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“I am Georgian, and therefore I am European” – Re-researching the Europeanness of Georgia

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Abstract

“I’m Georgian, and therefore I am European.” These are the words of late Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania while speaking in front of the Council of Europe in 1999. During the speech, he expressed Georgia’s EU aspirations and outlined the country’s foreign policy agenda for the next decade. Since the Rose revolution in 2003, Georgia has significantly deepened its ties with the EU. A number of foreign policy achievements such as the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea Synergy have demonstrated Georgia’s considerable progress towards the potentiality of future EU membership. However, little is known about the societal changes that have occurred against the background of such formal, inter-elite cooperation. Nationwide public opinion surveys conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) in Georgia in 2009 and 2011 identified the following trends: 1. Public attitudes towards the EU are overwhelmingly positive and most Georgians strongly support EU membership, 2. There is a slight shift from survival values to self-expression values with regard to the relationship between society and state. Compared to 2009, the 2011 survey data shows that Georgians have taken a more active view of citizens’ responsibilities, and 3. Despite their remarkable enthusiasm for the EU, national identity remains more profound for Georgians than a European identity.

Keywords: Georgia, European Union, Public Attitudes, Value Change, Identity.

Introduction

On 27 April 1999 when Georgia became a member state of the Council of Europe, the chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly, Lord Russell-Johnston, addressed the Georgian delegation with the following words - “Georgia, welcome back home!” Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, European integration has acquired new momentum in Georgia. The Georgian government loudly proclaimed its European identity and made EU membership its main goal. Through a number of international formal agreements Georgia has significantly deepened its relations with the EU.

The cooperation between Georgia and the EU began in 1991 when Georgia gained independence. During the first few years this cooperation consisted of the EU providing humanitarian assistance to Georgia. Later in the 1990s the EU expanded its aid through technical cooperation such as the Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States Program (TACIS) that facilitated Georgia’s social and economic development (European Union External Action, 2010). In 1999 the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the EU and Georgia entered into force and provided the legal framework for wide-ranging cooperation aimed at increasing political dialogue, consolidating democracy, promoting trade and investment, as well as developing a market economy in Georgia. After the Rose Revolution, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) included the EU’s eastern and southern neighbours, and in 2006 the EU and Georgia agreed upon an action plan (EU-Georgia Cooperation Council, 2006) as a part of the ENP.

According to a typology provided by Schimmelfenning and Scholtz (2008), the ENP is classified as a low-credibility association policy due to two main reasons. First, the partnership is devised by the EU as an alternative for accession and thus excludes a membership perspective for the ENP countries. Second, it does not set high political standards for

participation and its political conditionality component is quite weak. In 2007 the Black Sea Synergy – a regional initiative – was introduced to facilitate coordination between countries in the wider Black Sea region in key sectors such as energy, transport, environment, mobility and security (Commission of the European Communities, 2007). In 2009 the EU launched the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which, unlike Black Sea Synergy, aims at bringing its participating countries closer to the EU and allows for deeper integration in the areas of institution building, visa agreements, free trade, energy security and regional development. However, while EaP is designed to allow participating countries to deepen their ties with the EU, it does not imply any promise of EU membership (Commission of the European Communities, 2008).

Even though the Georgian government has been trying to move toward EU integration, little is known about changes in mass-orientations that have occurred against such political “EUphoria” in Georgia. While talking about the progress Georgia has made on its way to European integration, this study looks at the population’s attitudes, values and identities related to the process of European integration. What does it mean for Georgia to have European integration as its main foreign policy goal? Is this goal supported and shared from bottom up? What are Georgians’ attitudes towards the EU and how do their values and identities follow Georgia’s political desire to obtain EU membership? To address these questions, this paper presents and analyzes results from two waves of a nationwide public opinion survey entitled “Knowledge and Attitudes toward the EU in Georgia” conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) in 2009 and 2011.¹

This paper consists of an introduction, three main sections and a conclusion. The first section will focus on public attitudes towards EU membership. The second section will look at the value changes that have occurred over the last two years.² The third will examine the extent to which Georgians claim European identity.

Georgians’ attitudes towards EU: Strong support, high trust and optimism

Public attitudes towards the EU are overwhelmingly positive and most Georgians strongly support EU membership. Attitudes towards the EU have become more positive over the past two years. Georgian attitudes towards the EU can be characterized as strong support, high importance, high trust, great optimism and positive perceptions.

