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## Why Is the Turnout of Young People So Low in Georgian Elections?

By Rati Shubladze (CRRC-Georgia)

### Abstract

The paper analyzes the different factors contributing to the generational gap between younger and older voters in Georgia. It shows that the lack of awareness and interest in political and specifically in electoral processes among young people largely explains this phenomenon. At the same time, several institutional factors, such as electoral campaign salience and specific legislation, also contribute to the low levels of youth participation in elections. Finally, the article proposes several practical steps, including the introduction of online and/or electronic voting and the emphasis of youth-related issues in electoral campaigns, that could help to increase the turnout of young voters in Georgia.

### Introduction

A lack of interest in politics and low levels of political participation among young people are common not only in Georgia but also in many countries (Fieldhouse et.al. 2007). A number of complex issues are believed to explain this phenomenon, e.g., having little stake in society (Economist 2014) or preferring other types of activities (EUROPP 2013) to express one's political and social views. The low levels of political participation among youth and their alienation from public activities, such as elections, have been matters of concern in representative democracies (Norris, 2003). Political parties, usually not mainstream and protest-oriented, see youth alienation as an opportunity to gain their support. During the 2016 parliamentary election campaign in Georgia, a minor political party, "New Political Center—Girchi," released a commercial encouraging young people to participate in the upcoming elections<sup>1</sup>. The commercial appealed to young voters to change the current political situation, wherein political parties use populist promises in an attempt to attract older voters. In addition, the commercial claimed that younger voters needed to turn out to voting booths and have their say. Despite this, post electoral surveys revealed that a relatively small number of younger voters participated in the 2016 elections (Figure 1 on p. 15). This contribution argues that low levels of electoral involvement result from a combination of interconnected aspects, including systemic, institutional and individual factors. Furthermore, the article claims that by implementing a few practical steps, such as online and/or electronic voting and the application of more youth-oriented political campaigns, the turnout of young voters in Georgia could be increased.

### Assessing Young Voters' Involvement in Voting

This contribution was not able to use the official election data, as the Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC) does not report voter turnout by age group. To estimate the turnout of young voters, this contribution uses reported rates of participation in elections based on CRRC/NDI polls conducted in June 2016, November 2016 and June 2017<sup>2</sup>. Polling data provide the opportunity to deeply investigate the socio-economic background of the adult population (18 years old and over), as well as their preferences, attitudes toward elections and reasoning for voting or not voting at elections. However, using data from public opinion polls has its own limitations, and these should be kept in mind during analysis. Political scientists have identified that there is a considerable difference between self-reported voter turnout, as seen in survey findings, and official turnout. The most widespread explanation for this fact is social desirability bias, i.e., when respondents who did not vote are embarrassed to admit it (Holbrook and Krosnick, 2009). The same difference is observed when comparing official electoral turnout with turnout reported in surveys conducted in Georgia, including the CRRC/NDI post-electoral survey. For example, according to the CEC, the voter turnout for the 2012 parliamentary election was approximately 60%<sup>3</sup>, but the survey conducted right after the election indicated an 86% turnout<sup>4</sup>.

According to the results of the CRRC/NDI post-electoral November 2016 survey, there is a generational gap between voters in Georgia. Even accounting for social desirability bias, during both the October 8<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections and the October 30<sup>th</sup> runoff elections in 2016, voters who were between the ages of 18 and 35

1 The party, whose stated goal is to attract young educated voters, promotes socially liberal and fiscally conservative values. Source of the commercial: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHHbyv87z7U>>

2 The 2016 parliamentary elections were held on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and the runoffs were held on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

3 Source: <<http://cesko.ge/res/old/other/29/29081.pdf>>

4 The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016) "Caucasus Barometer". Retrieved through ODA—<<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2012ge/VOTLELE/>> on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

were reported to be less active than older voters (See Figure 1 on p. 15). In the pre-electoral June 2016 and June 2017 surveys, younger voters also indicated relatively low levels of voting intention when compared to other generational groups (See Figure 2a and 2b on p. 16). Moreover, in June 2017, the CRRC/NDI pre-electoral survey also provided likely voter model<sup>5</sup> variables to eliminate social desirability bias. However, the younger cohort again showed lower levels of voting intention than did older generations (See Figure 3 on p. 17).

### Factors of Low Young Voter Turnout

To understand what factors can constrain young voters from casting their votes, this paper employs analytical tools to evaluate systemic, institutional and individual factors (Esser and De Vreese 2007). At the systemic level, overall historical and cultural traditions, particularly those related to the political culture and electoral traditions of the country, could influence youth turnout. Evaluations at the institutional level take into consideration “the structural context of political and media institutions,” i.e., how specific electoral laws and media coverage can encourage or discourage young voters to cast their votes. The individual level looks at the socio-demographic features of voters, such as their involvement in electoral processes and their knowledge of electoral procedures.

On a systemic level, the general lack of interest in politics could explain why young Georgians tend to stay at home and not vote. A number of surveys suggest that young people in Georgia are indifferent towards politics. For instance, those who are younger report discussing politics and current events with friends and close relatives less frequently<sup>6</sup> than do those who are older. Many young Georgians also do not even know who the majoritarian member of Parliament from their constituency is<sup>7</sup>. The CRRC/NDI pre-electoral poll in June 2017 asked questions about an important ongoing political issue, namely, the draft of the Revision of the Constitu-

tion adopted by the State Constitutional Commission<sup>8</sup>. The results showed that young Georgians are less aware and less informed about the constitutional amendments than are older citizens (See Figure 4a and 4b on p. 17/18).

The institutional level provides yet another potential explanation of why young Georgians tend to avoid participating in elections. Georgian electoral law requires that voters cast their votes in the settlements where they are registered. However, because of internal migration, Georgians do not always dwell in the settlements where they are registered to vote<sup>9</sup>. As a result, young voters in Georgia report that they are not able to participate in the voting process, as they cannot travel to the settlement in which they are registered (See Figure 5 on p. 18). In addition to the existing electoral laws, the salience of electoral campaigns can also explain why there is a difference among age groups in regard to voting. As has already been mentioned, political campaigns in Georgia are usually concentrated on issues that correspond to the needs and requirements of an older generation<sup>10</sup>. According to the CRRC/NDI pre-electoral June 2017 survey, in comparison to other age groups, young Georgians have not given much thought to the upcoming local self-government elections, and even those young Georgians who plan to vote for a specific party are less confident in their choices (See Figure 8 and 9 on p. 21/22). Both Georgian politicians and voters are heavily dependent on television as a medium for communicating with the electorate and receiving information on political events (Anable 2006). According to the CRRC/NDI post-electoral November 2016 survey, the main source of information about parties and candidates was television, although its share was smaller in the 18–35 age group than it was in other generational groups<sup>11</sup>. The combination of these factors could eventually lead to increasingly indifferent attitudes among youth toward elections and politics.

