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James Monogan, the Professor of the University of Georgia was a supervisor during the preparation of the article. The paper uses complex statistical analysis

## **Georgians' Political Knowledge and Attitudes towards the West and Russia**

### **Abstract**

This paper considers the effect that knowledge has on Georgians' attitudes about foreign policy alliances. Georgia's current political course is directed towards the West and NATO membership. However, due to the difficult historical past, the Georgian population may have different wishes and expectations, and many might want to get closer to Russia. This article shows exactly whether the Georgian political course and the expectations of the population coincide with each other, and to what degree the most knowledgeable citizens of Georgia agree with the view of elites.

*Key Words: Political knowledge, Political attitudes, Political allays*

### **Introduction**

The political landscape of Georgia, a country nested between Turkey and Russia, has drastically changed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, constituent part of which it was. The declaration of independence in 1991 marked the transition of the country from Soviet rule to democratic governance. With little experience of independent statehood, Georgia quickly became a transitional country. This transition period can be described as "democratizing backwards," which refers to a situation in which democratic institutions exist but were created before the rule of law and civil society (Rose & Shin, 2001). Now Georgia had to forget its totalitarian past and become a democratically-minded country. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, almost no one thought the process of transition to democracy would be such a difficult, long and painful one.

As Georgia is forging its own path, one of the main issues it faces is with which countries should it form international alliances? Georgia has a difficult geographical location and neighborhood because it represents the corridor between Europe and Asia, which is the reason why it is important to see which path Georgia will follow. With regard to economic and security relations, a natural path would be to ally more closely with Russia, which was the leading power in the Soviet Union. The other is to turn to the West for international alliances--reaching out to the United States or, more likely, the more proximate European Union (EU). Georgia's leadership has largely focused on allying with the West. But what does the mass public think about this issue?

## **Political Knowledge and Political Attitudes**

On foreign relations or any issue, why is political knowledge so important to public opinion? According to numerous studies, citizens who know a vast amount of information are considered to be central players in democratic theory and this is a crucial element of democracy (Dahl, 1971). Political scientists like Almond and Verba (1963) mention that civic competencies and abilities are important for democracy. Citizens should have some knowledge about general politics in order to be able to exercise their power through elections or other democratic means.

There have been serious debates among scholars about what the concept of political knowledge means; it is hard to define and also hard to measure. Delli Carpini and Keeter define political knowledge as “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (Carpini, Keeter 1991, 10).

Politically knowledgeable people seem to engage differently in thinking about and doing politics than less knowledgeable people. Their cognitive abilities function differently in the processing of information. Research has shown that political knowledge is linked to more politically stable opinions, more to left wing opinions than to right-wing ones, and unwillingness to accept irrelevant and propagandistic information.

In terms of how people form attitudes, John Zaller (1992) argues that opinions are based on the information they process, which they both have to receive and accept as valid. As they hear this information, people form "considerations" in response to elite discourse in the mass media. This discourse consists of multiple, frequently conflicting streams of persuasive messages. In fact these processes require cognitive and intellectual engagement.

## **Context of the Issue: The Choice between Russia and the West**

Before considering how citizens choose their preference between Russia and the West, it is essential to consider the recent history of Georgian foreign relations, with particular attention to the relationship with Russia. Georgia has a difficult geopolitical location. Its relationship to Russia has been historically very complicated.

Due to major events that have happened in the country (Georgia has faced civil war and wars with Russia), establishing civil society was further delayed. Unlike Western countries, in post-Soviet countries there are not only social and economic differences, but the perceptions and behaviors of people are different (Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2008; Howard, 2003; Rose & Shin, 2001; Makarovic et al., 2008). Other researchers indicate that in former Soviet countries the population is cynical and apathetic (Howard, 2003; Rose & Shin, 2001). People exhibit low levels of trust in state institutions, and they are less involved in volunteer activities. People have difficulty in reducing post-communist thinking and exercising the liberties offered by a democratic regime, such as active participation in the decision making process and taking democratic responsibilities. Of course, no society is merely in the role of recipient of various resources from the states. Political processes and participation in politics largely depend on the relationship between people and the state. Post-Soviet citizens' attitudes on state decisions often include political distrust, misunderstanding, and apathy. The same pattern applies to the Georgian population.

In the context of these complexities and challenges, today's Georgian political course is strongly directed towards the West and seeking to join the European Union. Is the Georgian public

following the politicians' lead on this issue? How does opinion vary among Georgian citizens and what might that mean for long-term support of the pro-Western foreign policy?

