



Policy Briefing  
Eurasia Democratic Security Network  
Center for Social Sciences | April 2018

# Georgian Perceptions & Cautious Conditionality

By Levan Kakhishvili

The 2015 Caucasus Barometer Survey demonstrates that for more than half of Georgians, democracy is not necessarily the most preferable form of government. In fact, only some 47 percent of the population thinks that democracy is better than other types of government.<sup>1</sup> While such numbers are concerning, they are not necessarily atypical compared to global views of democracy.<sup>2</sup> However, 2017 survey data suggests that 71 percent of Georgians would vote for membership in the EU should there be a referendum. This high—and durable—level of support for the EU is both

## BOTTOM LINE

- Durably strong support for EU integration in Georgia is tied to practical considerations.
- Party support is not associated with European identification.
- There is still work to do in associating democracy and Europeanization.
- Practical expectations for EU integration should be tempered.

an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity in the sense that EU conditionality could be leveraged to make Georgia more democratic.<sup>3</sup> However, as the process of Europeanization involves social and economic changes that can contribute to social backlash and increased populism—and considering the public’s lack of consensus on the normative merits of democracy—conditionality should be implemented with caution and in consideration of local realities.

### *Perception of Europeanization in Georgia*

The experience of Central and Eastern European countries demonstrates that the process of Europeanization results in cultural and economic changes. These two types of changes, however, represent the primary causes that give rise to populism.<sup>4</sup> Given the growing political clout of populist movements in the U.S. and throughout Europe, there is a high likelihood that the process of “Europeanization,” which requires painful economic reforms and social changes, could trigger a negative public response. One way to avoid this could be the careful management of public expectations.

Over two thirds of Georgians—69 percent—agree with the statement that the EU supports the development of democracy in non-member countries.<sup>5</sup> However, 58 percent of Georgian society believes that the most important issues for EU support to Georgia would be economic (28 percent), restoring territorial integrity (19 percent), or solving social problems (11 percent).<sup>6</sup>

Relatedly, and not unsurprisingly, the most visible reasons why Georgians support EU membership is almost exclusively limited to economic prosperity and security—approximately 85 percent of respondents that

would vote for EU membership said in 2015 that the reason was for the improvement of one’s own economic conditions (44 percent), better protection from foreign threats (23 percent), or better chances of restoring territorial integrity (18 percent).<sup>7</sup>