Support: According to the 2011 survey, 88% of Georgians think Georgia should be in the EU, up from 81% in 2009. On a similar question asking how people would vote if there were a referendum on joining the EU, 80% of Georgians say they would vote for membership. Moreover, many Georgians are positive that Georgia’s membership in the EU is widely supported by their co-nationals, and under half of the Georgian population thinks EU member states and citizens would support this move. 70% of Georgians think that majority of Georgian citizens support Georgia becoming an EU member state, and 35% think a majority of European citizens would like Georgia to join the EU (only 11% think that Europeans would not like Georgia to join the EU and 54% do not know). Similarly, 41% of Georgians are positive that all the EU member states would like Georgia to join the EU, 8% do not think so and 50% do not know (Table 1).

Table 1.				
	AGREE	DISAGREE	DK	RA
Georgia should be in the EU (%)	88	4	8	0
The majority of Georgian citizens support Georgia becoming a EU member state ... (%)	70	6	23	1
All the European Union member states would like Georgia to join the European Union (%)	41	8	50	1
The majority of European citizens would like Georgia to join the European Union (%)	35	11	54	0

Source: Survey on Knowledge and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia, 2011

Importance: 89% of Georgians think that strengthening ties with the EU is very or rather important for Georgia. This falls above NATO (84%), USA (83%), Russia (80%) and other neighbouring countries. Additionally, NATO and the EU are considered as the most important international organizations for the country by 66% and 55% of Georgians,

respectively. 41% of Georgians (34% in 2009) agree that EU membership is more important for Georgia than joining NATO (only 23% disagree and 36% do not know). When asked which organization should Georgia join first – the NATO or the EU, in 2009 both organizations received almost equal support from the Georgian public (34% said Georgia should join NATO first and 37% – EU). Compared to 2009, in 2011 more Georgians think Georgia should join the EU first (46%) and overall, vast majority of Georgians (89%) think that the support of the EU for Georgia is important.

Trust: According to the 2011 data, 51% of Georgians fully or rather trust the EU.³ This falls after religious institutions (88%), the army (76%), police (67%) and president (55%) and just above courts (29%), media (32%), government (34%), parliament (34%), ombudsman (44%), UN (46%) and banks (46%) (Table 2).

How much do you trust or distrust...? (%)							
	Fully trust	Rather trust	Neutral	Rather distrust	Fully distrust	DK	RA
Religious institutions	74	14	6	2	2	1	1
Army	50	26	12	3	3	6	0
Police	40	27	16	7	7	3	0
President	32	23	18	9	11	6	1
EU	22	29	22	6	4	16	1
Banks	21	25	25	7	8	14	0
Ombudsman	20	24	27	7	4	17	1
UN	20	26	24	7	5	17	1
Healthcare system	18	23	35	11	11	2	0
Local Government	16	23	27	13	9	11	1
Media	13	19	40	14	7	6	1
Government	13	21	29	16	12	9	0
Courts	12	17	24	13	14	19	0
Parliament	12	22	28	15	14	9	0
NGOs	8	16	26	13	7	29	1

Source: Survey on Knowledge and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia, 2011

Optimism: Over half of Georgians (58%) believe that Georgia will be prepared to join the EU in 10 years or less. In 2009, 31% of Georgians thought Georgia would be prepared to join the EU in 5 years or less. This share increased to 38% in 2011, which indicates that Georgians are now even more optimistic about their country's potentiality to become an EU member state. Similarly, approximately 1/3 of Georgians think Georgia will actually join the EU in 5 years or less and 19% think this will happen in 5-10 years. Only 9% believe Georgia will get EU membership in more than 10 years and 2% think this will never happen. These results indicate that people are highly optimistic about Georgia potentially joining the EU in the future. However, in spite of such widespread optimism significant numbers are still unsure about when Georgia will be ready to join or will actually join. 31% do not know when Georgia will be prepared to join the EU and this share increases to 37% when they are asked when Georgia will actually join the EU (Table 3).

