

# When Distrust Meets Hope: Georgian Migrant Women in Greece

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*For many women situated in post-socialist countries, the end of communism entailed the loss of state protection and social security. This often resulted in migration, underpinned by the hope for a better future and facilitated by trust in social networks. Trust and hope are often highlighted in the social-science literature as being indispensable means for navigating migration. What this perspective lacks, however, is an eye for the detrimental effects of the work of hope and for the beneficial effects of the work of distrust. For it can be hope that relates a subject to its exploiter and/or exploitative circumstances and it can be distrust that provides an escape route and increases agency. This article considers the illusive dimension of hope and the mobilising effect of distrust by referring to the experiences of Georgian migrant women in Thessaloniki (Greece). It shows how hope occasionally emanates out of distrust and how the combination of the two allows for new perspectives of action.*

*Keywords: hope, distrust, migration, Greece, Caucasus*

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## Introduction

For many women situated in post-socialist countries, the end of communism entailed the loss of ‘state protection and the security they had enjoyed as working women and mothers under communism’ and marked the ‘beginning of poverty and dispersal’ and a rising sense of insecurity (Michail and Christou 2016: 68–69). Such states of insecurity are difficult to maintain; they often result in depression and paralysis although they also accelerate strategies that result in migration, underpinned by the hope for a better future (Kleist 2017). Hope makes migration endurable for those many migrants who count on the positive future effects of their remittances (Lianos and Pseiridis 2014). It is often the hope of a better future for their children (Pine 2014) that is cited as a decisive reason for moving abroad – which is why remittances are effectively higher when they are used for the education of children (Lianos and Pseiridis 2014). If such hope does not exist, women in particular are less likely to migrate. Others hope to secure upward mobility (Hage 2003) or a ‘normal life’ (Jansen 2015) by the means of migration.

Some sociologists, psychologists and political scientists have argued that, in addition to hope, another affective competence is needed for navigating the vagaries that go along with migration: trust. It takes trust in one’s networks (Tilly 2007) and, to a certain extent, trust in brokers (Alpes 2017), to be able to embark on the risky endeavour that is migration. Others argue that trust fosters the social cohesion of migrants (Flores-Yeffal 2013), contributes to their emancipation (Bilgic 2013) and facilitates their integration in the new society (Korzeniewska, Bivand Erdal, Kosakowska-Berezecka and Żadkowska 2019; Reinhardt 2015). These arguments reflect the more general statements that frame trust as the glue of society (Simmel 1950: 318–319) and as a prerequisite for a good and successful life (Fukuyama 1995; Sztompka 2019). Distrust, on the contrary, allegedly fragments migrants’ solidarity (Guarnizo, Sánchez and Roach 1999), fosters hostility both among them and towards them (da Silva Rebelo, Fernández and Meneses 2020), and is an obstacle to the integration of refugees (Daniel and Knudsen 1995; Lenette 2013). Distrust is also said to hamper ‘democratic transition in post-communist Europe’ (Marková 2004). Anthropology has thus far been conspicuously absent from the investigation of the social life of distrust in migration, let alone in a post-socialist context.

Trust and hope are not isolated modes of coping with insecurity (in migration and elsewhere) but deeply intertwined. It takes trust in oneself and one’s surroundings to be able to imagine a better future – and thus to hope (Lisberg, Pedersen and Dalsgård 2015). Both aspects play a significant role in migration; trust is part of a strategy of adaptation to new surroundings and hope is directed towards the benefits of one’s work. What this perspective lacks, however, is ‘an eye for potential detrimental effects of the work of hope’ (Jansen 2021: 14) and for the potential beneficial effects of the work of distrust, for example in situations of migration. For it can be hope that relates a subject to its exploiter and/or exploitative circumstances and it can be distrust that provides an escape route. This, at least, is what we intend to illustrate in this article. The aim of this endeavour is twofold. On the one hand, we mean to contribute to the emergence of the ‘burgeoning subfield around the anthropology of hope’ and its role in migration (Jansen 2021: 1). On the other hand, we intend to add to the still few and only very recent ethnographic investigations of distrust (e.g. Carey 2017; Humphrey 2018; Mühlfried 2019) and introduce this notion into discussions of migration.<sup>1</sup>

In ethnographic investigations of distrust, the latter is decentred from its alleged constitutive counterpart – namely trust – and treated as a quality *per se*. Further on, normative assumptions regarding its assumed detrimental effect on individuals and societies are at least temporarily suspended in order to give way to empirical investigations. Following this approach, the authors mentioned above would probably agree that, in the words of Humphrey (2018: 9–10), distrust ‘can be socially productive’. Examples of the social productivity of distrust range from its potential to foster trans-border relations (Humphrey 2018), to undermine the perpetuation of political power (Carey 2017) or to domesticate a stranger through the rules of hospitality

(Mühlfried 2019). The problematic part of Humphrey's above-mentioned statement is the word 'can' as, in some instances, distrust can also have a paralysing or socially destructive effect. This is why Humphrey, in reference to Diego Gambetta's (1988) seminal book on trust, advocates 'the idea that distrust (...) can be understood as a range, varying from 'hard' (paralysing) distrust to 'prudent' distrust that allows for certain interactions' (1988: 14). However, the question remains: What exactly is it that either channels distrust into a form of 'socially productive' engagement or into a paralysing and non-productive form of despair? When, why and how does distrust widen or minimise the scope of agency, for example, in the case of migrants?

## Agenda

The following is an attempt to approach the question of how distrust relates to agency and how it impacts regimes of hope in the context of migration. We do this by referring to the experience of Georgian migrant women in Thessaloniki (Greece) who mostly work in the care sector. As with other migrant women in Greece, the on-going economic crisis has further undermined their already atomised and vulnerable status (Psimmenos 2017; Xypolitas, Vassilikou and Fouskas 2017). Among these women, distrust of the political and administrative system, the brokers who mediated their working places, the households they work in, as well as a good portion of their fellow Georgians in Thessaloniki, is so widespread that it is an essential part of their migratory experience. For some women, this omnipresent distrust wears them out and takes away all their joy, fostering depression and inactivity. For others, however, distrust increases their agency – namely when distrust leads to a critical reevaluation of people and circumstances that have previously been trusted and to an eventual disentanglement from these unhealthy relationships. It is this transitory movement from trust to distrust, we argue, that opens up a space for hope. For hope to emanate in this constellation, however, distrust needs to be backed by trust in one's resources (Zmiejewski 2020).

