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Peculiarities of Foreign Policy Orientation of Georgia's Ethnic Minorities

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Ethnic minorities residing on the territory of Georgia are not fully integrated into the Georgian society. This factor has its implications on their various viewpoints on the foreign policy course of Georgia. A significant portion of the two most numerous ethnic minorities of Georgia – Azerbaijanis and Armenians – are more pro-Russian oriented segment of the population as compared to their Georgian counterparts. Therefore, they demonstrate less support towards foreign policy course aimed at the Euro-Atlantic integration. This tendency is highlighted by the public opinion polls conducted in Georgia during the last several years. Public opinion polls of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) of the US are particularly interesting in this respect¹.

Key words

Ethnic Minorities, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Georgia, public opinion polls

Azerbaijanis and Armenians – the Two Most Numerous Ethnic Minorities in Georgia

According to the population census of 2014, the population of Georgia (excluding inhabitants of the occupied territories – Abkhazia and South Ossetia) comprised 3.713.8 persons, among them Georgians were 3.224.6 (86.8 percent). Ethnic minorities, making 13.2 percent of the entire population, are dominated by Azerbaijanis (233.0 – 6.3 percent) and Armenians (168.1 – 4.5 percent). Other ethnic minorities are significantly lagging behind in numerical terms. For example, next to Armenians and Azerbaijanis, the Russian ethnic minority count 26.5

¹ The NDI has been conducting public opinion polls in Georgia systematically. From 2016 “Minority Settlements” were separately included in its surveys. These segments include ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian settlements in 2016 survey conducted three times (March, June and November). This enables to follow the dynamics of public opinion among ethnic minorities.

persons, which comprises 0.7 percent of country's population². A great majority of Azerbaijanis (177.032) are compactly settled in the Khvemo Khartli region, whereas great majority of ethnic Armenians (81.089) resides in Javakheti³.

The lack of Georgian language skills among the ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis is the main factor hindering their effective integration into the mainstream Georgian society. According to the public opinion polls of 2014, 231.456 persons indicated the Azerbaijani language as their mother language, whereas 43.579 persons declared that they master the Georgian language skills. In the region of Khvemo Khartli, 176.417 persons named the Azerbaijani language as their mother language, whereas only 18.983 persons among them master the Georgian language skills.

According to the public opinion polls conducted in 2014, 144.812 persons declared that their mother language was Armenian; among them 57.316 persons stated that they know the Georgian language fluently. Situation is more complicated in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region: 79.878 persons stated that the Armenian language was their mother language, whereas 5.573 persons confirmed that they know the Georgian language fluently⁴.

Due to the lack of knowledge of the Georgian language, a great portion of ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia do not get news from the Georgian sources. Correspondingly, they either have a lack of information or have tendentious information on the ongoing processes. Although the Public Broadcaster of Georgia is obliged to transmit news on minority languages, minorities are not systematically

² Main results of the population census of 2014. General Information. http://census.ge/files/results/Census%20Release_GEO.pdf.

³ Main results of the population census of 2014. Distribution of population according to regions and nationalities. <http://census.ge/ge/results/census>.

⁴ Main results of the population census of 2014. Distribution of population according to regions, mother language and knowledge of the Georgian language, <http://census.ge/ge/results/census>.

provided with up-to-date information. This has a negative influence on their political and civic inclusion⁵.

Ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis are getting information mainly from the countries of their ethnic origins, in their mother language, or in Russian, through the TV stations of the Russian Federation. This fact further alienates them from the Georgian society⁶. Information sources of Azerbaijan and Russia have either negative or neutral attitudes towards the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Georgia.

Public opinion polls conducted in Georgia during the last several years demonstrated that ethnic minorities were the least informed segment of the Georgian population. Compared to the Georgian population, they do not equate themselves with Europeans and consider Russia to be their preferred trade ally⁷.

The West and Russia through the Eyes of Ethnic Minorities

This part of the paper will analyze the peculiarities of viewpoints held by ethnic minorities on country's foreign policy course and will compare it to the outcomes of the public opinion polls on this issue. The public opinion polls conducted in 2016 on the issue of Georgia's membership in the EU and NATO structures demonstrated the following dynamics of public attitudes in the areas populated by ethnic minorities and on the nation-wide level⁸:

⁵ State of Being of Minorities in Georgia, The Georgian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2013, p. 8, Policy Paper_WG1_Umciresobebi_1.pdf.

