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The EU as a “Threat” to Georgian Traditions: Who Is Afraid, and Why?

By Tinatin Zurabishvili (CRRC-Georgia)

Abstract

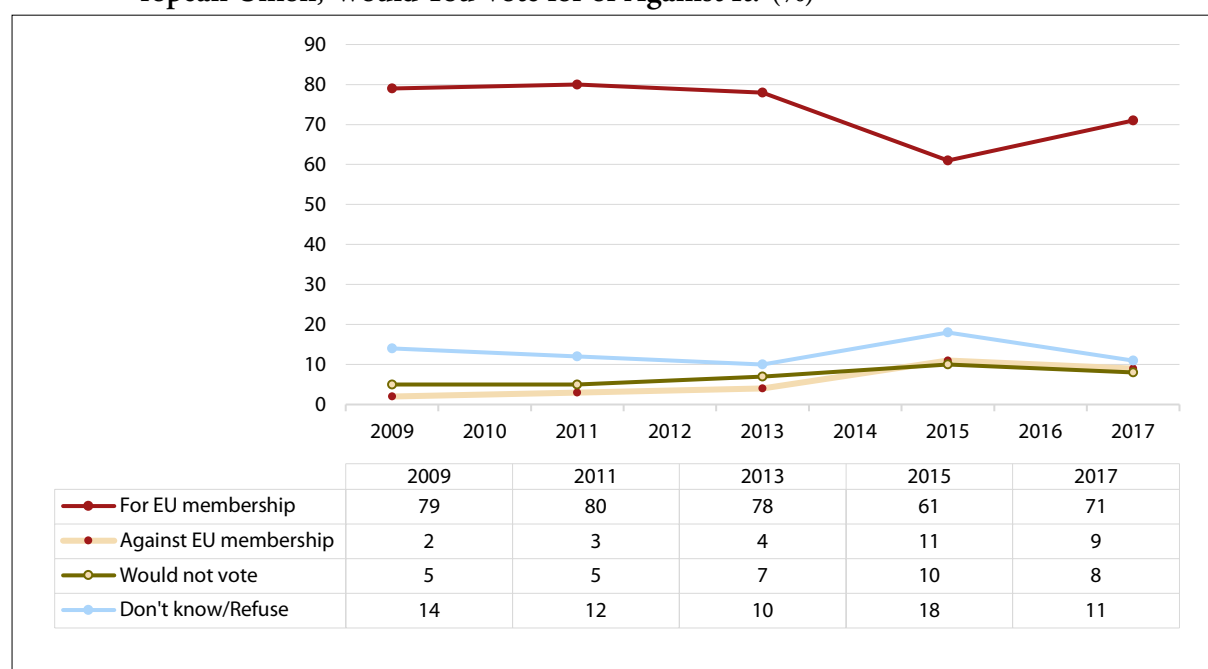
This contribution gives an overview of Georgian public opinion towards the EU based on a survey conducted in May 2017. The analysis focuses on the perceived relation between Georgian traditional values and closer integration with the EU by looking at the characteristics of those people who report the perception that the EU threatens Georgian traditions.

Introduction

EU–Georgia relations are developing at an impressive pace with the EU–Georgia Association Agreement (AA) fully entered into force on July 1, 2016. The creation of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), a part of the AA, will eventually result in the removal of many customs tariffs and trade quotas between the two parties and will facilitate Georgia’s gradual integration into the EU single market. The number of Georgian laws harmonised with EU legislation is regularly growing. Importantly, visa liberalisation entered into force on March 28, 2017, allowing Georgian citizens’ short visa free visits to the Schengen zone countries.

Support for EU membership enjoys consistent and strong support from the population of Georgia and has been an important factor contributing to the deepening of the relationship between the parties. Seventy-one percent of the population of the country reported in 2017 that they would vote for Georgia’s EU membership if there were a referendum tomorrow; just 1/10th of the population stated they would vote against EU membership. According to the findings of the Europe Foundation’s regular surveys on *Knowledge of and Attitudes towards the European Union in Georgia*, the lowest support for Georgia’s EU membership was recorded in 2015, at 61% (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: If There Were a Referendum Tomorrow Regarding Georgia’s Membership in the European Union, Would You Vote for or Against It? (%)



Source: EF/CRRC-Georgia surveys on Knowledge of and Attitudes towards the European Union in Georgia, 2009–2017. Datasets available at <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/>

