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Inconsistent (Dis)Trust in Polls in Georgia: Wrong Expectations?

By Tinatin Zurabishvili (CRRC-Georgia)

Abstract

In CB 2017, the CRRC continued to measure the population's trust in public opinion polls' results in Georgia. While almost half of the population reported trusting poll results themselves, a much weaker belief was recorded that 'people around' trust the results of public opinion polls conducted in Georgia. Only a quarter of the population reported trusting public opinion poll results and, at the same time, believed that people around them also trusted them. Three quarters, on the other hand, agreed that polls help all of us obtain better knowledge about the society we live in. This paper presents some of the inconsistencies in the attitudes towards polls in Georgia, confirming one of the major findings based on the 2015 data: there is so far little certainty in the Georgian society about public opinion polls.

Introduction

Any society challenges the trustworthiness of public opinion polls at some point(s) of its development. Journalists, policymakers and academics discuss the issue, expressing varying degrees of skepticism. 'Failures' of polls to predict events such as Brexit—or the outcome of any regular election, for that matter—fuel this skepticism and may lead to the development of sophisticated conspiracy theories. “Can we still trust opinion polls after 2015, Brexit and Trump?”—asks the Guardian (Travis 2017). “Can we trust the polls? It all depends,”—the Brookings Institution tries to reason (Traugott 2003), while Levada Center's relatively earlier publication describes a crisis of understanding “reality,” largely caused by a society's limited possibilities to understand it (Gudkov 2016).

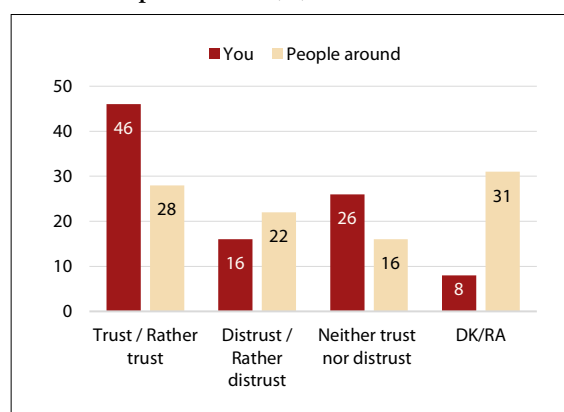
Societies with a less developed 'survey culture' (to which all post-Soviet societies belong) find it more difficult to trust opinion polls. Georgia is a rather turbulent example in this respect. Questions about the population's trust in public opinion polls were first asked in the 2015 wave of the CRRC's Caucasus Barometer survey (CB) and discussed in the 85th issue of the *Caucasus Analytical Digest* (Zurabishvili 2016). The issue of polls' trustworthiness is still an emotionally debated issue in Georgia; thus, the CRRC has decided to collect the same data in the course of the 2017 CB wave as well. In this article, new findings are presented and compared to the earlier results.

Reported Trust in Poll Results: 'Me' vs. 'People Around'

Almost half (46%) of the population of Georgia reported trusting the results of public opinion polls conducted in the country, according to CB 2017, with only 4% saying they do not know anything about the polls. The answers are, however, affected to a certain degree by social desirability bias: when asked, “[W]ould you say that most of the people around you trust or distrust the results

of public opinion polls conducted in Georgia?”, only 28% answered positively (Figure 1).¹

Figure 1: Would you say that you / most of the people around you trust or distrust the poll results? (%)



Source: CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2017, Georgia

Various factors may affect people's answers to these two questions and explain the difference. As it has been widely and convincingly argued by the theorists of public opinion, people often feel more confident—and more sincere—when they speak about their perceptions of others' opinion than when they report their own opinion on sensitive issues, or when they frame their opinion as a 'generally widespread' one. In this light, the actual level of trust in poll results in Georgia should be believed to be somewhere between the two trust figures of 46% and 28%, and this estimate is in line with the 2015 findings of a rather modest level of trust.

¹ A 10-point scale and respective Show Card were used in 2015. In 2017, the answer options were simplified: a 3-point scale, and no show card was used. Thus, the findings are not directly comparable over time. Bearing the existing differences in mind, however, broadly speaking, there are few differences in the level of trust between 2015 and 2017.