⁶ **Mekhuzla S., Roshe E.**, Education Reform and National Minorities in Georgia, ECMI Working Paper, 2009, September, 46, p. 8, http://www.ecmcaucasus.org/upload/publications/working_paper_46_en.pdf.

⁷ Assessment of Attitudes and Knowledge towards the EU in Georgia. Changes and Tendencies in 2009-2013. Research Outcomes, p. 5, [eu_survey_report_2013_final_geo.pdf](http://www.ecmcaucasus.org/upload/publications/working_paper_46_en.pdf).

⁸ Public Opinion Survey in Georgia: Results of March, 2016, conducted by the CRRC under the order of the NDI-Georgia-March-2016-PoliticalRatings-geo.pdf; Public Opinion in Georgia: Results of the Survey Conducted in June, 2016, conducted by the CRRC under the order of the NDI. NDI-poll-June-2016-geo.pdf.

Table 1. Answers to the question: “Do you approve the statement of the government of Georgia regarding country’s prospective membership in the EU?”

	Nation-Wide Results			Results in the Areas Populated by Ethnic Minorities		
	2016 III	2016 VI	2016 XI	2016 III	2016 VI	2016 XI
Approve	77	72	72	55	50	47
Disapprove	14	16	18	27	24	29
Do not Know	9	12	10	18	26	24

Source: NDI Polls Conducted in 2016

Table 2. Answer to the question: “Do you approve the statement of the government of Georgia regarding country’s prospective membership to NATO?”

	Nation-Wide Results			Results in the Areas Populated by Ethnic Minorities		
	2016 III	2016 VI	2016 XI	2016 III	2016 VI	2016 XI
Approve	68	64	61	44	47	39
Dissapprove	19	22	25	31	25	32
Do not Know	12	14	14	24	27	28

Source: NDI Polls Conducted in 2016

These results demonstrate that support towards the pro-Western orientation of Georgia is low among ethnic minorities as compared to the nation-wide results. In March 2016, support towards Georgia's prospective membership in the EU and NATO was 22 percent and 24 percent lower compared to the nation-wide indicators. Considering changes in the society on this issue in 2016, it is apparent that support towards Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration dropped from 77 percent to 72 percent on the nation-wide level, whereas among ethnic minorities it dropped from 55 percent to 47 percent.

As for the support towards the membership in the NATO, this figure is 10 percent lower than support towards the EU membership both, on the nation-wide level, and among ethnic minorities. In terms of dynamics of public opinion in 2016, support towards membership in the NATO decreased by 7 percent (from 68 percent to 61 percent) on the nation-wide level, whereas it dropped by 5 percent among ethnic minorities (from 44 percent to 39 percent).

Comparison of the NDI polls of 2016 to those conducted in previous years attest the rise of support towards membership in the EU among ethnic minorities of Georgia. Public opinion polls demonstrate that 52 percent of ethnic minorities supported Georgia's membership in the EU or were not determined in his/her position if the issue would be put on referendum. Only 1/3 of ethnic minorities hold positive image of the EU and another 1/3 were neutral on this issue; 23 percent was not yet clear on his/her attitudes towards the EU⁹.

Public opinion polls conducted among ethnic minorities demonstrate that orientation towards Russia is higher among ethnic minorities. According to the public opinion polls conducted in March 2016, 47 percent considered Russia as the main threat to Georgia on the nation-wide level, whereas among ethnic minorities this figure was 19 percent¹⁰.

⁹ Assessment of Attitudes..., Op. cit. p. 7.

¹⁰ Public Opinion in Georgia: Results of the Survey Conducted in March, 2016, conducted by the CRRC under the order of the NDI. NDI-Poll-Georgia-March-2016-geo.pdf.

Table 3. Answer to the question: Which country or organization presents the biggest threat for Georgia?