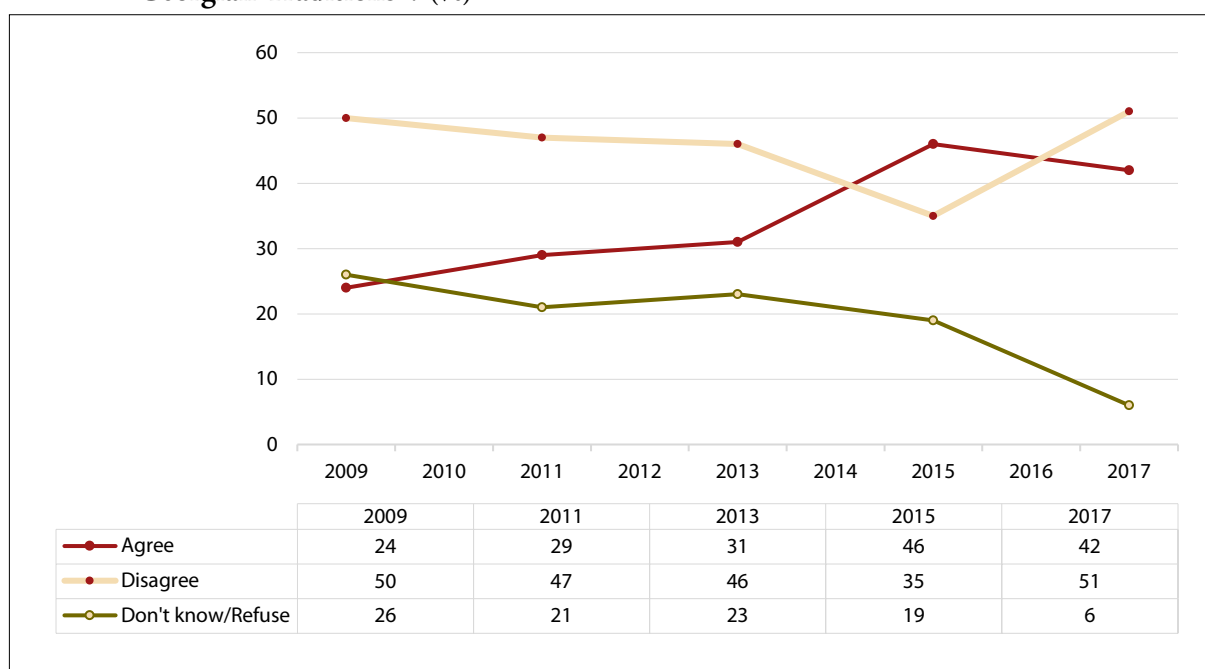
As the Europe Foundation’s 2015 survey report claimed, “[t]he fear that the EU will harm Georgian culture and traditions has intensified among Georgian society, which seems to largely contribute to the decrease in the number of

supporters of Georgia’s EU membership.” (p. 19) This article is primarily focused on the 2017 survey data and looks at the characteristics of those people who report the perception that the EU threatens Georgian traditions.

The 2017 survey on *Knowledge of and Attitudes towards the European Union in Georgia* was conducted between May 9 and 31 as part of Europe Foundation’s European integration programme. In total, 2,258 respondents were interviewed countrywide. The survey findings are representative of the adult population of Georgia except for people living in the occupied territories and on military bases. Weighted results are presented in this article.

While overall assessments of the EU and its role in Georgia have remained rather positive over time, between 2009 and 2015 the share of the ethnic Georgian population who agreed with the statement “The EU threatens Georgian traditions” doubled and, for the first time in these surveys, in 2015, the share of those who agreed with this statement exceeded the share of those who disagreed (see Figure 2). The increased perception that the EU threatens Georgian traditions coincides with decreased support for Georgia’s EU membership.

Figure 2: To What Extent Do You Agree or Disagree With the Statement: “The EU Threatens Georgian Traditions”? (%)



Source: EF/CRRC-Georgia surveys on Knowledge of and Attitudes towards the European Union in Georgia, 2009–2017. Datasets available at <<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/>>