In the process of unfolding this argument, we understand both 'hope' and 'distrust' as generalised, gendered and culturally specific ways for Georgian women to perceive their relationships, ranging from those with the state and their employers to those with their compatriots, husbands and children. In certain situations, the one is enacted to process the other; in this vein, 'hope' represents a culturally specific way of dealing with 'distrust' and *vice versa*. It is this entanglement of hope and distrust which is in the foreground here.

## Context of the research and methodological note

In order to show the mutual constitution of distrust and hope, we elaborate on the life trajectories of Georgian migrant women in Thessaloniki who were trying to escape the 'big crisis' triggered by the breakdown of the Soviet Union and a civil war that severely deteriorated their living conditions in Georgia and hampered their prospects as well as those of their children. In this situation, the prevailing number of these labour migrants lost their confidence in the Georgian government and state, when virtually all institutions were deficient and only powerful connections or money could provide one with access to even rudimentary services. The years of the 'big crisis' in the 1990s in Georgia were marked by loss in many senses. For migrant women, it was the loss of protection (*p'at'ronoba*), which meant losing their social, physical and ontological security, as state institutions that formerly guaranteed protection in Soviet times failed to do so. Statements like 'since those times I could not put my heart into anything' – which are frequently expressed by migrant women – represent the lasting traumatic impact of this period. Their dismissive attitude towards the proliferation of radical insecurities that developed in the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union – years which, for most migrant women, brought about a fundamental loss of credibility, hope and trust – led to a self-perceived incapacity to trust, as coined in the Georgian phrase *ver vendobi* ('I cannot trust'). Expressed by the modal

verb *ver* (cannot), this phrase indicates relations where trust is hoped for or expected but is impossible to develop.

In addition to distrust in the political and social surroundings, most Georgian migrant women to Greece were also driven by a strongly articulated distrust in the capacity of their husbands and/or sons to effectively navigate the difficult situation. More than that, some women were essentially trying to escape the revitalised patriarchal norms within Georgian society that significantly limited their scope by relocating them to the realm of the household and narrowing their access to the formal labour market. The kind of experiences that migrant women had in Georgia made a significant impact on the ways in which they encountered the new, equally distrusted world. It is the rebirth of hope in an environment of distrust, then, which is at stake here.

The case material stems from 8 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Thessaloniki among Georgian migrant women, conducted by one of the authors, namely Weronika Zmiejewski, and is centred on the narratives of 50 middle- and older-aged Georgian migrant women who were educated in Soviet Georgia.<sup>2</sup> The semi-structured interviews were mostly conducted in Thessaloniki, with several others in Georgia, on the basis of snowball sampling. Most were held in Georgian and a few in Russian. Looking at the profiles of the informants, the majority of the female interviewees had been working as care-workers or cleaners in Greece for more than two years and were mothers and, in some cases, already grandmothers. Though around half of the informants had a documented status during their stay in Greece, all of the interviewed migrant women experienced times in migration without such a status. Data were also collected through participant observation – e.g. when visiting migrant women at their workplaces or accompanying them on their daily routines in Thessaloniki. The interviewees were informed about the research aims, methods and use of the qualitative data, and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. Furthermore, the data have been treated in ways that guarantee the safety of the interviewees.<sup>3</sup>

Thessaloniki, as the second largest city in Greece, became a hub for post-Soviet migrants by the end of the 1990s, spurred on by the inflow of thousands of ethnic Greeks from former Soviet Georgia to Greece after the fall of the Soviet Union. The economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s created a strong demand for labour in Greece that was partially met by Greek women who were increasingly entering the official labour market. This, in turn, created a demand for work in the home-care sector to be filled with female workers from abroad. For many women in Georgia who had suffered from the socio-economic hardships of the 1990s, this demand for labour came at exactly the right time, since the former most popular target country for migration, the Russian Federation, became almost inaccessible to Georgian migrants due to the worsening political climate between the two countries and the concomitant restrictive migration regulations *vis-à-vis* Georgian citizens in the Russian Federation. Further on, migration to Greece was facilitated by the social relations which many Georgians had created during the Soviet period with members of the Greek community in Georgia. As most of the ethnic Greeks from Georgia had settled in Greece in the 1990s, they could be approached as intermediaries for migration. At the end of the last century, Greece thus became one of the main target countries for Georgian migrant women, despite the immense obstacles they faced in documenting their status, owing to the conditions of their employment in the domestic branch (Marouf 2015).

The stream of Georgian female migrants to Greece steadily intensified from the beginning of the new millennium until 2012 (Hofmann 2012), when the economic crisis and recession deprived the Greek middle and higher class of its economic resources. To the present day, women from Georgia are mostly engaged in informal domestic services in Greece, with care for the elderly, babysitting, housekeeping and cleaning as the main tasks. Even if they manage to regulate their stay, they only have access to a temporal residence that nevertheless legalises their work relations. Despite the harsh effects of the Greek economic crisis, thousands of Georgian women – many without documented status in any shape or form – carried on working in the Greek domestic sector during the time of the fieldwork in 2015.

The following sections begin with the life histories of two Georgian migrant women who were working in different branches in Thessaloniki without a documented status<sup>4</sup> at the time when the fieldwork was conducted. We focus on these two life stories, as they are not only paradigmatic for the biographies of our interviewees, but also represent exemplary ways of dealing with the experience of distrust in migration. The first is Nino who, in the course of migration, came to distrust those who offered support and help when she first arrived in Thessaloniki.<sup>5</sup> The process initiated by this distrust was a painful one; it ended with a radical break with her former patrons that opened up pathways for a new future and thus allowed her to hope again. The second woman is Tamar, who had been deeply disappointed in her husband and her son, whom she neither trusted to enhance the economic situation of the family nor to take responsibility for their own lives.