5 The variable was computed using following methods: respondents were given one point for each question they answered in a way consistent with voting, resulting in overall likelihood of voting scores ranging from 0 to 5. Numbers 0, 1, 2 and 3 from the Voter Model were grouped together and labeled as likely abstainers. For more information, please visit: <<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nj2017ge/VOTMODEL/>>

6 The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016) “Caucasus Barometer”. Retrieved through ODA—<<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2015ge/DISCPOL-by-AGEGROUP/>> on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

7 The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016) “Caucasus Barometer”. Retrieved through ODA—<<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nn2016ge/MAJNAME-by-AGEGROUP/>> on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

8 The aim of the Commission is to elaborate the draft law on revision of the Constitution of Georgia. For more information, please visit: <<http://constitution.parliament.ge/en-52>>

9 The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016) “Caucasus Barometer”. Retrieved through ODA—<<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/na2014ge/LIVEREG-by-AGEGROUP/>> on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

10 The project implemented by The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) makes it possible to compare the policy programs of key political parties in Georgia. According to the programs, social assistance and pensions are top priorities for parties, and they pay little attention to the spending related to youth issues. Source: <[http://nimd.ge/documents/NIMD\\_wigni\\_ENG.pdf](http://nimd.ge/documents/NIMD_wigni_ENG.pdf); <http://partiebi.ge/new/>>

11 The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016) “Caucasus Barometer”. Retrieved through ODA—<<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nn2016ge/INFOSOURCE-by-AGEGROUP/>> on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

The final element that may explain the low voter turnout among young people can be seen to be an individual-level factor. The CRRC/NDI pre-electoral June 2017 survey revealed that Georgian youth reported lower rates of voting in the previous local elections, while at the same time, they did not show much interest in the upcoming local self-governance elections (See Figure 6a–c on p. 18/20). Given these circumstances, it is not a surprise that young voters in Georgia are less informed about where people in their neighborhood go to vote (See Figure 6a–c on p. 18/20).

### How to Encourage Young Voters?

Certain practical steps could help increase turnout in younger age groups. The first is associated with technological innovations, such as the introduction of absentee ballots or online voting. Significantly, the country does have the technical capacity to launch an online voting system, as the Minister of Justice of Georgia has already noted (Agenda.ge 2017). This could encourage more people to vote, and not just the young ones. As Figure 5 on p. 18 shows, voters under the age of 35 frequently reported that they were registered to vote in a different settlement than the one in which they lived and that they could not go to their precinct on Election Day. As Figures 7a and 7b on p. 21/22 show, young voters in Georgia are generally fond of innovations in electoral voting techniques, such as electronic and distance voting. However, past experience of electoral studies—for instance, the Estonian electoral reform—shows that the mere

technical modification of an electoral system does not guarantee an increased turnout (Madise/Martens 2006).

Looking more at increased engagement and involvement of youth within the political process, literature on voting theory has shown that exposure to politically relevant issues increases the likelihood that youth will vote in elections (Kaid et.al 2007). Green and Gerber (2015) claim that “the more personal the interaction between campaign and potential voter, the more it raises a person’s chances of voting.” Therefore, direct engagement with young voters is vital in encouraging them to vote. The 2017 Tbilisi Mayoral elections have taken the first steps in mobilizing young activists around politicians<sup>12</sup> and in attracting young voters with interesting topics such as supporting the “Night Life” of the capital<sup>13</sup>.

### Conclusion

The detachment from political processes and the lack of knowledge about politics and specifically electoral processes is related to low turnout among young Georgian voters. In addition, institutional level constraints, such as living in a different electoral district, can also contribute to a lack of participation in elections. It is also important to note that the political system and political culture of Georgian parties also have an impact on youth frustration with elections. Therefore, in order to increase voter turnout among young Georgians, changes must be made both within electoral procedures and within political agendas.

#### *About the Author*

Rati Shubladze is a researcher at CRRC-Georgia. He holds a Master’s degree in Social Sciences from Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU) and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. from the Department of Sociology and Social Work at TSU. Rati’s doctoral research investigates electoral behavior in Georgia. He also teaches undergraduate and graduate level research methods classes at TSU.

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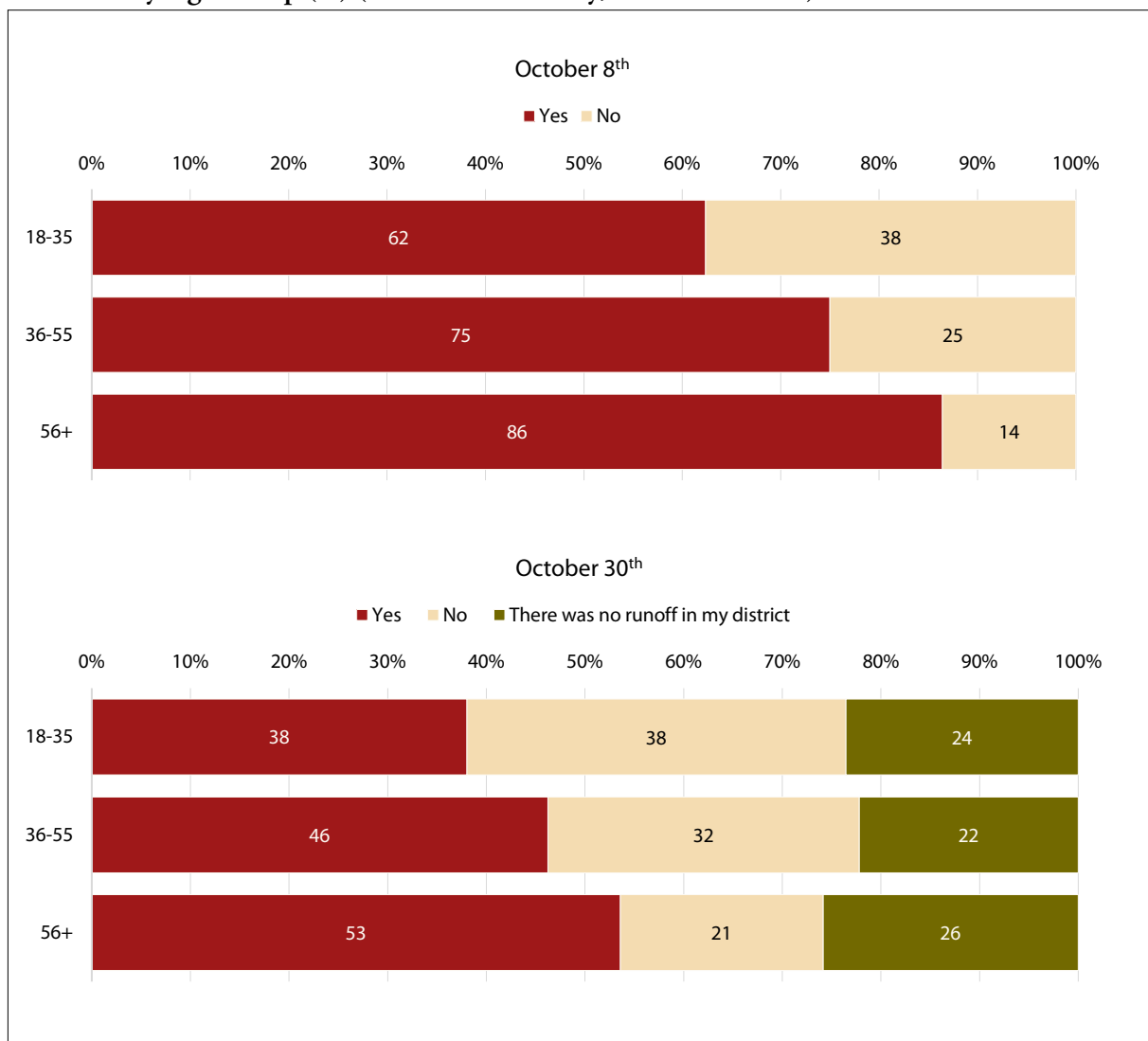
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12 The team of independent candidate and one of the major challenger for Tbilisi Mayor post consistent mostly from young activists. Source: <<http://netgazeti.ge/news/208492/>>