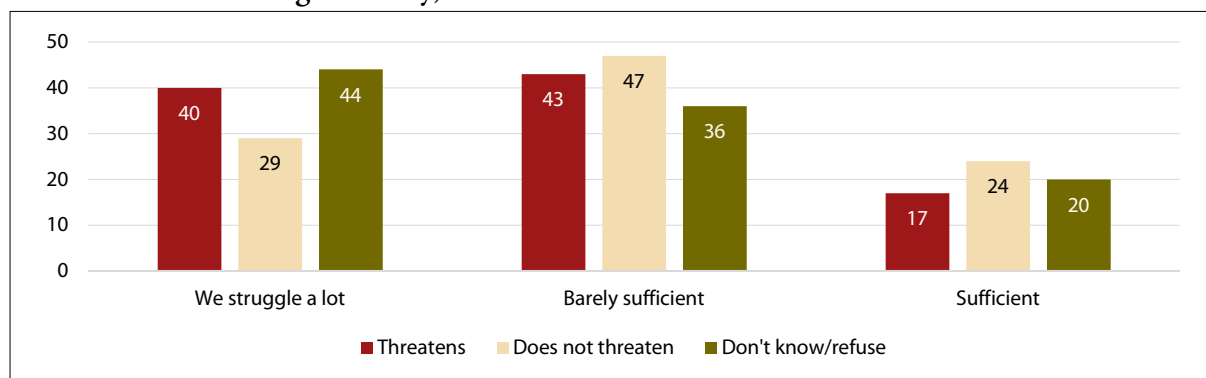
Who Sees the EU as Threatening Georgian Traditions?

Quite surprisingly, there does not appear to be a specific demographic “profile” of people who believe that the EU threatens Georgian traditions. Although small differences can be seen in some basic demographic characteristics between those who believe that the EU threatens Georgian traditions and the rest of Georgians, the former group cannot be strongly marked as predominantly male or female, urban or rural, old or young or middle aged, religious or not, or more or less educated. Most surprisingly, the perception of the EU as a threat to Georgian traditions differs only slightly for people from households of different self-assessed well-being (see Figure 3 overleaf). For the rest of the article, only the answers of ethnic Georgians have been analysed in order to get as focused an understanding of the issue as possible. In the 2017 survey, those who identified themselves as ethnic Georgians constituted 87% of those interviewed.

While the frequency of internet usage (as well as internet access as such) is, normally, a highly characteristic “marker” of various attitudes in Georgia, this, again, is not the case in regard to the perception of the EU threatening Georgian traditions since the frequency of agreement with this statement is very similar in the groups reporting regular, occasional or no internet usage.

With about half of ethnic Georgians believing that the EU threatens Georgian traditions, one would expect some variation by major demographic characteristics. However, this is not the case, which suggests that factors other than

Figure 3: “To What Extent Do You Agree or Disagree With the Statement: ‘The EU Threatens Georgian Traditions’” By “How Sufficient Is Your Current Household Income?” (%) Ethnic Georgians Only



Source: EF/CRRC-Georgia surveys on Knowledge of and Attitudes towards the European Union in Georgia, 2009–2017. Datasets available at <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/>

demography determine such a belief. This belief—or, rather, this fear—is rather evenly spread throughout various “visible” groups in the society. While there is no direct answer to the question who are those who see the EU as threatening Georgian traditions, there are a number of “invisible” factors that this fear is associated with.

Driven by Suspicion?

People who believe that the EU threatens Georgian traditions also *tend* to believe more strongly than others that it is Russia who can currently best support Georgia—not the EU and not the US. They *tend* to think that Russian, not the English language, should be mandatory in the public schools of Georgia. They also *tend* to support a Russian “orientation” for the foreign policy of Georgia and would also *tend* to support Georgia’s membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Importantly though, support for Georgia’s membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Union still is not dominant in this group; equal shares of Georgians who believe that the EU threatens Georgian traditions report that they would vote for and against Georgia’s EEU membership if a referendum were held tomorrow. Concurrently, a 65% majority would vote for Georgia’s membership in the European Union. Thus, it would be a mistake to believe the Georgians in this group are strongly pro-Russian. They are, however, *more* pro-Russian than those Georgians who do not see the EU as a threat to Georgian traditions.

On the other hand, Georgians who believe that the EU threatens Georgian traditions are more critical of democratic developments in Georgia and of Georgia’s readiness for EU membership compared to Georgians who do not think that the EU threatens Georgian traditions. Considering the level of protection of human rights in Georgia, the rule of law, the formation of democratic institutions or the competitiveness of the market economy in the country, those who believe that the EU threatens Georgian traditions are less convinced that Georgia is ready to join the EU.

They are, further, certainly very suspicious of the EU’s intentions. They more strongly believe—in fact, twice as strongly compared to the rest of Georgians—that the EU is helping Georgia because it wants to have Georgia under its influence (Figure 4 overleaf). They also report lower trust of the EU compared to those who disagree with the opinion that the EU threatens Georgian traditions (respectively, 31% and 58%).

Georgians who believe that the EU threatens Georgian traditions are slightly more nationalistic than those who do not believe so. Still, they cannot be characterised as authoritarian, as they, by an impressive majority and at the same rate as the rest of the population, give preference to human rights as a supreme value, clearly placing them above state interests while answering a respective question.