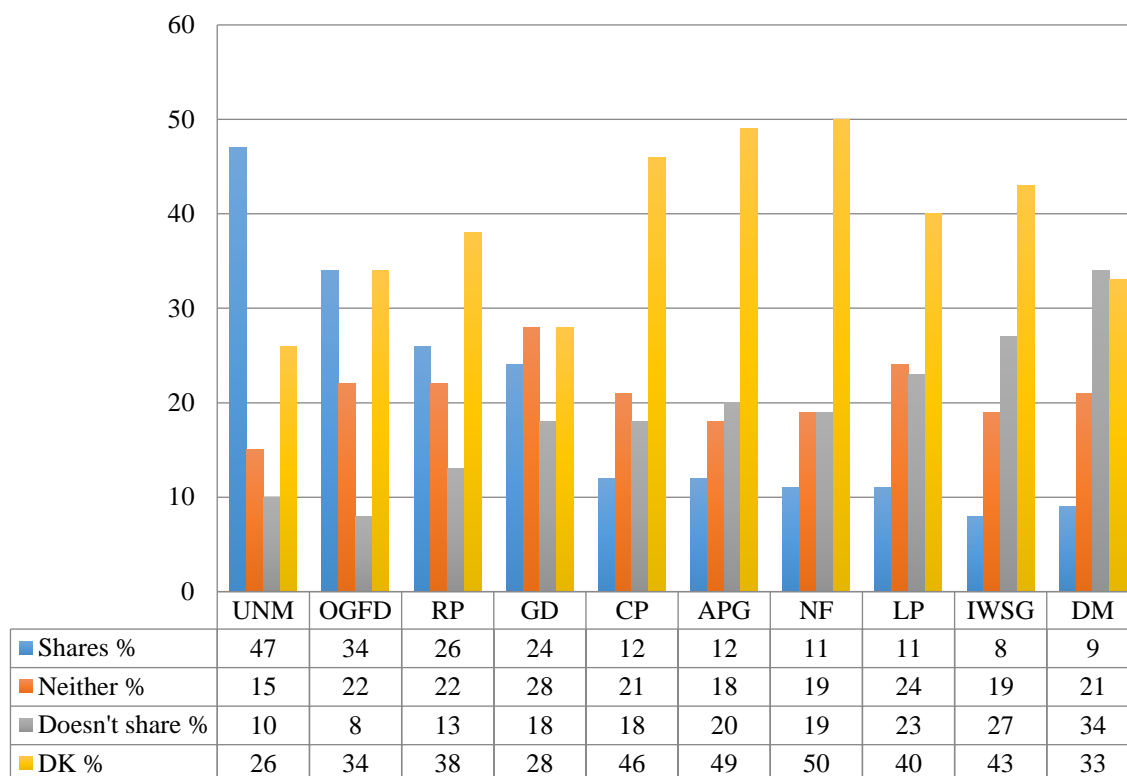
All this data suggests that Georgian public support for the EU and Europeanization is not necessarily a value-driven choice, but a rational, albeit possibly illusion-based, decision. By extension, public expectations for tangible, immediate benefits should be managed in order to avoid the potential for backlash if neither integration or their presupposed benefits fail to materialize.

### *Values of Europeanization or Values and Europeanization*

That Europeanization for Georgians is a rational choice rather than a value, or identity-driven, civilizational orientation seems clear when two public perceptions regarding Georgian political parties are examined: the public’s perception of how closely political parties share European values, and popular attitudes toward them.

Chart 1 shows the extent that a particular political party shares European values, according to public perception, and what kind of attitudes people have toward each of them. Such data can provide important insights on whether a party’s perceived European values correlates to positive ratings.

Political party ratings represent a complex issue in a country like Georgia and numbers can be misleading if one wants to predict election outcomes.<sup>8</sup> However, the data and its discussion is not necessarily focused on which party is more likely to win the next election.

**Chart 2: Political Parties and European values**

Source: *The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2015. "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2015". <http://caucasusbarometer.org>.*

**Parties Represented:** United National Movement (UNM); Our Georgia-Free Democrats (OGFD); Republican Party (RP); Georgian Dream (GD); Conservative Party (CP); Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG); National Forum (NF); Labor Party (LP); Industry Will Save Georgia (IWSG); Democratic Movement (DM)