### Looking for protection

In the post-socialist period, household units adapted new economic strategies in which women, in particular, played a key role by establishing diverse care-networks (Pine 1995; Sumbadze 2008). Within this process, the ‘extension of existing kin-based, inter-household divisions of labour’ was decisive (Pine 1995: 57), as it reached beyond national borders and thus enabled women to leave for migration. At a certain stage of life – mostly before migration – the support of certain kin members of the network played a crucial role for all the women met in Thessaloniki, e.g. in regards to the search for a job, to financial sustenance or to assistance in organising a documented status. These ties fundamentally impacted on the migratory trajectory.

Nino arrived in Thessaloniki in 2008 on a three-month tourist visa. Like thousands of other Georgian migrant women in Greece, she entered the country before the European Council adopted a regulation on visa liberalisation for Georgians travelling to the EU in 2017. Having left Georgia, her husband and their two teenage daughters for the first time in her life, Nino was met by her affinal relatives who had come to Thessaloniki with the first wave of mainly Georgian Greeks shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union. Since this related couple could claim Greek origins, they had legalised their stay and thus had established their small business in Thessaloniki. Nino, who did not know anyone else apart from these relatives and had no Greek language skills, agreed to help out with cleaning and cooking in their bistro and thus to get under the patronage of her relatives. For kinship members (here the couple), acting as the patrons ensures the return of their patronage (Turaeva 2016). In the context of migration, structural imbalances between kinship members due to differences in status (e.g. regarding the possession of a residence permit or citizenship), unequal access to resources and the general vulnerability of the newcomers lead to the overlapping of patronage and kin relations (Turaeva 2016). Thus, when confronted with very difficult socio-economic conditions, accepting the role of the client in kinship relations becomes an existential strategy (Murphy 2016).

After several months of consolidating the clientelist relationship, the couple organised additional informal cleaning jobs for Nino, who had overstayed her visa, so she could start to remit money to her family in Georgia; they also offered her housing and assistance in obtaining a residence permit as well as raised her hopes of accumulating capital, a circumstance that made her prone to providing care-work and unpaid labour. Since, for Nino, as for all the interviewed middle- and older-aged migrant women, migration is about earning money as fast as possible.

As the situation in Greece worsened with the onset of the Greek crisis, the couple offered Nino the option of marrying an older Georgian-Greek man with whom they were acquainted in order to obtain a Greek residence permit and thus access to formal cleaning occupations. Nino, though married in Georgia for 19 years, agreed. As the Greek crisis shut down cleaning jobs in private houses, she did not want to work in elderly care – the most accessible niche for undocumented migrant workers. Nino divorced her husband in Georgia for the sole purpose of getting legally married in Greece (and without breaking off her relationship with him).

Although officially married for the second time, she continued to live with the couple for the next three years. When the Greek authorities contested the marriage, Nino had to spend her savings from her recent years of work in order to pay for a lawyer the couple had found for her and for the appeal.

In spring 2015, Nino was still living with the couple. Though the juridical process was not completed, she had a temporary residence permit and could work as a cleaner in cafés. She had only a little time to meet, as at night she would clean cafés and during the day would have to sleep a little and then help out in the bistro and in the couple's house. Most of her free time she dedicated to the well-being of the couple and their children, stressing the importance of her relatives' care (*p'at'ronoba*, literally: patronage, implying protection) as an economic necessity. A year later, however, she had resigned from her work in the bistro and painfully separated from her relatives, explaining this process as follows:

*When I arrived here, I thought they should help me since I am from the same village and we are family members. I totally entrusted myself to Vazha and Tsitsi [the couple] as I did not know anything about anything here in Greece – I thought there was no other choice. I did whatever they told me; I was so naïve. As they helped me, I sacrificed myself by working for them. And not only for them. I tried to save every cent and send the money back to my daughters but now all this belongs in the past.*

Engaging in a trust relationship with the couple who promised protection, information and labour made her highly dependent on the trust-givers and vulnerable to exploitation – especially as the relatives were also the providers of brokerage. Nino continued:

*When I lived with them [the couple], I had nothing, no house back in Georgia,<sup>6</sup> no capital. I still do not have anything. But living with them I could avoid working with the elderly. This I just can't do. Though I was sceptical about everything they did, how they lived and how they behaved towards others [Georgians] in Thessaloniki, I hoped so much that by staying with them, my condition would change. They promised me that, so I followed all their instructions, without question.*

The authoritarian position of migrant brokers is accepted by most migrants due to their vulnerable position in the new place, but not only. As Vammen (2017) rightly observed, the mediation and support that the brokers provide also trigger migrants' hopes by 'producing ideas of potential futures that drive migrants' trajectories beyond structural constraints' (2017: 43). This side effect of brokerage, which had been overlooked in scholarship on migration (2017: 43) is important for understanding why Nino was attached to her hopes for such

a long time. This observation supports a more general point made by Crapanzano (2004) in which, in contrast to a desire, hope entails a passive mode as it depends on circumstances and other actors. Although Zigon (2009) agrees with Crapanzano on the 'background attitude of preserving hope through the everyday routines' (2009: 268), he disagrees in regards to locating hope outside of the active realm. Based on his own research, Zigon instead defines hope as 'the temporal orientation of intentional and ethical action' (2009: 254).

Though Nino's hope depended on external agents, she continued to hope for the positive effects of being good and working hard. In Nino's words, 'I sacrificed myself by working for them', with this 'sacrifice' seemingly serving as the only way to cope with very depressing circumstances. Here, again, hope is essential for negotiating insecurity and undertaking a migration project (cf. Kleist and Thorsen 2017). The interplay of hope and uncertainty encourages migrants to actively engage with precariousness in positive anticipation (Hernández-Carretero 2017: 113).