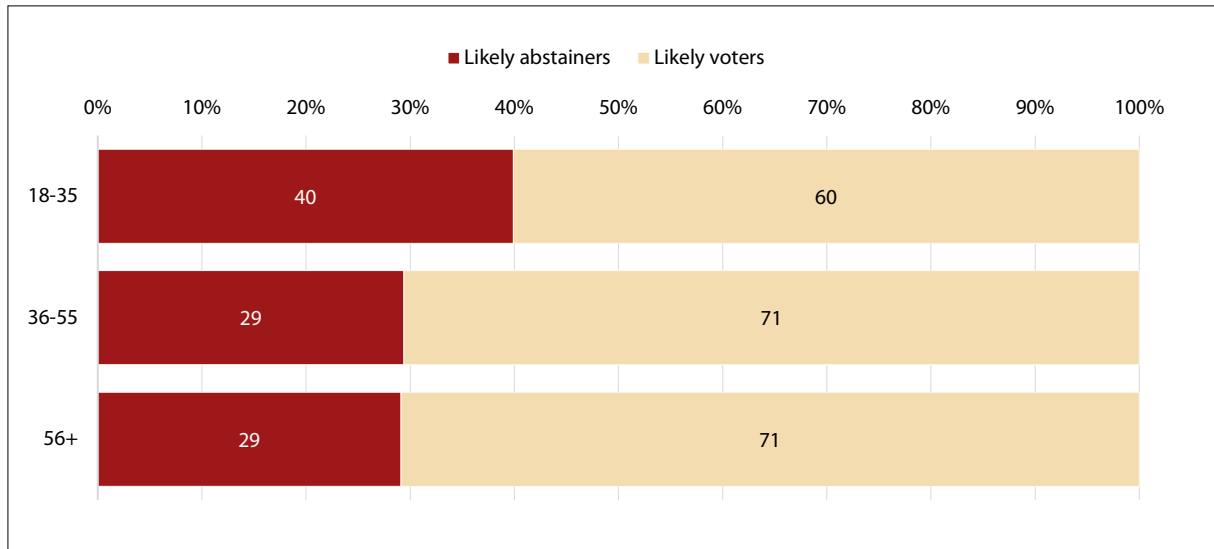
13 From the advertisement of governmental candidate for Tbilisi Mayor and former Vice-Premier, Kakha Kaladze. Source: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IF1oZIXCUXE>>

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**Figure 1: Did You Vote in October 8 Parliamentary Elections/ the Runoffs on October 30?  
By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, November 2016)**

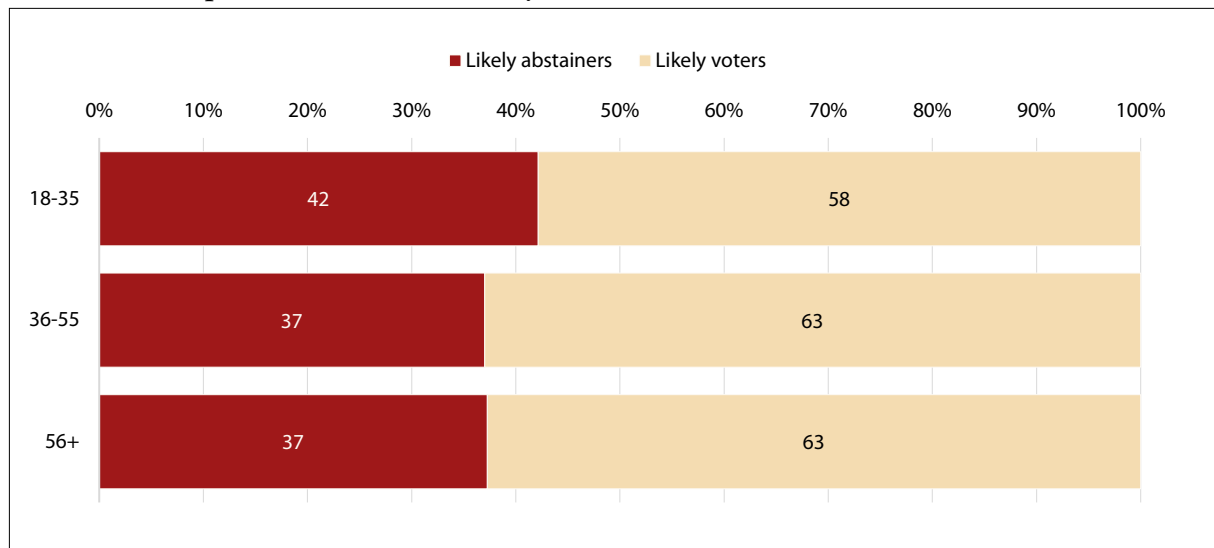


**Figure 2a: If Parliamentary Elections Were Held Tomorrow, Would You Vote? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2016)**



