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EU and Ethnic Minorities in Georgia: How to Counter Misinformation and Disruptive Communication

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Executive summary

High public support is frequently claimed as a backbone of Georgia`s foreign policy direction and especially its ambition for membership in the European Union (EU). However, ethnic minorities in Georgia comprise a group whose unanimous approval the state`s foreign policy lacks. In comparison to ethnic Georgians, ethnic Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Georgia are significantly less supportive of Georgia`s potential membership in the European Union. This paper outlines possible explanations for this low support among minorities and gives recommendations towards improving their support for EU membership. The paper establishes the extent to which a lack of information and misinformation about the EU account for their position and proposes a more efficient and wider-reaching information campaign.

Key words: Eurointegration, ethnic minorities, Euroscepticism, fake news, anti-western propaganda.

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Introduction

Integration of ethnic minorities into the rest of Georgian society has been a state issue for decades now. Despite government programs that target the issue, the isolation and detachment of Georgia's minority populations persist and progress has been slow.ⁱ According to the last census in Georgia in 2014, around 13.2% of residents belong to ethnic minority groups, the majority of which belong to one of two groups: 6.3% ethnic Azerbaijanis and 4.5% ethnic Armenians (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2016). These two groups mainly live in compact settlements in the southern parts of Georgia – Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti respectively. Unlike ethnic Georgians, they are not unanimously on board with the state's western foreign policy orientation. Only 32% of Azerbaijanis and 48% of Armenians support Georgia's potential membership in the EU compared to 75% of ethnic Georgians (Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2019a). In the Europeanization process, such a gap creates a challenge, especially considering that ethnic minorities are also the most vulnerable to anti-western propaganda, including from Russia (Avalishvili, Lomtadze, Kevkhishvili 2016).

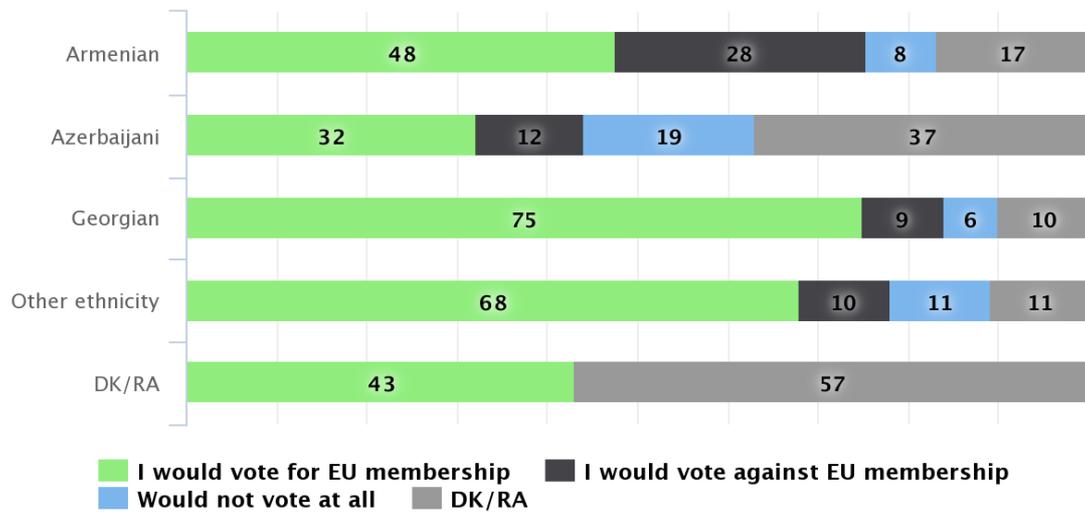
Based on nationwide surveys, interviews with experts, and focus group discussions in the ethnic minority communities, this policy paper examines potential explanations for this low support and gives recommendations to state and civic agents for tackling the issue. The paper argues that despite some Eurosceptic attitudes, most ethnic minorities are actually indecisive or confused about the EU membership question and this is primarily caused by a lack of information about the EU. Therefore, an effective and wide-scale information campaign is deemed essential.

Minorities and their position on the EU

Even though support for the EU membership is far below a 50% among ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia, a majority among both groups is also not against membership. Only 28% of Armenians and 12% of Azerbaijanis would not vote for EU membership. In fact, a majority of Azerbaijanis (56%) would either not vote or do not know if they would vote for or against membership. While the same can be said for 25% of Armenians (Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2019a).