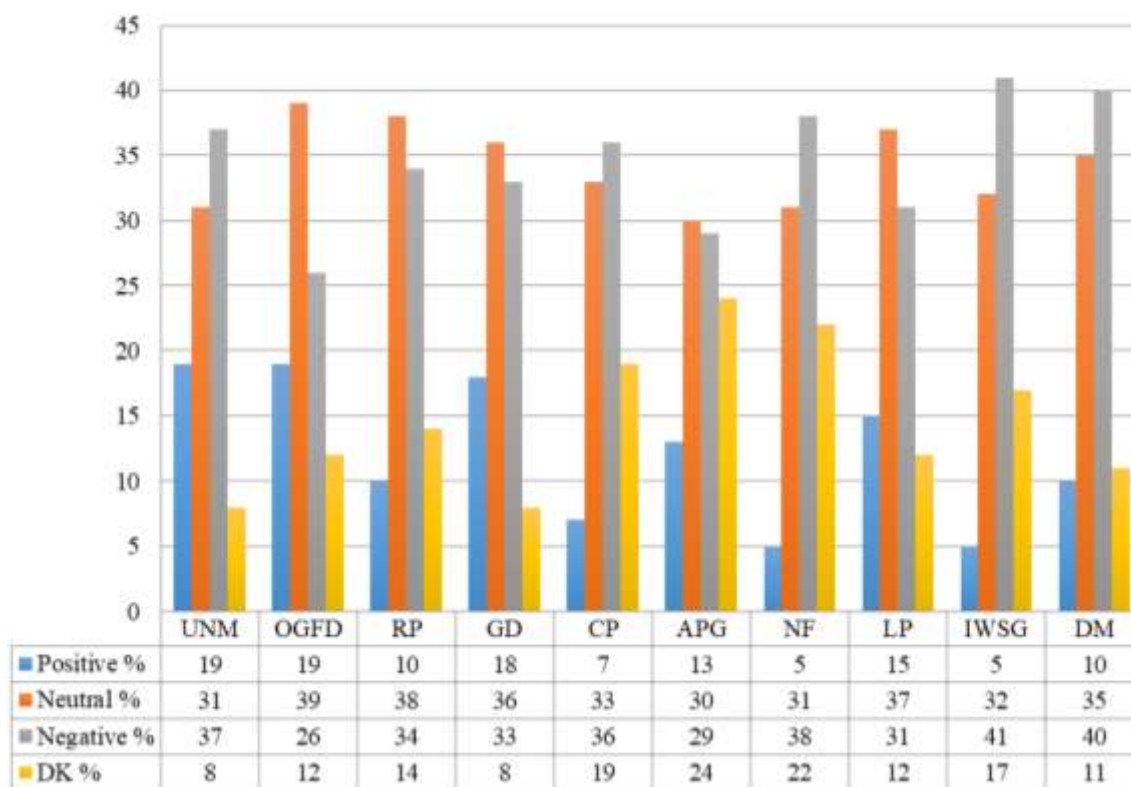
Instead, the primary concern of this analysis is the extent to which it is possible to establish any reasonable correlation between a party sharing European values and public perceptions of this party. It must be emphasized, however, that these figures do not necessarily describe the extent to which political parties actually share European values. The popular perception is more important in this case, and that is the focus of this paper.

Chart 2 illustrated data about Georgian public perceptions of whether parties share European values.<sup>ix</sup> The data makes it clear that there is high degree of confusion among the public, i.e. a large proportion of

population cannot decide whether parties do or do not share European values.

The share of answer category "Don't know" ranges from 26 percent to as high as 50 percent. Furthermore, the answer category "Neither" also has a high proportion, ranging from 15 to 28 percent.<sup>x</sup>

This may mean two things. First, the public is unsure about what European values mean, which is why people cannot decide whether a particular party shares them or not. Second, political parties themselves represent such conflicting values that it becomes extremely difficult for the people to decide to what extent they share European values. However,

**Chart 3: Popular attitudes towards political parties**

Source: *The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2015b. "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2015". <http://caucasusbarometer.org>.*

it is, perhaps, that a combination of the both factors shapes public perceptions.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the data, however, the ten political parties can be broken down into three groups in terms of the extent they are perceived as sharing European values. The first group of parties includes the United National Movement (UNM) and Our Georgia Free Democrats (OGFD), since more a third of society believes they share European values.

The second category also includes two political parties: the Republican Party (RP) and Georgian Dream (GD), which are believed to share European values by about 25 percent of the public. The final group would include the rest of the parties. However, the third group includes two

political parties—Industry Will Save Georgia (IWSG) and the Democratic Movement (DM)—that are regarded as explicitly not representing European values, according to 27 and 34 per cent of the public, respectively. This represents the two highest levels on this particularly question.

Although Chart 3 does not necessarily predict election results, it shows which parties the public views positively. There are a few outliers: GD, APG, LP and DM. The GD was categorized in the second group above but it has the same share of positive attitudes as the UNM, which is perceived to share European values by twice as many people. The APG, LP and DM all have a higher share of positive attitudes—13, 15 and 10 percent respectively—than the RP at 10 percent.<sup>xi</sup>

In light of the fact that the RP is perceived to share European values by two to three times more people than any of these three parties, it appears that sharing European values is not the primary factor that shapes popular attitudes towards political parties. This again speaks for the low level of importance of European values for most Georgians implying an alternative rationale(s) undergirding durable public support for Europeanization.