Table 3.		
	When, if ever, do you think Georgia will be prepared to join the European Union? (%)	When, if ever, do you think Georgia will actually join the European Union? (%)
In 5 years or less	38	33
In 5-10 years	20	19
In more than 10 years	8	9
Never	2	2
DK	31	37
RA	0	0

Source: Survey on Knowledge and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia, 2011

Perceptions: Georgian perceptions of the EU have changed little since 2009 and remain largely positive. 17% of Georgians have a very positive perception and 35% have rather positive than negative perception of the EU. Only 5% have rather or very negative perception of the EU. Georgians also believe the EU to be a benign institution; 79% of Georgians think the EU is a democratic institution and 76% say that it is a source of peace and security in Europe. Additionally, 70% of Georgia’s population believe that the EU promotes democracy and economic development in countries outside EU. Moreover, 29% agree that the EU threatens Georgian traditions, in contrast to 47% who disagree with this statement. Likewise, only 20% believe that the EU is a new form of empire and 54% reject this opinion.

Georgians also tend to believe that the EU supports Georgia for mutually beneficial reasons; over half of the adult population (65%) think that the EU supports Georgia to have stability in its neighbourhood or to have stability for oil and gas transport (60%). When asked whether the EU supports Georgia in order to subordinate it, a plurality (45%) disagrees and 24% agrees which indicates some scepticism about the EU’s true intention in Georgia.

Overall, Georgians’ attitudes towards the EU are overwhelmingly positive. Georgian people look forward to joining the EU and believe that this is going to happen in a few years. Trust towards the EU is high and people’s perceptions of the EU are overall positive. Moreover, the Georgian public believes that the EU support is of high importance for their country.

Value change: A shift towards a more “European” way of thinking

For Georgians, “Return to Europe”⁴ has another very important but least researched aspect – the symbolic return to the world of European political values: freedom, democracy, justice, solidarity and prosperity. Thus, striving towards Europeanness does not only mean obtaining EU membership, but also and most importantly, sharing European political values and identity.

Views regarding the relationship between state and people are central if we are to understand Europeanness of Georgia. According to theories about political culture, individuals play a crucial role in democratization by taking an active role in the process and engaging with the state. As Inglehart and Welzel (2010) have shown, people’s values and beliefs play a crucial role in a country’s democratization. This study looks at how Georgians view citizens’ responsibilities and how their perceptions of good citizenship have changed in the past two years. Social values are quite static and two years is a short period of time to examine change over time. However, the data indicates that Georgians have taken a more active view of citizens’ responsibilities in 2011 when compared to 2009.

Table 4. To be a good citizen, how important would you say it is for a person to...? (%)⁵					
		Important	Not important	DK	RA
Support people who are worse off	2009	97	2	1	0
	2011	97	2	1	0
Protect traditions	2009	95	4	1	0
	2011	95	3	1	1
Obey laws	2009	91	5	3	1
	2011	94	3	2	1
Vote in elections	2009	86	9	4	1
	2011	92	4	3	1
Form own opinions	2009	83	8	9	0
	2011	92	2	5	1
Be critical towards the government	2009	52	29	17	2
	2011	66	19	14	1
Work as a volunteer	2009	48	32	19	1
	2011	58	28	13	1
Participate in protests	2009	30	46	22	2
	2011	55	30	14	1

Source: Survey on Knowledge and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia, 2009, 2011

In the survey, people were asked to consider the level of importance of certain activities or values in order to be a good citizen. The data shows that some values related to citizenship remain more or less unchanged and highly important while others have slightly changed and became more important in the past two years (Table 4). Supporting people who are worse off than themselves, protecting traditions and obeying laws, importance of which remained almost unchanged in the past two years, can be considered as more traditional values linked to survival. While last five values in the table reflect are more similar to Western values linked to self-expression, autonomy and participation. These latter values are gradually changing and gaining more importance for Georgians. Since 2009, there has been an increase in the proportion of Georgians who think that voting in elections, forming their own opinions independently of others, being critical towards the government, and working as a volunteer are important for good citizenship. In addition, the number of people who think that participation in protests is important for a good citizen nearly doubled in 2011. By observing these trends one can notice that the values which remain unchanged as well as those that changed differ from each other by the degree of effort they require from citizens.

