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Hopes and Fears

The Case of Georgian Asylum Seekers in the EU

Author: Meri Chachava

Supervisor: Olle Frödin

ABSTRACT

Since March 2017, when the EC allowed visa-free travel to the Schengen area for Georgian citizens, the member states warned about the sharp and continuous rise in the number of unfounded asylum seekers from Georgia. It became the subject of active discussion at the political level, as the visa-waiver deal with the EU is an important aspect of EU-Georgia relations. Even though the rising number of Georgian asylum seekers is high on the political agenda, there is a lack of qualitative understanding of the reasons for asylum flow.

Utilizing a qualitative method, this thesis responds to the urgent need to increase the understanding of why Georgians are seeking asylum from the viewpoint of the asylum seekers themselves. Guided by Robinson and Segrott's (2002) model, this study indicates that Georgian asylum seekers' decisions to leave the home country are very complex based on growing fears of being subjected to threats to their safety, discrimination, and violence, and hopes for improving their lives. Additionally, while Georgian asylum seekers are active agents in their decision-making, their choices of destination are influenced by the structural factors, such as visa-free travel, social networks, knowledge, and policy measures, which do not totally individualise their decisions.

Key words: Georgia, Visa-free, EU, Asylum Seekers, Push and Pull factors, Decision-Making Process, Social Networks.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
Geostat	National Statistics Office of Georgia
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (or Queer)
VLAP	Visa Liberalisation Action Plan

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Motivation for Study

Over the past decades, the need to seek international protection has become one of the main reasons that push people to leave their home countries and to cross the European Union (EU) borders. In 2019, the number of asylum applications in the EU-27¹ increased by 11.2 per cent compared with 2018 (Eurostat, 2020: 1). There are many reasons why people leave their home countries and seek asylum, including political and ethnic persecution, conflict, violence, economic difficulties, etc. (EASO, 2016; IOM, 2019a). In order to limit the number of asylum applications, different countries take different policy measures at the national levels, including tightening asylum policy, creating less favourable conditions for asylum seekers, introducing visa requirements, and increasing border securitisation (Böcker & Havinga, 1997; Neumayer, 2004). In addition to the policy measures, the presence of social networks, future opportunities, the image of the country, etc. make some European countries more attractive as a destination for asylum seekers than others (ibid.). In 2019, among member states, Germany accounted for 23.3 per cent of all first-time² asylum applications, followed by France (19.6 per cent) and Spain (18.8 per cent) (Eurostat, 2020: 4).

While there has been a general increase, with 19,655 applicants registered in 2019, Georgia has been listed among the top eight countries of origin of asylum seekers in the EU (Eurostat, 2020: 3). In 2019, the highest numbers of Georgian first-time asylum applicants were observed in France (7,735) and Germany (3,330) (Eurostat. n.d.a). Data has shown that asylum applications filed by Georgian citizens increased rapidly since March 2017, when after many years of negotiations, the European Commission (EC) allowed *visa-free* travel³ to the Schengen area for Georgian citizens (Eurostat, 2020).

Due to the fact that the rising numbers of asylum claims from Georgian citizens were combined with very low acceptance rates (three per cent), the member states warned about the unfounded

¹ EU-27: member states (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden (Eurostat, 2020).

² First-time asylum applicant more accurately reflects the number of newly arrived individuals as it excludes repeat applicants in the member states (ibid.:2).

³ The visa-free regime grants Georgian citizens the right to travel to the Schengen area without a visa for a period of 90 days within any 180 days for purposes other than working (Schengen visa info, n.d.).

asylum applications and undocumented migrants from Georgia, which became a subject of active discussion at the political level. German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière at the 54th Munich Security Conference said: “if the number of asylum seekers from Georgia further increases, the suspension mechanism might be activated” (Georgia Today, 2018). The EU has the right to suspend the visa-waiver if there is substance abuse of the visa-free travel rules, including a sharp rise in the number of unfounded asylum applications and entry refusals at the EU borders (Dolidze et al., 2019: 5).

The visa-waiver deal with the EU is an important aspect of EU-Georgia relations. When the visa-free regime was officially granted, Georgian Prime-Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said: “Georgia is returning to the European family” (Civil Georgia, 2017). Therefore, the fear of losing the EU’s political trust runs high in the Georgian government.

In order to reduce the overall number of Georgian asylum seekers in the EU, after the visa-liberalisation process, both member states and the Georgian government have taken various steps (Grigalashvili & Sarjveladze, 2018; Dolidze et al., 2019). First, the Georgian government strengthened cooperation with Frontex⁴. Secondly, travel documents examination has been significantly tightened at airports both in Georgia and in the destination countries, including interviews with immigration officers. Moreover, in order to easily identify citizens who, violate the visa-free travel rules and prevent further returns to the Schengen zone, the Ministry of Justice of Georgia imposed restrictions on surname changes (ibid.: 16). At the same time, EU member states decided to put Georgia on the ‘safe country list’⁵, which limits the possibility for Georgians to receive refugee status, as applications from nationals of safe countries are fast-tracked and usually decided in a negative way (ECRE, 2015). By recognizing Georgia as a safe country of origin, it is officially acknowledged that there is generally and consistently no war and prosecution (EUR-Lex, 2011).

A wide range of policy papers has discussed the negative consequences of the increasing number of Georgian asylum seekers in the EU, such as losing the right of visa-free travel, damaging

⁴ European Border and Coast Guard Agency which coordinates and develops European border management in line with the EU fundamental rights (Frontex, n.d.).

⁵ Based on the information requested and received from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, Georgia is recognised as a safe country by 16 countries in the EU. However, for now, Georgia is not recognized as a safe country of origin by Germany. In January 2019, the German Bundestag adopted the law that put Georgia on the safe country list, but it is still in progress (Dolidze et al. 2019: 16).

Georgia's political image internationally, and depopulation (Grigalashvili & Sarjveladze, 2018; Wuite, 2018). However, the reasons why the Georgian asylum seekers leaving the country and factors behind their decisions have not been adequately assessed and addressed from the perspectives of those people who experience it. This study seeks to fill this knowledge gap by exploring the issue from the viewpoint of the asylum seekers themselves.

The first incentive to work on the case of Georgian asylum seekers was a sharp and continuous rise in the number of asylum applications submitted by the Georgian citizens in the EU after the visa-liberalization. Secondly, given the political and social attention that the Georgian asylum seekers have been attracting over the last years, there is a lack of qualitative understanding of the reasons for asylum flow. Lastly, Kuschminder et al. (2015: 38) and Rowe (2018: 104) argued based on the extensive literature review that in the field of asylum-related migration, academic studies, as well as international organizations, mainly have paid attention to war-torn countries. Hence, there is a need to illustrate asylum seekers' experiences from *safe* countries of origin⁶ to which little attention has been paid.

1.2 Research Questions and Purpose

With this motivation in mind, this thesis aims to examine the stated reasons and factors influencing Georgians decisions to leave the home country and the subsequent decision to seek asylum in France and Germany. Furthermore, drawing on the current social and political discourse about Georgian asylum seekers, it is important to see whether and how visa-free travel effects on asylum seekers' decision-making process. In doing so, this thesis seeks to answer the following research questions from the viewpoint of the asylum seekers themselves:

1. What are the reasons behind Georgian citizens' decisions to leave their home country and to seek asylum, rather than using regular migration routes?
2. What are the reasons and factors influencing the choice of destination?
3. How, if at all, does the visa-free regime influence their decision to leave and as well as the choice of destination?

⁶ Which countries are designated as safe countries of origin depends on the member states. However, based on the EU Asylum Procedures Directive, a country is considered as safe country when there is a democratic system and generally and consistently: no persecution, torture, threat of violence, and armed conflict (EMN, 2018: 3).

The purpose of this thesis is to shed light on the decision-making process of Georgian asylum seekers, rather than quantitatively measuring the asylum flow and relying on the existing political discourse. Hence, asylum seekers are conceptualised as active agents, each with individual biography and different goals, who have choices in the decision-making process (Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Robinson & Sergrott, 2002).

By looking at a case of Georgian asylum seekers in the EU, this study develops an in-depth understanding of asylum-related migration from safe countries of origin, which moves beyond the traditional simplistic understanding of asylum seeker migration and demonstrates its complexities. Furthermore, this study illustrates the urgent need to listen to asylum seekers and contributes important qualitative findings to the existing literature on Georgian asylum seekers, as most of the work done focuses on irregular labour migration, its demographic and social-economic framework. Lastly, based on the lived experiences, this thesis supports Georgian policymakers to gain a rich understanding of the root causes of recent Georgian asylum flow.

1.3 Thesis Outline

Chapter Two presents background information on Georgia's socio-economic development, migration trends, and the visa-liberalisation agreement with the EU. Chapter Three reviews the existing literature on asylum seekers with a focus on factors influencing the decision-making process. The theories employed by this study, along with the generalised model in the exploration of Georgian asylum seekers' decision-making process are presented in Chapter four. Chapter five explains the methodological choice of this study, detailing fieldwork, research ethics, and limitations. Chapter six presents the findings from data collection and analyse them based on the proposed theories and generalised model. Finally, Chapter seven concludes the findings of the study and its implications, which is followed by the suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Background

This chapter presents background information on Georgia's socio-economic development and its migration landscape. It is followed by a brief overview of EU-Georgia relations, particularly focusing on the visa-liberalisation process.

2.1. Country Context: Georgia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia faced severe political and economic stagnation. The transition period from the socialist structure to the market economy is divided into three main periods: stagnation (1991-1994), stabilisation (1995-2003), and development (2004-present) (Badurashvili & Nadareishvili, 2012: 3). The transition period is also discussed at three different levels including the processes of market transition, nation-building, and state consolidation (Vanore & Siegel, 2015: 3). These processes became particularly complicated due to armed conflicts in the 1990s and later in 2008 (Badurashvili & Nadareishvili, 2012: 3).

Since 2004, a stage of slow economic development started in Georgia, and in 2016, Georgia advanced in the World Bank classification and moved from the category of lower-middle-income countries to the upper-middle-income countries (World Bank, n.d.a). According to Geostat (n.d.a), in 2019, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Nominal) Per Capita in Georgia was 17.7 billion US dollars⁷. Poverty indicators and the unemployment rate decreased in parallel with economic progress, but they still affect close to one-fourth of the population. In 2018, 20.1 per cent of Georgia's population lived below the poverty line and 12.7 per cent was unemployed (Geostat, n.d.b). Moreover, the latest data show that Georgia's monthly average gross salary was 1,217.1 GEL (€ 350) in March 2019, when the minimum subsistence level for a working-age male was 206.1 Gel (€ 59) (Geostat, n.d.c).

Along with the economic development, Georgia steadily increases its Human Development Index (HDI)⁸ value. Between 2000 and 2018, Georgia's HDI value increased by 17.5 per cent which put it in the high human development category (rank 70) (UNDP, 2019:2-3). However, Georgia fails

⁷ There is a gap between Nominal and PPP per capita GDP. In 2019, GDP (PPP) per capita in Georgia was 46.055 US dollars (International Monetary Fund, n.d.).

⁸ Key dimensions of the Human Development Index (HDI): a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable, and have a decent standard of living (UNDP, 2019).

to achieve human development for all. When the HDI value is discounted for inequality, Georgia losses 12 per cent progress (UNDP, 2019:5).