Looking at the interplay of insecurity, uncertainty and hope is crucial for understanding Nino's endurance and actions directed towards the fulfilment of her 'precarious hope' (Parla 2019: 177). The initial stage is the most uncertain in the whole migration project, as migrant women lack languages skills and social networks in the new destination, are mostly indebted and, therefore, are in urgent need of earning money as fast as possible. As Nino said in retrospect:

*I preserved hope (imedi) for a reward for my labour. I tried to be good, always good to them. Though I was sad, I could not show my sadness. I felt under pressure and control all the time, since they cared for me. I knew that their world was not my world. Still, I endured all this with the hope that, by giving up my life, I could make a better life for my children.*

This indicates that hope is sustained by the idea of 'existential reciprocity', implying a strong belief in reward for the sacrifice made (Lucht 2017: 154). In the migration context, the reward very often implies 'successful children', who gain the capacity to reciprocate the emotional and material care they received. Belief in compensation for sacrifice feeds the hopes of many migrant mothers from the post-socialist realm. In this respect, hope is also rooted in cultural gender perceptions, as apparent in another statement by Nino:

*Everything I learned in childhood was a big mistake. One should know about pain and things that can happen. Somehow everything in my childhood was told in an idealistic way – how to behave as a woman, kalivit (womanlike), how to think and act as a woman. This was all a big lie. But somehow this is still part of my self. Maybe because of this idealistic worldview, I have preserved hope and dreams inside of me.*

This statement identifies a central characteristic or prerequisite of hope: past experiences that set the venue for the creation of expectations guiding present aspirations and hopes (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). Nino takes a critical stance towards her past – more precisely the way in which she was educated, raised and socialised back in Georgia – because her childhood and youth did not prepare her for the hard years of transition in Georgia and even harder years in migration, when she needed to face an unimaginable reality. Her morality is rooted in (consciously reflected) idealised perceptions of the then-existing socialist reality, which predefined women's habitus and rules of conduct. Behaving in a 'womanlike' (*kalivit*) manner meant to comply both with the role of working mothers participating in Soviet society through labour and with the role of women as bearers of the nations (Ashwin 2000), including the responsibilities of motherhood (Barkaia 2018), engendering the image of a self-sacrificing woman (Lundkvist-Houndoumadi 2010). Incorporating these two roles nurtured Nino's hopes for reward and a stable life. Hence, Nino's deep hope could be seen as being grounded in a utopian ideology, one that promised a better future (Pine 2014).

### **Developing distrust**

After Nino had gone through a period of mental hardship, she finally dared to listen to the rising sense of distrust of her relatives. When Nino consequentially asked to have direct access to resources, hence a share in the business, this claim caused a conflict. From the point of view of the relatives, Nino disregarded the support, shelter and family ties as appropriate return favours for her labour. The difference in status and power between Nino – the newcomer – and the couple – the established migrants – contributed to the conflict over resources. Distrust was thus needed in order for Nino to change her personal circumstances in migration, despite her vulnerability as the one with fewer resources. She explained it this way:

*How long should I have stayed dependent? I felt so dependent on them – the papers, the house, the life. But then so many little things happened – little things again and again and again. I said things in a careful way but no one listened to me. They even did not notice how much I have drudged for them these last years.*

According to Nino's explanation, it was not a sudden event that switched her mind into a mode of distrust but a process initiated by suspicion. Once the suspicion was present, it only needed a little push to cross the 'threshold' (Luhmann 2014 [1968]: 84–85) of replacing trust with distrust. This push emanated from Nino's realisation that her relatives were effectively exploiting her. In a sudden fit of anger, she asked for direct access to resources, i.e., a salary for the hours she worked in the bistro. This demand caused a major conflict where all involved in the relationship started to highlight their commitment and the concomitant sacrifice (care, protection, family life). Consequentially, Nino moved to a little apartment belonging to a friend and cut off all links with her relatives.

Within this process, she managed to disentangle herself from the previously demanded unconditional loyalty that made her prone to exploitation. She dared to become *up'at'rono* (without patronage) and thus to accept the vulnerability of being without protection (the juridical process of her status was still not completed) which, for Nino, meant to gain freedom (*tavisupleba*, literally: self-right). In retrospect, Nino realised that, like all the other migrant women whom she met, she yearned for protection and because of this was willing to behave loyally to those who provided it. Loyalty towards the providers of protection does not necessarily indicate a general and internalised acceptance of status differences, however. Showing weakness and vulnerability is a means of receiving protection.

Distrust gave Nino the power to step out of her asymmetric relationships and finally enabled her to look for new, more equal ones. Though, often, distrust is triggered by the unfamiliar and strange, in this particular case it was, instead, ignited by familiarity with circumstances that are only too well known. In migration, women have often blamed other compatriots for misusing cultural proximity to justify exploitation and to legitimise demands by referring to nationally coded principles of honour and kinship tropes. Thus, from Nino's perspective, trusting in the context of migration is dangerous, since it means allowing others (in this case the settled migrants or brokers) to have power over oneself (Raffnsøe 2015).

Frequently used phrases such as 'I have only acquaintances here', 'I do not want a lot of friends', or 'I avoid places where Georgians meet' express migrant women's distrust of their community and a sense of social distance. Instead of breaking these ties, however, migrant women still interact with the people they actually distrust, because life in migration is uncertain. In the words of Davide Torsello (2003: 219), 'Mistrust operates ... not as a form of apathy or inactivity, but as an active way of dealing with uncertainty and general conditions of scarcity'. Hence, mistrust does not necessarily lead to cutting off relations but to a certain 'reserved' mode of interaction (Mühlfried 2018: 16). In some cases, when migrant women lose their flats or jobs and urgently need money or support, they have to call on their entire network and call upon individuals with access to services, jobs or other networks, even if they distrust them. Therefore, migrant women often engage in relationships charged with distrust in order to counteract unforeseen eventualities.