It might be due to the changes in the wording of the question about personal trust in public opinion poll results,² but in the 2017 data, the correlations between the answers to this question and reported trust in major social and political institutions are much weaker. The strength of correlation is relatively stronger (although rather weak in absolute terms) in cases of the educational system (Spearman correlation coefficient being $-.139$), local government ($-.137$), police ($-.126$) and the president ($-.120$), i.e., institutions that have quite different roles and functions, as well as background and image in the society. Thus, it would be very hard to argue that the nature of people's trust in the results of public opinion polls in Georgia is more or less similar to the nature of trust in major social and political institutions. It is, however, quite clear that trust—or distrust—in public opinion polls is not a consistent and straightforward phenomenon.

Paradoxes of (Dis)Trust

Although there is a rather high correlation between the answers to the questions about personal vs. others' trust in poll results (Spearman correlation coefficient is $.371$), approximately half of the population assessed other people's (dis)trust in poll results in Georgia differ-

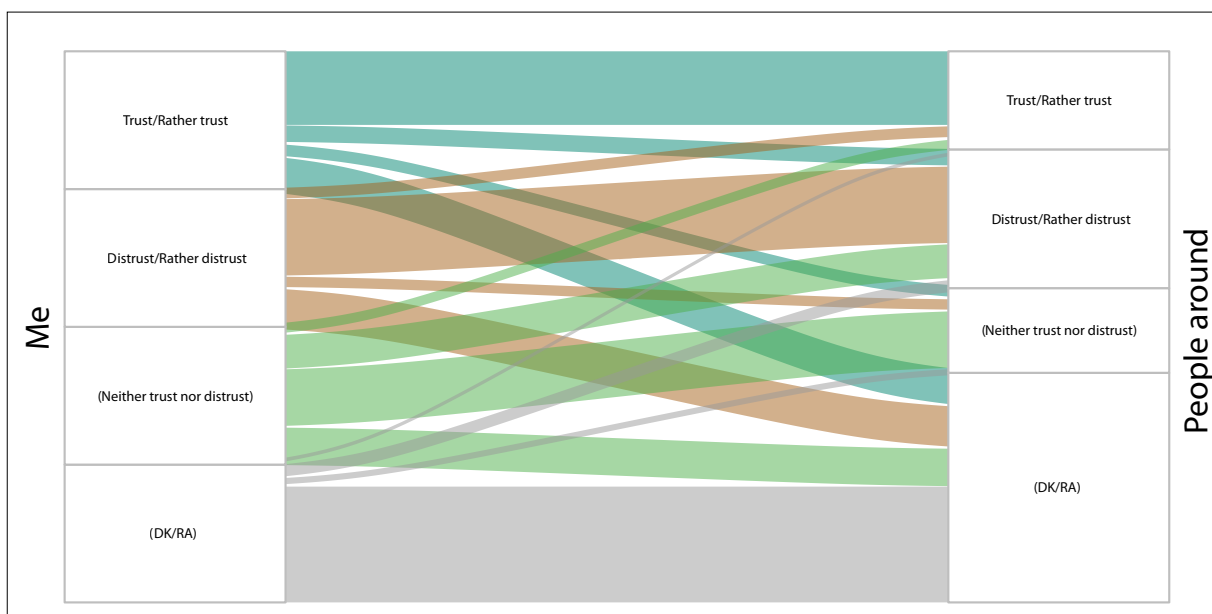
ently than his/her own (dis)trust (Figure 2). For example, of those who reported trusting the poll results themselves, 53% believed the same to be the case for people around them; 26% reported that they did not know about others, while the rest believed that the others either did not trust poll results (12%) or neither trusted nor distrusted them (9%).

The inconsistencies that can be seen in Figure 2 are not the only ones that are observed when looking closely at the CB findings. 83% of the population reporting distrust of the results of public opinion polls conducted in Georgia believe at the same time that the government should consider these results when making political decisions. The respective share is 85% among those who neither trust nor distrust poll results. To continue, 59% of those who distrust poll results also say that the polls help all of us get better knowledge about the society we live in. In addition, 74% of those disagreeing with the opinion that polls help all of us obtain better knowledge about the society we live in claim that the government should consider these results when making political decisions.