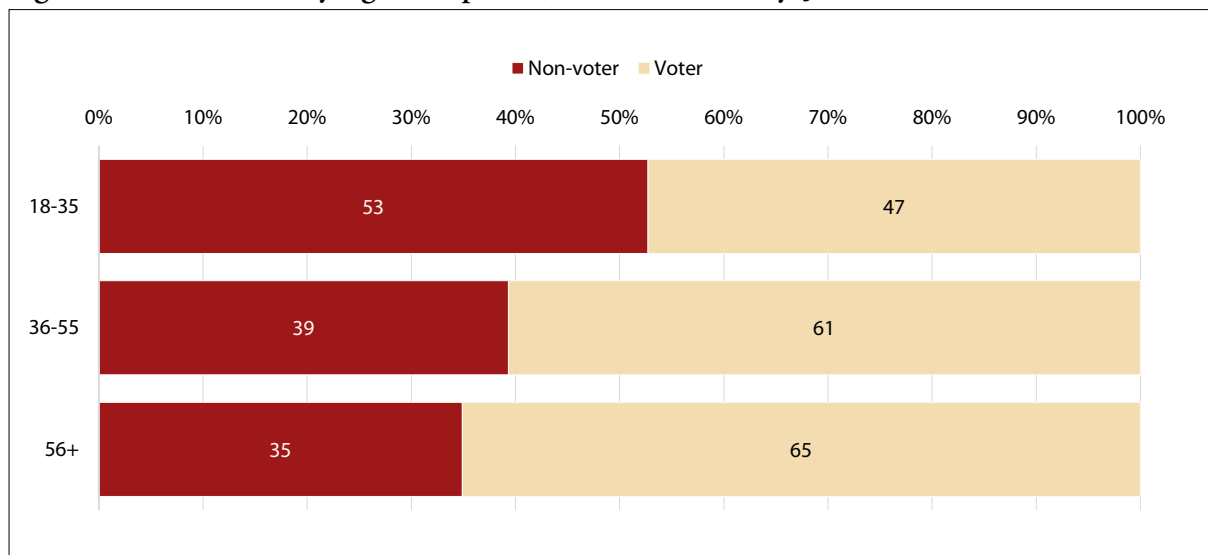
\* Variable was recoded from 10-point scale. Answer option “10—Absolutely will vote” was coded into “Likely voters”, other options into “Likely abstainers”

**Figure 2b: If Local Self-Government Elections Were Held Tomorrow, Would You Vote? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2016)**



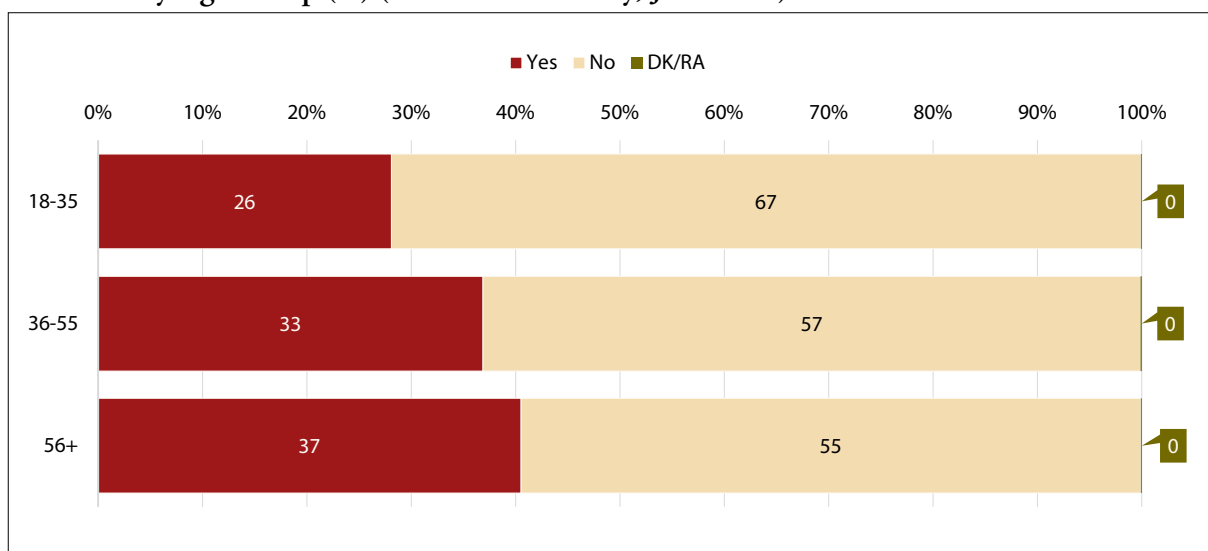
\* Variable was recoded from 10-point scale. Answer option “10—Absolutely will vote” was coded into “Likely voters”, other options into “Likely abstainers”

**Figure 3: Voter Model By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2017)**

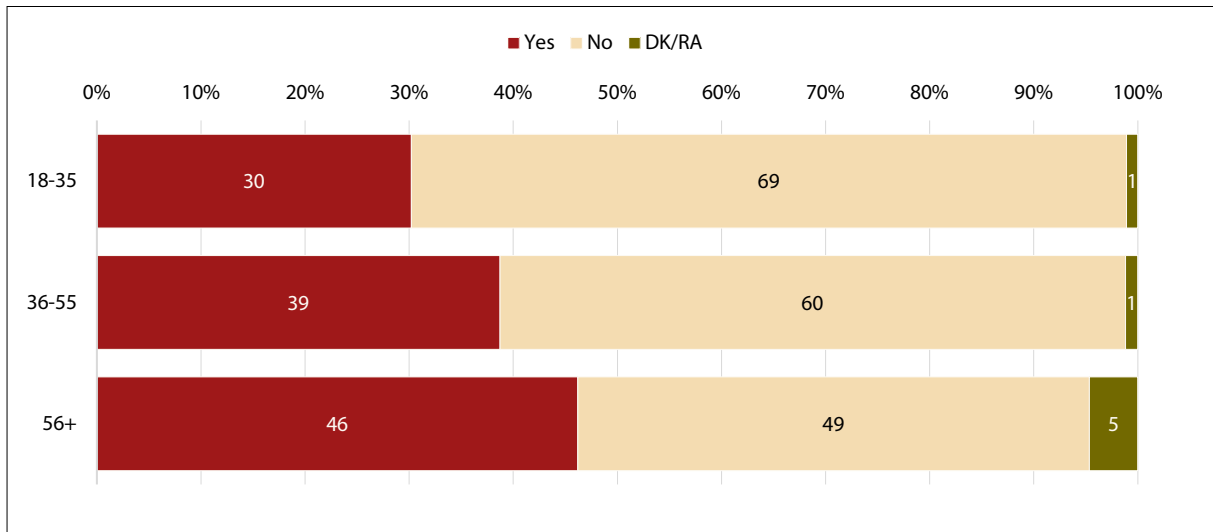


\* The variable was computed using following methods—Respondents were given one point for each question they answered in a way consistent with voting, resulting in overall likelihood of voting scores ranging from 0 to 5: 0, 1, 2 and 3 from the Voter Model were grouped together and labeled as Likely abstainers.

