

## Population's Attitudes Towards Georgia's Foreign Policy Choices in Times of Uncertainty

Sichinava, David

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sichinava, D. (2018). Population's Attitudes Towards Georgia's Foreign Policy Choices in Times of Uncertainty. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 102, 6-9. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000254660>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

- Rajzman, R., Semyonov, M. and Schmidt, P. (2003). Do foreigners deserve rights? Determinants of public views towards foreigners in Germany and Israel. *European Sociological Review*, 19(4), pp. 379–392.
- Rodriguez-Garcia, D. (2010). Beyond Assimilation and Multiculturalism: A Critical Review of the debate on Managing Diversity. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 11(3), pp. 251–271.
- State Commission on Migration Issues. (2015). *Migration Strategy of Georgia 2016–2020*. Available at: <[http://migration.commission.ge/files/migration\\_strategy\\_2016-2020\\_eng\\_final\\_-\\_amended.pdf](http://migration.commission.ge/files/migration_strategy_2016-2020_eng_final_-_amended.pdf)> [Accessed 31 Jan. 2018].
- State Commission on Migration Issues. (2017). *2017 Migration Profile of Georgia*. Available at: <[http://migration.commission.ge/files/migration\\_profile\\_2017\\_eng\\_final\\_.pdf](http://migration.commission.ge/files/migration_profile_2017_eng_final_.pdf)> [Accessed 19 Mar. 2018].
- Verbeek, G., Scheepers, P. and Felling, A. (2002). Attitudes and behavioural intentions towards ethnic minorities: An empirical test of several theoretical explanations for the Dutch case, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28(2), pp. 197–219.

## Population's Attitudes Towards Georgia's Foreign Policy Choices in Times of Uncertainty

By David Sichinava (CRRC-Georgia)

### Abstract

This article explores key characteristics of people's attitudes towards Georgia's foreign policy choices and the factors that most likely predict these attitudes. While the support for NATO and/or European Union membership clearly represents a pro-Western orientation, the support for membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union also needs to be analyzed. In addition to discussing the factors that might explain people's support, the article looks at how the population of Georgia feels about the country's hypothetical neutral status.

### Introduction

The idea of Georgia becoming a member of the European Union and NATO has been almost unanimously endorsed by key Georgian political parties and by the national government. Meanwhile, recent opinion polls indicate growing neutral or skeptical sentiments of the population towards the country's pro-Western aspirations. Based on the data from the 2017 wave of the CRRC's Caucasus Barometer survey, this article discusses the population's attitudes towards Georgia's foreign policy choices and the factors that are most likely behind them.

Georgia's foreign policy orientation remains at the very heart of the policy debate in Georgia. However, this issue is less salient for ordinary people. Polls show that Georgia's potential membership in NATO or in the European Union is not the issue that people worry about most, while unemployment and poverty are almost exclusively named as the most important issues the country faces<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, the majority of the population of Georgia has keenly supported the country's

leanings towards the West.<sup>2</sup> However, little is known about how specific groups of the population feel about the country's foreign policy orientation or about the factors that statistically predict people's foreign policy preferences in Georgia.

### How Do People Feel About Political Unions?

The population remains positively disposed towards the country's Western-oriented foreign policy (see Figure 1 on p. 9). While 41% would support Georgia's NATO membership, this share is twice the share of those who are against it. Membership in the European Union is supported by almost half of the population, while it is opposed by only 14%. A much smaller share is keen to support the country's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union led by the Russian Federation—only one fifth, while twice as many oppose the idea.

Over time, however, people in Georgia have become less supportive of the country's membership in any union. The proportion of those who back the country's NATO

1 <<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/IMPISS1/>>

2 <<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=16868>>

membership declined from 70% in 2010 to a mere 41% in 2017. While 69% supported the idea of the country becoming a member of the European Union in 2011, only 45% felt so in 2017. Importantly, the decline in support has been accompanied by an increasing proportion of those who partially support, partially do not support, or do not know how to answer the respective question.

People reflect differently about potential gains and losses when supporting or opposing membership in each of the unions. Those who back the NATO membership bid consider Georgia's security and territorial integrity:<sup>3</sup> approximately one-third of NATO supporters believe that the membership will protect the country from foreign threats, while approximately one-fifth think that it will increase Georgia's chances of restoring its territorial integrity.

