



SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Public Opinion on Foreign Affairs

NDI Georgia
June 2017

Methodology

- ▶ Fieldwork dates: May 22-29, 2017
- ▶ Carried out by CRRC for NDI
- ▶ Where: Tbilisi, Telavi, Batumi, Marneuli, Akhalkalaki
- ▶ 10 focus groups overall, 2 groups per city: each group consisted of participants of mixed gender, age, and employment status
 - ▶ In Marneuli men's and women's groups were held separately
- ▶ +/-10 participants in each group
- ▶ Not statistically representative (!)

Selection of participants

CRRC coordinators go to several central places in the selected cities and randomly stop and recruit people. Participation is voluntary.

→ **Requirement: Do you watch news coverage at least three times a week? (answer must be yes)**

Areas of Research

- ▶ Perfect Georgia and expectations
- ▶ Democracy
- ▶ Attitudes towards Russia
- ▶ Attitudes towards dissolution of Soviet Union
- ▶ Attitudes towards EU/Europeans
- ▶ Attitudes towards security
- ▶ Anti-western propaganda

Imagine you wake up tomorrow and Georgia is perfect...
What is it like? What would be different from the way it is
now?



What does democracy mean to you?

- ▶ **Frequent answers:** Freedom of speech, freedom of expression, equality
- ▶ **In a democratic country** everyone is equal before the law, human rights are protected, you speak your mind, you have adequate economic conditions, ethnic minorities are an integral part of the society
- ▶ **All believe democracy is a preferable form of governance:** Dominant opinion was that democracy is not perfect but there is no better form of governance
- ▶ Some people associate democracy with freedom of action and therefore believe there can be “too much democracy” which could turn into chaos

Is Georgia a democracy?

Opinions split (as reflected in NDI's April 2017 poll)

- ▶ Those skeptical about Georgian democracy:
 - ▶ Nepotism was often named as a barrier
 - ▶ Batumi groups talked about lack of trust in the judiciary, saying that they don't feel protected
 - ▶ Minorities stated that in a democracy minorities shouldn't feel like second rated people; Georgia not a democracy but has elements
- ▶ Those who said that Georgia is a democracy:
 - ▶ Talked about all the progress made in terms of development and freedom of speech in post-2012 period
- ▶ Opinions like "Georgia is not ready for democracy" or "democracy is not right for Georgia" didn't come up during the discussions

Is Russia a democracy?

Groups were divided between those who were not sure or those who said it is not a democracy; very few thought Russia is a democracy

- ▶ Russia is not a democracy: due to the fact that people have no political choice and liberties are not respected there
- ▶ Russia is a democracy: perceived economic well being – key factor
 - ▶ **Simply put: if Russians are well off and their economy is doing well then their government must be doing something right**
 - ▶ Concerning: economic well being determines state of democracy

Do you think that Putin is a good or bad leader?

Groups were divided on this issue

- ▶ Putin is a good leader:
 - ▶ Russians are well off and their economy is doing well, therefore Putin and his government must be doing something right
 - ▶ Putin's foreign policy is supported by Russian citizens
- ▶ Majority thinks he is bad for the rest of the world

Siding with imperialism: many participants could rationalize Russia's foreign policy saying Georgia would act in the same way if it was as large as Russia



Russians viewed as:

- ▶ Free spirited (participants liked this feature)
- ▶ Living in a moment (participants liked this feature)
- ▶ Knowing how to have a good time (participants liked this feature)
- ▶ Taking good care of themselves (participants liked this feature)
- ▶ Envious
- ▶ Not reliable
- ▶ Not friendly



Generally people believe that the average Russian lives better than average Georgian

- ▶ Why? everybody employed and high pensions

Relationship status with Russia: complicated

Relationship Status:

Interested in:

Looking for:

Single
In a Relationship
Engaged
Married
It's Complicated
In an Open Relationship
Widowed