### **Radical, resilient and lost hope**

For a long time, Nino had hoped that her commitment to the couple, who had supported her from her very first days in Thessaloniki, would be rewarded. It was this hope that made her endure and accept the obligations and demands within the couple's household. She surrendered to an illusion and, thereby, disregarded the present, underpinning her loyalty for many years. Trust had left her much earlier than hope had but, as Nino emphasised, it was hope (*imedi*) that made her stay with her relatives. The questioning of routinely sacrificing



to kin members in both the migrant community and at home in Georgia constitutes a turning point in migration (Zmiejewski 2020). Why did hope remain when trust in the agents disappeared? For Nino, hope became an anchor that enabled her to continue struggling, because it provided security when trust was fading. Before it did so, hope existed as a Siamese twin of trust, since hope that concerns the immediate life-world is usually ‘backed up by some kind of trust in ... things being possible to realize’ (Pedersen and Liisberg 2015: 1). This momentum of continuous hope, when trust has vanished, discloses the illusive dimension of hope. The hope was also based on values and norms that guarantee some stability and therefore functioned as a coping mechanism when trying to avoid a conflict. In the case presented here, kin relations are involved; a conflict with the related couple could endanger Nino’s reputation not only in the migrant community, but also in her social surroundings back in Georgia. Instead of a future orientation, adhering to the illusive hope of a later reward – while, at the same time, no longer trusting her patrons as a prerequisite to gain access to flats and money – becomes a coping strategy aimed at a ‘relief from the pressing demands of everyday life’ (Bryant and Knight 2019: 153).

Zigon (2009) questioned the utopian dimension that has perpetually been subscribed to hope by the Marxist philosopher Bloch (1996) and anthropologists such as Miyazaki (2003), Turner (2015) and Sliwinski (2016). Based on research in Moscow in the 2000s, Zigon (2009) argues that hopes are not oriented towards utopia but aim at stability and the living of a normal life. Indeed, Georgian migrant women articulated hopes (in the sense of Zigon 2009) but, rather, in regard to the whole migration project; hence from a forward-looking perspective, they also hoped to gain stability and what they perceived as a normal stable life through their struggles in migration. Yet Nino’s ‘concrete’ hope associated with her patron relatives was of a much more short-term, short-lived and illusive nature. When, finally, her hopes began to fade, distrust slid in and impelled Nino towards separation and the consequent start of a vulnerable but new life in migration.

In Nino’s relationship with her relatives, hope had vanished and distrust encouraged her to separate. After many years as a migrant, Nino dared to trust in her self-established resources, such as her professional networks and her own abilities; such trust in one’s resources and capacities is a precondition for the emancipatory effect of distrust that allowed Nino to separate from her patrons and live her own life. A year after her separation, Nino explained in a conversation how she had slowly recovered from the conflict and made herself feel more comfortable in her own flat and the hitherto unknown and unprotected situation. Finally, the process of distrust made her hope for a different future, a future that before she was not able to anticipate. This hope was radical in the sense that it not only entailed an entirely new direction but also fundamentally affected her presence. Despite the complaints of her relatives in Georgia, Nino separated from her Georgian husband and thus lost her social standing in Georgia. She therefore started to direct her practices and investments towards the hope of a radically different life uncoupled from the patrons and her former as well as current, official husband – be it in Georgia or in Greece. In the light of the continuous political and social vulnerability that Nino faced in migration, turning to and investing in the possibilities of the present expresses the ‘radical hope’ of subjects (Lear 2008) to overcome the alleged ‘right of other actors to define the direction of their active presence’ (Kallio *et al.* 2021: 4008). As with Nino, many migrant women gain more self-esteem and more knowledge over the course of time and, although mostly their political status does not change, they manage to detect situations of dependency and thus become more selective in respect to their relationships.

### **Hopeless distrust**

Due to their uncertain status in which migrant women have to cope with plenty of difficulties, many of them search for protection or patronage (*p’at’ronoba*). In the given context, the role of a patron can be taken over by relatives (as in the case of Nino), former neighbours who moved to Greece earlier, friends or acquaintances

from Georgia of ethnic Greek origin, Greek employers and/or other established migrants. When the trust invested in the providers of protection is subverted because it demands everlasting subordination and hampers the cultivation of individual resources, it may turn into distrust and eventually result in the breaking of an established relationship. The process of separation from the target of distrust – here, the former providers of protection – can be an uplifting experience and eventually foster hope, as in the case of Nino. In other words, hope comes into play after successfully disentangling oneself from the centre of distrust, for example by embarking on migration or breaking away from a patron. However, sometimes it does not, as the following example of Tamar illustrates. What does it take, then, for hope to emerge out of distrust and which factors work against such emergence?

### *Distrusting home*

Tamar left Batumi at the most critical moment in her life. It was in 2012 after her grown-up son was taken to hospital. He underwent a very costly surgical procedure, for which Tamar had to mortgage one of her two flats to gain a bank loan. After she was sure that her son would make a full recovery, Tamar decided to migrate. This was the only option that gave her the hope that she would be able to earn the money to pay off the mortgage in the near future and thus would get the flat back. She reached out to all her acquaintances and hoped to get to the USA (which she managed to do a decade later) but, at that time, she was willing to move anywhere that middle-aged or older Georgian women could work – be it Turkey, Italy, Greece or Spain. Until 2014, most migrant women from Georgia worked in Greece.<sup>7</sup> A former neighbour who lived in Thessaloniki offered Tamar some patronage (*p'at'ronoba*) for her migration project. Tamar took out another loan to finance an illicit and dangerous border crossing to Greece and thus entered the country without a documented status. Like most Georgian migrant women, Tamar was already considering migration years before her son's accident, but different obstacles – such as the moral objections that a mother and a wife should stay with her family, as well as economic difficulties to finance the migration process – had deterred her from labouring abroad.

Tamar, like the prevailing number of Georgian migrant women to Greece, lost her confidence in the Georgian government and state during the post-socialist period, when only powerful connections and/or money could provide one with access to rudimentary services. This is how Tamar remembered how distrust entered her life:

*We lost pretty much everything. Shota [her husband] had always worked, but never earned enough for all we needed. He was submissive towards his family, never asking for support or fighting for anything. For a long time, I hoped he would manage to provide us with a normal life. But then, when Levan [her son] needed an urgent operation, I noticed again that he was too weak. So, I decided to mortgage our flat and, although I never wanted to, I went to Greece with a great pain in my heart. From that moment on, I distrusted him. I know he wanted the best for us but he never managed to do so, no matter what he promised. So, it was me who had to do something for our future.*

The loss of hope had finally triggered her distrust and encouraged her to leave Georgia. The husband, who was considered to be the primary caretaker of the family, could not cope with the emanating difficulties. Having lost their hope (*imedi*), many migrant women remembered how uncertainties led them to distrust the promises of improvement and fostered their plan to migrate.