Economic considerations resurface in regard to the reasons why people in Georgia support the country's hypothetical membership in the European Union or the Eurasian Economic Union. Almost half of those who would support Georgia's EU membership hope that it will help improve the economic conditions of the population.<sup>4</sup> The same hope is reported by 40% of EEU supporters.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, the second most important reason for support of Georgia's membership in the EU or EEU is the belief that it would strengthen the country's ties, respectively, with the West or with Russia.

### What Factors Predict Support for Membership in Political Unions?

Studies from elsewhere in the broader post-communist space argue that the attitudes towards integration in the European Union are shaped by the peculiarities of post-Communist transition and its impact on the economy (Tucker et al, 2002). Among other factors, the expected economic benefits from EU membership often drive people towards supporting the cause (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Boomgaarden et al, 2011). At the same time, positive attitudes towards democracy, foreigners, or immigrants are also good predictors of pro-Western attitudes (Cichowski, 2000; Garry & Tilley, 2009). Below I evaluate whether some or all of these factors statistically predict attitudes towards Georgia's membership in these political unions<sup>6</sup>.

3 <<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/NATOSUPW/>>

4 <<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/EUSUPWHY/>>

5 <<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/EEUSUPW/>>

6 The probabilities presented in this section are based on regression models predicting the support of Georgia's membership in the European Union, NATO and the Eurasian Economic Union. Predictors (the independent variables) are respondents' demographic characteristics (gender, age, settlement type, household income, reported ethnicity, and highest level of education achieved) and attitudes towards immigrants, assessments of the

As the regression models show, the population's demographic and socio-economic characteristics predict their feelings towards the European Union, NATO, and the Eurasian Economic Union to some extent. Not surprisingly, younger people are more prone to support the country's membership in the Western-led political organizations than those who are older. The latter are more likely to oppose the cause and feel positive towards the hypothetical Eurasian path.

The analysis also shows that Tbilisi residents are twice more likely than rural residents to oppose the country's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. They are also among the staunchest supporters of Georgia's EU membership. The ethnic minority population<sup>7</sup> is somewhat reluctant to support the idea of Georgia becoming a part of the European Union and NATO, while their ethnic Georgian peers are much more enthusiastic about such opportunities. The ethnic minority population, on the other hand, is more supportive of EEU membership than ethnic Georgians are.

Higher household income is associated with people's more positive feelings towards the West. Contrary to expectation, when controlling for other factors, people's education does not predict attitudes towards Georgia's foreign policy choices.

In regard to values, people's negative attitudes towards immigrants stand out as a good predictor of their opposition to integrating into the Western-led blocs. The way people perceive domestic politics and the government are also good predictors of their attitudes towards foreign policy choices. Those who believe that domestic politics in Georgia are developing in the right direction or are not changing are less likely to oppose EU and NATO membership and to support integration in the Eurasian Economic Union. The supporters of EEU membership are those who report that the country's domestic politics are developing in the wrong direction.

Foreign policy preferences differ across groups with different perceptions about the role of the government. Those who believe that the government should be the people's employee and be controlled by the citizens are twice more likely to support than to oppose EU membership. They are also more prone to oppose Georgia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. On the other hand, those who see the government as a parent who takes care of people as if they were children are

direction of domestic politics, the role of the government and so forth. Detailed information and replication data can be obtained at <[https://github.com/crcrgeorgia/fpc\\_geo](https://github.com/crcrgeorgia/fpc_geo)>

7 A variable on self-reported ethnicity was used to classify ethnic majority (Georgians) and ethnic minority (all other ethnicities) groups.

slightly less likely to support the country's membership both in the European Union and NATO. Interestingly, attitudes towards the role of the government are highly correlated with education and settlement type. People living in rural settlements are more likely to have paternalistic attitudes, as do those having lower levels of education.

### To Be or Not to Be Neutral?

The ideas about Georgia's neutral status sometimes make it into the country's political discourse. Certain politicians<sup>8</sup> and the representatives of pro-Russian<sup>9</sup> civil society organizations<sup>10</sup> argue that neutrality is the path leading to the security and the development of the country. The neutral or "non-aligned" status of Georgia is, however, unacceptable for the mainstream Georgian politicians and analysts<sup>11</sup>, and the public seems to be divided over the issue.