### **Hypotheses**

Overall, Georgian citizens with higher political knowledge should be more favorable towards the EU and the West, as well as less favorable towards Russia, than citizens who are less politically knowledgeable. These effects will be more pronounced for citizens who do not primarily speak Russian. Among those who are fluent in Russian, however, the effects will be reversed: citizens with higher political knowledge should be less favorable towards the EU and the West, as well as more favorable towards Russia, than citizens who are less politically knowledgeable.

### **Data**

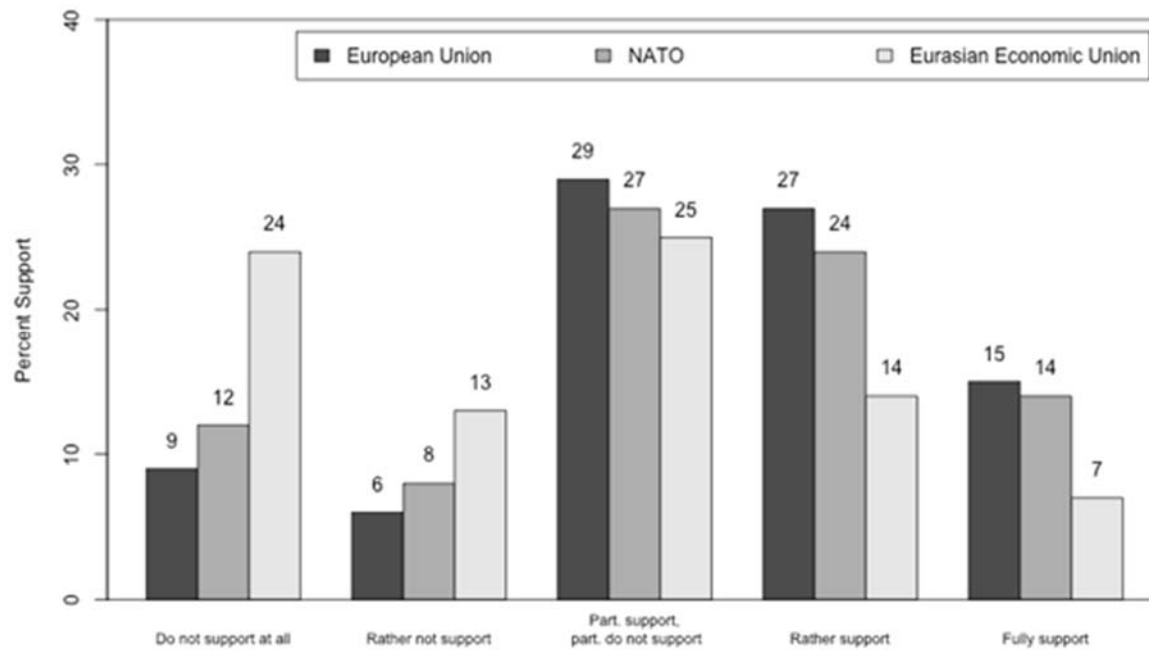
I analyze the Caucasus Barometer Survey (2017), which is mostly about socio-economic issues and political attitudes. This survey recruited respondents using multi-stage cluster sampling with preliminary stratification. 2,379 residents of Georgia took part in the survey, out of which 54% were women, and 46% were males. 45% of respondents live in the rural areas of Georgia, 29% in the urban areas, and 27% in the capital city. The age distribution of individuals participating in the study is as follows: 18 to 35 years was 33%, 36 to 55 years was 34%, and 56+ was 33%. As for ethnic groups, the majority of the survey participants were Georgian at 84%, 9% were ethnic Azerbaijani, 5% ethnic Armenians, and the remaining 2% were from another Caucasian ethnicity (including Russian).

I measure my primary predictor, which is the knowledge of the respondents about social, political and economic issues with the following question: interviewers were asked how often did they feel that respondents did not understand the questions asked: 42% of respondents were described as never misunderstanding what was asked (and hence understanding all questions), 33% of respondents were only confused for 10 or fewer questions, 18% of respondents were described as being confused some questions but not that many (10-20 questions), 5% of respondents were described as misunderstanding many questions but still understanding a majority of what was asked, and only 1% of respondents were described as being confused throughout most of the interview.

As a potential conditioning variable, the effect of knowledge might be linked to language barriers. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the Russian language and Russian propaganda are still ways that Russia has had a huge influence on the Georgian population. In this survey, 48% of the respondents have an intermediate knowledge of Russian, 23% are advanced in Russian, and only 8% of the survey participants do not have basic knowledge of Russian language. This variable may moderate the effect of knowledge on attitudes.