The low level of trust is in fact surprising when looking at the assessments of specific qualities of polls by the population of Georgia. An impressive majority (76%) agrees with the opinion that "Public opinion polls help all of us get better knowledge about the society we live in," with almost no variation by major

² CB questionnaires are available at <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/downloads/>.

Figure 2: [W]ould you say that you trust or distrust the results of public opinion polls conducted in our country?
By [W]ould you say that most of the people around you trust or distrust the results of public opinion polls conducted in our country? (%)



Source: CRRG Caucasus Barometer 2017, Georgia

demographic characteristics. An even larger and thus even more impressive share (86%) agrees that “The government should consider the results of public opinion polls while making political decisions,” with those living in the capital and those with higher than secondary education being more convinced in this compared to the rest of the population. With only approximately one-third of the population agreeing with the statement, “Public opinion polls can only work well in developed democratic countries, but not in countries such as Georgia”—thus with a majority believing that Georgia is no exception to the polls’ potential best practices—it would seem that public opinion polls should be rather appreciated in the country.

However, this is not the case. Approximately two thirds (64%) agree with the statement, “Ordinary people trust public opinion poll results only when they like the results,” and 78% believe that politicians trust these results only when they are favorable for them or for their party. These findings suggest that people are mostly able to see the biased attitudes of ‘the others,’ be it politicians or ‘people’ in general, but to what extent are they biased themselves, and if they are, would they admit their own bias?

Slightly over the half of the population of Georgia reports that they think they understand quite well how public opinion polls are conducted. While it would be impossible to test the reliability of this self-assessment, there is an interesting tendency showing that those who believe they have knowledge of survey practices report trusting polls more often (Table 1).

Overall, 24% of the population reported trusting public opinion poll results in Georgia and at the same time believed people around them to trust them. Inter-

estingly, these people can be found in villages rather than in the capital. Quite counterintuitively, people with different levels of education are evenly represented in this group. For the rest, though, this relatively small group tends to be more consistent in its position. Compared to the rest of the population, a higher share of people who reported trusting public opinion poll results and at the same time believed people around them to trust them said that they understand quite well how public opinion polls are conducted, and 97% of them also believed that public opinion polls help all of us get better knowledge of the society we live in.

Wrong Expectations?

Since public opinion, by its nature, is not and should not be expected to be straightforward (Lippmann 1997), the polls are not here to provide straightforward conclusions or to directly predict an outcome of elections. Too often, the polls—their quality, reliability, and even the very fact of whether they are needed or not in a society—are judged without understanding their nature, and thus, they will be ‘wrong again’ (Lipsey 2017) if judged so. It takes certain expertise, as well as at least minimal specialized education, to be able to reasonably judge the reliability of public opinion polls—a precondition that journalists and policymakers in Georgia mostly lack. As a result, they often create ‘straightforward’ expectations among their audience—expectations that the polls cannot meet. When judging the polls from the point of view of whether they have been ‘right or wrong’ in predicting a certain social event, the ‘opinion makers’ often completely miss the point—that of trying to understand the public opinion.

Table 1: [W]ould you say that you trust or distrust the results of public opinion polls conducted in our country? By “I think I understand quite well how public opinion polls are conducted” (%)

	Trust / Rather trust	Distrust / Rather distrust	Neither trust nor distrust	Don't know	(Total)
Agree / Rather agree	70	46	50	20	56
Disagree / Rather disagree	19	41	27	29	26
Don't know	11	12	22	51	17

Source: CRRG Caucasus Barometer 2017, Georgia

About the Author

Tinatina Zurabishvili holds a PhD in Sociology of Journalism from Moscow M. Lomonosov State University. From 1994 to 1999, Tinatin worked for the Yuri Levada Analytical Center in Moscow (VTsIOM at the time). After returning to Georgia in 1999, she taught various courses in sociology, particularly focusing on research methodology, for BA and MA programs at Telavi State University and the Tbilisi State University Center for Social Sciences. From 2001 to 2003, she was a Civic Education Project Local Faculty Fellow; from 2010 to 2012, she was a professor at the Geor-

gian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA). In 2007, she joined the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) as the Caucasus Barometer survey regional coordinator. Since 2012, she has worked as CRRC-Georgia's research director. Her research interests are focused on post-Soviet transformation, sociology of migration, media studies, and social research methodology.

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