Many of them expressed feelings of exposure, as life became unpredictable due to economic and political changes, civil conflicts and partially 'open' borders. When recalling the moment when they decided to leave for Greece, migrant women stressed their urgent need for money and their vulnerable situation in general. The

poverty and unemployment that had burdened most families in post-Soviet Georgia made them dependent on kinship relations.

Every migrant woman interviewed remembered the struggle to ensure the survival of their families and how distrust of the outside world – namely the new political and economic system – was intersecting with their private lives. In the private realm, distrust was initially directed at their husbands' ability (if still alive) to sustain the family and then towards the capacity of the kinship system to provide support for the children. As a way to potentially change those circumstances related to 'hopelessness, despair and acute loss in the present' (Pine 2014: 96), migration becomes an enactment of hope. In precarious living conditions, as Kleist (2017: 13–14) has described it in reference to Hage (2003) and Gaibazzi (2014), it is the existential stuntedness that encourages potential migrants to believe in and imagine a different future through physical escape.

### *Maintaining distrust*

According to Tamar, women in migration compensate for loneliness with mutual socialising. 'Here, in Thessaloniki, we eat each other' is a phrase, which she used to express the relationship between Georgian migrants in Greece. Her statement presupposes that the relationships that migrant women invest in are based on the idea of profit and business rather than emotional attachment. In relation to her Greek employers, Tamar also remained distant and suspicious – a stance that allowed her to protect herself from exploitation. Tamar, who provided 24-hour care for a retired couple, did her work properly and accurately but never more than was demanded; she also avoided becoming part of the family she worked for. She did not believe in the necessity to engage in intimate trust relations. According to Tamar as well as other migrant women working in domestic care work, one is usually distrusted by their employers – so mutual trust is unfounded, at least at the beginning of the employment relationship.

The distrust between Greek employers and their houseworkers is historically rooted. According to Pinelopi Topali (2010), this distrust shaped a certain habitus towards incoming care-workers from the early-twentieth century until now. However, it is a quality that provides the potential for change:

*The domestic worker-‘spy’ is gradually transformed into a trustworthy person and finally into a person of the ‘house’, as soon as she completes the period of her intensive training by the employer and, as a result of this training, gets to develop an almost inherent, ‘natural’ relationship with the domestic space (2010: 322).*

Thus, a domestic worker has to go through several stages until the initial distrust and the perception of them as a 'spy' is possibly transformed into something else. Looking at domestic workers as a potential threat is both a historical continuity and a reproduction of the current media discourse on migrant domestic workers, which substantiates anxiety and prejudice towards them.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in this particular setting, where relationships are built on oral arrangements that contain risk and insecurity, distrust is socially and culturally embedded and accepted.

The distrust that migrant women articulated during or after migration is also related to the fact that care-workers are generally distrusted by Greek society as well as by the Greek government and media. Experienced migrants who have been in Greece for longer than others, like the couple who provided patronage for Nino, are very much aware of the distrust that incoming migrants are confronted with. They also understand that the newcomers are eager to establish a network as fast as possible in order to process their urgent economic needs. This implies that it is not only sympathy and emotional attachment that motivates them to engage with the newcomers but also a search for profit which, in turn, contributes to the perpetuation of distrust. After passing

through the difficult period of being distrusted, many migrant women establish trust bonds that consequently move towards the familiarisation of the relationship within the workplace which, in turn, offers them protection (*p'at'ronoba*) in respect to legalisation and stable employment.

Tamar maintained her distrust towards her employers throughout the entirety of her migration journey. She did not feel the need to trust, as she relied on the properties she owned in Georgia and her abilities at work. As she noted: 'My flats are my castles, my back, my existence, the most important of what I have'. Having confidence in her own resources, Tamar's distrust made her less vulnerable to exploitation and betrayal. However, the distance that she maintained towards her employers and the Georgian community also caused loneliness, depression and a craving for recognition.

### **Intimate distrust**

Tamar tolerated the degrading care-work, buoyed by hope for a greater good in the far-distant future – the future that she planned and imagined for her son. The whole migration project was dedicated to building a dignified life for him. She stated:

*My husband is weak, he is not a mamak'aci (real [Georgian] man). I was always suffering from this. For this reason, I wanted to do everything to make my son become a real man. I want to buy my son a flat. And of course he needs a car. But I never send money like other women do. I only send things that he needs for our home or for his everyday life – and gifts for sure. This is what every mother does.*

Tamar's entire migration project is dedicated to her imaginings in regard to the life of her son. By means of migration, she hopes to provide her son with the resources that would make him the kind of man (*mamak'aci*) she desired. Her economic activities are derived from her dreams concerning his manhood. Though she believes in her son's potential, she does not trust in his abilities. For this reason, she tries to exert control over him, as it is she who buys gifts and items and thus shapes his material future. Moreover, she checks his every action – an act of distrust which is interpreted as a migrant woman's motherly care in Georgia, another reminder that the notion of trust and the value of trust are socially and culturally embedded (Pedersen 2015: 105).