Lastly, it is important to highlight that different international organisations regularly report the human rights situation in Georgia. The latest human rights reports covered the following areas of concerns: labour rights, lack of accountability for law enforcement abuses, unlawful interference with privacy, freedom of media, and violence or threats towards LGBTI persons (HRW, 2020: 236-242; U.S Department of State, 2019).

2.2 Georgia's Migration Landscape

In line with the above-discussed transition periods, scholars have classified Georgia's emigration trends in three waves: collapse and conflict (1990-1995), economic struggle (1996-2004), and hope and economic rebuilding (after 2004) (CRRC & IST, 2010: 8). Emigration from Georgia became one of the main reasons behind the population decline. According to Geostat (n.d.d), the number of the population declined from 4.37 million in 2002 to 3.72 million in 2019.

The latest data show that the flow of emigrants from Georgia is increasing. By 2019, totally 105,107 persons have left the country for different reasons (Geostat, n.d.d). Take into consideration the strong historic ties between Georgia and Russia, the majority of emigrants have been directed at Russia. However, after the visa restriction (2002) and military conflict (2008) between the two countries, the emigration flow to Russia decreased (Hofmann, 2015: 816; OECD & CRRC, 2017:51). After Russia, alternative destination countries became Turkey, Greece, and Italy. Studies have shown that due to the high demand for female occupations, these new destinations were more attractive to female labour (CRRC & IST, 2010: 11; Vanore & Siegel, 2015: 6).

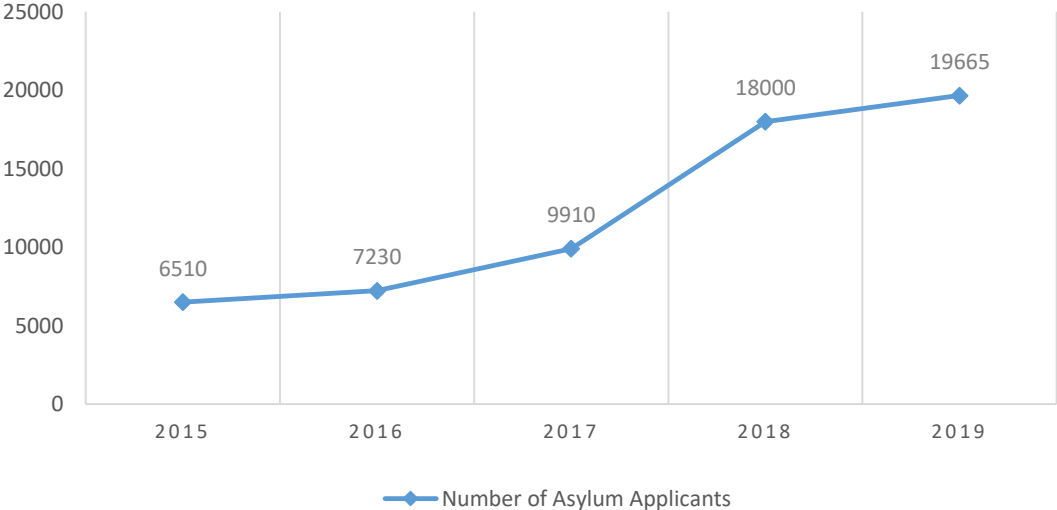
The existing studies on emigration from Georgia provide fragmented evidence on the character of Georgian emigrants. Different studies have argued that high outward migration from Georgia is motivated by the lack of economic opportunities at home. The emigration flows are mainly characterised as temporary labour migration, meaning that Georgian emigrants leave the country with short-term tourist visas, then stay and involve in irregular employment (Badurashvili, 2012: 3; CRRC, 2007: 7). Due to the lack of opportunities for the legal employment of Georgian citizens,

Georgian irregular migrants use social networks to find jobs. Therefore, the presence of friends, relatives, and acquaintances plays a key role in irregular labour migration (Badurashvili, 2012: 3; Hofmann, 2015: 815).

Moreover, remittances are an important part of the Georgian economy. According to the World Bank (n.d.b), the latest value from 2018 is 11.56 per cent of GDP and Russia, Italy, and Greece are the largest remittances senders. However, studies have shown that migrants’ remittances are spent on the everyday needs of their families in Georgia. This helps to lower the poverty level but does not have a sustainable effect on the socio-economic development of migrants’ families in Georgia (Badurashvili, 2012: 8).

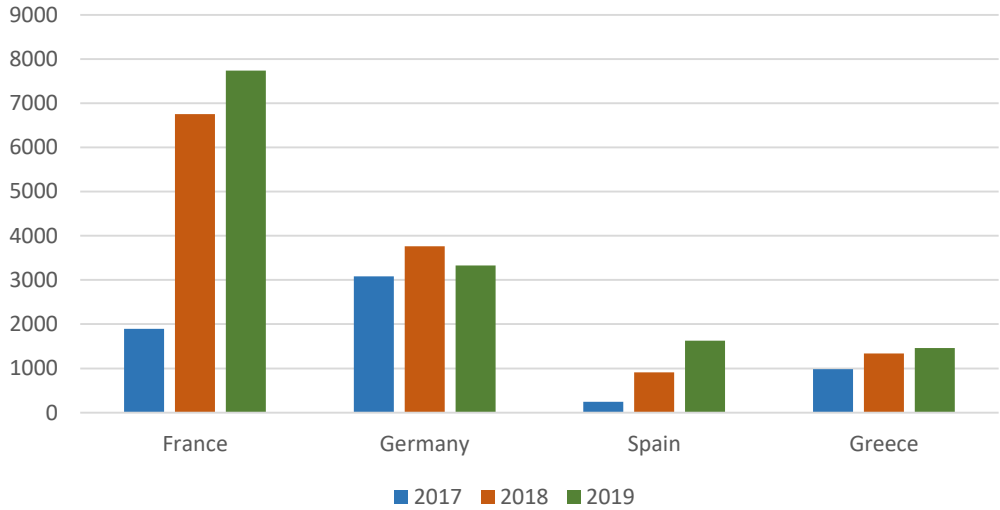
In line with irregular labour migration, during the above-discussed transition periods, the number of asylum applications made by Georgians has increased steadily. However, there is a lack of qualitative studies that cover asylum seekers’ experiences. According to ICMPD (2015: 41), starting in 2006, an increase in the total number of asylum applications from Georgians is observed, peaking at 15,735 individuals in 2009. Also, recognition rates were highest (22 per cent) in 2009, which is explained by the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war. After 2009, the numbers of asylum seekers and the recognition rates marked a significant decrease (ibid.: 43). However, according to Eurostat (n.d.a), since 2017, in the EU the number of asylum seekers from Georgia rose at a rapid pace, with 18,000 applications in 2018 and 19,665 in 2019 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Georgian First-time Asylum Applicants in the EU-27 (Eurostat, n.d.a)



In 2018 and 2019, Georgia has been listed among the top eight countries of origin of asylum seekers in the EU. The list of the top destination countries has varied during the last three years, but the first two places have always been taken by France and Germany (see Figure 2). Since 2017, the total recognition rate for asylum seekers from Georgia has varied between three and five per cent (Eurostat, n.d.a). Also, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of entry refusals at the EU member states borders. According to Eurostat (n.d.b), 4,040 Georgians were refused to enter the EU in 2018, compared to 895 in 2016.

Figure 2: Top Four Countries of Destination for Georgian Asylum Seekers in the EU-27 (Eurostat, n.d.a).



According to the Georgian state agencies, Georgian asylum seekers’ decisions are economically motivated, aiming to receive welfare payments and free healthcare services (Dolidze et al., 2019: 10). As the country has not faced a major economic or political crisis during the above-indicated years, experts have argued that the sharp and continuous rise in the number of asylum applications is connected to the visa-free regime with the EU, which came into force on 28 March 2017 (ibid.).

As illustrated in this section, migration has always played an important role in Georgian history. However, emigration and specifically, asylum-seeking has never been a subject of such active political debates as it is today.

2.3 Visa-Liberalisation

The EU-Georgia cooperation started in 1999 with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). Since then, this cooperation remains Georgia's key foreign priority (Chkhikvadze, 2019, n.p.). In 2009, Georgia joined the Eastern Partnership (EaP) which aims to support the country's political and economic integration with the EU. It was soon followed by the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement (EUR-Lex, 2011). As a result of a positive implementation process of the following agreement, the EC's initiative to start a visa-free dialogue with Georgia was approved in 2012 (Samvelidze, 2014: 5).

Georgia received the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan (VLAP) in 2013, which included different measures that needed to be adopted and implemented by Georgia. These measures were grouped into four blocks: document security, integrated migration management, public order and security, external relations, and fundamental rights. Moreover, the VLAP contained two tiers of benchmarks: legislation and implementation. Each set of benchmarks was assessed by four progress reports (EC, 2012). Experts argued that the commitments envisaged by the VLAP became push factors in Georgia to carry out reforms in border management, security, rule of law, anti-discrimination and personal data protection, food safety, etc. (Chkhikvadze, 2019, n.p.).

Based on the positive assessment of the four progress reports on Georgia's implementation of the VLAP, the EC decided that Georgia meets the criteria for the visa-free travel. Thus, since March 2017, Georgian citizens are granted the right to travel without a visa within the Schengen area (Maglakelidze, 2018: 31). As already mentioned in the Introduction, the visa-free regime allows only short-term travel, such as touristic purposes, family visits, short term business, or educational meetings (Schengen visa info, n.d.).

Prior to the visa-free regime, the EC put a suspension mechanism in place that will allow each member states, as well as the EC itself, to temporarily cancel the visa-free agreement (Wuite, 2018). The visa suspension mechanism can be used under the following circumstances: a substantial increase in the number of irregular migrants, unfounded asylum applications, and organized crime groups (Dolidze et al., 2019: 6).

Experts argue that the cancellation of the visa-free regime for Georgia might have different consequences both at international and national levels. First, it will damage Georgia's image at the international level. Secondly, it will harm EU-Georgia relations. Lastly, it will reduce the number

of supporters for Georgia's European future at the national level (Grigalashvili & Sarjveladze, 2018: 15-16). Take into consideration the well-established cooperation with the EU, the current situation regarding the Georgian asylum seekers is high on the political agenda.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

This chapter begins with a brief look at the concept of international migrants under the international legal and academic framework. The subsequent sections present the body of existing literature on asylum seekers' decision-making process, with a focus on reasons for leaving the home country and for the choice of particular destination countries. The last part of this chapter reviews the impact of visa policy on asylum flows.

3.1 Defining the Concepts of International Migrants (refugee, forced, and voluntary migrant)

In order to understand the complex realities of asylum migration, it is important to define the key concepts of international migrants. There are no universally accepted definitions of international migrants under the legal framework or academic literature.

The status of refugees is a legal concept, clearly defined under "The Convention (1951) and the Protocol (1967) Relating to the Status of Refugees" (Refugee Convention). It defines a refugee as a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his/her home country and has a well-founded fear of persecution due to reasons of religion, nationality, race, membership of particular social or political groups (UNHCR, 2010: 3). While an asylum seeker is someone whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined (UNHCR, 2016: 39).