Approximately half of the people in Georgia would prefer the country's neutral status over its membership in any union. A closer examination<sup>12</sup> of the CB data suggests that lack of support of Georgia's NATO membership is a good predictor of people's belief that neutrality is the best choice for the country (see Figure 2 on p. 9). Interestingly, support for Georgia's membership in either the EU or the EEU does not seem to influence attitudes towards the country's neutrality.

Factors other than the support for Georgia's NATO membership are associated with less pronounced vari-

ations in how people feel about their country's neutrality. The way people perceive tensions between the West and Russia predicts their feelings towards the country's neutrality. Those who believe that these tensions are detrimental to Georgia are slightly more likely to think that Georgia should embrace neutrality. In the same vein, older people and the ethnic minority population are also more prone to agree that neutrality could resolve Georgia's conflicts and help improve the country's security.

To sum up, a large share of the population of Georgia prefers neutrality over the country's alignment with a political union. The lack of support for NATO membership well predicts such a position. Interestingly, attitudes towards neutrality do not vary significantly by major demographic characteristics.

### Concluding Remarks

In general, the population of Georgia supports the country's official foreign policy priorities, although the results of the 2017 wave of the Caucasus Barometer survey show growing ambivalence. While unemployment and poverty are haunting people in Georgia, they hope that Western prospects would bring better livelihood and improved security. Georgia still has to wait to harvest fruits of the close cooperation with the West. It might be tempting to ascribe the growing ambivalence to the rising Russian influence—however, this would be an exaggeration.

#### About the Author

Dr. David Sichinava is a senior policy analyst at CRRC-Georgia and assistant professor of human geography at Tbilisi State University. David holds his undergraduate and graduate degrees in Human Geography from Tbilisi State University (TSU). In the fall semester 2016, he was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the Institute of Behavioral Sciences of the University of Colorado Boulder. David's research interests are focused on political geography, urban theory, election modeling and GIS applications in social sciences.

#### Bibliography

- Tucker, J. A., Pacek, A. C., & Berinsky, A. J. (2002). Transitional winners and losers: Attitudes toward EU membership in post-communist countries. *American Journal of Political Science*, 46(3), 557–571.
- Hobolt, S. B., & de Vries, C. E. (2016). Public support for European integration. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19, 413–432.
- Boomgaarden, H. G., Schuck, A. R., Elenbaas, M., & De Vreese, C. H. (2011). Mapping EU attitudes: Conceptual and empirical dimensions of Euroscepticism and EU support. *European Union Politics*, 12(2), 241–266.

8 <<http://netgazeti.ge/news/134040/>>

9 <<https://jamestown.org/program/pro-russian-forces-in-georgia-demand-neutral-status-for-country/>>

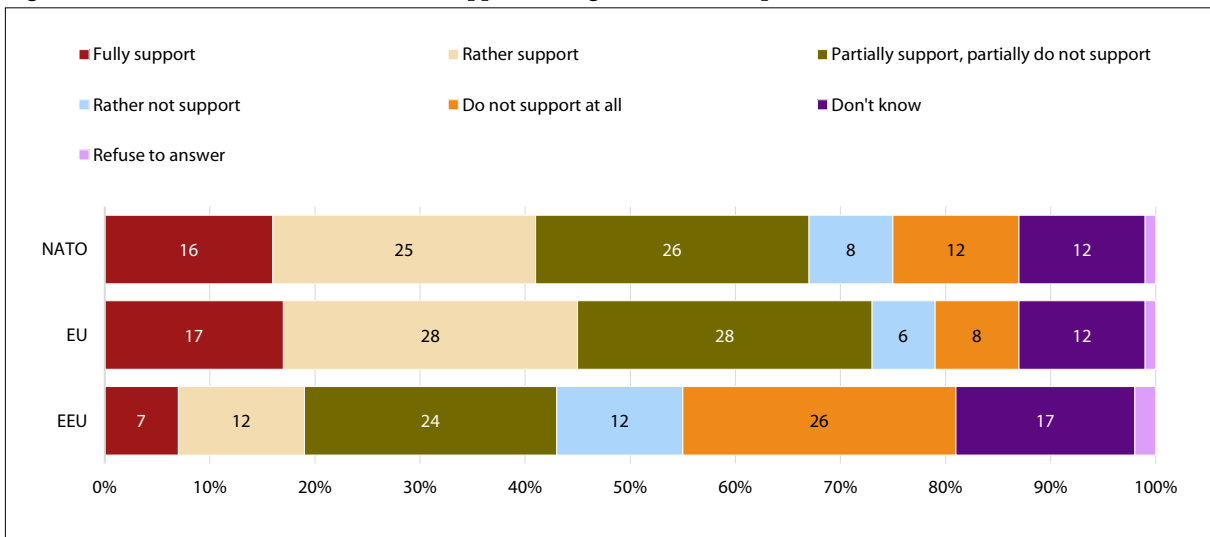
10 <<https://sputnik-georgia.com/georgia/20160325/230800736/saqartvelo-samxedro-neitralitetis-gzaze.html>>