**Figure 4a: [Are You] Aware That Commission Adopted a Draft of Revision of the Constitution? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2017)**



**Figure 4b: Do You Feel You Have Enough Information about the Constitutional Changes? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2017)**



**Figure 5: What Was the Main Reason You Did Not Vote in the Parliamentary Elections? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, November 2016)**

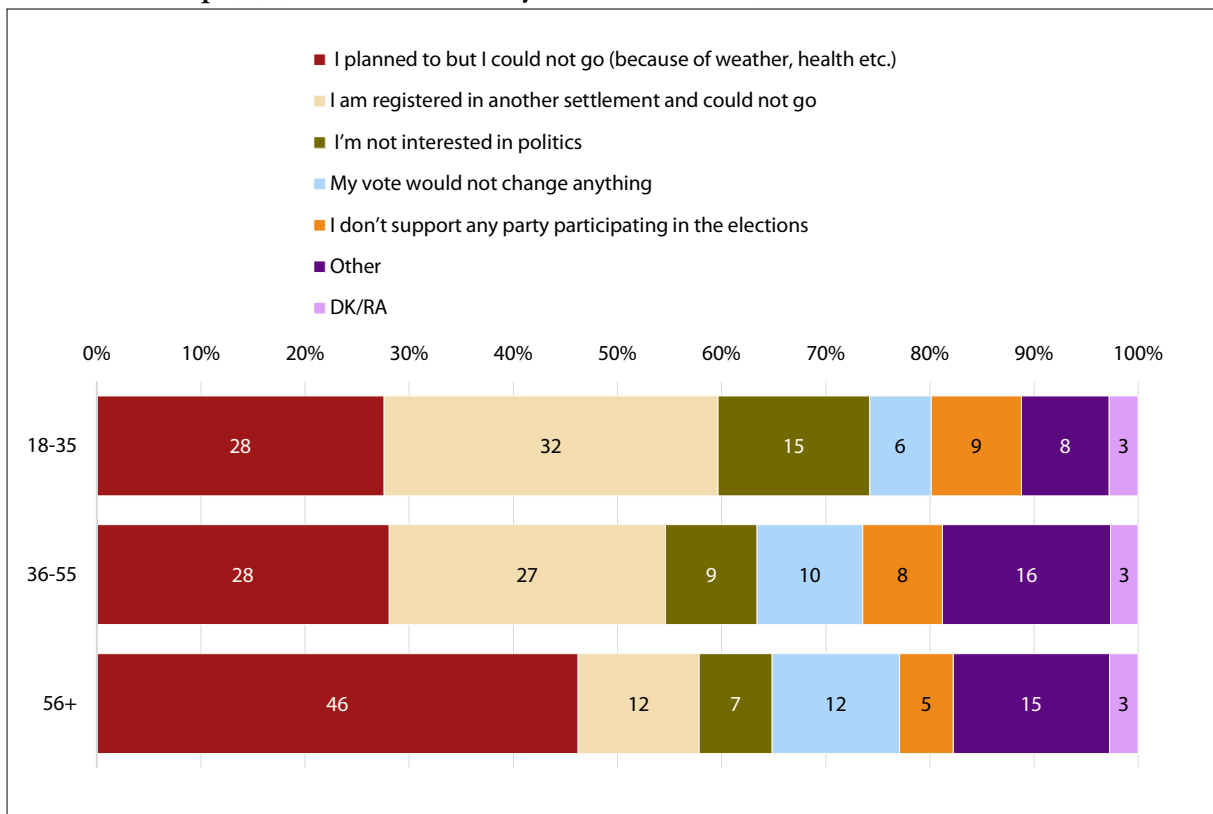




Figure 6a: Did You Vote in the Last Local Elections? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2017)

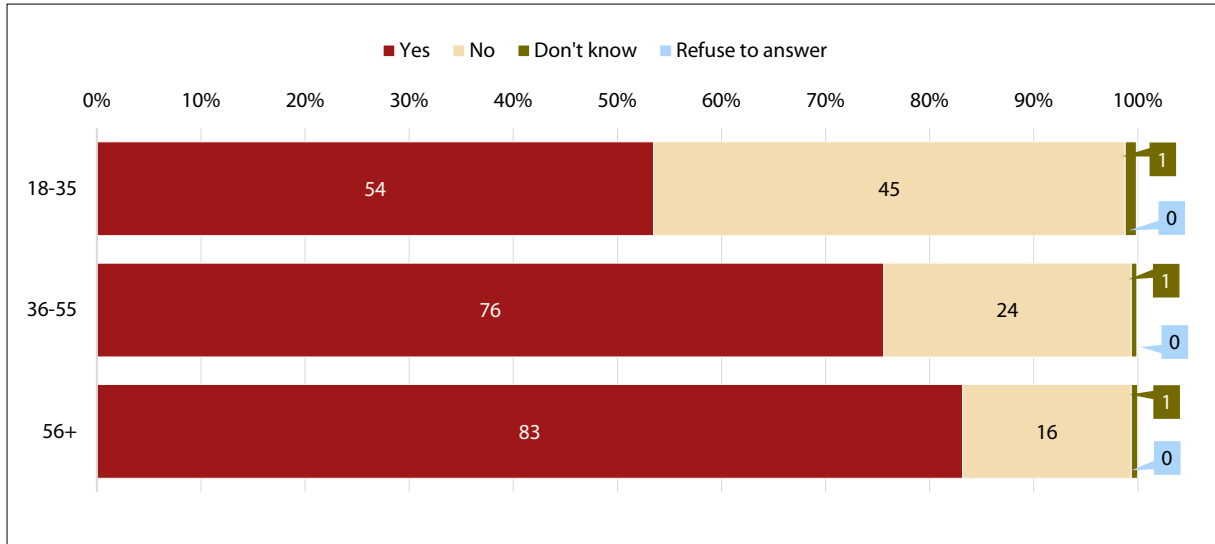
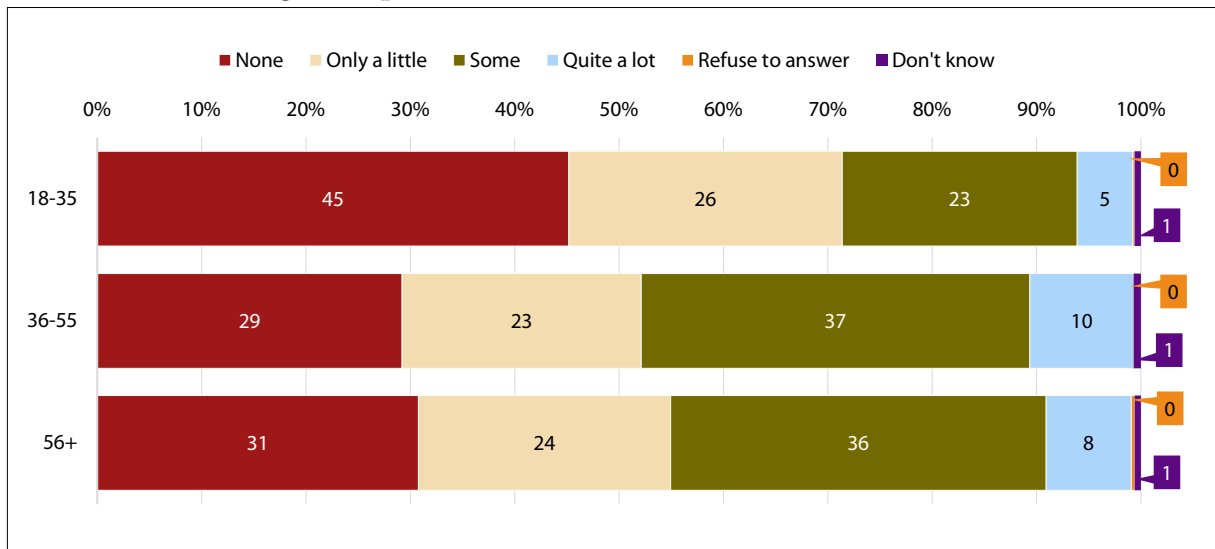
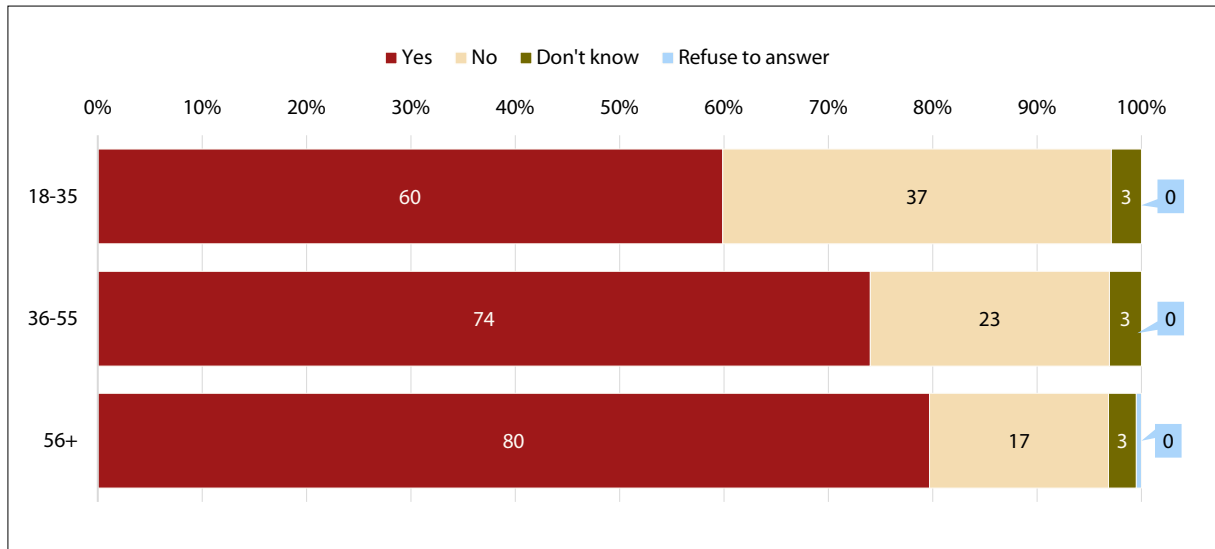