Forced migration, on the other hand, is not a legal concept. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2011: 39), it covers threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes, both across international borders and inside a single country. Consequently, a forced migrant is defined as a person who migrates because of the existence of some form(s) of coercion. They are also defined as 'survival migrants', including any person who suffers from violations of the most basic human rights (Betts, 2013; Klaus & Pachocka, 2019: 2).

A concept that is critical to understand the reasons for migration is the categorisation for migrants as involuntary (forced) and voluntary (economic). Much of the literature on migration argues that there is always some degree of choice for all migrants even in the most difficult situations (Cummings et al., 2015; Richmond, 1994; Van Hear, 1998), and as Van Hear (1998: 42) stated: “Only a few migrants are wholly voluntary or wholly involuntary”. Others have underlined that because of the complexity of factors, migrants can move between the categories and at the same time can be presented in both categories (Cummings et al., 2015: 25; Zimmerman, 2009: 224). To move beyond such categorisation, Richmond (1993: 10-11) emphasised the continuum between *proactive* (voluntary) and *reactive* (involuntary) migration, where the decisions made by migrants are responses to a failure of the country to provide the fundamental human needs.

3.2 Leaving Home Country

The difficulties of clearly separating economic and political factors in analyses of asylum-related migration movement strongly appear in the literature. Therefore, there are many common reasons and motivations behind economic migrants’ and asylum seekers’ decisions to leave home countries (Cummings et al., 2015: 24).

Different studies have empirically tested neoclassical migration theories and provided evidence that unemployment, actual and expected wage differentials and different living standards between the place of origin and destination play important roles in shaping migration flows (Docquier et al. 2014; Neto & Mullet, 1998; Ruysen et al., 2014). On the meso-level, the NELM theorists conceptualized migration as household-level risk diversification and survival strategies and identified the key role of remittances in the migration process (Altai Consulting, 2015; Constant & Massey, 2002; Massey et al., 1993). Studies have found that family-related factors such as poor housing quality, lack of access to education, health services, and generally the low quality of family life in the country of origin influence migration decisions (ibid.). Constant and Massey (2002: 33) also argued that international migrants adopt different strategies based on their needs, resources, and aspirations, therefore he argued that neoclassical and NELM-related motivations are often correlated.

Following economic reasons, it is important to note that while refugees’ home countries tend to be poor and there is a strong relationship between asylum-seeking, economic insecurity, and poverty

alleviation, it is well-established that the poorest rarely can migrate since having sufficient resources to migrate is an important factor in the decision-making process (Cummings et al., 2015; UNDP, 2009; Zimmermann, 2011). As de Haas (2011a: 562) has stated: “middle-income countries have the highest average levels of emigration.”

Migration scholars have also found conflict, violence, personal insecurity, political instability, and human rights abuses as the most significant motivating factors for forced migration flows (Crawley, 2010; Ibanez & Velez, 2008; Moore & Shellman, 2004; Neumayer, 2005). Davenport et al. (2003: 46-47) conducted a statistical analysis of forced migration trends that covered 129 countries and found that the threats to personal integrity were the key factors in leading people to flee. Moreover, the authors argued that countries transitioning toward democracy have a greater number of forced migrants (ibid.).

There is a broad agreement in the literature that the categorisation of migrants do not encompass the complexities of migration as it is not driven by one factor alone but by different social, economic, political and environmental reasons, which are often correlated (Cummings et al., 2015; de Haas, 2011b; Loschmann et al., 2014; Zimmerman, 2009). Castles (2003: 15) underlined that political instability and conflict affect people’s economic security, and on the other hand, lack of economic opportunities may increase the likelihood of conflict. Furthermore, Conradie (2013: 213-214) argued that the threats of violence and discrimination impact peoples’ safety and also their living conditions, such as access to education, employment, etc. Based on the case of the ‘refugee crisis’⁹ in Europe, Cummings et al. (2015: 6) found that migrants’ motivations are a combination of conflict, political instability, and economic insecurity. Furthermore, a study conducted in Belgium suggested that migration motivations are not fixed and can change through the journey (Vervliet et al., 2014: 339). The authors found out that the unaccompanied asylum seekers’ first motive of migration was to find physical safety. A second motivation was to get a better education and employment opportunities. After arriving in Belgium, however, their main motivations switched (ibid.).

⁹ According to the UNHCR (2015), in 2015, the number of refugees and migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa (MENA) to Europe reached a staggering level. It is also called as ‘Mediterranean crisis’, as refugees fled across the Mediterranean Sea.

Lastly, de Haas (2003; 2014) asserted that both fears as the current state of wellbeing and hope as the potential wellbeing motivates the decision to seek asylum. These hopes and aspirations regarding the better life have also psychological or emotional basis because of their idealistic vision of the destination countries, based on media, films, and other sources of information (Belloni, 2016; Klaus & Pachocka, 2019).

3.3 Choice of Destination Country

Economic theories of migration tend to portray refugees and asylum seekers as ‘passive pawns’, who have no choice but to flee without considering a specific destination (Bakewell 2010: 1690; Böcker & Havinga, 1998: 4). According to Crawley (2010: 5), the decision to leave the home country may be based on rational choice theory, but the specific country of asylum is often a result of chance rather than choice. Similarly, Spinks (2013: 8) asserted that asylum seekers make decisions to leave or stay, but their choice of destination is limited and constrained by different factors, such as geography, the ease of movement, visa restrictions, social and financial capitals.

Take into consideration the transient nature of migration, some scholars argued that refugees’ and asylum seekers’ decision-making is a flexible process that does not always follow plans (Schapendonk, 2012: 34; Spinks, 2013: 9). Therefore, plans can change due to unexpected barriers in reaching a particular destination, or forming new contacts and seizing new opportunities while in a transit country, which change intended destination countries (Kuschminder et al., 2015: 68).

Moreover, Spinks (2013: 9) argued based on the extensive literature review that asylum seekers’ decisions about where to go are often determined and influenced by others. First, he identified a key role of agents and smugglers in the decision-making process. Secondly, he argued that their choice is heavily influenced by the presence of friends and family members in the destination countries. Similarly, Robinson and Segrott (2002: 59-60) discussed a key role of agents and networks in directing and guiding asylum seekers towards or away from particular countries. Also, information exchange and chain migration have been proved to influence the decision-making process (Koser & Pinkerton, 2002; Spinks, 2013). Furthermore, the cost of travelling to a certain county was also identified as an important element determining destination choice (Van Hear 2006: 1; 2014).

Moreover, Neumayer (2004: 171-175) discussed the attractiveness of West European countries as a destination for asylum seekers and identified that destination countries, where the right-wing populist parties are successful are less attractive for asylum seekers. He also found that former colonial links, the sharing of a common language and religion were far more statistically significant than policy measures in determining destination choice. Moreover, in the case of the UK, studies also showed that asylum seekers were mostly unaware of the asylum policies and their welfare benefits before arrival (Crawley, 2010: 7; Robinson & Segrott, 2002: 46).

In contrast, studies conducted by Kuschminder et al. (2015; 2016) argued that certain countries' policies relating to the asylum process and economic support available to refugees make them more attractive for migrants. Similarly, Yoo and Koo (2014: 65) identified that policy factors such as the availability and accessibility of welfare provisions shape asylum decisions.

Furthermore, different country-specific studies have identified different factors behind the asylum seekers' choice of destination countries. Böcker and Havinga (1997: 51) with a focus on Belgium, the Netherlands, and the UK, argued that the opportunity to join a family or friends is more important for asylum seekers than the country as such. In Norway's context, Brekke and Aarset (2009: 84) identified factors such as security, future opportunities, country reputation, and asylum policy in determining the destination country. Migration policy was also an important factor in the case of Germany and Sweden, Tucker (2018: 15) found out that being able to acquire citizenship easily and quickly had a major role in the decision-making process than economic and educational opportunities or agents.

Other considerations include the image of the destination country and aspirations for a better life, to live in a country with democracy, freedom and human rights, to have access to employment, education and social welfare services (Neumayer, 2004; Robinson & Segrott, 2002; Rowe, 2018).

3.4 Visa Policies

A travel visa is seen as an important component of the immigration policy instruments and is a subject of ongoing debate in the academic and policy literature.

Some scholars have argued that the rich industrialised countries' border policies are more selection than control (Czaika & de Haas, 2017: 902-903; Mau et al., 2012). For instance, based on the trade, colonial ties, war experiences, political cooperation and so on, the EU has developed a list of countries whose citizens need a visa to cross the EU borders ('black list'), and a list of those whose nationals are offered visa-free travel ('white list') (EUR-Lex, 2018; Laube, 2009:5). Laube (2009: 18) has discussed the EU's visa policy in terms of 'border diplomacy' and argued that visa is a tool to control 'unwanted' migration flow and to build external relations. The visa-free travel is also discussed as freedom of movement for people from 'respective' countries (Mau et al., 2012: 54). The list of countries whose citizens can enter the EU zone visa-free is expanding. In 2019, it was enlarged from 44 to 62 countries (Schengen visa info, 2019).

Czaika and de Haas (2017: 922) stated that visa restrictions significantly reduce both inflows and outflows. Different countries have used visa restrictions as a way of declining asylum seekers' flow. For instance, in 1989 the Turkish government reintroduced a visa requirement for Bulgarian citizens, in order to decrease the inflow of Bulgarians (OECD, 2003: 82). Furthermore, in response to increasing asylum claims, in 1992, Sweden introduced the visa regimes for Serbians, Montenegrins, and, Macedonians (Czaika & de Haas, 2017: 902). Similarly, in response to large asylum inflow, in 2009, the government of Canada put a visa regime for Mexican and Czech citizens (ibid.).

Furthermore, studies illustrated that asylum and visa restrictions may not only decrease asylum numbers but may also push migrants into irregular routes via smugglers (Czaika & Hobolth, 2016: 361). Similarly, Koser (2000) in his study found that many Iranian asylum seekers in the Netherlands started their irregular migration to Europe after the rejection of a travel visa.

According to Czaika and de Haas (2017: 921), after the introduction of a visa requirement, levels of immigration go down gradually, when the removing has an immediate increasing effect. It is explained by the 'inter-temporal substitution effect' when people see migration as a 'now or never' possibility because of fear of reintroduction of restrictions (ibid.: 900).

In contrast, other scholars have argued that visa policies have a very limited effect on migration flows, and international migration is mainly influenced by broader structural economic and political factors (Castles, 2004; Krissman, 2005; Massey, 1990). For instance, in 2010, after the EU granted visa-free travel to the Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia), the number of unfounded asylum applications in the EU has almost tripled (Trauner & Manigrassi, 2014: 2). Different studies have discussed the influence of a visa-free regime on this flow and argued that the decision to leave was influenced by economic reasons, based on the perception of financial benefits after requesting asylum in certain EU countries (Ikonomi & Ndoci, 2012; Trauner & Manigrassi, 2014: 11).

Chapter 4: Theory

The following chapter outlines the theories employed by this study and introduces the generalised model of asylum seeker decision-making, developed by Robinson and Segrott (2002) in the exploration of Georgian asylum seekers' decision-making process.

4.1 Push and Pull Theory

Various academic and policy literature on the factors that shape human mobility decisions distinguish between factors pushing people to leave a place and pulling them into destination places (de Haas, 2011; European Communities, 2000). The concept of push and pull factor belongs to functionalist theories and remains dominant in migration studies since Ravenstein (1885; 1889) formulated his 'laws of migration' (EASO, 2016: 10). According to King (2012: 13), Ravenstein laws' integrated individual rational-choice theory with the broader structures of developmental inequalities.