Tamar was one of the few migrant women who never invested in documenting her status and who returned to Georgia relatively soon (three years) after her arrival in Thessaloniki. The hope that she cultivated over the course of her migration grew when her son married and took on a new job. Though she was frightened and not sure whether or not she could risk trusting her son, when her suffering in the psychologically challenging 24-hour-care arrangement became unbearable, she decided to return to Georgia. Several months later, in Batumi, she said:

*I see I have to leave again, he [her son] will not manage to pay off so many loans. Everything that is costly in our flat is sold or in the pawnshop. My friends in Greece told me, 'You will come back as soon as you understand that actually nothing works back in Georgia, that you have to ask for money to colour your hair'. They are right. I have to leave again. But I have to go to America where I will get paid better. Only then can I change the situation here.*

The hope that money would solve a multitude of problems is the biggest illusion in the migration project. Despite the large financial contribution of women to the well-being and maintenance of household lives in Georgia, many migrant women have experienced this very bitter moment after returning from migration. They realised that their substantial long-term support was not sustainable. Moreover, the demands of leading

a middle-class life are growing faster than salaries in Georgia. In these circumstances, Tamar did not want to accept and endure the harsh living conditions, which is what made her migrate again. This time it was not Greece – where she had already established her ties and even a job was waiting for her – but the USA which shaped her hope for faster labour achievements due to much higher salaries for migrant care-workers. In contrast to Nino, Tamar's distrust did not lead to a detachment from the distrusted subject, which would direct hope in new directions but, rather, to an engagement. Though she spatially created distance and became financially independent, her whole migration project was dedicated to substituting for the lack of trust in her son and husband. Hence, there is no turning point in her migratory experience – a turning point that is reached when migrant women like Nino start questioning their engagements due to rising distrust in the sense of their loyalty and remittances on the one hand and, on the other, entrust in new established resources in migration such as friendship, employers and own abilities. This process may apparently lead to a development of hope in the radical new. It can exist then even without trust (Pedersen and Liisberg 2015: 1).

Tamar is still counting on the hope inherent in many migration projects that is rooted in the idea that material means and money provide for the well-being of the household back home and thus sustain life across generations (Narotzky and Besnier 2014: 4–5). To cope with loss and status devaluation, Tamar, like many Georgian women, chose migration in order to restore and ensure the middle-class status of her family. The demands are high and challenging since the capitalist market economy greatly contributes to the images of well-being and class perceptions. For Tamar, as for her co-migrants, their economic practices in regard to crisis, hope and values are essentially embedded in a space that is market-dominated. However, Tamar continues labouring as a migrant care-worker (only this time in the USA) not only due to her family's lack of material means but also because she feels the need to provide her son with material attributes that correspond to the prevalent neo-traditional notions of manhood in contemporary Georgia. This invites us to think critically about the vast majority of anthropological writings on hope which, as Jansen (2021: 13) noted, consider hope to be good. Though hope bears optimism and is a positive feeling or mode, it can paralyse (Crapanzano 2003) or contradict other individuals' or groups' hopes and thus generate conflict (Jansen 2021: 13). Hope is a multifaceted and ambiguous concept, as it has the potential to both enable and disable (Parla 2019). Thus hope can also be oppressive. The sons and daughters of Georgian women labouring in Greece, for example, often feel obliged to follow the life paths that have been designed by their migrant mothers in order not to destroy their hopes as well as their endurance to withstand migration. This is also a heavy burden for adult children back in Georgia.

Yet, when thinking about Tamar's economic practices and the hopes attached to them, one also has to consider the years of uncertainty she experienced before migration and the hopelessness of this particular 'Soviet' generation trying to make a living in Georgia. This hopelessness, which has been expressed by almost all of the Georgian migrant women that were a part of this research, is often related to the reported unwillingness of the various post-Soviet Georgian governments to acknowledge women's migration struggles and their Soviet educational background. This points to the importance of yet another actor playing a significant role in creating and distributing 'societal hope' in capitalist systems: the nation state – which also excludes certain marginalised groups from state-promoted visions of social advancement (Hage 2003), as most Georgian migrant women would certainly agree with.

It can be concluded that hope not only arises in situations of uncertainty (Hage 2003; Kleist 2017; Miyazaki 2004; Vigh 2009), but also 'out of the socio-historic-cultural, as well as the personal, condition of struggle' (Zigon 2009: 262). The struggle is inherent in Tamar's migration project and, more precisely, in her labour activity since the precarious working conditions and the exhausting 24-hour live-in care-work sustain a very uncertain environment and challenge her daily life on many levels. Still, it is this daily labour struggle through

which migrant women have to discipline their bodies and minds (Fedyuk 2011) in order to cope with the pressing circumstances and to sustain the hope of finally achieving the imagined well-being of one's household.

Like Tamar, all interviewed migrant women hoped that, through their engagement and hard work, the living conditions of the entire family would change. Though the care-work for the elderly and sick is perceived as devalued, this same work engenders the hope that, through its gains and assets, the status of the family back in Georgia can be released from devaluation. This logic also feeds the hope of healing broken relationships since, like many migrant women, Tamar and Nino left Georgia while being trapped in destructive marriages.

Tamar is still labouring from a distance in order to sustain her hopes and transform the imagined future into her present. Although while living and working in the USA she does not physically participate in this present that is localised in Georgia, her distrust of her son's and her husband's abilities is the driving force in her struggles of everyday hardship in migration. She hopes to return to Georgia after creating circumstances that will meet her conceived financial demands for the family, which means that she would risk trusting anew.

## Conclusions

The findings of this article support the view that hope and trust are indispensable means of navigating the insecurity that is symptomatic of migration. What they also indicate, however, is that in particular migratory experiences, hope has a paralysing and distrust a mobilising effect that, in certain circumstances, lays the grounds for new hopes. It is with this observation that we aim to contribute to the flourishing anthropology of hope and the nascent anthropology of mistrust, as well as to migration studies. Whereas the first has recently brought to the fore the constructive potential of distrust (Carey 2017; Mühlfried 2019), the latter is still dominated by a perception of distrust as a problem – e.g. by pointing to the distrust with which refugees are often confronted as an obstacle to their integration (Daniel and Knudsen 1995).

As for the anthropology of hope, we follow the call to pay attention to the 'potential detrimental effects of the work of hope' (Jansen 2021: 14). In respect to studies of mistrust, we converge with approaches illustrating that distrust does not equal the absence of trust (which often has a paralysing effect) but is, instead, to be seen as a mode of engagement – and thus may increase agency (cf. Carey 2017; Mühlfried 2019). Finally, we intend to put into perspective migration studies that have highlighted hope's emancipatory and visionary potential (e.g. Kleist and Thorsen 2017) and make the argument that such potential and effects should not be taken for granted. For quite a few of the Georgian care workers in Thessaloniki, for example, it is precisely the hope that things will change for the better that ties them to exploitative relationships and deeply unsatisfying settings.

