GEORGIA’S DIASPORA POLICY AT THE CURRENT STAGE

Massive migration has been characteristic for the post-Soviet period in Georgia. In 1990s, it was mainly determined by economic devastation, ethnic conflicts and civil war. Drain of population from the country due to economic hardships and lack of jobs continued in the following period as well. At present, Georgia has a sizeable Diaspora in many countries of the world. Under the given circumstances, Georgian government is trying to develop the kind of policy towards Diaspora, which will preserve its relations with homeland, ensure country’s economic development through Diaspora and besides, ultimately will facilitate repatriation of migrants to homeland.

Key words: Georgia, Diaspora, Diaspora strategy, post-Soviet period

Growth of Georgian Diaspora in Post-Soviet Period

Georgia’s population in 1990 was 5,424,400. This was the highest figure in the Soviet period. According to 2014 census, population of Georgia decreased by 600 thousand compared to the data from 2002 census and as per January 1, 2015 the population size equaled to 3,729,500. According to the above statistics, Georgian population decreased by 14,7% in comparison with 2002 and over past 30 years, it has reduced by about 1,600 thousand.

According to unofficial statistics, the number of Georgian citizens living abroad equals to 1,607,744. Most of them live in Russia. Their number reaches 800,000; 285,915 (2009) out of them are the citizens of Russian Federation. The next country according to the size of our compatriots living there is Greece, with 250,000 people, out of whom 100,000 are ethnic Greeks, followed by Ukraine (150,000). Other countries with high number of Georgian citizens are: Turkey (100,000), the USA (80,000) Azerbaijan (35,000), Spain (30,000), Germany (25,000), Belgium (20,000), France (20,000), the Great Britain (15,000), Italy (12,000), Israel (10,000), Austria (10,000), Kazakhstan (7

2 Georgian Diaspora abroad – 05.05.2015. https://opendatablog.wordpress.com/2015/05/01/sazgyvargaret-mcxovrebi-qartuli-Diaspora/
3 Change of the size of the Georgian population over years – 02.11.2015. https://www.allnews.ge/sazogadoeba/150556
4 Official data on Diaspora are not accurate, since a considerable part of Georgian citizens are staying in foreign countries illegally, they are not registered in the Consulate. Besides, the intensiveness of their movement to different countries is very high.
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000), Cyprus (7 000), Belorussia (5 000), the Netherlands (5 000), etc.\(^5\)

The most organized Georgian Diasporas are in Russia, Turkey, Greece and the USA.

Most of the Diaspora organizations in Russia, Turkey and Greece are of cultural character. The least organized Diasporas are in Italy and Spain. In these countries there are mostly labor migrants that are less coordinated. Georgian emigration distinguished with the largest businessmen and big business potential is in Russia, Turkey and the USA.\(^6\)

Economic potential of Georgian Diaspora is very important for our country.\(^7\) Over the past years, money transfers of emigrants to Georgia have become an important source for the country’s economy (constituting about 6 percent of GDP), exceeding the investment rate. The research of Diaspora potential has shown that the volume of transfers is directly linked to the number of Georgian Diaspora representatives; however, practically almost no connection can be seen with the scale of investments from these countries. For instance, if we look through the statistics of transfers, it will appear that Russia, Greece and Italy are among top three contributors, as well as Spain, whereas investments from Greece, Italy and Spain in Georgia are extremely insignificant.\(^8\) Despite the fact that there is a varied approach to Georgian investment environment, the majority of Diaspora representatives express interest towards conducting business in Georgia.

The scale of Diaspora and its economic and political potential place Georgian government before the challenge of developing special policy for Diaspora.

Documents defining the state policy towards Diaspora

In post-Soviet period, the first document defining the state policy connected with migration in Georgia and in particular, Diasporas, was first developed in 1997. It was the document approved by President Eduard Shevardnadze – “The Concept of Georgian Migration Policy”. However, it was mainly of a declarative character and it did not contain any implementation mechanism such as action plan.

A significant step in terms of relationship with Diaspora, was the creation of the Office of the State Minister for Diaspora Issues under the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili on 8 February 2008. Its aim was to “deepen the relationships with the compatriots living outside the Georgian border, support the relations between Georgian government and Georgian Diaspora and their organizational activities”\(^9\).

Georgian law on “Diaspora Organizations and Compatriots Living Abroad” was adopted on 24 December 2011.

After “Georgian Dream” came to power, Georgian government approved the migration strategy and action plan for 2013–2015. Based on this experience, on 30 September 2015, “Migration strategy of Georgia for 2016–2020” developed by the government commission for migration issues was approved on the resolution of Georgian government.