Lee (1966), who revised Ravenstein's laws, identified that the migration process involves origin and destination areas, and intervening obstacles between them. *Push factors* are associated with the origin area and usually include lack of economic opportunities, population density, and political repression, while *pull factors* are the perceived benefits at destination places, such as political freedom, economic and employment opportunities. *Intervening obstacles* include physical, financial, technical, and legal barriers that influence a decision to migrate (Castles et al., 2014; de Haas, 2011b; Lee, 1966). Personal factors also play important roles in Lee's theory. He

argued that people respond differently to the sets of push and pull factors and have different abilities to overcome the intervening obstacles according to their economic status, educational background, gender, and life-stage (King, 2012; Lee 1966). All these factors can be divided into hard and soft ones (Oberg, 1996: 371).

It is well-acknowledged that the push and pull theory explains migration in general and is primarily applicable to voluntary migrants (Brekke & Aarset, 2009). However, Kunz (1973: 131-132) argued that push factors are particularly strong in the field of forced migration, as people are pushed to leave their country to survive. He distinguished the category of ‘anticipatory refugee’, including people who leave their country of origin before they are forced to flee. In this case, they have time to analyse the possible destination countries and plan the journey (Klaus & Pachocka, 2019: 2). Moreover, in the field of forced migration, the push and pull theory can explain the relationship between positive and negative liberty (Vella, 2019: 22-23). Positive liberty is an ‘exercise’ of freedom, which gives individuals opportunities to develop himself/herself. On the other hand, negative liberty is identified as a lack of political freedom, which hinders individuals’ development processes and pushes them to leave the country of origin (ibid.: 19).

Critics of this theory argued that it tends to be overly simplistic, static, presents migration as a single action rather than a process, and does not underline the importance of chains, networks, and culture (de Haas, 2011b). Similarly, Arango (2004: 27) pointed out that push and pull theory is economically deterministic which considers migrant as ‘passive pawns’ and failures to explain, first, why there are different rates of migration between countries with the same structural economic conditions; and second, why so few people migrate, despite their motivation to do so. Others have underlined that Lee’s theory identifies poverty as a key push factor and neglects the fact that the poorest rarely can migrate since different resources are needed (Tapinos, 1990; UNDP, 2009).

Despite the above-mentioned criticisms, however, the push and pull theory is valuable in this study to differentiate the reasons and decisions of asylum seekers’ experiences. Given that it is used by migration scholars of different disciplines, allows exploring various factors that shape decision outcomes and facilitate analysis of these factors which contributes to informing exploratory research. Lastly, as already discussed in the Literature Review there are difficulties of clearly separating economic and political factors in analyses of asylum-related migration. Hence, bringing

economically deterministic theory in identifying reasons and factors behind Georgian asylum seekers' decisions is beneficial for this study.

4.2 Social Network Theory

Social network theory has been well-established in migration studies. As already discussed in section 3.3, empirical evidence showed that social networks in the destination country can influence migration choices at every stage of the decision-making process (Neumayer, 2004; McAuliffe, 2013; Spinks, 2013).

Boyd and Nowak (2012: 79-83) identified three main types of social networks: family and personal networks, labour networks, and illegal migrant networks. According to de Haas (2010), network theory also aims to account for different actors in the migration process, such as labour smugglers, traffickers, employers, government, and private agencies. These 'non-traditional' networks are placed between social and business (criminal) networks (Krissman, 2005; Samers, 2009).

Arango (2004: 28) ranked the social networks among the most important explanatory factors for migration. They are considered as a form of social and financial capital that facilitates the migration process by providing information, contacts, and services (employment, housing, etc.) (Massey at al., 1998: 42-43). Therefore, Haug (2008: 588) found that these networks are vital for migrants who have complex barriers, such as language and qualifications. Moreover, social networks can impact on the choice of the destination country, as it is more attractive for migrants to live in a country where there are supportive networks (Massey at al., 2005). As Tilly (1990: 79) asserted: "it is not people who migrate but networks."

Social network theory is often discussed in conjunction with push and pull factors and allows to connect individual and socio-structural reasons for migration (Goss & Lindquist 1995; Rowe, 2018). Fussell (2012) discussed three key insights in which migration networks further contribute to the theories of international migration. First, they help to understand the dynamics of *differential* migration. Secondly, by reproducing migrants through time, social networks help to *predict* future migration. Lastly, they fulfil a major theoretical difference between the initial *causes* of migration and its *distribution* in time and space (Fussell, 2012; King, 2012: 21).

However, some critics argued that due to its *post factum* nature, the network theory cannot explain large-scale international migration flows (Krissman, 2005:5). Similarly, Collyer (2005) mentioned that there is a little acknowledgement that these networks can explain different types of migration flows, for example, flows of asylum seekers. Furthermore, he argued that network theory does not cover the personal agency and choice in migration (ibid.). Some critiques also pointed at the above-mentioned non-traditional networks and argued that these networks are not always positive or beneficial to migrants (Rowe, 2018: 35).

By discussing the influence of social capital on asylum-related migration, the social network theory adds complexity to the dichotomy of push and pull theory. Moreover, it enables to move beyond the classical view, claimed that asylum seekers leave their home country without considering a specific destination (see section 3.3).

4.3 Generalised Model of Asylum Seeker Decision-making

In order to illustrate the whole process of Georgian asylum seekers' decision-making, Robinson and Segrott's (2002: 61) generalised model of asylum seeker decision-making was used (see figure 3).

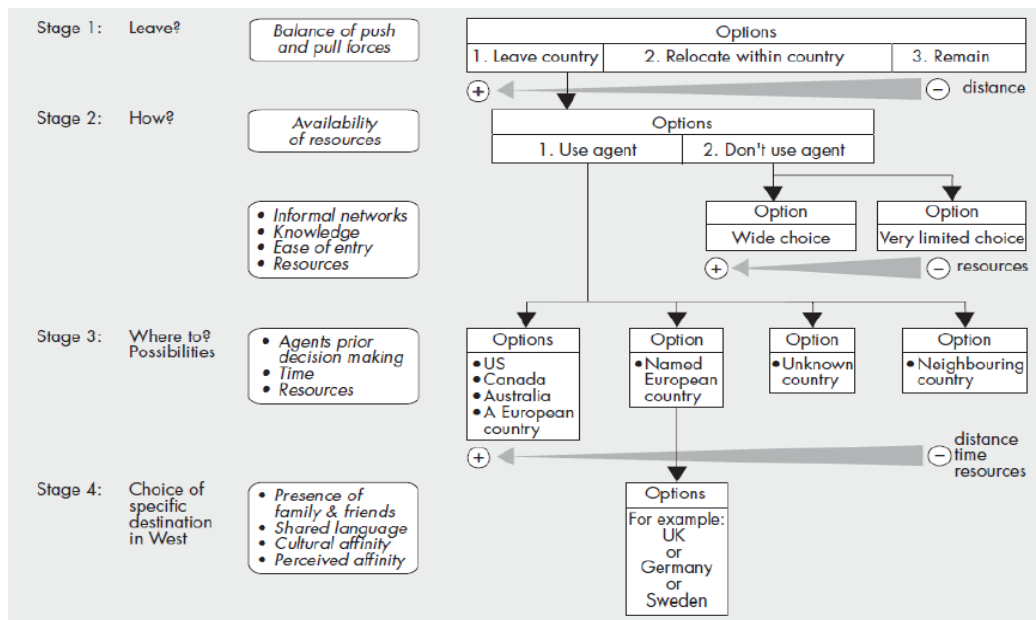


Figure 3: A Generalised Model of Asylum Seeker Decision-making (Robinson & Segrott, 2002: 61)

The model breaks the decision-making process down into four stages: 1) At this stage, the potential asylum seeker decides how to respond to the situation in the home country, stay or leave. 2) By covering the availability and accessibility of resources such as funds, knowledge, networks, ease to entry, etc., this stage examines the ways of how to leave. 3) At this stage, asylum seeker analyses the possibilities of where to go. This process is influenced by agents and by time, whether the departure is urgent or not. 4) The final stage covers the selection of the specific destination country, which is influenced by different pull factors such as opportunities for employment, education, freedom of speech, etc. (Robinson & Sergrott, 2002: 59-60). In addition, the model summarises the key factors that shape decision outcomes such as availability of resources, networks, access to information, agents' experiences, expectations, and knowledge of destination countries (ibid.).

As seen in the generalised model, agents play a key role in directing asylum seekers towards or away from a particular country. Therefore, those who cannot afford the agents have limited choices which are determined by factors such as individual and received knowledge about possible destinations (Robinson & Sergrott 2002: 60). According to the model, time also influences the degree of choice. For instance, when the departure is urgent asylum seekers take the first possible destination, while those who have time (anticipatory asylum seekers) make decisions in their best self-interests (ibid.).

The model was selected as it allows to explore not only the process relating to destination choice, but also it looks at the reasons for leaving and enables to balance the push and pull factors (Robinson & Sergrott 2002). By focusing on what pushes or pulls Georgian citizens in the asylum-seeking process, this model explores the role of both social and economic capitals in the decision-making process.

Moreover, the model is beneficial in that it emphasises both asylum seekers' agency and structure in the decision-making process and displays the different options available to asylum seekers (Kuschminder et al., 2015: 15). Furthermore, by covering a variety of decisions that need to be made, this model allows Georgian asylum seekers to have a voice.

The model does not, however, sufficiently account for transit experiences and changes in the migration trajectory (Brekke & Aarset, 2009: 31-32). Given that this study targets only those asylum seekers, whose first destination choice is France and Germany, therefore covering the transit experience is not relevant to this study.

Chapter 5: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological choice of this thesis, including the philosophical stance, research design, data sampling, collection, and analysis. Moreover, the chapter discusses the limitations, ethical considerations, and quality assessments of the study.

5.1 Philosophical Stance and Research Design

Bearing in mind, that migration is a complex concept which can be understood in different ways by different actors, this thesis adheres to a social constructivist worldview. In social constructivism, individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences which are socially constructed, formed through cultural and historical norms (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 60). Accordingly, the constructivist researcher focuses on the specific (historical, cultural) context in which people live and work (ibid.). Therefore, these subjective meanings (personal reasons) of the Georgian asylum seekers' decisions to leave their home country led the author to illustrate the complexity of views (Bryman, 2012: 33). Hence, the author played an important role in constructing knowledge which was shaped by her own experiences and background (Creswell, 2007: 15).

In line with the outlined philosophical stance, a qualitative approach has been found particularly relevant given that it encourages individuals to share their stories and thoughts (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 84). Moreover, a qualitative approach allowed to investigate asylum seekers' personal perspectives and to develop a complex picture (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Furthermore, in order to collect data without a pre-established set of theories, the study has taken an inductive approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014: 359). Bryman (2012: 27), however, argued that this classification (inductive and deductive) is not entirely straightforward and in inductive studies, a theory is often used as a 'background' to qualitative examinations. Hence, by asking open-ended questions, participants have built the meaning of their situations, and the proposed theories were only used at the very least as a background of the interviews (Creswell & Poth 2018: 60).