Despite some slightly increasing progressive views regarding the relationship between state and society, it is important to note that Georgia remains a deeply socially conservative country when it comes to certain social values. This puts it at odds with many populations within the EU. This paper cannot fully discuss this aspect of Georgia-EU comparisons, however it is important to note that conservatism towards particular social issues continue to set Georgia apart from EU member states even though Georgians' political attitudes and western-leaning ideals are different. For example, half of Georgian population thinks that a woman bearing a child without marriage can never be justified. 64% think that women having sex before marriage can never be justified (while this percent drops to 33% when the same question is asked about men), and the vast majority (90%) of Georgians think that homosexuality can never be justified (Table 5). Even though values related to women having sex or bearing a child without marriage are slightly changing in a more liberal way, other values such as tolerance of homosexuality remain unchanged.

Table 5. How justified are the following activities? (%)						
		Always justified	Sometimes justified	Never justified	DK	RA
Woman bearing a child without marriage	2009	3	27	63	6	1
	2011	6	36	50	6	1
Woman having sex before marriage	2009	1	14	78	6	1
	2011	6	22	64	6	1
Homosexuality	2009	1	3	90	5	1
	2011	1	3	90	5	1

Source: Survey on Knowledge and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia, 2009, 2011

National Identity versus European Identity

Understanding European identity means examining the relationship between a common European identity and numerous national identities. On the one hand, some scholars such as Carey (2002) argue that these identities are contradictory and a stronger feeling of national identity produces a lower level of support for the EU as a project. On the other hand, most analysts today hold another point of view, defining the relationship between national and European identities as associated and coexistent. They understand postmodern identity as a dynamic and multiple structure in which independent and partially contradictory sub-identities are related to one another and support a sense of coherence (Kraus, 2000). As Meehan (1993) writes, a multiple identity “allows different identities to be expressed and different rights and duties to be exercised” (185) and implies that one does not need to give up one’s national identity to adopt a European one.

Table 6. In the near future do you see yourself as..?				
Country	European only	European and Nationality	Nationality and European	Nationality only
Italy	5	9	60	25
Spain	5	8	58	27
Luxembourg	10	11	47	27
France	6	10	53	27
The Netherlands	1	7	53	38
Belgium	8	11	39	40
EU15	4	8	45	41
Germany	4	8	39	45
Denmark	2	6	44	46
Portugal	2	3	48	46
Austria	4	7	34	53
Greece	1	4	40	55
Finland	1	3	41	55
Ireland	2	4	37	56
Sweden	1	5	34	60
United Kingdom	2	4	27	64

Source: Standard Eurobarometer survey no. 53, 2000, Fig. 6.3

Note: EU15 shows total population results from 15 EU countries

Recent empirical results from the Eurobarometer (EB spring 2000, Report No. 53) indicate that the majority of Europeans declare having both a national and a European identity, demonstrating that they consider both identities to be compatible

(Table 6). These findings support the multiple identity theory according to which identity cannot be analysed in terms of a zero-sum game meaning that European identity does not imply the substitution of other identities (Panebianco, 1996). Even the Treaty of Maastricht does not ask the citizens to choose *either* a national identity *or* a European one. Title I, Article F states that, “The Union shall respect the national identities of its Member States, whose systems of government are founded on the principles of democracy”.

According to CRRC data in 2011 over half of Georgians (59%) agree with the sentiment of Zurab Zhvania’s famous phrase: “I am Georgian, and therefore I am European”. Interestingly far fewer Georgians identify themselves as European. Only 16% of Georgians identify as both Georgian and European, whereas a large majority (60%) identify as their own ethnicity only.

How do you identify yourself? As ... (%)		
	2011	2009
Only (respondent’s ethnicity)	60	60
(Respondent’s ethnicity) and European	16	13
(Respondent’s ethnicity) and Caucasian	14	10
Caucasian	6	9
Other	4	6
DK	1	1

Source: Survey on Knowledge and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia, 2009, 2011

Comparing the results with the data from the Eurobarometer, it becomes evident that European identity is much more profound in most of the EU countries than in Georgia. Even though the differences between the EU countries are great and most people even in the EU do not regard themselves as exclusively Europeans, in 9 out of 15 EU member states (unlike in Georgia) the majority of people say that they feel European. In another words, Georgia is clearly set apart from the most EU countries where mixed identity prevails.⁶

These results do not support Carey’s theory according to which strong sense of national identity weakens the support for EU. The Georgian case demonstrates that it is possible to maintain a strong sense of national identity while expressing strong support and enthusiasm for European integration. One potential explanation of this fact can be that the importance of EU membership for pressing problems such as national security, economic and territorial integrity are of top priority for Georgians (Müller, 2011). For them, the EU holds a promise of security and democracy and is positively perceived and strongly supported. These concerns outweigh the threat of losing national identity.