For my primary dependent variables, I am interested in what the Georgian population actually thinks about to whom the country should establish close international relations. Respondents were asked to what extent they would support country's membership in the European Union, in NATO, and in the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia. Please see Figure 1 for an overview of these three questions.

**Figure 1: Overall Support for Alliances with Western and with Russian-Aligned Institutions**



As we can see in Figure 1, a plurality of the respondents (29%, 27% and 25%) in all three cases partially support and partially do not support the membership in those unions, which might mean that they do not have enough information and knowledge to have a strong opinion about the stated issues. The options of "rather support" and "fully support" are much more popular for the European Union and NATO than they are for the Eurasian Economic Union. Hence, we can see that overall levels of support for Western alliances are higher among Georgians than for a Russian-oriented alliance. But does political knowledge affect whether a respondent is higher in support for the EU, NATO, or the Eurasian Economic Union? I turn to regression analysis to test this idea.

## Analysis

In order to understand which factors have a strong influence on supporting joining each of these three organizations (the European Union, NATO, and the Eurasian Economic Union), I have run a multiple linear regression model of each. The main predictor in each model is how unknowledgeable or confused the interviewer thought the respondent was (which is the opposite of being knowledgeable). Confusion is interacted with knowledge of the Russian language in each model. Age in years and ethnicity (coded as a dummy for Georgian ethnicity) are two more control variables.

**Table 1: Linear Regression of Support for EU Membership (5-Point Scale)**

Parameter	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr (> t )
Intercept	4.1670	0.2384	17.47	0.000
Confusion	-0.0826	0.0987	-0.83	0.403
Know Russian	0.0061	0.0694	0.88	0.930
Age	-0.0100	0.0014	-7.30	0.0000
Georgian ethnicity	0.0208	0.0811	0.26	0.798

<b>Confusion*Know Russian</b>	-0.0274	0.0332	-0.85	0.409
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Notes: N=2,037. R<sup>2</sup>=0.0456.

Table 1 shows the model of support for Georgia's becoming a member of the European Union. The effect of confusion is not significant, nor is the interaction of confusion with knowledge of Russian. This means that despite the fact that many in the Georgian population might know the Russian language well, language does not seem to affect opinions about establishing closer relationships with European Union. The effect of age, as I expected, is negative and statistically significant. This result means that younger people realize that real threats for Georgia are coming from Russia, and we need to look to the West for alliances. The effect of ethnicity is not significant, which means that whether or not a respondent is ethnically Georgian, holding all other factors constant, there are not differences in EU support.

**Table 2: Linear Regression of Support for NATO Membership (5-Point Scale)**

<b>Parameter</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>t value</b>	<b>Pr (&gt; t )</b>
<b>Intercept</b>	4.2816	0.2620	16.33	0.0028
<b>Confusion</b>	-0.3225	0.1080	-2.98	0.0028
<b>Know Russian</b>	-0.1762	0.0760	-2.17	0.0206
<b>Age</b>	-0.0110	0.0045	-7.39	0.0000
<b>Georgian ethnicity</b>	0.2856	0.0905	3.15	0.001
<b>Confusion*Know Russian</b>	0.0714	0.0364	1.95	0.0503

Notes: N=2,021. R<sup>2</sup>=0.0447.

Table 2 shows the model of support for Georgia's becoming a member of NATO. The effect of confusion is negative and significant, which is exactly what I hypothesized. The more knowledge someone has, the more likely he or she is to support Georgia's joining NATO. Additionally, the interaction of confusion with knowledge of Russian is positive and significant, which is also what I hypothesized: This means that the effect of knowledge is weaker among Georgian citizens who know Russian well. As those who are fluent in Russian become more politically knowledgeable, there is less change in support for Georgia's building strong relations with a military union like NATO. Meanwhile, the main effect of knowing the Russian language itself presents the result for a respondent who shows no survey confusion. This coefficient is negative and significant, which means that those who are better at speaking Russian are less likely to support NATO membership, on average and all else equal. The effect of age is negative and statistically significant which again is what I expected: the younger generation is more supportive towards allying with NATO. The effect of ethnicity is positive and significant which highlights the fact that ethnic Georgians are against the Russian occupation and prefer to cope with the military aggression with the support of a strong union like NATO.