By looking at a case of Georgian asylum seekers in the EU, this study develops an in-depth understanding of asylum-related migration from *safe* countries of origin. Hence, drawing on Creswell and Poth (2018:153), this is a case study in which “a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) over time and place” is explored.

5.2 Sampling

Considering the purpose of this qualitative study, the main source of the primary data was interviews with Georgian asylum seekers. To get a wider insight into the issue, refugee consultants and the representatives of the Georgian diaspora organisations were also interviewed. However, it should be noted that they were selected to discuss asylum seekers' experiences (decision-making process) from their knowledge, rather than to share their own attitudes toward the topic.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, meaning that interviewees are particularly knowledgeable about the research problem and can build the meaning of a situation (Schutt, 2017: 75). Moreover, in order to reach out to hidden and 'hard-to-reach' populations such as asylum seekers, a snowball technique has been used (ibid.). Furthermore, only those Georgian asylum seekers who had lodged applications in France and Germany after the visa-liberalisation process were selected. This set of selection criteria was defined as a sharp and continuous rise in the number of Georgian asylum seekers has been observed after the visa-liberalization, with the highest number in France and Germany.

Furthermore, in order to contact the refugee consultants and the Georgian diaspora organisations in France and Germany, social media and organisational webpages were used.

Considering the difficulties to access asylum seeker communities due to the experiences that make them asylum seekers, the representatives of the Georgian diaspora organisations have been selected not only as of the participants but also as key informants (gatekeepers). Therefore, the interviews with them became an important method of reaching out the asylum seekers, as they have developed strong local networks and close relationships with Georgian asylum seekers. Furthermore, in order to avoid being overly dependent on them and to cover as many different experiences as possible, personal networks have been used and through the snowball method, participants have been selected along with the following criteria: gender, age, place of residence, status, household type.

This method of sampling ensured to have a wide variety of participants, however, it should be acknowledged that this thesis could not derive a statistically representative sample of respondents.

5.3 Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted as the main data collection method.

A pilot interview was conducted to refine a fieldwork plan and to develop a relevant interview guideline. Accordingly, different questionnaires were developed for asylum seekers and key informants (see Appendix 1). There were three major groups of the questions: decisions to leave (balance of push and pull factors), journey, and living abroad. Questionnaires were constructed in accordance with Robinson and Segrott's (2002: 61) generalised model of asylum seeker decision-making (see Section 4.3). Using semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility, avoided leading responses, and employed a more personal approach to each interview (Bryman, 2012: 27). Moreover, open-ended questions enabled to collect rich data, based on the personal experience and knowledge of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 204).

The fieldwork took place in January 2020 in France (Montendre, Nice, Paris, Creil, Metz), Germany (Munich, Dresden, Berlin), and Georgia (Tbilisi)¹⁰. The interviews were conducted with 20 participants including a total number of eight individual and five group interviews. During the data collection, 16 asylum seekers, two refugee consultants, and two representatives from the Georgian diaspora organisations were interviewed.

All interviews were done face-to-face, apart from two individual interviews which were conducted via Skype. It is important to underline that the group interviews have been requested by the participants and each group included colleagues, friends, and neighbours.

The interviews were conducted in Georgian and English (with refugee consultants), lasting 40 to 90 minutes, and taking place in cafes, refugee consultant's office, and asylum seekers' living places. Permission was asked to record all interviews with the purpose of creating a transcript, and only one participant refused this request. In this case, written notes were taken and shared with the interviewee for her approval. Table 1 below provides a brief overview of the collected qualitative data (See Appendix 2 for the full list of participants).

¹⁰ Only one interview was conducted in Georgia via Skype because the respondent was deported back to Georgia.

Table 1: Key Characteristics of Participants

Method	Number of interviews	Number of interviewees	Female	Male	Age
Individual interviews	8	8	6	2	19-37
Group interviews (2-3 participants)	5	12	6	6	27-65
Total	13	20	12	8	-

5.4 Data Analysis

After the data collection, all interviews were transcribed. Before coding the interviews, transcripts were read several times for further analysing details (Saldana, 2013: 4). By using NVivo software, the first coding process included 20 codes. After the second coding process, eight codes were identified that clustered under two major themes: reasons for leaving and for destination choices. Everything related to the push factors was coded under the first theme. The second theme covered the pull factors and answered the question of where to go? (see Table 2). In order to broadly structure the findings and to keep the data rooted in the interviewees' own language, a *Descriptive* and an *In Vivo Code* have been applied to the data (Saldana, 2013: 4).

Table 2: Coding Scheme

Theme	Reasons for Leaving
1	
Codes 1.1	Healthcare
Codes 1.2	Sexual orientation & Gender identity
Codes 1.3	Disability
Codes 1.4	Political situation
Codes 1.5	Economic conditions

Theme	Reasons for Destination choices
2	
Codes 2.1	Visa-liberalisation
Codes 2.2	Knowledge & Expectations
Codes 2.3	Social networks

5.5 Limitations

It is important to acknowledge a number of limitations. Drawing on Funder (2005: 1), in order to understand participants' lived experiences, it is important to enter the field with an 'open mind'. Moreover, he underlined that a field researcher is constrained by several biases particularly *academic bias*, meaning that a researcher might apply a distinct view of the issue that is always different from the participants' views (ibid.: 4). This was balanced by using different academic scholarships and the author's own knowledge of the Georgian perspective.

Taking into consideration that this thesis aims to examine the stated reasons and factors behind the participants' decisions, another important consideration is regarding the *response bias*. Dealing with the sensitive topic it can be assumed that the participants presented themselves in a socially desirable way and provided answers that they thought the author wanted to hear (Hammett et al., 2015:147). To mitigate these challenges, before and during the interviews, the author was reiterating that the interview was not a test of knowledge and there were no right or wrong answers. Furthermore, the author requested the same information in different ways that could check the accuracy of the answers. Also, despite the fact that the group interviews were requested by the participants, it should be acknowledged that they could impact each other's responses.

Moreover, given that a referral from actual to potential respondent usually takes place within a similar social group and key informants might also have their own ideological perspective on the issue (Goodman, 1961; Schutt, 2017), the use of the snowball method and key informants in identifying participants could lead the analysis in the wrong direction. First, this was overcome by contacting different NGOs, social, and diaspora networks. Also, participants were asked to introduce the author to asylum seekers from different backgrounds.

Finally, in keeping with the social constructivist worldview, it is important to note that the author interpreted the data concerning the participants' realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 60). As Sipe and Ghiso (2004: 482-483) stated, during the coding process "we bring our subjectivities, our personalities to the study."

5.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues play an important role in the research influences participants' lives. In order to ensure safe and ethical study, with no harm to the author and the people involved in this study, the LUMID's Ethical Guidelines for Fieldwork was followed.

Taking into consideration the contextual issues that characterise asylum seekers, verbal consent was more appropriate and respectful to them than written consent (Rowe, 2018: 76). Furthermore, during the pilot interview, it was found that confidentiality is more protected when participants do not sign official forms. Thus, information forms were given to all participants as part of the verbal consent including clear and concise information about their rights and purpose of the research, who will have access to the information, the procedure of the interview, the expected duration, and permission for audio-recording, which was further explained during the interview.

In order to pay attention to the wellbeing of the participants, to make them feel comfortable and minimize the potential emotional harm, interviews were implemented at a time and place preferred by the participants. Furthermore, careful attention has been paid to the longer-term safety and confidentiality of the participants and the information. The research data has been stored securely in a password protected folder and the names were anonymized (referred to as R1, R2 and so on).

In addition, the fact that the interviews were done in the participants' mother language helped the author build trust with them. Taking into consideration the sensitive nature of the topic, collecting

data without a translator also added another layer of protection and anonymity and encouraged interviewees to speak more openly and freely.

5.7 Reflectivity, Positionality and Validity

Drawing on Creswell (2007: 248), the author should be reflective and show readers that she is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that she has brought to this study. Therefore, all phases of this research process have been discussed transparently with clearly specified methods, theories, and data collection practices.

In keeping with the social constructivist worldview, the author's positionality can be assumed to influence data collection, interpretations, and analysis of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 60). Previous studies identified that asylum seekers are more likely to share their personal and sensitive experiences when the interviewer expresses empathy, non-judgment, and acceptance. Given that the author was born and raised in Georgia, made her familiar with the context and the participants. It also gave her an '*insider*' position and helped trust-building. However, it cannot be ignored that the author's educational background, gender, and *academic power* could create inequality and showed power over the research participants (Galeta, 2014: 132). Nevertheless, it can be assumed that these different positions facilitated interactions and gave the author a 'betweenness' position, indicating that no one is an *insider* or *outsider* in any absolute sense (Hammett et al., 2015: 54).

Furthermore, it is commonly acknowledged that validity is an important criterion in assessing the quality of qualitative research (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, this study has maximized the quality through *internal validity*, meaning that a good match between the concepts, empirical work, and the conclusions is ensured (Bryman, 2012: 47). Secondly, by using different sources of data, the *triangulation* approach took place within the study. Individual and group interviews with asylum seekers and key informants and the background desktop research provided 'corroborating evidence' for validating the accuracy of the study (ibid.: 392).

Chapter 6: Findings & Analysis

Drawing on the chosen theories and generalised model of asylum seeker decision-making, this chapter presents and analyses the findings of the study. Hence, the first section explores the situation in Georgia and identifies stated reasons behind the Georgian asylum seekers' decisions to leave their home country. It is divided into five subsections that have emerged consistently in the data. The second section presents and analyses the findings of the role of visa-liberalisation in the decision-making process. The third section provides information about resources such as knowledge and expectations. Lastly, the fourth section discusses the presence of personal networks and agents in the Georgian asylum seekers' decision-making process.

6.1 Reasons for Leaving

6.1.1 Poor-Quality and High-Cost of Healthcare Services

A lack of access to healthcare services was the first most cited reason behind the Georgian asylum seekers' decisions to leave their home county. Furthermore, the analysis of the interviews identified individual stories and different barriers to healthcare delivery. Those interviewees who applied for asylum because of their health problems suffered from heart disease, different types of cancer, tuberculosis, and other communicable diseases. They have reported cases of serious medical malpractice, negligence, and misdiagnosis in Georgia. One example is the story of R12:

“After the medical checkups and tests, I received a cancer diagnosis and have undergone surgery. During the surgery, doctors discovered that they had made a mistake and it was not cancer. After that, abscesses have occurred in the stomach area and my skin cells started dissolving. Georgian doctors were unable to diagnose me. I am 26 years old, I want to live a little longer and this is a reason why I left Georgia.”

In line with this, R10 reported that she had made a mistake by trusting Georgian doctors: “To remove all the lymph nodes in the neck, I got three surgeries in Georgia but the problems got worse than before.” She said that if she stayed in Georgia, she would have been died by now. Likewise, R2 expressed that after being diagnosed with breast cancer, she left the country to get free and high-quality healthcare.

All the interviewees mentioned a poor-quality of healthcare in Georgia. For example, R7 described a case such as leaving a piece of surgical equipment inside a patient's body: "If it happens once it is a mistake, but in Georgia, it happens very often which shows a lack of professionalism." They argued that the quality of healthcare in Georgia is zero because Georgian doctors have not developed their knowledge and skills after the Soviet Union. Also, some participants reported that Georgian doctors have new technologies but do not know how to properly use them.