### *Implications and recommendations*

The above discussion demonstrates that Europeanization and democratization in the perception of the public are two different processes, with the former being more desirable than the latter. Europeanization is associated with material gain, which makes it more appealing, while democracy remains a vague concept for most Georgians that is not necessarily the best form of government.

Consequently, Dr. Lincoln Mitchell<sup>xii</sup> has correctly argued (in a previous EDSN briefing) that Georgia's democratization is increasingly a province of local actors and agendas. However, public opinion is not likely to be a driver of these processes any time soon and, as Mitchell<sup>xiii</sup> notes, neither

are political parties. This means that the fate of Georgian democracy is in the hands of the degree of uncertainty and relative strength of bargaining power among political actors. Although such conditions can drive democratization,<sup>xiv</sup> it is often argued that the presence of democratizers can help the process as well.<sup>xv</sup>

As a result, two types of actions are required urgently. First, Georgian parties need to internalize the importance of democracy and democratic values. This can happen through the process of socialization of Georgian parties in European alliances of political parties, which some of them already have accomplished through membership. And second, public opinion and expectations should be managed effectively.

It is important to promote democratic values to increase the appeal of democracy *per se* for Georgian citizens, and to connect these democratic values to Europeanization. Consequently, the public should be aware that the primary short-term benefit for Georgia on the path of Europeanization through the policy of conditionality is not immediate economic prosperity, but citizens' increased control over the political decision-makers in the country. ♦

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The **Eurasia Democratic Security Network** (EDSN) is a project by the Center for Social Sciences with the generous funding of National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The project aims to cultivate an international network of scholars and practitioners to further develop the intellectual and public policy rationale for the maintenance of Euro-Atlantic conditionality as a peacemaking and economic dynamizing force. Particularly aimed to aspirant states, EDSN also advocates for liberal democratization on its own merits, such as through the increasingly and variously established linkages between democracy, national security, and economic development.

<sup>1</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2015. "Caucasus Barometer, 2015". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org>

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Centers. 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/30/global-views-political-systems/>.

<sup>3</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2017. "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2017". Retrieved through ODA -

<http://caucasusbarometer.org>

<sup>4</sup> See: Inglehart, R. F., and Norris, P. 2016. "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Havens and Cultural Backlash". *HKS Working Paper No. RWP16-026*. Available at SSRN:

<https://ssrn.com/abstract=2818659> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2818659>

<sup>5</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2017. "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2017". Retrieved through ODA -

<http://caucasusbarometer.org>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2015. "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2015". Retrieved through ODA -

<http://caucasusbarometer.org>

<sup>8</sup> Gutbrod, H. and Dunbar, W., 2016. "Corridor of Expectations: Georgian Dream Ahead, for #GVote16" [online] Available at: <https://medium.com/@hansgutbrod/georgian-dream-ahead-according-to-aggregate-estimate-406f2831ebd2#.evoo748lz>

<sup>x</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2017. "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2017". Retrieved through ODA -

<http://caucasusbarometer.org>

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> Mitchelm L., 2017. "Does Democracy Still Matter in Georgia?" [online] Available at: [http://edsn.css.ge/documents/policy\\_briefs/Lincoln\\_p\\_b\\_Democracy.pdf](http://edsn.css.ge/documents/policy_briefs/Lincoln_p_b_Democracy.pdf)

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> See: Przeworski, A., 1991. "The 'East' Becomes the 'South'? The 'Autumn of the People' and the Future of Eastern Europe". *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 20-24.

<sup>xv</sup> See: McFaul, M., 2002. "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World". *World Politics*, Vol. 54, No. 2, pp. 212-244.



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