	Nation-Wide	Ethnic Minority Settlements
Russia	47	19
ISIS	8	11
US	7	7
Turkey	5	8
NATO	2	4

Source: NDI Polls Conducted in 2016

Public opinion polls conducted in 2013 attested positive attitudes towards Russia among ethnic minorities. 57 percent of ethnic minorities considered Russia to be the country which supported Georgia the most (this figure was 17 percent among ethnic Georgian population). Meantime, for ethnic Georgian population, the EU supported Georgia better than other states/entities. According to the public opinion polls of 2013, this figure was 38 percent for ethnic Georgian population and 14 percent for ethnic minorities¹¹.

Orientation of ethnic minorities towards Russia becomes apparent through exploring the issue of choice of a foreign language. According to the public opinion poll conducted in 2013, which posed the question “*Which foreign language should be a mandatory one in secondary schools as a choice of a second language?*”, 53 percent of ethnic minorities preferred the Russian language, whereas this figure was only 25 percent among ethnic Georgians. 62 percent of ethnic Georgians argued for the necessity of introducing the English language as a second language in Georgian secondary schools. Prioritization of the English language from the side of ethnic Georgians is the testimony to their pro-Western orientation. Meantime, prioritization of the Russian language from the side of ethnic minorities does not necessarily mean that they

¹¹ Assessment of Attitudes..., Op. cit., p. 11.

know the Russian language better than their ethnic Georgian counterparts. 29 percent of ethnic Georgians declared that they master the Russian language, whereas this figure was only 20 percent among ethnic minorities. The 17 percent of minorities and 10 percent of ethnic Georgians did not have basic competences of the Russian language¹².

The Viewpoints of Ethnic Minorities on the Foreign Policy Course of Georgia

Differences in foreign policy course of Georgia are determined by divergent opinions on the West and Russia held among society. Support towards the pro-Western course is considerably lower among national minorities compared to the nation-wide results. According to the survey conducted by the NDI in March, 2016, 20 percent of surveyed minorities argued for the necessity of launching the pro-Russian course of Georgia, whereas this figure was only 5 percent in nation-wide results; 25 percent of minorities argued that Georgia had to launch the pro-Russian foreign policy, balanced by good relations with the NATO and EU structures (support to this line was 16 percent in the nation-wide results). 27 percent of minorities was in support of the pro-Western course through maintenance of good relations with Russia (52 percent in the nation-wide results), whereas support towards the pro-Western course was 12 percent (14 percent in the nation-wide results)¹³. It should be mentioned that support towards the pro-Western course lowered both among national minorities, and on the nation-wide level in 2016 (see table 4).

¹² Assessment of Attitudes..., Op. cit., p. 12.

¹³ Public Opinion in Georgia... Op. cit.

Table 4. Answer to the question: “According to you, the foreign policy of Georgia should be ... ”

	Nation-Wide Indicator			National Minority Settlements		
	2016 III	2016 VI	2016 XI	2016 III	2016 VI	2016 XI
Pro-Western	14	13	12	12	5	7
Pro-Western, although good relations with Russia should be maintained	52	48	54	27	28	25
Pro-Russian, although good relations with EU and NATO should be maintained	16	20	18	25	28	24
Pro-Russian	5	6	9	20	23	30
Do not know	11	11	13	15	13	13

Source: NDI Polls Conducted in 2016

Ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia have rather different foreign policy priorities, compared to their ethnic Georgian counterparts. This is testified by the following indicators: among the countries, which could provide security of Georgia in their best, 11 percent of national minorities give priority to Azerbaijan, whereas this figure is only 1 percent in nation-wide results. Evidently, Azerbaijan as the main security guarantor of Georgia was named by ethnic Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia. 8 percent of national minorities consider Turkey as the main threat to Georgia, whereas this figure is 5 percent in nation-wide results. Evidently, Turkey as the number one threat is considered by

ethnic Armenian population of Georgia. 29 percent of national minorities consider Russia as a country which could provide security to Georgia in its best, whereas this figure is only 13 percent in the nation-wide results¹⁴.

Table 5. Answer to the question: Which country or organization could provide security to Georgia in its best?

	Nation-Wide Census	Settlements of National Minorities
NATO	23	15
EU	13	16
Russia	13	29
US	10	3
Azerbaijan	1	11

Source: NDI Polls Conducted in March, 2016

¹⁴Public Opinion in Georgia..., Op. cit.