Moreover, the majority of the participants argued that the health care system (hospitals and the pharmaceutical industry) in Georgia is a business, which has its financial interest and does not care about the well-being of patients. They also discussed the high cost of medicines and the fact that people have to pay out-of-pocket for the majority of healthcare services. As R10 stated, she cannot afford to pay for healthcare and medicines as pension (approx. € 63) is the only income for her. According to the asylum seeker participants, the universal health insurance in Georgia covers only a part of surgery costs and does not include the cost of medicines. Moreover, they discussed that the services which they can get from the state insurance are very poor. As R12 said: "If you are poor, you will die in Georgia." This quote highlights existing socio-economic inequalities and illustrates migration as a survival strategy.

The findings show that Georgian citizens' decisions to seek asylum are motivated to get free and quality healthcare services, which at first glance, might be explained by the economic (voluntary) migration theories (push and pull). However, based on the empirical data it is clear that the Georgian government fails to ensure that everyone without distinction of economic and social conditions has access to quality healthcare. Taking into consideration that health is recognized as a fundamental human right¹¹ (UDHR, 1948: 7; WHO, 2005: 1), it can be argued that Georgians' decisions to seek asylum for health reasons are responses to the failure of the state to provide the fundamental human needs. Therefore, drawing on Richmond (1993: 10-11), these Georgian asylum seekers can be identified as reactive (involuntary) migrants which emphasises the continuum between voluntary and involuntary migration.

¹¹ The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition (WHO, 2005:1).

6.1.2 Lack of Access to Basic Services for Persons with Disabilities

Mothers of children with disabilities illustrated everyday problems they had faced in Georgia, which impacted on their decisions to leave. A lack of access to basic services and widespread prejudices were reported as two main sources of all problems. As R9 said, she has been fighting the system for 13 years:

“I faced problems at every level of our life. My son could not attend the regular school system because they are not adapted for children with disabilities. He could not get adequate medical care due to the lack of appropriate services and knowledge of his specific needs. He could not have friends because of widespread disability-related stigma.”

This quote illustrates the complexities of the problem and reflects not only the current situation but also the future life of children with disabilities. Furthermore, as a single mother, she discussed the financial difficulties which are caused by the lack of social services. As she suggested in the quote below, asylum-seeking was a survival strategy for her and her son:

“I could not get a job because I had to spend every day with my son. He receives the state disability benefit which is 220 GEL (€ 63) per month and it is not enough to cover the costs of medicines. How can I pay rent, buy food, cover costs of treatment? We were doomed to die in Georgia” (R9).

Likewise, R3 and R4 who are parents of a child with Duane syndrome asserted that the legislative framework in Georgia is in accordance with international standards, promoting full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by individuals with disabilities, but in practice, “our children are not recognized as part of this society” (R3; R4).

In sum, again, linking back to the discourse about voluntary migrants versus asylum seekers distinction (see Section 3.1), these cases show that different social and economic reasons are correlated. On the one hand, the threats of discrimination against children with disabilities deprive them of the opportunity to live in a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment, that would build their base for independent living. On the other hand, it impacts families’ economic security as well.

6.1.3 Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Violence, intolerance, and discrimination against sexual and gender minorities also were one of the most commonly indicated reasons for leaving Georgia to seek asylum. Throughout the interviews, asylum seekers from the LGBTQ community described their life in Georgia as ‘fighting to survival’ and stated that they had faced problems in every aspect of their life.

For instance, R19 and R20 indicated that existing prejudices in the Georgian society about LGBTQ persons forced them to hide their orientation and gender identity, in order to protect themselves from violence and discrimination. R20 stated:

“I was living in a small city in Georgia where the situation was much worse than in big cities. I have always been a subject of discrimination, verbal, and physical violence because of my clothing and style. But it is my identity and I always wanted to freely express it. I know how stressful it is to hide your sexual orientation, it is torture for LGBTQ people and by expressing my identity I wanted to encourage others in the community [LGBTQ] to disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity.”

This quote indicates that LGBTQ people in Georgia are punished for being themselves. Also, it can be noted that when they talked about ‘survival’, it included both physical and personal survival. Therefore, they seek both physical safety and freedom. As R19 expressed: “Here (Germany) I found this freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of being gay.”

The asylum seekers also indicated that the labour market in Georgia is limited for LGBTQ persons and discussed the necessity to hide their orientation and gender identity in order to find and also to keep the working place. Moreover, R19 illustrated that every part of the discriminatory system is interlinked which makes it more difficult to protect their rights:

“I lost jobs after my bosses found out about my sexual orientation. Of course, they know that you cannot be fired because of that, so they give you false reasons for termination, such as incompetence or create an atmosphere that often makes you leave your workplace. I did not take cases to the court because it is often impossible to prove that discrimination occurred. Furthermore, due to the nature of the case, it is very difficult to hire a professional lawyer. I got tired of fighting with this system and decided to seek asylum in France.”

Due to the fact that neither same-sex marriage nor civil partnerships are legally recognized in Georgia, having family life was also an important factor for LGBTQ asylum seekers in deciding to leave Georgia. Another issue was discriminatory treatment by healthcare personnel and lack of knowledge of the specific needs of LGBTQ patients. Interviews also uncovered that transgender persons encounter violence and discrimination at even higher rates than gay and lesbians.

Furthermore, the participants discussed that the above-mentioned homophobic attitude in the Georgian society is formed and encouraged by religious and public figures. For instance, R20 stated:

“By using media, they [religious and public figures] express hate and encourage violence towards us [LGBTQ persons]. We are always discussed in the context of morality who have “incorrect” sexual orientation and need “treatment”. How can I sleep well in this country?!”

This quote illustrates the structural nature of the issue and shows that discrimination and violence against LGBTQ persons are deeply rooted in Georgian society. Moreover, it is important to highlight that the right to equality is granted by the state Constitution¹². Further, following the EU-Georgia negotiations (see Section 2.3), Georgia is transforming towards democracy by carrying out various reforms including the adaptation of the law of elimination of all forms of discrimination. However, findings show that there is a lack of political will and an effective mechanism to implement the laws and protect LGBTQ individuals from the above-quoted hate speeches and discriminatory treatments.

Based on the above-mentioned quotes, it can be argued that discrimination against LGBTQ individuals affects their economic security, health, personal life, etc. In addition, it should be mentioned that they did not need to find immediate physical safety, they had time for making rational choices. Hence, it illustrates that there are similarities between the decision-making process of asylum migration and economic migration (based on the rational choice).

¹² All persons are equal before the law. Any discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, sex, origin, ethnicity, language, religion, political or other views, social affiliation, property or titular status, place of residence, or on any other grounds shall be prohibited (Parliament of the Republic of Georgia, 2018).

6.1.4 Political Violence

All the interviewees underlined the importance of ensuring freedom from political pressure in building a safe country. They discussed the situation in Georgia in this regard and identified that factors such as political instability, threats to personal security, and human rights abuses impacted their decisions to migrate.

R13 who was working for the opposition-affiliated media reported cases of bullying and psychological pressure against journalists. Politically motivated threats appear to have been a critical factor underlying the decision to leave, as suggested in the quote below:

“Our [journalists] freedom of expression was restricted. After publishing articles critical of the government I was receiving telephone and email threats, informing to stop critical writing. Also, my family members received the same warnings from sources close to the government. Furthermore, I was a victim of bullying on social media from those people. I could endure the stress and fear but I was worried about my family and decided to leave the country” (R13).

Informant R13 also mentioned that cyberbullying was managed by the fake news pages and accounts (trolls), linked to the ruling party¹³.

Furthermore, political violence was discussed in the context of the election. The majority of the participants discussed the cases of vote-buying, intimidation of voters, the use of administrative resources for election, etc. As R3 stated: “The ruling party does everything to stay in power.” R7 and R2 also reported the widespread pressure on voters, in particular on civil servants to vote for the ruling party and to attend meetings organized by them. Furthermore, some participants argued that administrative cleansing follows up after each election and if someone does not support the party in power, he/she could lose the job. Moreover, all asylum seeker participants reported that nepotism and corruption are deep-rooted in Georgian society.

The participants also discussed a lack of state protection and expressed distrust in the police and justice system. They argued that these institutions often are influenced and controlled by the ruling party for fulfilling its political agenda. Some participants mentioned recent high-profile cases in

¹³ On December 20, 2019, the head of the Security Policy of Facebook announced that Facebook removed 344 pages and 13 groups related to the Georgian Government and which were coordinated ‘inauthentic’ behaviour (Civil.ge, 2019).

Georgia¹⁴ and expressed their concerns about selective justice and politically motivated prosecution. As one of the participants reported, there is no political will and an independent mechanism for investigating crimes committed by law enforcement officials.

As R3 expressed: “If you have money or/and power, you can fix everything here. It makes me feel unsafe.” These types of expressions such as power, money, and insecurity appeared to be commonly used by the asylum seeker participants which again, shows the combination of different economic and political reasons in the decision-making process.

Moreover, as illustrated in the quote below, hope for a better life was also indicated as a push factor:

“After the collapse of the Soviet Union, we are going round and round in circles. There is just no hope that the situation will ever get better in Georgia. I did not want to raise my children there; they deserve a better life.”

Considering the above, it is clear that Georgian asylum seekers’ decisions to leave the home country are based on both fears and hopes. It is important to underline that their hopes for a better life go beyond economic maximisation and include political freedom, the enabling conditions for good health, education, etc.

Lastly, in line with Vella (2019), above-discussed political violence can be connected to the negative liberty, when Georgian asylum seekers have not had political freedom to express their opinions in media, to make a free choice during the election, to get justice, etc. Hence, this negative liberty pushed them to leave the home country.

¹⁴ In 2017, 18-year-old Temirlan Machalikhvili was shot to death by the State Security Service officers. Since then, the issue of proportionality of the force used against him is under the investigation (Ombudsman, 2018: 28). In 2017, two minors were killed in a school brawl. The city court partially acquitted the suspects which led to mass protests about law enforcement bias. They claimed that the Prosecutor’s Office had manipulated evidence (HRW, 2018). In 2019, 15-year-old boy Luka Siradze committed suicide after being interrogated at the police station under the psychological pressure from the investigator (Agenda.ge, 2019).

6.1.5 Poverty and Poor Working Conditions

Whilst the previous sub-sections have discussed different personal reasons behind their decisions to leave Georgia, this sub-section illustrates the economic reasons, such as high rates of unemployment, poor working conditions and low wages, which were reported by all asylum seeker participants along with their threats and fears.

All respondents argued that due to the lack of decent work opportunities, lots of people in Georgia do not have sustainable living conditions. For example, R18 identified working conditions in Georgia as ‘modern slavery’ and said:

“I was working as a financial officer for a local company from 09:00 am to 09:00 pm and getting a wage of 500 GEL (€ 144) per month. In my village, kindergarten caregivers who are responsible for 30 children have unlivable wages of 180 GEL (€ 53) per month.”

Moreover, some participants also mentioned that most of the Georgians hold informal jobs, meaning a lack of social protection, poor and dangerous working conditions. R1 reported that there are many cases of workplace injury, illness and fatality, children labour, hunger, and suicides. It is important to underline that fears connected to these cases were not based on personal experiences, but rather were induced by general public experiences.

