

Georgian Exodus

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New figures suggest Georgia is losing some of its best people in a massive migration crisis.

Georgia's population has shrunk by one-fifth - a million people - in the 13 years since independence, according to census figures just released.

The much-delayed census results highlight for the first time the full extent of the country's migration crisis. The figures were released on May 6, more than a year after the census was held.

They show that Georgia now has a population of 4.4 million. The last census in Soviet Georgia in 1989 recorded a population of five and a half million people.

Government and independent experts agree that the main reason for the disastrous figures is a mass exodus of people, mainly of working age.

"The country continues to be in a state of crisis, both politically and economically, and it is no big surprise that a huge number of its citizens are trying to find a new homeland for themselves where they can be sure of a stable and secure existence," said Tamaz Gugushvili of Georgia's ministry for refugees and resettlement.

Statistical and anecdotal evidence suggests that the country is losing its most valuable people - professionals, people with a higher education, and men and women aged between 20 and 50 who could be having children. As a result, the birth rate in Georgia has halved since 1992, and a disproportion has grown up between the sexes, with women making up 52.8 per cent of the population and men 47.2 per cent.

It is hard to get a fully reliable figure for Georgia's population. The state statistical department points out that it was only able to do a proper survey in territory that is currently under the political control of the Georgian government. Officials did estimate population numbers for the unrecognised republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which broke away from Georgia in the 1990s, but only through "alternative sources of information."

Sociologists point out that most migrants leave the country looking for work and many of them would like to return at some point.

This phenomenon may actually be concealing the true scale of the problem, warns Emil Adelkhanov, an expert with the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development.

"When the census was carried out, many people hid the fact that their relatives had left Georgia because they did not want to attract attention to their families, either from officials or from criminals," he said.

For many, what began as temporary emigration is becoming permanent. "I am happy that I am working in Canada," Mariam Razmadze, a professional ballerina and choreographer, told IWPR. She had come back to Tbilisi for a week to visit her family. "Of course you have to get used to being paid much less than the Canadians, but I think I'm very lucky compared with the people who stay in Georgia and have to beg for

money, which is what my colleagues at the Tbilisi opera basically have to do."

The first wave of emigrants to leave independent Georgia did so mainly between 1993 and 1995. They mainly came from the country's ethnic minorities and left for their "historical homelands," meaning Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, Greece, Israel and Germany.

The second big wave of emigration began in 1999, and this time those leaving were mainly Georgians. The experts suggest that these people had waited for 10 years for their lives to improve, but they had finally run out of patience.

Russia remains the main destination for migrants, with up to 750,000 Georgians believed to be living there now. It is a natural place for them to go - it is a country they know well, which has higher living standards, and a language they understand. However, many Georgians work in Russia either semi-legally or illegally for lower than average wages. Some are victims of illegal people trafficking.

A recent damning report on Georgia by the International Organization for Migration, entitled "Hardship Abroad or Hunger", concludes that, "This study has clearly demonstrated that irregular migration from Georgia is substantial and that trafficking in Georgian citizens is a serious problem."

The report suggests government corruption is fuelling much of the illegal migration.

"The government of Georgia has so far made only limited steps in trying to restrict irregular migration and suppress trafficking," the IOM report declares. "Some analysts claim that certain government officials have vested financial interests in the operation of tourism firms and employment mediators, which could serve as an explanation of why irregular migration can still operate with virtual impunity."

Arkady Akopov, now aged 45, came home to Tbilisi two years ago after living for almost nine years in Moscow with his wife and son. He has been driven back partly by the recently established visa regime with Russia, partly by a change in the economic climate.

"I was in the wholesale trade," he said. "We bought up goods and sent them to places in the Russian regions. But my chances of working and earning money began to dry up. The small businesses started to disappear and big business got stronger."

Another class of emigrants consists of young Georgian men, who go abroad to escape two years' military service in the country's miserable and underfed armed forces.

"Last year I sent my son to some distant relatives in Volgograd in Russia and paid a dealer for a false passport," one Tbilisi mother confided. "We changed his date of birth so he wasn't taken straight to an army unit from customs. And please don't mention my name - one day he will come back and we will have serious problems."

Migration official Tamaz Gugushvili is blunt. "Georgia is on the brink of a demographic catastrophe," he said. "The government prefers to give the most implausible arguments to explain the dramatic fall in the number of citizens, rather than admit to its own incompetence. And that's the reason that there was a 13-year gap since the last census."

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Location: Africa
Focus: Caucasus

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