11 <<http://netgazeti.ge/news/134192/>>

12 The probabilities presented in this section have been computed based on a regression model that predicts the support of the statement "Georgia's neutrality could help resolve conflicts and improve Georgia's security." Potential predictors (i.e., the independent variables, whose influence was tested in the model) are demographic characteristics (gender, age, settlement type, reported ethnicity, and highest level of education achieved); attitudes towards the potential effects of tensions between foreign countries on Georgia, and the support of Georgia's membership in the EU, NATO, and the Eurasian Economic Union.

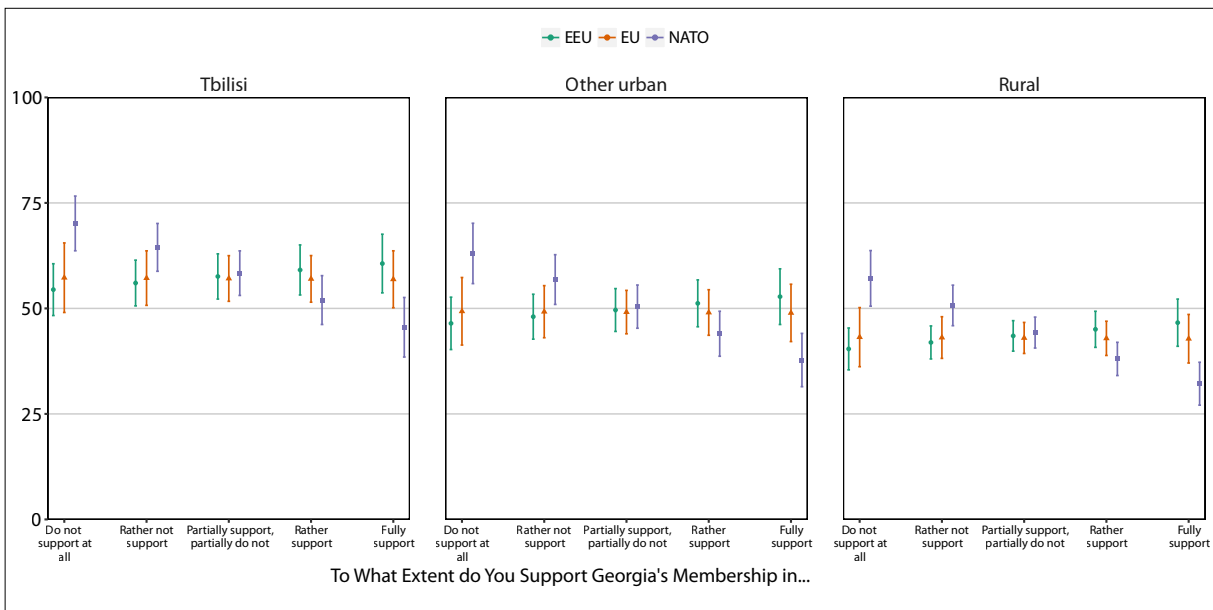
- Cichowski, R. A. (2000). Western dreams, eastern realities: Support for the European Union in Central and Eastern Europe. *Comparative political studies*, 33(10), 1243–1278.
- Garry, J., & Tilley, J. (2009). The macroeconomic factors conditioning the impact of identity on attitudes towards the EU. *European Union Politics*, 10(3), 361–379.

Figure 1: To What Extent Would You Support Georgia’s Membership in ...? (%)



Source: Caucasus Barometer 2017

Figure 2: Agree That Georgia Should Be Neutral  
Predicted Probabilities With 95% Confidence Intervals



Note: The data points on the chart display the predicted probabilities of a person with certain characteristics to have a particular opinion. For instance, a person who lives in Tbilisi and does not support Georgia’s membership in NATO at all (denoted as squares on the leftmost panel) has approximately 70% chance of agreeing that Georgia should be neutral.