Considering the above, one may argue that it does not follow the UNHCR definition of refugee, which says that fear is the subjective element, based on the personal and family background (UNHCR: 6). However, drawing on the category of ‘anticipatory refugees’ developed by Kunz (1973:131-132)¹⁵, it can be argued that those Georgian asylum seekers left the country just before they faced the problems personally and became forced to leave.

Moreover, many respondents reported that the government of Georgia promotes the country as the best tourism destination on the international market. However, as R2 said: “Maybe it is a safe country for tourists, but not for us [citizens].” This finding challenges the existing perception of a safe country of origin.

¹⁵ See Section 4.1

As stated in section 2.1, according to the official data (Geostat, n.d.c), Georgia's monthly average gross salary was 1,217.1 GEL (€ 350) in March 2019, and the minimum subsistence level for a working-age male was 206.1 Gel (€ 59). However, these numbers were estimated as unrealistic by the participants of this study. As R4 asserted:

“I was the only wage earner of the family of four and earned 1000 Gel (€ 274) per month. How could we allocate my salary? Food costs in Georgia are higher than the national average.”

According to the participants, welfare benefits for asylum seekers in France and Germany are higher than wages in Georgia. Moreover, they mentioned the local NGOs in destination countries providing free legal aid, food, clothes, etc. to asylum seekers. It can be seen that having the possibility to get welfare benefits played an important role in deciding to seek asylum rather than using the regular migration routes.

In line with the push and pull theory, it is clear that different economic possibilities in between the place of origin and destination played a role in shaping asylum flows. However, drawing on the opinion that ‘the poorest rarely migrate’ (Tapinos, 1990; UNDP, 2009), it should be noted that none of the participants had lived below the poverty line in Georgia. They had faced financial difficulties but could not identify themselves as the poorest. This finding highlights the importance of financial resources in the asylum-seeking migration process and also shows that Georgian asylum seekers are not wholly economic or wholly political migrants (see Section 3.1), which challenges the existing categorization of international migrants.

Based on the findings, it can be assumed that during the interviews economic reasons have not been stated as main push factors because asylum seekers were aware that the above-mentioned economic difficulties could not create legal grounds for granting asylum.

6.2 Choice of Destination

6.2.1 The Role of Visa-Liberalisation

As discussed earlier in section 2.3, after the visa-liberalisation process with the EU, there has been a sharp increase in the number of asylum applications from the Georgian citizens in France and Germany. As Czaika and de Haas (2017: 921) argued, a travel visa is an important element of the asylum policy and the removal of restrictions has an immediate increasing effect on the applications (see Section 3.4).

In line with this, the interviews revealed that by removing visa restrictions, Georgian asylum seekers overcome ‘intervening obstacle’ as Lee (1966: 51) referred it and became able to fulfil their migration desires. The participants underlined that before the visa-liberalisation it was difficult and costly to obtain a visa and to travel. In addition to the visa cost, given the bureaucratic challenges that existed to get a visa, they needed to hire agents or smugglers. For example, R17 said:

“I wanted, for a long time, to leave Georgia but could not take a risk because it was costly. My wife migrated to Italy as a domestic worker ten years ago and paid € 3000; I paid only € 200.”

Along with the decision to leave, the Georgian asylum seekers’ choice over the destination was also formed by the visa-liberalization process. As, R12 explained: “First, I wanted to go to the USA but due to the visa restrictions I could not make it, so I decided to come to the EU.”

Furthermore, the majority of the respondents mentioned the fact that many low-costs direct flights to the EU have been added after the visa-liberalisation process which also influenced their decision. Nowadays, two low-cost airlines with around 40 direct flights to the EU operate in Georgia (Flight connection, n.d.). It shows that there is a correlation between the visa-free regime and the access to transportation.

Moreover, all respondents illustrated that the rules and regulations regarding the Georgian asylum seekers in France and Germany change day by day. As R8 reported: “Now they are checking every detail at the airports both in Georgia and here. They also have reduced the overall processing time for Georgian asylum applications.” Drawing on Czaika and de Haas (2017: 900), it can be argued

that Georgian asylum seekers have seen migration as a ‘now or never’ possibility because they have fear of reintroduction of restrictions or changing the asylum police.

Finally, taking into consideration the fact that visa-free travel was mainly discussed in terms of cost and risks reduction by the participants, it can be argued that visa-free travel had an important role in deciding where to go. However, it had a very limited effect on the decision to leave Georgia, as it was mainly influenced by the broader structural factors discussed in the previous section (6.2).

6.2.2 Knowledge of Destination Countries and Expectations

The findings of this research support the previous studies (see Section 3.3) showing that knowledge and image of destination countries play important roles in asylum seekers’ decision-making process.

All asylum seeker participants stated that before leaving Georgia, they were generally aware of the asylum process, housing, welfare benefits, and chances of employment in the destination country. It should be noted that not all information had the same effect. For instance, information about the ability to get free access to quality health care and other social welfare services was the first most cited factor to seek asylum in France and Germany. As illustrated by R3 and R8, France’s ‘openhanded’ social welfare system made the country attractive to the Georgian asylum seekers.

Information on asylum applications and their outcomes was also discussed as an important aspect of the decision-making process. Furthermore, France’s and Germany’s policies towards refugees have been seen as liberal policies by the interviewees. As R19 reported:

“I have heard that France is more tolerant of asylum seekers like me [sexual minority] than other countries. Also, before coming here, I searched for information on the recognition rate by countries and found out that many Georgians had received positive decisions here than in other countries in the EU.”

The internet and social networks were identified as the main sources of information. As, R1 said: “My knowledge is very practical, based on one’s personal experiences.” Hence, capturing this finding, it can be argued that the knowledge of destination country may not always be exact, as different personal factors affect each asylum case differently. Moreover, findings show that

Georgian asylum seekers lack specific knowledge of immigration policy, political and social climate of destination countries. In addition, their knowledge of regular migration routes is very limited.

This study has found that Georgian asylum seekers' expectations had more of an impact on their decision-making process than their knowledge of France and Germany. Their expectations were based on the perceived image of the destination countries and characteristics of the local societies such as democracy, respect for human rights, stable political situation, a strong economy, etc. Drawing on de Haas (2003; 2014), it can be argued that the above-mentioned expectations created hopes for a better life and increased their motivation to migrate. In the long term, all asylum seeker participants expressed desires to stay in France and Germany, to build a better life through achieving physical and psychological safety, accessing employment, education, and social welfare services. Only two interviewees who were in their 60s said that they plan to go back to Georgia after treatment.

Taking into consideration the participants' financial and individual obstacles (language, educational background, etc.) and welfare benefits for asylum seekers, it seemed more realistic to build a *better life* by seeking asylum than by using regular migration routes. However, it should be underlined that asylum seekers' hopes for a better life have not decreased the level of fear of discrimination and violence (grounds for seeking asylum).

6.2.3 The Presence of Social Networks

The presence of family and friends emerged consistently in the data as an important capital and a pull factor. According to some participants, the decision to migrate was influenced by relatives, living abroad. For instance, R10 said:

“I have relatives here [France], they knew about my problems and advised me to seek asylum here. They guided me and supported each step of the asylum-seeking process.”

One of the participants also indicated that the desire to be near family members was the main reason for choosing France. As R7 reported, her mother and brother have been living in France for six years and it was the main reason behind her decision to choose France as a destination country.

Moreover, in some cases, asylum seekers identified contact and built networks at the planning stage, after deciding to leave Georgia. For instance, R9 discussed:

“I did not know where to go, I found out my friend’s relative who had asked for asylum in France and contacted her. She shared all the important information with me and when I arrived helped me with housing, finding work, etc.”

Similarly, R17 mentioned the importance of the social network in the destination country: “Since I have never been abroad, I do not know the foreign language, and I am 63-year-old, knowing someone in the destination country was very important” (R17).

The existing social networks in Germany and France were also mentioned in the form of diaspora, refugee organizations, and religious communities. The representatives of the Georgian diaspora organizations stated that they try to build new social connections between different types of migrants and non-migrants. They use social media, specifically Facebook groups¹⁶ to share information among the migrants.

The above-mentioned Facebook groups also were reported as the main sources of information by all asylum seeker participants. The findings identified Facebook groups as the most useful social networking platform, where asylum seekers from different parts of the destination countries share their personal experiences regarding asylum procedures.

Linking back to the previous studies and the network theory (sections 3.3; 4.2), it may not seem surprising that the majority of the interviewees reported having close family members, relatives, friends, or just acquaintances in Germany and France. Therefore, based on the empirical data, it can be argued that in the case of Georgian asylum seekers, the social networks were presented at every stage of the decision-making process and played a key role in determining where to go. They were identified as main financial and human capital, facilitated the asylum-seeking process by providing information, housing, food, job opportunities, language assistance, etc.

Drawing on the network theory and the previous studies, along with family members and friends, agents and smugglers play key roles in directing asylum seekers to particular countries and in

¹⁶ Facebook groups: “ქართველები გერმანიაში/Georgier in Deutschland” (Georgians in Germany) and “ქართველები საფრანგეთში, Géorgiens en France” (Georgians in France).

facilitating travel (Robinson & Segrott, 2002: 59-60; Spinks, 2013: 9). The findings of this study do not, however, correspond to it.

None of the asylum seekers who were interviewed reported the cooperation with agent or smuggler to assist with the journey. As some participants mentioned, due to the visa-liberalisation it has become easier to plan the journey and get to Europe without agents. Moreover, participants highlighted the role of personal networks and the internet in the asylum-seeking process.

Finally, it is clear that asylum seekers need facilitators to cope with the various difficulties in the asylum-seeking process, however, in the case of Georgia, the roles of agents and smugglers were replaced by the personal networks and social media. Therefore, it can be argued that family members, relatives, and friends are non-commercial facilitators in this process.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Findings

Through a qualitative approach, this study allowed Georgian asylum seekers to describe their decision-making process.¹⁷ Guided by Robinson and Segrott's (2002) generalised model of asylum seeker decision-making, this study has analysed the stated reasons and factors behind their decisions to leave Georgia and to seek asylum in France and Germany. The study has also discussed the role of a visa-free regime in the asylum-seeking process.

In order to answer the research questions, the summary of findings is presented according to the stages of the proposed model (see section 4.3).

Stage one: Leave? and Stage two: How?

For answering the first research question: "*What are the reasons behind Georgian citizens' decisions to leave their home country and to seek asylum, rather than using regular migration routes?*", findings show that their decisions to leave were twofold:

First, the decisions were based on *fear* for their and their families' safety. In their own words, the asylum seekers interviewed defined safety beyond immediate physical threats. Rather it was

¹⁷ It is important to highlight that those who already had registered asylum applications in France and Germany were interviewed for this study.

characterised as fulfilling the basic needs, such as having access to healthcare services, decent work, justice, etc. Hence, the main reasons behind their decisions to leave Georgia were stated as follows: poor-quality and high-cost of healthcare services, violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, lack of access to basic services for persons with disabilities, and political violence.

Secondly, *hope* for a better life was also indicated as one of the reasons that influenced Georgian asylum seekers' decisions to leave the home country. In this regard, the participants stated economic reasons such as low income, poverty, and poor working conditions in Georgia. However, findings reveal that hopes to improve the economic situation did not diminish their experiences of discrimination, violence, and other above-mentioned political threats. Also, it should be noted that in some cases, the hope for a better life goes beyond a merely economic perspective, it is also defined as political liberties, better health, education, etc.

