**Responding to Russian Refugee Influx: Implications for Small State**

 **Abstract**

The influx of Russian migrants after Russian full-fledged invasion of Ukraine has presented Georgia with a complex array of challenges and opportunities. Georgia has emerged as a secure haven and an economic destination for Russians, leading to a mix of positive economic gains and societal disparities. Consequently, this influx has introduced a new set of security concerns for the nation, prompting a pragmatic assessment by both the government and the populace. The government's approach is driven by a desire to secure electoral support, leveraging the argument that the surge in Russian migration has bolstered economic collaboration with Russia, thereby fostering economic growth and stability. Conversely, the general population's outlook is marked by a sense of ambivalence. On one hand, there is apprehension about the implications of Russian migration on economic ties with Russia, while on the other hand, there is resistance due to the adverse effects on daily life, including heightened prices, intensified competition in the labor market, and an augmented sense of insecurity. According to statistical data, the initial economic windfall from Russian migration appears to be a one-time occurrence, with limited potential for similar growth in subsequent years, as projected by economists. Furthermore, the inflow of Russian migrants has deepened Georgia's economic reliance on Russia, potentially exposing the nation to risks associated with Russia's strategic influence over Georgia's critical infrastructure. This growing dependency could lead to significant long-term disadvantages, both economically and in terms of national security.

**Introduction**

Russia’s influence over Georgia varies between conventional and hybrid threats. Its hybrid power has become stronger and more diverse during the last two years, especially in the form of migration. The rate of migration of Russian citizens into Georgia reached a peak in 2022 in line with the Russian war in Ukraine. The influx of Russian citizens into Georgia changed the country's security, socio-economic, and political landscape. The consequences of the influx of Russian citizens differ in accordance with different waves, considering the socioeconomic backgrounds of the people crossing the border. Attitudes toward Russian migration and on its economic effect vary among the different groups of Georgian society: state officials, expert communities, and the general public. Some find their presence as an economic benefit to the country and some see it as a security and political risk. On the other hand, the vast majority of the Russian citizens coming to Georgia find the place secure, affordable to live, and easily accessible. Therefore, in this research paper analyses are based on the assessment of the statistical results and consequences of the migration of Russians, the existing moods and expectations of locals towards them, and the “Push” and “Pull” factors of their migration and attitudes of migrant Russians to settle in Georgia. Moreover, this paper explores potential socio-economic and security risks due to the emergence of Russian citizens, as well as increasing dependency on Moscow.

**Conclusion**

The socio-economic, political, and security effects of Russian migration on Georgia cannot be assessed ultimately as positive or negative. The issue is more complex depending on the motives of the migrants, and the views of different actors in Georgia, be it the government, the society, or the expert circle. It is a fact that the population of Russian citizens did not come to Georgia for no reason, and it is also a fact that the majority of them had a normal life in their country before Russia invaded Ukraine. If we rely on the results of the migrants' survey, the main PUSH factor for their departure from Russia in the first time was the fear of losing wealth, and during the second wave, the PUSH factor for their departure was to escape from the involvement in the war, while the PULL factor was to find a safe and economically favorable environment, which Georgia provided them with.

Due to the growth of the general economic indicator, the Georgian government, as an “intervening opportunity” makes it as easy as possible for Russian citizens to come to Georgia, and start and establish a business. By doing this, they really achieve a quick economic benefit that has a one-time character and which can create a false sense of stability in the population. In addition, the government is proud of the country's peace and economic progress, which it uses more or less successfully for electoral purposes. Regardless of the economic benefits, which may be stable depending on what type of investments will be made in Georgia, economic dependence on Russia in the long term has many risks. The concern of economists and security experts in this case is that if Russia takes control of Georgia's critical infrastructure, Georgia will become more and more dependent on Russia not only economically, but also in general, and this may distance Georgia from its foreign policy aspirations and create new security challenges. Possession of critical infrastructure means that the adversary will be able to disable strategic objects at any time and therefore have leverage to manipulate.

It seems that the population of Georgia does not follow an emotional, but a pragmatic policy. This is reflected in the fact that they still do not oppose economic relations with Russia, although they oppose the government's stated policy of accepting Russian migrants and organizing their activities. A relatively neutral attitude towards the Georgian-Russian economic relations might come from the fear that cutting ties with Russia, as well as with an economic actor may cause socioeconomic failure of the state. The fact that the majority of the Georgian public has a negative attitude towards migration might be based on more existential issues, whether it is the increase in prices, entering into competition with Russians in the employment market, or seeing them as a security challenge. While talking about security threats, there are also “micro-conflict” tensions between immigrants and locals that could be caused by hostile historical memories, and social and cultural alienation.

In general, it is important that states act pragmatically, which may reflect the current Georgian government in peace, stability, and economic growth. But this should not happen at the expense of social inequality and damage to dignity in the country. It is also of utmost importance for the country to protect its national interests such as sovereignty, independence and democracy.