). Georgia has been especially attractive for Punjabi farmers who are able to buy land in Georgia at much lower prices than in their native India. For instance, for the amount needed to buy one hectare of land in Punjab, Indian farmers can purchase the equivalent of 200 hectares in Georgia.

Due to the increasing presence of Indian farmers in Georgia, there are more Indian labour migrants who open businesses in Georgia catering for other Indians. India restaurants, hotels and shops help Indian farmers create their own ethnic communities. The response from Georgian society has been one of caution and growing concern. For instance, publications with titles such 'Georgian farmers are confronted with the problem of an invasion of Indians'; 'Attracted by low prices, Thousands of Punjabi farmers bought land in remote parts of Georgia, which irritates locals'; 'Georgians are not happy that Punjabi farmers are attracted by new and cheap land in Georgia'. Many Georgians voice their perception of Indians as overwhelming Georgia, buying up its lands.

Concluding remarks

While Turkish citizens continue to be one of the dominant groups of immigrants in Georgia, immigrants from India and China are likely to continue influencing Georgia's society and migration debates. The number of immigrants from China and India seeking permission to stay in Georgia has already outstripped the corresponding figure for Turkish citizens. Migration flows from India are mainly composed of students and labour migrants. The latter are beginning to create some social tensions. As many Punjabi farmers buy land in Georgia, locals begin voicing concerns. Immigrants from China



mainly arrive as economic migrants. Increasing migration from China is accompanied by an increase in trade and investment. A further increase in the numbers of immigrants from China in Georgia is likely to continue, further reinforced by the country's liberal migration laws.



Migration Policy Centre

The Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute, Florence, conducts advanced research on global migration to serve migration governance needs at European level, from developing, implementing and monitoring migration-related policies to assessing their impact on the wider economy and society. The Migration Policy Centre is co-financed by the European Union.

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