Table 6. Answer to the question: Which country or organization presents the main threat for Georgia?

	Nation-Wide Census	Settlements of National Minorities
Russia	47	19
ISIS	8	11
USA	7	7
Turkey	5	8
NATO	2	4

Source: NDI Polls Conducted in March, 2016

What factors determine the pro-Russian stance of ethnic minorities? As the results of the NDI survey demonstrate, foreign language TV stations and news sources play a key role in formation of this reality. If a portion of an electorate receives information from foreign news sources, the probability of their pro-Russian incline becomes higher. This holds true for non-ethnic minority population as well¹⁵. NDI survey of the June, 2016 demonstrated that 23 percent of population of Georgia receive every-day information from the non-Georgian TV stations¹⁶. Although this figure is 52 percent among national minorities¹⁷.

¹⁵ Public Opinion in Georgia: Results of the Survey Conducted in June, 2016, conducted by the CRRC under the order of the NDI. NDI-poll-June-2016-geo.pdf, p.68.

¹⁶ The survey outcomes revealed that the middle-age population comprises the main audience of the non-Georgian TV channels.

¹⁷ Public Opinion in Georgia: Results of the Survey Conducted in June, 2016..., p.77.

Table 7. Answer to the question: Do you receive information on politics and ongoing developments from non-Georgian TV stations?

	Nation-wide indicators	National Minority Settlements
Yes	23	52
No	77	45

Source: NDI Polls Conducted in June, 2016

Foreign broadcasting companies, which are transmitted in Georgia, are mainly the Russian ones. According to the survey, conducted in June, 2016, the most popular foreign TV channels watched in Georgia are the Russian ones: Channel One Russia – 35 percent, RTR – 26 percent, Rossiya 1 – 18 percent, Rossiya 24 – 12 percent, followed by Euronews – 10 percent, the Russian Ren-TV – 7 percent, TV-Tsentr – 4 percent, RTVI – 2 percent, “Russia Today” – 1 percent. 26 percent of the surveyed population named other channels, among them Armenian, Azerbaijani, Turkish and some other Russian information sources.

Provision of information on politics and on some other urgent issues from the Russian media outlets has a direct impact on foreign policy choice of the audience. Considering the impact of foreign information sources on the foreign policy choice of the population in Georgia, the following picture is provided by the survey of the NDI conducted in June, 2016 (see table 8).

Table 8

	Follows to the non-Georgian information sources (TV channels)	Does not Follow to the non-Georgian information sources (TV channels)
Pro-Western	11	14
Pro-Western, with a desire to maintain good relations with Russia	43	50
Pro-Russian, although with a desire to maintain good relations with the EU and NATO	29	18
Pro-Russian	9	5
Do not Know	6	13

Source: Survey conducted in June, 2016 by the NDI

The same tendency is revealed through the survey conducted on feasibility of a particular foreign policy choice for Georgia (see Table 9)¹⁸.

¹⁸Public Opinion in Georgia: Results of the Survey Conducted in June, 2016, ..., p. 68.

Table 9

	Follows to the non-Georgian information sources (TV channels)	Does not Follow to the non-Georgian information sources (TV channels)
Georgia will benefit more through its European and Euro-Atlantic integration	47	55
Georgia will benefit more if it abandons its Euro-Atlantic integration course for the improvement of its relations with Russia	39	27
Do not agree with none of them	8	7
Do not know	5	11

Ethnic Minorities and the Factor of Russia

The significant pro-Russian predisposition of ethnic minorities could be used by Russia and pro-Russian forces of Georgia. In 2010, Vladimir Sokor, commenting the statement of the foreign minister of the Russian Federation Sergei Lavrov, made on July 8, 2010, argued that “apart from Abkhazians and South Ossetians, the Russian government has never tried to provoke some other ethnic groups of Georgia”¹⁹. In his statement, Lavrov suggested to the government of Georgia to restore normal relations with “Armenians, Azerbaijanis and some other ethnic groups residing in Georgia”. This was a warning signal from the side of Russia that Moscow could provoke ethnic tensions in Georgia in case of defeat of the pro-Russian forces acting in the country; if this becomes

¹⁹ **Sokor V.**, Lavrov’s allusion on inter-ethnic conflicts in Georgia, Jamestown Foundation, July 12, 2010, <http://foreignpress.ge/analitika/2503-lavrovi-saqarthveloshi-ethnikuri-konfliqtis-tsaqezebaze-mianishnebs.html?lang=ka-GE>.

reality, the Kremlin will seek for various instruments to destabilize the Georgian provinces populated by ethnic minorities²⁰.