- ▶ Difficulty articulating what kind of relationship Georgia and Russia have
 - ▶ Participants explained that Georgian Dream government's policy is ambiguous
 - ▶ Whether approving or disapproving, most participants believe that UNM was tougher with Russia
 - ▶ Despite more pro-Russian attitudes in minority groups, people still approved of Saakashvili's approach towards Russia
- ▶ Russia is perceived as **occupant** – Except among minorities
 - ▶ Pro-Western participants thought that it was up to Russia to improve the relationship and that as long as Russia remained an occupant of Georgian territory, a normal relationship was off the table
- ▶ Russia is seen as an economic opportunity; however the majority of participants wanted to limit the relationship to solely trade/tourism
- ▶ Compared to previous focus groups, fewer people seem to believe that one can differentiate between Russian people and Russian politics

QUOTES

- ▶ “Russia is an occupant in the whole world and an occupant can never be a democratic country, right?” - Tbilisi, female, 55, married, employed
- ▶ “The borders keep moving and moving, is this what they [Government] call their policy?! They don’t react to it, soon Russians will approach Batumi, this is what their policy will do,” - Batumi, 35, married, self-employed
- ▶ “Those close to Putin are economically well off, others simply starve,” - Telavi, female, 24, single, unemployed
- ▶ “People and their attitudes have also changes [in Russia]., among our generation, young people, lots of attitudes have changes, they hate Georgians; if you must know, they are very hostile towards us,” - Tbilisi, male, 37, divorced, employed
- ▶ “Taking into account that Russia is an occupant, we have really good relations – no one says anything to them and furthermore, part of populations is still going towards Russia,” - Tbilisi, female, 21, single, a student

QUOTES

- ▶ “We should have some relationship with Russia, because it’s our neighbor and it’s strong, we should have maybe economic relations, partnership. However, we shouldn’t become it’s part, or join any union with Russia,” - Telavi, male, 41, married, unemployed
- ▶ “This is what I think: Russia is an occupant; it has occupied a large portion of our territories. Our country should be ready for a dialogue, but not the kind of dialogue this government is following. On the other hand, sometimes I think even dialogue will have no effect, Russia will do whatever it wants to do. And it doesn’t matter whether Russia will be led by Putin or someone else. I don’t think that the problem is solely Putin - one man and his wishes. I think that no matter who heads Russia, everyone will do the same, because Georgia has strategic location and Russia simply wants it to be part of their country.” Telavi, female, 23, married, unemployed
- ▶ “Our relations with Russia should be limited to only economic transfers, nothing more, no cultural relationships, nothing. Just economical,” - Batumi, male, 25
- ▶ “They have our territories occupied, what relationship are we talking about?! I can hardly imagine the possibility of any relationship,” Batumi, male, 30

Back to USSR? Yes or no?



- ▶ Similar to the poll findings, people are divided on whether dissolution of USSR was a good thing or a bad thing
- ▶ Positive attitudes towards USSR
 - ▶ Mostly economic: a popular belief that the dissolution of USSR destroyed Georgian economy
 - ▶ **USSR: employment, visa free travel with neighbors, stability, more security**
 - ▶ For elderly, those that experienced life under USSR, nostalgia is related to their youth rather than ideology or political beliefs
 - ▶ Most participants acknowledged lack of human liberties during USSR, however the benefits of economic stability were more prominent than lack of freedom

Perks of post-Soviet era: Technology, development, freedom of speech, banking system, larger choice of goods, freedom of movement, ability to open businesses

QUOTES

- ▶ “We were all employed, you were not afraid; you could go, fly anywhere you wanted – inside the USSR borders of course. But we had trips abroad, I personally lived quite well, received a good education and I went wherever I wanted,” - Tbilisi, female, 55, married, employed
- ▶ “Markets, shops were full. Borrowing money was shameful, can you imagine that? And how can you say that this kind of life was bad?! It was great; but there was no democracy, for people to be free, to talk freely, and to purchase things freely with earned money,” - Batumi, male, 45, married, self-employed
- ▶ “Maybe economically Georgia was stronger, but they deprived us of our language and our churches; take for example Shuamta or Alaverdy churches, only later they managed to restore them and chip away that awful paints [from the walls]. Russification was everywhere. It was a terrible era for Georgia,” - Telavi, female, 26, married, a student