On 5 November 2013, a new ordinance of the Ministry of Diaspora was approved.\(^10\) The Ministry pursued the following objectives: a) To

\(^{5}\) Georgian Diaspora living abroad – 1.05.2015. https://opendatablog.wordpress.com/2015/05/01/sazvgargaret-mcxovrebi-qartuli-Diaspora/
\(^{7}\) In this direction, a special research was carried out by the Research Center for Economic Policy, with the support of German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) in 2012.
\(^{9}\) Ordinance of the State Minister for Diaspora Issues – https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/2069627
\(^{10}\) On the approval of the Ordinance of the State Minister for Diaspora Issues – https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/2069627
search Georgian historical and cultural values outside Georgia; b) Help compatriots abroad to maintain national identity; c) Monitor external migration (emigrational) flows; d) Support the protection of emigrants’ rights within its competence; e) Attract Diaspora investments and support implementation of investment strategy in Georgia; f) Create a registry office for Diaspora organizations.11

After 2016 Parliamentary elections, the Ministry of Diaspora was dissolved and merged with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the reason of cutting down state expenses, which caused certain dissatisfaction. Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association appealed the government against the dissolution of the Ministry of Diaspora. According to their statement, this step “could be perceived as a negative message for emigrants living outside Georgia and create an impression as if Diaspora was of no special importance for the state”.12

On 29 December 2016, Georgian Parliament adopted a resolution on “Foreign Policy of Georgia”. In Clause 11 it was noted that the priority of Georgian foreign policy was to defend the rights and legal interests of Georgian citizens abroad, strengthen relationships with Diaspora and ensure dignified repatriation of Georgian citizens and their reintegration.13

A separate document “The Strategy of Relationships with Georgian Diaspora” has been under elaboration for several years now, which has not been approved yet. The working version of government strategy for relations with Diaspora was discussed back in 2015. On the statement of Shalva Kiknavelidze, deputy chair of the Parliamentary Committee for Diaspora and Issues of the Caucasus, “Georgian state and government realize the responsibility before millions of our compatriots who have been living abroad for decades. It is of particular importance for our state to stand by their side and provide support”.14

Afterwards the above document has been discussed twice at the government sittings and as it appears it is close to finalizing. On 27 May 2017, Mikheil Janelidze, Minister of Foreign Affairs, presented the state strategy of Diaspora “Consolidated Diaspora for Strong Georgia” to the forum participants.

In August 2017, Irakli Sesiashvili, the Chair of Defense and Security Committee of the Parliament, declared that the strategy on relationship with Diaspora was developed for the first time. Within the framework of the strategy, the relationship will be systematized and maximum support will be provided to Georgian emigrants living abroad.15

The strategy is being developed on the initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It includes the policy on the relationships with Diaspora and the priorities.

**Main directions of the state policy regarding Diaspora**

State policy objectives and main directions in relation to Diaspora will finally be defined in the state strategy on Diaspora issues entitled “Consolidated and strong Diaspora with close links with homeland”. The state strategy on Diaspora has two main priorities: a) implementation of such policy that will support the use of Diaspora and in general migrants’ potential for the country’s social-economic development; b)  

15 Sesiashvili, Irakli. Strategy on relationships with Diaspora has been developed for the first time – 08.18.2017. http://ghn.ge/print.php?print=134484
Support repatriation of Georgian citizens living abroad and their reintegration.

According to the strategy, state policy on Diaspora serves the solution of the following tasks:\(^{16}\)

1. Supporting the implementation of common interests of our compatriots and Diaspora organizations.

In order to ensure the implementation of the above task, it is necessary to carry out the following activities within the program framework: a) Identify Diaspora problems and jointly devise the mechanisms for their solution; b) Support dissemination of the information in the society about current events and ongoing projects in the Diaspora; c) Support scientific work on Diaspora issues; d) Supply information about state programs and projects on Diaspora issues to compatriots, ensure their involvement in developing proposals and projects; e) Support establishing sectoral associations of compatriots abroad and develop their contacts with the relevant agencies in Georgia; f) Ensure connections of professionals living abroad with their Georgian counterparts through sectoral associations; g) Organize forums and conferences to encourage initiating new ideas and establishing innovative approaches by sharing knowledge and experience acquired abroad.\(^{17}\)

2. Defend the rights and interests of compatriots living abroad.

Several activities have been planned to ensure the implementation of this task: a) To establish a “hot line” for Diaspora representatives, which will make it possible to identify problematic issues and search the ways of their solution; b) Support arranging medical campaigns by sending groups of physicians, providing medical consultations and treatment for the representatives of Georgian Diaspora abroad; c) Provide legal consultations in native language to compatriots and migrants and supply necessary information; d) Promote and appreciate the contribution made by Georgian Diaspora to the host state.


