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NDI POLL: GEORGIANS INCREASINGLY SUPPORT EU AND EURO-ATLANTIC ASPIRATIONS; VIEW RUSSIA AS A THREAT

TBILISI – Poll results released today by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and CRRC Georgia show that support for the European Union (EU) has risen to 80 percent from 72 percent in November 2016. As in previous polls, this support is lower among older people (70 percent compared to 84 percent of youth) and those in minority settlements (54 percent). Reasons for supporting Georgia’s membership are largely related to economic and employment concerns, although supporters also believe membership would strengthen security and democracy. For those who do not support EU membership, 43 percent believe it would cause conflict with Russia, while a quarter (24 percent) believe that EU membership would weaken the country’s cultural identity.

The vast majority of Georgians (92 percent) is aware of the recent visa liberalization to most EU countries, although this percentage is significantly lower in minority settlements, at 64 percent. A large majority (78 percent), however, agrees that even with visa liberalization “ordinary people” will not be able to travel to the EU. Most Georgians, 64 percent, say they have enough information on the rules and procedures surrounding visa liberalization. Despite this, 67 percent state that many Georgians will emigrate. Further, about a quarter of Georgians believes that visa liberalization both will “degrade Georgia’s morality” and cause the country to “lose its national identity.”

NATO support is strong, with 68 percent of Georgians approving membership. As with the EU, this approval is lower among older and in minority settlements. Those who support NATO membership believe it will provide greater security (71 percent), although 30 percent believe membership will benefit the economy. The vast majority of Georgians who disapprove NATO membership, feel that membership would bring high risk of Russian aggression toward Georgia. Misinformation about NATO is evident. A quarter of Georgians (23 percent), for example, thinks that the country is already a NATO member.

“Georgians continue to demonstrate resilient support for the country’s EU and Euro-Atlantic goals,” - says NDI senior director Laura Thornton, - “but the impact of disinformation campaigns is clear through the views and misinformation prevalent among segments of the population, particularly the narratives that the EU and NATO will lead to Russian aggression and weaken the country’s culture and identity.” - Thornton adds, - “It is imperative that leaders and stakeholders devote more energy and information towards vulnerable segments of society – older, rural, and minority populations -- and continue to build strong, preemptive messaging to counter misinformation.”

A significant majority (78 percent) report Russia as a threat to neighboring countries, and almost half of Georgians believe that Russia has had a negative impact on Georgia's economy (41 percent), security (41 percent), and politics (42 percent). Further, 47 percent acknowledge that Russian propaganda exists in Georgia -- only 27 percent disagree -- and that this propaganda takes place primarily through Georgian television, political parties, and social media. Despite these views, Georgians are divided on whether the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a good or bad development for the country, 48 percent and 42 percent respectively. Further advanced analysis of this data show that older population, people living in minority settlements, people with lower education, and those that see fewer benefits in visa liberalization are more likely to lament the end of the Union. Non-English speakers and those who do not believe that Russian propaganda exists in Georgia are also more likely to believe that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a bad thing.

On national security, half of Georgians (52 percent) agree that Georgia is a secure country, while half disagree. Georgians believe that the U.S., Georgia, and Russia offer Georgia the best security, 35 percent, 12 percent, and 10 percent respectively. As for greatest threats to Georgia, Russia leads with 63 percent, followed by Turkey (6 percent), and the U.S. (5 percent). The vast majority of citizens (82 percent) supports mandatory military service and believes in increasing (48 percent) or maintaining (32 percent) current military spending levels.

“It is important and impressive that Georgians look internally for defense of the nation's security, indicating a belief in the country's need for strong democratic institutions, self-sufficiency, and domestic resilience,” - says Thornton.

NDI surveys public opinion to help Georgian stakeholders diagnose and address issues of public concern by providing accurate, unbiased and statistically-sound data. This poll aims to capture the most relevant information to foster the development of responsive policies and governance. A wide range of leaders from across the political spectrum have reported that the polls are important to their work and encourage continued polling. The results reflect data collected from April 7 to April 28 through face-to-face interviews with a nationwide representative sample of Georgia's adult population (excluding occupied territories) that included 2,493 completed interviews. The average margin of error is +/- 2,7 percent.

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NDI is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. More information is available at www.ndi.org.

CRRC Georgia is a non-governmental, non-profit research organization with a mission to promote evidence based debates on policy issues by providing reliable, up-to-date and accessible data and analysis. More information is available at <http://www.crrc.ge>