Attitudes towards EU

- ▶ Attitudes towards EU were largely positive
 - ▶ People think the EU plays a big and important role in the world
 - ▶ EU membership -- economic benefits, development, travel and education opportunities
 - ▶ Whether a participant identified as “pro-Russian” or “pro-EU,” he/she associated the EU with progress and development
 - ▶ But participants lack information and understanding of what the EU is, particularly in minority settlements
 - ▶ In Akhalkalaki, many people would say that they would assess the benefits of EU only after Georgia joins it
- ▶ Popular belief: Georgia is not ready for EU
 - ▶ Example: if we join the EU, Georgian factories/production will not meet their standards and therefore will be closed, hurting our economy

Attitudes towards EU

Most people aware of the UK leaving the EU

- ▶ Britain leaving EU was almost always described as being positive for Britain but bad for the EU
- ▶ Even though participants had difficulty explaining why Brexit would be good for Britain, they just assumed that Britain, being a wise and prominent country as it is, must have had its reasons and motives behind this decision
- ▶ “They know better”

QUOTES

- ▶ “It’s very strong [EU], because most, actually every EU country is linked to one another economically. So this is why, whether you want it or not, they have to stand together, because if one of them goes down, it affects everyone else,” - Tbilisi, Female, 21, not married, student
- ▶ “Even if we join [EU] it would be great. I assume we shall join soon. Compared to recent years, there are many investors coming to Georgia. More and more investors from Europe come and I think now we can at least assume that we will join EU soon,” - Telavi, male, 23, married, employed
- ▶ “[EU] is setting standards, not only political but mostly economical, like product quality and trade standards,” - Batumi, female, 33, married, employed
- ▶ “For people like us, ordinary people, I think nothing much will change by Visa Free,” - Tbilisi, male, 25, single, unemployed

Attitudes towards EU countries and Europeans

Overall, positive or neutral characteristics were used to describe Europeans

- Europeans are law abiding, punctual, well-ordered, respectful of a clean environment; people of integrity
- Participants would emphasize how differently (from Georgians) they treat their children, encouraging them to be more independent (which they appreciate)
- What they dislike in Europeans: They are cold in personal relationships

Overall, people approve of European values and characteristics but view them as different from Georgian

Most frequently mentioned countries were Germany and France

Germans: Proud, punctual, good doctors

French: developed, take care of each other



Attitudes towards EU countries and Europeans

Minority views:

- ▶ Participants in ethnic minority groups were not well informed about European people, but those who were had mostly positive perceptions
- ▶ In men's group in Marnueli, participants couldn't describe Europeans due to the "lack of experience and contact with Europe"
- ▶ Disliked how young girls marry old men in Europe
- ▶ Armenian groups disliked that all religions have equal rights in Europe
- ▶ Several participants in Akhalkalaki disapproved of Europeans putting the elderly in retirement homes
- ▶ The women's group participants described Europeans as "free, cultural, educated, and have gender balance"



Visa Free with EU

- ▶ Participants **generally supportive** of a visa free regime with EU
- ▶ However:
 - ▶ People believe they will be required to have several thousand Euros in their accounts to get a visa
 - ▶ Many participants in minority focus groups were not aware of visa free at all
 - ▶ General opinion that visa free travel will not benefit larger masses because people can't afford travel

Which country is the biggest threat to Georgia's national security? Why?

- ▶ Russia: because of occupation, troops
- ▶ Turkey: because of economic reasons
 - ▶ People said that Turks own lots of businesses in Georgia and “are enslaving Georgians on their own land”

QUOTE: “For them [Turks, Iranians] quality of life in Georgia is very high, but it's not the case for Georgians unfortunately. They get employed in our country – we don't. They have successful businesses and we are unemployed. Basically it's like we are slaves and servants of foreigners in our own country,” - Tbilisi, Female, 47, married, unemployed

QUOTE: “The biggest threat is Russia and second biggest is Turkey. Russia has large territories occupied and what else needs to be said. As for Turkey, we all know the history – what went down and how and it's been repeated now. They practically own Batumi, they have money and they enslave Georgians on their own land,” - Tbilisi, male, 25, single, unemployed

What entity/country is the best guarantor of Georgia's national security? Why?