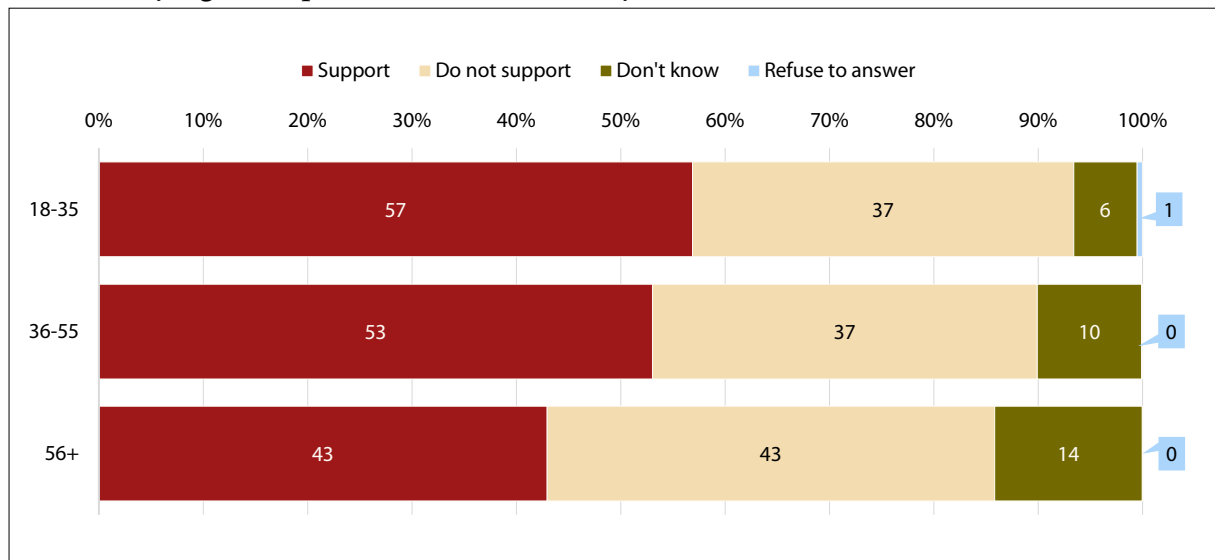
Figure 6b: How Much Thought Have You Given to the Upcoming Local Self-Government Elections? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2017)



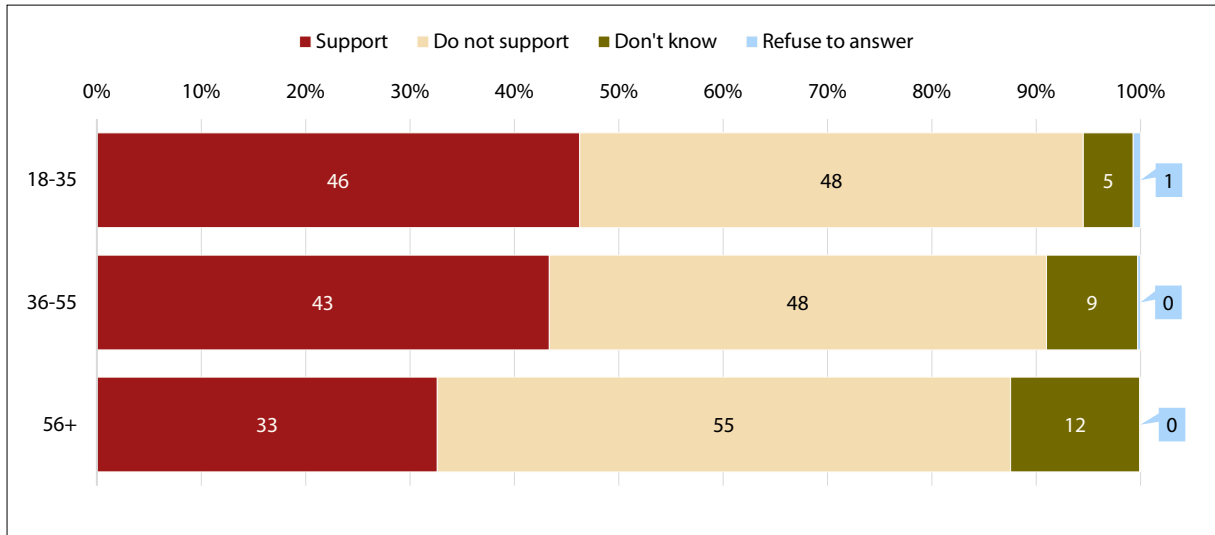
**Figure 6c: Do You Happen to Know Where People Who Live in Your Neighbourhood Go to Vote? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2017)**