Finally, CRRC data suggests that identity is a more static variable than attitudes or even values.⁷ Thus, it might not be surprising that Georgian attitudes and values have slightly changed in a pro-European way in the past years, while a strong sense of national identity remains unchanged.

Conclusion

The survey on Knowledge and Attitudes towards the EU offers interesting insights about societal processes that take place against the background of Georgia’s political “EUphoria”. While the formal, elite-to elite cooperation does not hold a promise for Georgia obtaining EU membership in the near future, Georgian society remains highly enthusiastic and optimistic about joining the EU. Georgian attitude towards the EU can be described as high trust, importance and optimism, as well as strong support and positive perceptions.

On the other hand, value changes related to “Europeanization” in Georgia is not as straightforward as Georgian attitudes towards the EU. This is expected taking into account the short period of time (two years) in which such changes are examined. Yet the data still suggests some important trends indicating that mass values and beliefs related to citizenship are gradually changing in a liberal direction while other traditional and conservative social values remain unchanged, thus setting Georgia apart from EU member states.

The difference between Georgia and the EU countries becomes even more evident with respect to European identity. In spite of strong support for Georgia becoming a EU member, and widespread agreement with Zurab Zhvania's famous phrase, Georgian national identity remains the prevalent sentiment in Georgia.

These results suggest that changes related to Europeanization in Georgia have occurred mainly on an attitudinal level and partially on the level of political values and beliefs. However, changing identities as well as some traditional beliefs that are deeply rooted in Georgian culture take more time and may be increased together with the credibility of cooperation between Georgia and the EU.

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¹ The first survey was carried out between July 26 and August 7, 2009 and resulted in 1,683 completed interviews; the second survey was carried out between July 7 and 18, 2011, and had 1,818 respondents. Both surveys employed multistage cluster sampling. To draw the sample the country was divided into three macro-strata: capital, urban and rural. Afterward 102 clusters were selected throughout the country. The target population of the surveys comprises Georgian-speaking adult citizens of Georgia (excluding Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Interviews were conducted face-to-face by trained interviewers in the homes of respondents. The margin of sampling error is ± 4 percentage points and the error attributable to random effects or sampling is \pm the margin of error with 95% confidence. Further information about these surveys are available at: <http://crcc.ge/research/projects/?id=18> and <http://crcc.ge/research/projects/?id=38>

² Even though this is a very short period speaking in terms of value structure changes, some insights still provide valuable information regarding the direction of specific value changes.

³ According to the Caucasus Barometer 2011, trust in the EU is higher in Georgia compared to its neighbouring countries of Armenia and Azerbaijan. 46% of Georgians fully or rather trust the EU, while this share decreases to 37% in Armenia and to 22% in Azerbaijan. The percentages of Georgians trusting the EU are slightly different in these two surveys. This can be explained by the fact that the target populations for both surveys were different. The survey on Knowledge and Attitudes towards the EU included only the Georgian-speaking population, while Caucasus Barometer includes all Georgians (Georgian, Armenian and Azeri speakers).

⁴ Using the language of "return" is based on Lord Russell-Johnston's phrase cited in introduction.

⁵ Respondents were asked, "To be a good citizen, how important would you say it is for a person to...?" The answer options shown in this figure were collapsed into two categories (important and not important) from "not important at all, rather not important than important, rather important than unimportant and very important".

⁶ Questions asked by CRRC and EB are slightly different that might affect the answers. CRRC asked Georgians: "How do you identify yourself? As..." and gave 8 optional answers to choose from: Only [Respondent's ethnicity], [Respondent's ethnicity] and European, Only European, Asian, Caucasian, [Respondent's ethnicity] and Asian, [Respondent's ethnicity] and Caucasian and Other. EB asked its respondents: "In the near future, do you see yourself as..? And gave four optional answers: European only, European and Nationality, nationality and European and Nationality only.

⁷ Time trend analysis of EB data shows that feeling European is a very static variable with very little changes from one measurement to the next. Standard Eurobarometer survey report no. 53, Spring 2000: 82, available at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb53/eb53_en.pdf

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