▶ USA:

- ▶ Helps Georgia with arms, trainings
- ▶ Is interested in the region hence is protective of Georgia
- ▶ Linked to NATO

▶ NATO:

- ▶ Attitudes towards NATO mostly positive or neutral (except for minorities)
- ▶ People were more decided about NATO than EU; presumably because its mandate is clearer for Georgians

QUOTES

- ▶ “It [Russia] tells you to give up on NATO, but you keep pushing for NATO, so it [Russia] moves the border little by little,” - Tbilisi, male, 55, married, unemployed
- ▶ “I would support [joining NATO] because the most important benefit would be military security,” - Tbilisi, female, 21, single, a student
- ▶ “NATO will not accept us until we restore territorial integrity,” - Telavi, male, 23, married, employed
- ▶ “I have very positive attitudes [towards NATO]. In each NATO country, their self-defense is guaranteed, it’s very difficult to touch NATO member country just like that,” - Telavi, male, 25, single, employed
- ▶ “I generally have a positive attitude [towards NATO], but I don’t have confidence that if we are in any danger they will rush to our defense,” - Batumi, female, 44, single, employed
- ▶ “At this point NATO membership is not in our interests. Every NATO member is obliged to contribute to NATO budget annually. Georgia’s current budget is 6.5 million and we can’t afford to spend some part of it for NATO budget. So basically NATO membership will hurt our budget,” - Batumi, male, 36

Anti-western propaganda

No definitive conclusions: Groups were divided into those who said there is Russian propaganda and those who say there isn't or didn't really understand the notion of propaganda and our questions.

- ▶ Those who held more favorable opinions of Russia were more likely to say there is no propaganda or have difficulty understanding the questions.

Outstanding findings: Minorities

Minorities differ from the rest of the cities on foreign policy views and understanding

- ▶ Relationship with Russia is more important than with the West
- ▶ Want visa free travel with Russia
- ▶ Have family members in Russia
- ▶ Depend on remittances from Russia

Division among Azeri and Armenian settlements:

- ▶ Ethnic Armenians are more informed and opinionated about foreign policy
- ▶ Deep-rooted differences in attitudes between Azeris and other groups; presumably because of their religious and cultural backgrounds

Outstanding findings: Minorities

▶ Most important national issues:

- ❑ Relations with Russia
- ❑ Budget deficits
- ❑ Need for better attitudes towards ethnic Armenians
- ❑ Easy travel to Russia/need for visa free with Russia
- ❑ Not limiting import of Armenian grapes
- ❑ People moving to Turkey, causing demographic problems (Armenian groups)
- ❑ Not being able to find a job because of not speaking Georgian
- ❑ Lack of factories and other industrial facilities
- ❑ Older people can't find jobs
- ❑ Migration crisis

QUOTES

- ▶ “Of course EU is a strong entity, entity that works for its own benefits. But it’s not that good for Georgia, because we can’t hold European standards, we need lots of time before achieving these standards,” - Marneuli, female, 29, married, employed
- ▶ “It’s a fact that we have always been dependent on Russia, each year 150000 people go to Russia from Javakheti to work. But in my opinion, we shouldn’t be under Russian influence, we should have good relationship but we should continue EU aspirations. Otherwise Russia will bring nothing good for us,” - Akhalkalaki, male, 22, single, employed
- ▶ I don’t care with who Georgia will have close ties with; what I care for is us not losing our identity and keeping our values. There are many bad things in West as well and I don’t want us to copy them,” - Akhalkalaki, male, 35, married, employed

Key takeaways

- ▶ Overall, people view many [even unexpected] topics through economic lenses – such as national security threats, the state of democracy, Russia, the dissolution of USSR, etc.
- ▶ Favorable views on Russia:
 - ▶ Perceptions (true or false) of the better quality of life, employment (family members), and economy there, benefits of association (e.g. people in Russia are economically well off – so if we have closer ties with Russia, our economy and own well being will improve)
 - ▶ Putin is a good leader for his people – so if we are on his good side, he will spare us from military aggression (conversely, NATO integration will anger Russia and Georgia will be endangered)
 - ▶ Ethnic minorities have more favorable attitudes toward Russia, but predominately based on economic ties -- integration into Georgian society, equal rights, and decent economic conditions are what matters most for these communities, not pursuing a pro-Russian agenda
- ▶ Solid ground for EU support in Georgia:
 - ▶ Mostly approve and trust EU but lack information on the EU and visa travel, if unaddressed will contribute to further Euro-skepticism
 - ▶ Positive opinions about Europeans, but seen as different – a need to bridge the gap