The following activities have been planned for the implementation of the above: a) Material-technical and ideological support of Sunday school activities\(^{18}\); b) Support learning of Georgian language, History and Geography of Georgia; c) Support Georgian folk dance and singing groups in foreign countries; d) Support organizing tours of theatrical troupes, folk and pop groups as well as solo artists from Georgia to the host countries of Diaspora; e) Promote works of art created by artists living abroad; It must be noted that Georgian National Dress Day in 2017 (18 May) which was marked the second time, covered 12 cities of the world.\(^{19}\)

4. Support the activities of Diaspora organizations.

In order to ensure the implementation of the above objective, the following activities will be carried out within the frames of the program: a) Create and improve renewable electronic base about compatriot and Diaspora organizations; b) Establish effective communication with Diaspora organizations and its representatives; c) Provide material-technical support to

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16 State strategy on Diaspora has been developed for the first time in Georgia. http://kavshiri.com/%E1%83%9E%E1%83%98%E1%83%A0%E1%83%95%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%90%E1%83%93
17 The first Diaspora professional forum “Share your Experience with Homeland” was held on 27–29 May 2014. http://gruzinform.ge/news/24030/pirveli+diaspora+uli+profesiuli+forumi+%E2%80%9Egauziare+gamocil eba+samshoblos%E2%80%9C.html.
18 In 2012, a week-long training workshop was delivered in Georgia for about 50 teachers of Sunday schools that are open in 23 foreign countries. The program covered up to 80 percent of Sunday School teachers (27 May – 02 May 2012, Days of Georgian Diaspora) – http://news.ge/ge/news/story/12605-maisi-diasporis-dge).
Diaspora organizations\(^{20}\); d) Organize trainings to enhance the efficiency of the management of Diaspora organizations; e) Support the improvement of the quality of cooperation between Diaspora organizations.

5. Development of sustainable links based on mutual profitability between the state and Diaspora.

For this purpose, the following steps will be taken within the scope of the program: a) Creation and constant renewal of electronic base of compatriots and Diaspora organizations abroad; b) Ensure the availability of information about the existing state services intended for Diaspora projects and compatriots; c) Support the involvement of our compatriot scientists living abroad in the process of development of Georgian scientific space; d) Regular supply of information about ongoing processes in Georgian economy to compatriots living abroad; e) Increase the involvement of Diaspora in promoting the investment environment of Georgia, advertising tourist potential and encouraging the export of Georgian production in the host country of Diaspora; f) Expand “Young Ambassadors’ Program” with the aim of realizing the potential of young generation, their active involvement in the promotion of Georgia and current processes going on in the homeland; g) Expand Diaspora internship program with the aim of attraction of young, qualified personnel to the country and sharing their experience; h) Support establishment and development of friendship programs with the aim of activating public diplomacy mechanism; i) Organize annual sport events such as Diaspora “Olympiad” in Georgia; j) Support development of Diaspora tourism; k) Celebrate “Georgian Diaspora Day” – on 27 May.\(^{21}\) l) Support repatriation; m) Support establishment and development of new reintegration programs.

**Achievements and problems related with the implementation of Diaspora policy**

Georgian government considers repatriation of Georgian citizens its foremost goal. Such statement was made back by Mikheil Saakashvili first and “Georgian Dream” has similar position too. For instance, in his speech about the Diaspora Day, Irakli Gharibashvili, the then Prime Minister stated: “My dream is that our compatriots return to such homeland, which we all would like to see. Our government will do its best to make this happen”\(^{22}\)

Clearly, to solve this problem it is necessary to drastically decrease the unemployment rate, create new jobs and considerably increase the existing salaries. But this cannot be achieved at present and consequently neither is repatriation of Diaspora representatives possible as yet. That is why Ilya II, the Catholicos-Patriarch of all Georgia appealed to Diaspora representatives in his speech on Diaspora Day in 2017 to stay where they are, help Georgia’s economic revival and take care that their children do not forget Georgian language and culture in a foreign country. “A few years ago I called on your return to the homeland. Now I urge you to stay where you are, but at the same time stay in touch with your homeland. This is in the first place necessary for Georgia. I would like to thank you for your spiritual or material help, which you render to your country. You must help us in creating small and medium businesses”, – noted the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church.\(^{23}\)

\(^{20}\) For instance, 400 000 GEL was allotted for assistance to Diaspora organizations in 2013 (Prime minister: My dream is that our compatriots return to homeland soon – 27.05.2014). http://georgianpress.ge/com/news/view/5580?lang=1.

\(^{21}\) Diaspora Day was established in 2008 and is marked on the following day after the Independence Day (26 May). Since then, on 27 May special Forum has been held every year where the problems of Georgian emigrants are discussed.