**Figure 7a: Would [You] Support Electronic Voting, People Voting Using Computer on Precinct? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2016)**



**Figure 7b: Would [You] Support Voting Using the Internet Without Going to the Electoral Precinct? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2016)**



**Figure 8: How Much Thought Have You Given to the Upcoming Local Self-Government Elections? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2017)**

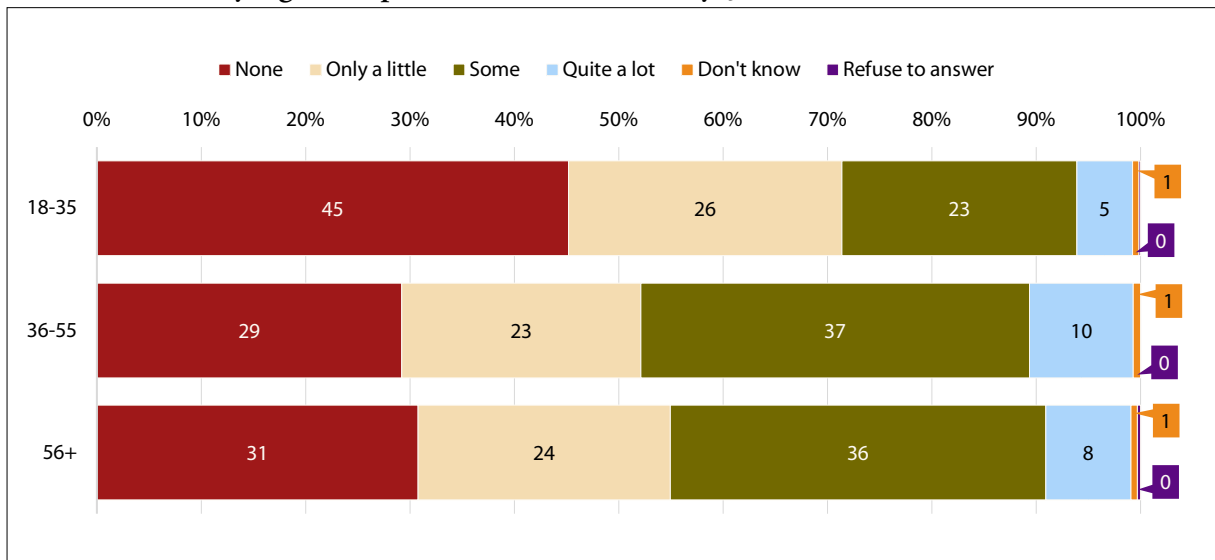
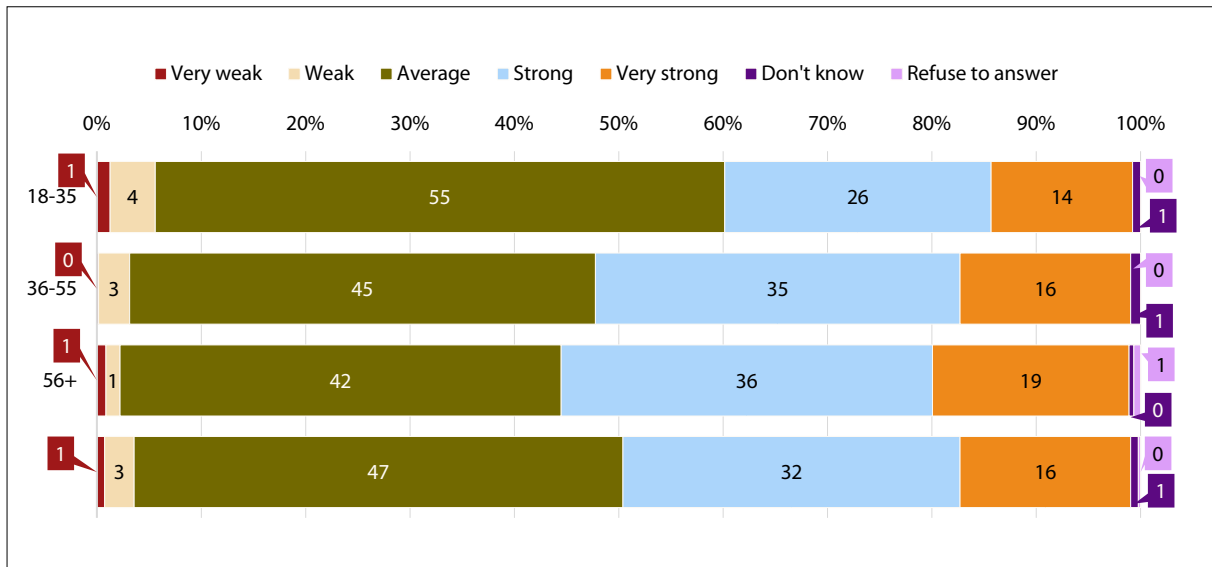


Figure 9: How Would You Describe Your Support for Your First Choice? By Age Group (%) (CRRC/NDI survey, June 2017)



## The Georgian Economy on a Stable Growth Path

By Ricardo Giucci and Anne Mdinardze (German Economic Team Georgia)

### Abstract

The Georgian economy is developing well: the GDP increased by 2.7% in 2016 and is expected to grow by 4.0% in 2017. With respect to demand, public investment is a key driver for growth this year. With respect to supply, construction and services remain the strongest contributors to growth.

A significant increase in excise taxes at the start of this year drove up consumer prices. As a result, inflation is expected to reach an average of 6.0% this year, which is higher than the inflation target of 4.0%. However, a significant inflation reduction is forecasted for next year.

Exports of goods are traditionally weak in Georgia, thus contributing to a large trade deficit. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that Georgia is a net exporter of services, especially in the tourism sector. The current account deficit will reach 13% of the GDP in 2017 and will continue to be financed by strong FDI inflows that amount to 11% of the GDP.

The budget deficit for this year is scheduled to amount to 3.7% of the GDP. A major shift from current to investment expenditures is foreseen, with positive long-term implications on economic growth.