Conclusion

Thus, while Georgians who believe that the EU threatens Georgian traditions cannot be distinguished by any particular demographic characteristic, their rather specific “profile” can be described based on the positions and preferences they report: they are suspicious of the EU’s intentions for Georgia, they are more pro-Russian than the rest of the population, and they are slightly more nationalistic. Their position on these issues is not, however, very firm and is often surprisingly inconsistent:

- While suspecting that the EU helps Georgia for far from altruistic reasons, the absolute majority (80%) still considers EU aid to be important for Georgia;

- The share of those who report trusting the EU is nearly twice as big than the share of those who report trusting the parliament of Georgia (respectively, 31% and 18%);
- 2/3 of those believing that the EU threatens Georgian traditions would still vote for Georgia's membership in the EU if the referendum were held tomorrow;
- At a rate similar to the rest of the population, they say they would like to move to live in a foreign country—often naming EU countries (Germany, Italy) as their preferred destination.

While perfect consistency is rarely characteristic of public opinion, such conspicuous discrepancies are not common either. These inconsistencies may suggest that the positions and preferences reported by Georgians who believe that the EU threatens Georgian traditions are not deeply internalised. Whether they will, at some point, become so, is a question that can only be answered with time. More important questions though are the ones for which no empirical data are yet available: what, specifically, do people mean when they speak of “Georgian traditions”? Do “Georgian traditions” have the same meaning for all people, or do different people mean different things when speaking about traditions? What exactly do people think is being threatened, and how do they think it is being “threatened” by the EU in Georgia? Hopefully, further research will be able to answer these questions.

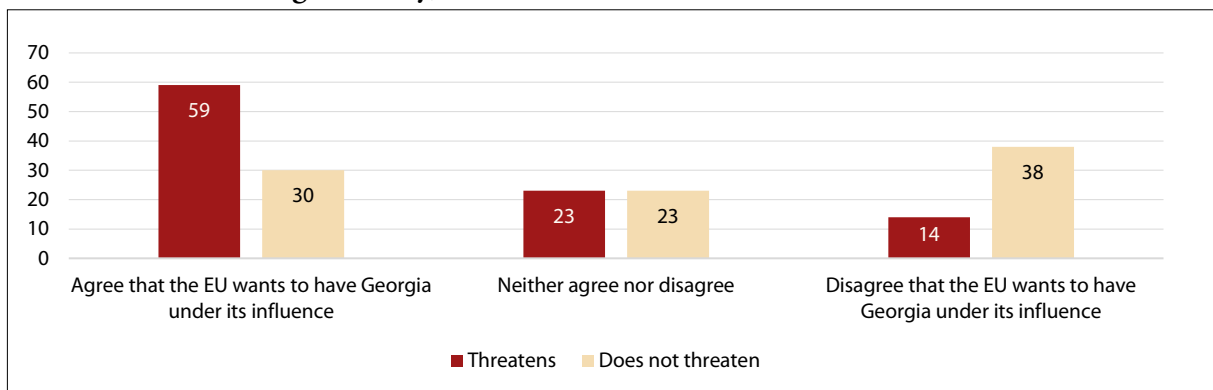
About the Author

Tinatin Zurabishvili holds a PhD in the Sociology of Journalism from Moscow M. Lomonosov State University. From 1994–1999, Tinatin worked for the Levada Center in Moscow. After returning to Georgia in 1999, she taught various courses in sociology for the BA and MA programmes in Telavi State University and the Tbilisi State University Center for Social Sciences. In 2001–2003 she was a Civic Education Project Local Faculty Fellow; from 2010–2012, she was a professor at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA). In 2007, she joined the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) as a Caucasus Barometer survey regional coordinator. Since 2012, she has worked as the CRRC-Georgia research director. Her research interests are focused on post-Soviet transformation, sociology of migration, media studies, and social research methodology.

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Figure 4: “To What Extent Do You Agree or Disagree With the Statement: ‘The EU Threatens Georgian Traditions’” By “The EU Wants To Have Georgia Under Its Influence” (%; Ethnic Georgians Only)



Source: EF/CRRC-Georgia surveys on Knowledge of and Attitudes towards the European Union in Georgia, 2009–2017. Datasets available at <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/> The full wording of the second question was “To what extent would you agree or disagree with the following opinions of why the European Union supports Georgia: ‘The EU wants to have Georgia under its influence?’” The distribution of the answers “Don’t know” and “Refuse to answer” is not shown on the chart.