After deciding to leave, the next decision to be taken is how to leave (*seeking asylum or using regular migration routes?*). By covering the availability and accessibility of resources, stage two completes the answer to the first research question. Findings show that, first, the *individual constraints* such as limited educational and professional background, language barriers, health problems, a lack of financial resources and information about other possibilities, reduced Georgian asylum seekers' capacity to use regular migration routes. Secondly, their experiences of *discrimination* and *violence* distinguish them from regular migrants. Lastly, having the possibility to get *welfare benefits* for asylum seekers (financial support, housing, healthcare) played an important role in deciding to claim asylum.

This study has found that discrimination, violence, and a lack of access to fundamental human needs affected Georgians' economic security, and on the other hand, a lack of financial resources reduced access to basic needs and impacted their living and health conditions. Hence, it is clear that the above-discussed political and economic reasons are interlinked, which shows the complexities of migration and also, challenges the discourse about economic migrants versus asylum seekers' distinction. Furthermore, this finding illustrates that none of the migration theories can solely explain the complexities of the decision-making process.

Stage three: Where to? and Stage four: Choice of a specific destination

After deciding to leave Georgia and seeking asylum, the next decision to be taken is where to go. At this stage, by applying the social network theory, this study has added complexity to the asylum seekers' decision-making process. Hence, it became clear that Georgian asylum seekers' departure was not urgent, which identified them as anticipatory asylum seekers (see section 4.1) who had time to analyse the possible destination countries, find resources, and plan their journeys.

For answering the second research question: "*What are the reasons and factors influencing the choice of destination?*", findings show that *social networks* had a significant impact on every stage of the decision-making process in Georgia, as well as in the destination countries. However, networks such as smugglers and agents have not been used by the Georgian asylum seekers, which makes this case different from other international migrants' cases. The presence of families and friends has been identified as financial and human capital, main sources of information, facilitators, and helpers in dealing with complex barriers. Furthermore, *information* and *knowledge* of destination country and asylum welfare benefits, received from the social networks also became a key part of directing asylum seekers to particular countries. Based on this information and knowledge, asylum seekers have formed the *image* of destination countries such as democracy, respect for human rights, the welfare system, high level of education and healthcare, job opportunities, and high wages.

For the third research question: "*How, if at all, does the visa-free regime influence their decision to leave and as well as the choice of destination?*", based on the interviews, this study has found visa-free travel as an important pull factor, which has influenced asylum seekers' choices of destination by reducing the risks and costs of migration. However, it had a limited effect as a push factor, as the decisions to leave were mainly influenced by the above-discussed broader structural reasons. Moreover, it should be mentioned that there is a clear correlation between visa-free travel and other pull factors, such as the image of the country (human rights, democracy, etc.), transportation, and the asylum welfare benefits. Considering all the above-discussed factors, Georgian asylum seekers decided to choose France and Germany as major destination countries in the EU.

To conclude, this study makes a direct contribution to the current social and political discourse and the state of qualitative knowledge about the Georgian asylum seekers.

By using economically deterministic push and pull theory in conjunction with the social network theory, this study contributes to expanding the debate on asylum-seeking beyond a forced migration perspective by the understanding of the complexities of the intertwined reasons and factors behind asylum seekers' decisions. While using the generalised model of asylum seekers' decision-making assisted to discuss these complexities step by step. Furthermore, this model illustrated asylum seekers as active individuals, rather than as 'passive pawns' as they are traditionally viewed. Moreover, considering that Georgian asylum seekers' decisions have been influenced by different structural factors, they were still able to make rational choices about their journeys to seek safety and economic prosperity. However, their choices to find a better life were made under threats, violence, and discrimination what made them asylum seekers and not voluntary migrants. This finding further challenges the dominant discourse about voluntary migrants versus asylum seekers' distinction.

Moreover, visa-free travel to the EU is undoubtedly one of the major political achievements for Georgia and it is important to maintain and further strengthen this cooperation. However, ensuring the protection of fundamental human rights for all should be the priority for every government. It can be seen in this study that the government often talks about the Georgian asylum seekers, but rarely talks to them. Therefore, it is important to underline that this study has illustrated the process from the viewpoint of the asylum seekers themselves. The findings support the Georgian policymakers to see the multi-layered nature of the process and to establish reasonable and effective migration policies that meet the needs of individual asylum seekers.

Lastly, looking beyond the implications in a Georgian context, by showing similarities between the decision-making process of forced migration and voluntary migration, this study has demonstrated that the understanding of the concept of safety changes over time. In the era of sustainable development, it means not only physical safety but also covers the fundamental human needs. Hence, the empirical findings challenge the content and value of the concept of safe country of origin and show the necessity to pay as much attention to asylum seekers from non-war-torn countries as from war-torn countries.

7.2 Suggestions for Future Research

As previously argued, there is a lack of studies focusing on Georgian asylum seekers, hence, there are many opportunities for future research. First, considering limitations presented in this study, empirical data from a larger, more representative sample of current and potential Georgian asylum seekers could enhance the empirical validity and enrich the research. Moreover, considering that this is a qualitative study, which has illustrated the asylum-seeking process from the viewpoint of asylum seekers themselves, a future study, aiming to explore and compare the actual and stated reasons would gain a better understanding of the current discourse about economic versus political migrants' distinction. Finally, this study has identified that there is a correlation between a visa-free regime and other pull factors, such as the image of the country (human rights, democracy, etc.), transportation, and asylum policy. Therefore, future quantitative research is needed to examine the cause-effect relationship between visa-free travel and asylum flow.

Finally, the findings of this study can form the starting point for future research beyond a Georgian context. In particular, this study has identified key roles of social-media activity and open-source information on the internet in the asylum migration, which seems a new topic in migration management, and further studies are needed to examine the influence and implications of these factors on migration flows. Moreover, as previously argued the concept of safe country of origin has significant political and legal implications. Hence, future research could explore to what extent criteria determining the country as safe are consistent with individuals' perceptions of safety and fundamental human rights.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Participants

#	Type	Name	Gender	Age (Approx.)	Place of resident	Position/Status
1	Face-to-face, individual; Semi-structured	(R) Respondent 1	Female	37	France, Nice	Asylum seeker/Negative decision is appealed
2	Face-to-face, group interview; Semi-structured	R 2 R 3 R 4	Female Female Male	29 42 45	France, Nice	Asylum seeker / Cases are pending
3	Face-to-face, individual; Semi-structured	R 5	Male	19	France, Paris	Asylum seeker / Negative decision is appealed
4	Face-to-face, individual; Semi-structured	R 6	Female	34	France, Paris	Asylum seeker/ Negative decision is appealed
5	Face-to-face, individual; Semi-structured	R 7	Female	24	France, Creil	Asylum seeker/ Negative decision is appealed
6	Face-to-face, individual; Semi-structured	R 8	Female	30	France, Paris	Georgian diaspora organisation
7	Face-to-face, group interview; Semi-structured	R 9 R10	Female Female	37 65	France, Metz	Asylum seeker/ Case is pending

8	Face-to-face, individual; Semi-structured	R 11	Female	32	Germany, Munich	Georgian diaspora organisation
9	Face-to-face, group interview; Semi-structured	R 12 R 13 R 14	Male Male Male	26 31 29	Germany, Berlin	Asylum seekers/ Negative decisions are appealed
10	Face-to-face, group interview; Semi-structured	R 15 R 16	Female Female	29 32	Germany, Dresden	NGO - Saxon Refugee Council
11	Face-to-face, group interview; Semi-structured	R 17 R 18	Male Male	63 34	Germany, Berlin	Asylum seekers/ Cases are pending
12	Individual, video Interview; Semi-structured	R 19	Female	31	France, Nice	Refugee status is granted
13	Individual, video interview; Semi-structured	R 20	Male	25	Georgia, Tbilisi	Refused asylum seeker / Deported to Georgia

Appendix 2: Interview Guides

Interview Guide

Introduce myself, the research aim, objectives and the purpose of the interview. Make them aware of their rights, who will have access to the information, the procedure of the interview and the expected duration.

2.1 For asylum seekers

Background information

1. Gender/Age/Marital status
2. Where did you live in Georgia? (Region of origin (urban/rural). Do you consider yourself as a member of any particular minority group?
3. What is your education/professional background?
4. What is your current immigration status in France/Germany?

Push and Pull factors

5. Could you tell me briefly about your (your family) life in Georgia?
6. Could you tell me about your decision to leave Georgia and seek asylum in France/Germany?
 - a. [Follow up] What made you make this decision and who was involved in the decision-making process (Family, friends, agents etc.)?
7. How long have you wanted to leave Georgia?

- a. [Follow up] What made you make this decision now?
- 8. Do you have information about regular migration routes?
 - a. [Prompt] (*if yes*) Why do not you use them?
- 9. Why did you choose France/Germany?
 - a. [Follow up] Did you consider seeking asylum in other countries?
- 10. Tell me what you knew about France/Germany before you left Georgia.
 - a. [Prompt] What did you know about the country policy towards asylum seekers (procedure and eligibility)?
 - b. [Follow up] Where/who did you get this information from?
 - c. [Follow up] How did this information impact on your decision to come here?
- 11. Please tell me about the preparation process and the trip to France/Germany?
 - a. [Follow up] How did you plan the journey and who was involved in this process?

Living abroad

- 12. What has been your experience during the procedure of asylum-seeking until now?
 - a. [Follow up] How did your expectations meet the reality?
- 13. What are your expectations regarding your case and what are your plans? (*If the case is ongoing*)
 - a. [Prompt] Do you intend to settle in France/Germany or do you intend a temporary stay?
- 14. What does security mean to you?
 - a. [Follow up] How safe do you feel in Georgia? In France/Germany?
- 15. What are the main differences between living in Georgia and living in France/Germany?
- 16. Anything else you would like to add?
- 17. Do you have any questions about the research?

2.2 For the representatives of the Georgian diaspora organisations and refugee consultants

- 1. Please tell me briefly about yourself and your experience working with Georgian asylum seekers.
- 2. How do you see Georgians' recent flow towards the EU asking for the refugee status?
 - a. [Follow up] Why did it increase rapidly after the visa-liberalisation and was it what you expected?

3. In your experience, why do Georgian asylum seekers decide to leave their country and to seek asylum rather using regular migration routes?
4. Are you aware of how was the final decision to leave Georgia made and who was involved in this process?
 - a. [Follow up] Does anyone else suggest coming to France/Germany or is it usually their own decision?
5. In your experience, what do asylum seekers and refugees know about France/Germany before leaving Georgia?
 - a. [Prompt] Do they know about the country policy towards asylum seekers (procedure and eligibility)?
 - b. [Follow up] Where or from whom did they get this information?
 - c. [Follow up] Did this information impact on their decision to come here?
6. In your experience, what professional background/education skills Georgian asylum seekers have?
7. Could you discuss the decisions on the Georgian asylum seekers' cases.
 - a. [Follow up] What are the main arguments behind them (both, positive and negative decisions)?
8. In your experience, how do Georgian asylum seekers act after the negative decision?
 - a. [Prompt] Do they appeal the decisions, leave country voluntarily or involuntarily?
9. How do you see the future relationship between Georgia and Germany regarding the migration management?
10. Anything else you would like to add?
11. Do you have any questions about the research?