**Table 3: Linear Regression of Support for Eurasian Economic Union Membership (5-Point Scale)**

<b>Parameter</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>t value</b>	<b>Pr (&gt; t )</b>
<b>Intercept</b>	2.5749	0.2641	9.74	0.0000
<b>Confusion</b>	0.2078	0.1099	1.89	0.0589
<b>Know Russian</b>	0.0416	0.0774	0.53	0.5914
<b>Age</b>	0.0077	0.0015	5.08	0.0000
<b>Georgian ethnicity</b>	-0.2476	0.0462	-5.36	0.0000
<b>Confusion*Know Russian</b>	-0.0068	0.0371	-0.18	0.8540

Notes: N=1,920. R<sup>2</sup>=0.0638.

Table 3 shows the model of support for Georgia's becoming a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. The effect of confusion is positive and significant, which is what I hypothesized - the more knowledge someone holds the less likely she or he is to support Georgia's joining a union like the Eurasian Economic Union, on average and all else equal. However, the interaction of confusion with knowledge of Russian is not significant. The effect of age is positive and significant which is exactly what I expected: the older a citizen is the more likely he or she is to support joining EEU on average and all else equal. The effect of ethnicity is negative and significant which I hypothesized: if a person is ethnic Georgian he or she is less likely to support Georgia's joining EEU on average and all else equal.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that more knowledgeable Georgians are more likely to support NATO membership and less likely to support EEU membership. For NATO, this effect is conditioned by the person's Russian language ability. My findings are relevant for state representatives in order to better understand how citizens form their attitudes and whether they support state foreign policy. My findings are relevant for interested officials from the West in order to better analyze whom Russian propaganda can reach. On questions related to economic alliances like the EU or EEU, there appears to be little effect that Russian propaganda can have. For military questions, as would be seen in the study of which respondents want to join NATO, however, knowledge and the language people learn from is important.

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## Appendix

### List of the variables used in the article

- P22. Using a scale of 1 to 5, where code “1” means no support and code “5” means your full support, to what extent would you support /country’s/ membership in NATO? [NATOSUPP]

Don’s support at all	1
Rather not support	2
Partially support, partially don’t support	3
Rather support	4
Fully Support	5
(Don’t know)	-1
(Refuse to answer)	-2

- P25. Using a scale of 1to 5, where code “1” means no support and code “5” means your full support, to what extent would you support /country’s/ membership in European Union? [EUSUPP].

Don’s support at all	1
Rather not support	2
Partially support, partially don’t support	3
Rather support	4
Fully Support	5
(Don’t know)	-1
(Refuse to answer)	-2

- P28\_GEO. Using a scale of 1to 5, where code “1” means no support and code “5” means your full support, to what extent would you support Georgia’s membership in Eurasian Economic Union led by the Russian Federation? [EEUSUPNG].

Don's support at all	1
Rather not support	2
Partially support, partially don't support	3
Rather support	4
Fully Support	5
(Don't know)	-1
(Refuse to answer)	-2

- D7. Please tell me which one of these levels best describes your ability in the following:

	No basic knowledge	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	(Don't know)	(Refused to answer)
Russian Language [KNOWRUS]	1	2	3	4	-1	-2
English Language [KNOWENG]	1	2	3	4	-1	-2
Other foreign language except, English or Russian [KNOWOTH]	1	2	3	4	-1	-2
Computer (Microsoft Office programs, <u>excluding</u> games) [COMPABL]	1	2	3	4	-1	-2

- W3. How often did you feel that the respondent did not understand the questions you asked? [FRQUNDST]

Never. 1

Just for a few questions (fewer than ten). 2

For some questions, but not that many (approximately between 10 and 20 questions). 3

For a substantial number of questions, but less than half the interview. 4

Throughout most of the interview, or through the entire interview. 5

- D9. Which of the following do you do most frequently when you are browsing the Internet? Please name three most frequent activities.

	(Don't Know)	-1
	(Refuse to answer)	-2
1	Receive / send emails [INTACEM]	
2	Use Skype for instant messaging and for calls [INTASKY]	
3	Use Facebook [INTACFB]	
4	Use social networking site(s) other than Facebook (e.g. Odnoklassniki, MySpace, Google+, etc.) [INTACSN]	



5	Engage in forum discussions [INTACFD]	
6	Write a blog / read other's blogs [INTACBL]	
7	Search for information (Google, Wiki, etc.) [INTACIN]	
8	Shop [INTACSH]	
9	Read, listen to or watch the news, including watching online TV, <b>apart</b> from news on social networking sites [INTACNW]	
10	Download / Listen to / Watch music/videos/movies [INTACEN]	
11	Play online games, except gambling [INTAGAME]	
12	Gamble, bet [INTABET]	
13	Visit dating websites [INTACDW]	
14	Other [INTACOT]	