In this context, rising distrust fosters feelings, convictions and actions that may eventually lead to a radical break with such relationships and settings, as exemplified in the experience of Nino, whose distrust in her 'patrons' opened up new horizons beyond exploitation. Based on these experiences, it rather seems that hope can be counterproductive – as it hinders the development and 'activation' of distrust, often over long periods of time – and that therefore hope, in certain situations, limits agency.

Migrants, such as the Georgian women in Thessaloniki, usually enter a field that is saturated by distrust, both in respect to their domestic workplace and to the migrant community itself. In order to cope with these situations, most migrants rely on trust-based relationships (Xypolitas *et al.* 2017). These relationships can be based on kinship, locality or joint experiences and can often be traced back to a mutual country or region of origin. Such relations provide protection in an unknown field that is difficult to navigate and potentially dangerous, not least because of the distrust the newcomers are confronted with. They also provide access to the local labour market – usually at a price, however. This price is to be paid in the form of money deduced from one's income handed over to brokers, job intermediaries, or in the form of favours to patrons that are not voluntary but, rather, 'part of the deal'.

After greater familiarity with patrons, the migrant community and the local labour situation, distrust often sneaks in. This may lead to a disentangling from constitutive relationships which, in turn, opens up a new space – as in the case of Nino illustrated above. This new space, in turn, contains the seeds of hope. In other words, hope comes into play only after a process of social disentanglement that is fostered by distrust. In this vein, Nino could only imagine a future beyond the realm of her depressing personal and professional surroundings by taking seriously the reality that the trust she invested into her ‘patrons’ was a wrong investment – or at least an investment that should come to an end at a certain point. In this vein, rather than hope (*imedi*), it is the act of its loss that allows for the imagining of a better future.

There are other cases, however, when the loss of trust does not foster hope but, rather, frustration. This is when, as in the case of Tamar, people feel that they are incapable of trusting any more: *ver vendobi* (I cannot trust). The modal verb *ver* (cannot) indicates cases or relations in which trust is desired, was once present and is dearly missed – or is perceived to be expected. For Tamar, it is the sad impossibility of trusting her husband and her son that motivated her to migrate and to take things into her hands; but the ongoing distrust of her husband sharply contrasts with the old hopes she is trying to maintain – namely, that the lives of her closest relative can be substantially improved by the means of her remittances, and that – with such improvement – she would no longer have to distrust them. She hopes to one day be able to overcome and ‘heal’ distrust. As in the case of Nino, then, distrust created a distance from the distrusted; however, this distance did not open up a space for (new) hope.

For this to happen – in other words: for distrust to become productive – the availability of social resources is decisive (Zmiejewski 2020). One such a resource – and a crucial one for migrants – are social networks, preferably those that extend into the realm of the local. For Nino and Tamar, for example, it makes a significant difference whether they obtain information regarding the kind, availability and payment of work from locals or from fellow migrants. It also matters if they are accompanied by a Greek citizen when dealing with a Greek government agency such as the immigration office. In this vein, friendships or partnerships are vital resources for dealing with distrust, as are stable workplaces and a documented status.

Any effort to scale distrust along a range ‘varying from “hard” (paralysing) distrust to “prudent” distrust that allows for certain interactions’ (Humphrey 2018: 14) thus needs to reflect the impact of resource availability. The consideration of this particular variable actually contributes to a finer-tuning of the scale. Based on the experiences of Georgian migrant women in Greece, it seems that the development of stable, substantial and reliable resources increases the likelihood of ‘prudent distrust’ by opening up a space of hope, whereas the lack or weakness of new resources hampers the development of hope and the concomitant search for alternatives.

## Notes


1. Humphrey (2018: 9) differentiates between mistrust as an ‘initial stance towards others’ and distrust as ‘a consequence of being let down’, hence the wording. In a similar vein, Carey (2017: 9) contrasts his approximation to mistrust with a take on distrust that characterises the latter as ‘based on a specific past experience’. Although, according to Merriam-Webster’s *New Dictionary of Synonyms* (1984: 263), mistrust and distrust are largely used interchangeably in quotidian parlance, we will, in what follows, refer to distrust as a particular and focused response to an object and to mistrust as a more general, ‘fuzzy’, multi-layered and multi-dimensional phenomenon.
2. Interviews were also conducted with the husbands and children of migrant women back in Georgia.
3. The research adheres to the ethics guidelines of ABv Code of Ethics ([https://antropologen.nl/app/uploads/2019/01/ABv\\_Code-of-Ethics\\_2019.pdf](https://antropologen.nl/app/uploads/2019/01/ABv_Code-of-Ethics_2019.pdf)).


4. One of the two women, Nino, received her documented status after our fieldwork was conducted.
5. All personal names are anonymised in order to secure confidentiality and compliance with ethics guidelines.
6. The house in Georgia, where her husband and her daughters lived, belonged to her husband's family.
7. According to the 'Migration Profile' of Georgia authored by the State Commission on Migration Issues (2017: 14), which relies on a census from 2014 conducted by the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat). Available online at [http://migration.commission.ge/files/migration\\_profile\\_2017\\_eng\\_final\\_.pdf](http://migration.commission.ge/files/migration_profile_2017_eng_final_.pdf) (accessed 1 August 2022).
8. The Greek media has mainly targeted Albanian domestic migrants for being supposedly involved in criminal activities (Vullnetari 2012: 86) but, in recent years, stories have started circulating about Georgian domestic workers being recruited by the 'Georgian mafia'. These articles from the newspapers *Theotoc* and *Newsit* are examples: <https://www.thetoc.gr/koinwnia/article/gewrgianes-narkwnan-kai-ekleban-ta-thumata-tous> and <https://www.newsit.gr/ellada/thyma-georgianon-liston-oikiaki-voithos-2602/1458101/> (accessed 1 August 2022).

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No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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