The pro-Russian tendencies of numerous ethnic minorities of Georgia should not lead to the creation of stereotypes among the Georgian society. Analyzing current situation in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, experts mention: it is unacceptable to make statements like “Armenians – the fifth column of Russia in Georgia”; “ethnic Armenians of Georgia are against the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country” – which are demonstrated not as an individual choice, but as a treason of the “great Georgia idea”²¹.

What are the tools to maintain the pro-Russian tendencies among ethnic minorities? Followed to the presentation of the results of public opinion polls of the NDI, conducted in March, 2016, experts argued the necessity of “transformation of the national project in a way to make it inclusive and satisfy the needs of ethnic minorities”²². Popularization and demonstration of the benefits of the pro-Western course and Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia among ethnic minorities will decrease the pro-Russian stance among them. Attitudes of ethnic minorities towards the visa liberalization are the testimony to this claim.

On December 15, 2015, the EU Commission published its positive report regarding the fulfillment of requirements of the action plan for visa liberalization of Georgia. Although ethnic minority settlements were poorly informed regarding visa-liberalization process (58 percent, compared to the nation-wide figure, which stood as 86 percent), supporters of visa liberalization process stood as 69 percent. Answering the question “*Do you agree or not to the statement that visa liberalization will bring benefits to the people, like you?*” positive answer among ethnic minorities is higher than on the nation-wide level (74 percent compared to 72 percent).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ **Molodini G.**, The Russia Factor in Javakheti, December, 2010 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/216263291_rusuli_paktori_javakhetshi.

²² Tskhadaia G., A Few Notes on the Results of NDI Polls. 13.04.2016, <http://www.tavisupleba.mobi/a/blog-giorgi-tskhadaia/27672369.html>.

Results of the Public Opinion Poll on the Topic of Visa Liberalization²³
(Table 10):

Table 10

	Nation-wide		In Ethnic Minority Settlements	
Where you informed regarding visa liberalization?				
Yes	86		58	
No	11		35	
Do not Know	4		7	
Do you support this decision?				
Support	84		69	
Do not Support	8		14	
Do not Know	7		14	
Do you agree or not to the statement that people like you could benefit from the visa free regime?	2016	2016	2016	2016
	III	VI	III	VI
Support	72	64	74	58
Do not Support	18	26	17	21
Do not Know	10	10	9	20

Prolongation of the visa liberalization process decreased optimism among population; although visa liberalization became a reality from the Spring of 2017, improvement of living conditions and

²³ Public Opinion in Georgia: Results of the Survey Conducted in March, 2016, ...

perspective of employment are the main topics of concern for Georgian and ethnic minority population of the country. If politicians, government and civil society want to increase support towards the EU in Georgia, population should be informed on the benefits of the European integration of Georgia²⁴.

Notwithstanding the pro-Russian stance of ethnic minorities, the governmental party, either the United National Movement or the Georgian Dream, promoting policy of the Euro-Atlantic integration, was getting popular support during elections in the regions populated by ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities.

Conclusion

The most significant ethnic minorities of Georgia – Azerbaijanis and Armenians – have different foreign policy priorities compared to their ethnic Georgian counterpart. Public opinion polls of 2016 demonstrate that these minorities are more pro-Russian oriented and demonstrate less support towards the Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia. Dynamics of public opinion among ethnic minorities is the same as in ethnic Georgian population – there is a rise and decline towards particular foreign policy course among ethnic minorities like on the nation-wide level.

Different foreign policy priorities of ethnic minorities could be explained by the weak knowledge of the Georgian language and overt reliance on the Russian information sources. Continuation of civic integration process and rising benefits from the politics of rapprochement to the EU will have its impact on the foreign policy priorities of ethnic minorities.

²⁴ Assessment of Attitudes..., Op. cit., p. 9.