### GDP Growth Driven by Public Investment

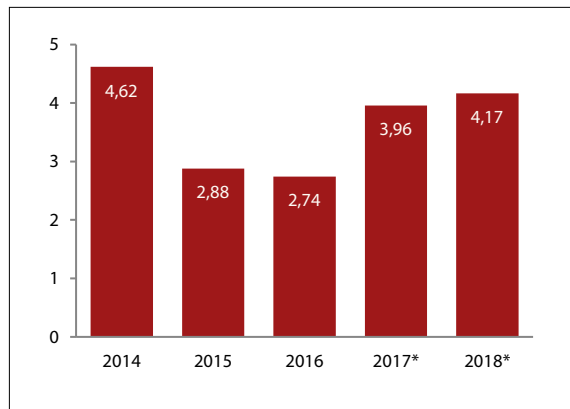
Despite weak growth for regional trade partners, Georgia maintained a stable growth path during 2016 with its GDP increasing by 2.7%. This year, economic growth was originally forecasted to reach 3.5%. However, due to better than expected performance of the economy,

the IMF forecast was revised to 4.0% for 2017 in the October World Economic Outlook. The main reason for this development on the demand side is due to stronger public investment. It remains to be seen whether the expectation that a higher public investment will be accompanied by a rise in private investment will be

realised. Aside from these internal factors, economic growth is also supported by a recovering external sector. On the supply side, the construction and services sectors (in particular tourism) continue to be the growth drivers.

It is a positive achievement that the Georgian economy exhibited stable positive growth rates even under difficult external conditions in 2014–2016. The growth trend is expected to continue with the GDP increasing by almost 4.2% in 2018. In addition, the potential exists to achieve even higher growth rates. Furthermore, growth remains unbalanced due to an underdeveloped industrial sector and an agricultural sector that is small and stagnating.

**Figure 1: Georgia: Real GDP Growth (% change year-over-year)**



Source: IMF; \*Forecast

### Excise Taxes Drive up Inflation in 2017

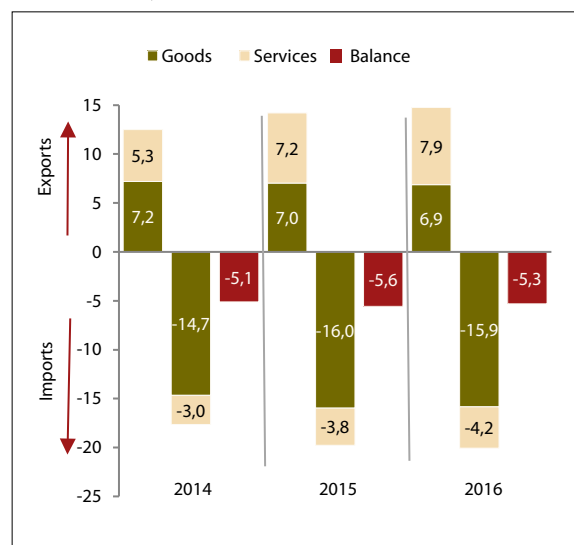
There were several reasons for low inflation in 2016. Due to weak aggregate demand, low oil prices and a high base effect from the previous year, prices had increased by only 2.1%. In 2017, however, inflation will increase significantly to an average of 6.0%. This comes after a strong increase of excise taxes for fuel, cars, tobacco and gas, which affect the price level. In response, the National Bank of Georgia (NBG) increased its policy rate from 6.5% to 7.0% in early 2017 in order to keep inflation in the target corridor. In 2018, the effect of increased excise taxes will weaken, and inflation is expected to meet its target of 3.0%.

### Persistently Large Trade Deficit

As in previous years, the Georgian trade balance continues to be negative, which is mainly due to weak export values. In 2016, imports remained almost unchanged and exports decreased by 4.2% due to low commodity prices. As Georgian exports are dominated by few commodities, they strongly reflect the development of world market prices.

However, a closer look at Georgian exports reveals an interesting picture. Exported goods account for only 47% of the country's total exports. The remaining 53% are made up by services. In fact, Georgia is a net exporter of services. In 2016, exports of services increased by 10% and imports increased by 11%. Transportation and tourism are the sectors which contribute most to the positive services balance. The revenues generated by the tourism sector exceed total goods exports.

**Figure 2: Georgia: Trade in Goods and Services (Gel bn)**



Source: Geostat

### Current Account and Exchange Rate

The structural weakness of goods exports is the main reason for the persistently negative current account balance. The IMF forecasts the country's current account deficit to reach almost 12% of the GDP in 2017. This is not expected to change significantly in 2018. To date, strong FDI inflows accounting for 11% of the GDP provide stable financing of the current account deficit. However, the persistent current account deficit remains a source of risk.

The NBG's flexible exchange rate policy allows for rapid economic absorption of external shocks. In 2014–2016, the exchange rate reacted to strong fluctuations of the main trading partners' exchange rates. In the recent past, the NBG intervened by buying US dollars to increase the country's international reserves as stipulated in the IMF programme.

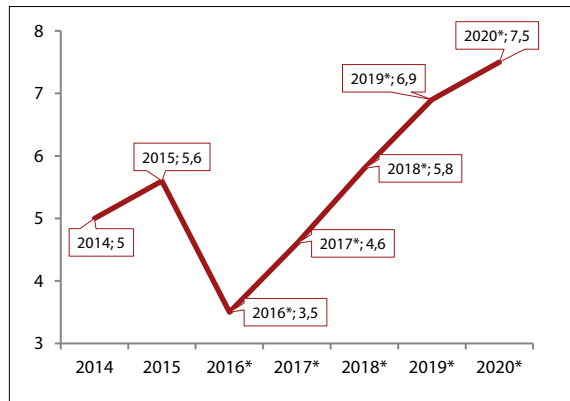
### Growth-Oriented Budget in 2017

In the context of parliamentary elections in 2016, when corporate tax reform was discussed and increased public investment was announced, it was feared that the budget

deficit might increase to 5% of the GDP in 2017. However, after elections, the ruling party took measures to counterbalance the budget. In particular, excise taxes were increased significantly, and the budget deficit is planned at “only” 3.7% of the GDP in 2017. The new IMF programme stipulates the continuation of the consolidation process. The budget deficit is to be reduced to 2.8% by 2020.

As it was announced during the election campaign, public investment is planned to strongly increase from 6.5% of the GDP in 2016 to 7.5% in 2020. This implies an immense budgetary reallocation from current to investment expenditures, with a positive long-term impact on economic growth.

**Figure 3: Georgia: Public Investment (% of GDP)**



\*Preliminary data/Forecast

Source: IMF

#### *About the Authors*

Dr *Ricardo Giucci* is the team leader and *Anne Mdinardze* is an analyst at the German Economic Team (GET) Georgia. GET Georgia advises the Government of Georgia on economic policy issues. It is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy.

This contribution is an updated version of Newsletter No. 18 of GET Georgia. To subscribe to the newsletter, please send an e-mail to [info@get-georgia.de](mailto:info@get-georgia.de)

## Conclusions and Outlook

The Georgian economy is on a stable growth path. The reallocation of government expenditures from consumption to investment is, in our view, a very positive step with long-term implications for the future of the country. The IMF programme provides a good economic policy framework for stability in the coming years.

At the same time, policy measures should be taken to reduce the dependency on services and secure a more balanced approach to economic growth. The current focus on services should be complemented with measures to promote agriculture and industry. In such a way, the strong exposure to global commodity prices and the large trade deficit could be reduced, thus keeping macroeconomic risks at bay.