Graph 1: Support for EU membership by ethnic groups (CRRC, 2019)

EUMEMVOT: If there were a referendum tomorrow would
 vote for or against EU membership?
 by ETHNIC: Respondent's ethnicity (%)

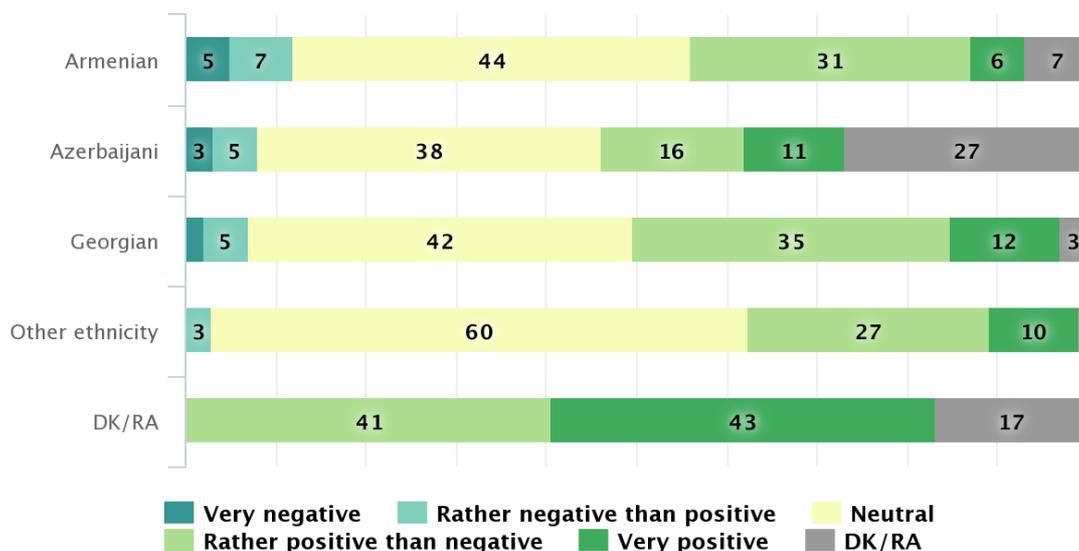


Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2019
 Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

This suggests that the lack of support for membership does not automatically stand for stark opposition to the EU, but is caused more by confusion and indecision. An overview of minority attitudes towards the EU also demonstrates this argument. Every third ethnic Azerbaijani, and more than a third of ethnic Armenians, have a positive perception of the EU and the largest share in both groups have a neutral stance on the EU (ibid). This in-between attitude creates a room for the state and non-state actors to contribute to the formation of positive perceptions of the EU.

Graph 2: Perception of the EU by ethnic groups (CRRC, 2019)

EUPERC: What is your general perception of the EU? by ETHNIC: Respondent's ethnicity (%)



Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2019
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

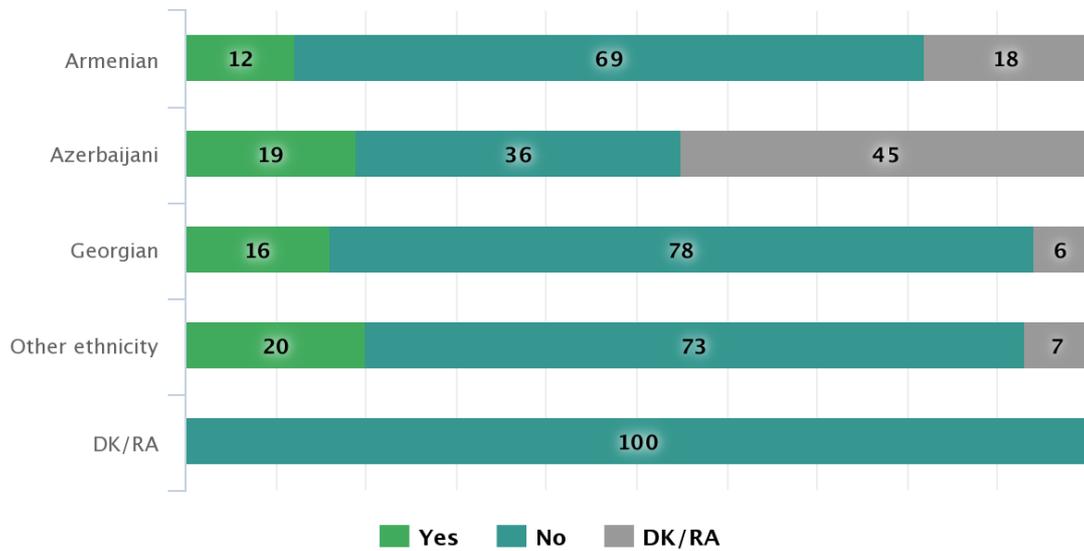
The above leads to the assumption that the lack of information might be explaining their primary position – hesitation and indecision. While the data does not show clearly why some Azerbaijanis and Armenians are also skeptical towards EU membership, misinformation can be one possible explanation.

Lack of information

The Georgian population is generally scarcely equipped with knowledge about the EU, including ethnic Georgians. However, this knowledge is even lower among ethnic minorities. For example, 6% of Georgians do not know if Georgia is a member of the EU in comparison to 18% of ethnic Armenians and 45% of ethnic Azerbaijanis. While 45% of ethnic Georgians have heard about the Association Agreement, only 15% and 10% of ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis have (ibid).

Graph 3: Knowledge of Georgia's membership in the EU by ethnic groups (CRRC, 2019)

**MEMBREU: Is Georgia currently a member of the EU?
by ETHNIC: Respondent's ethnicity (%)**



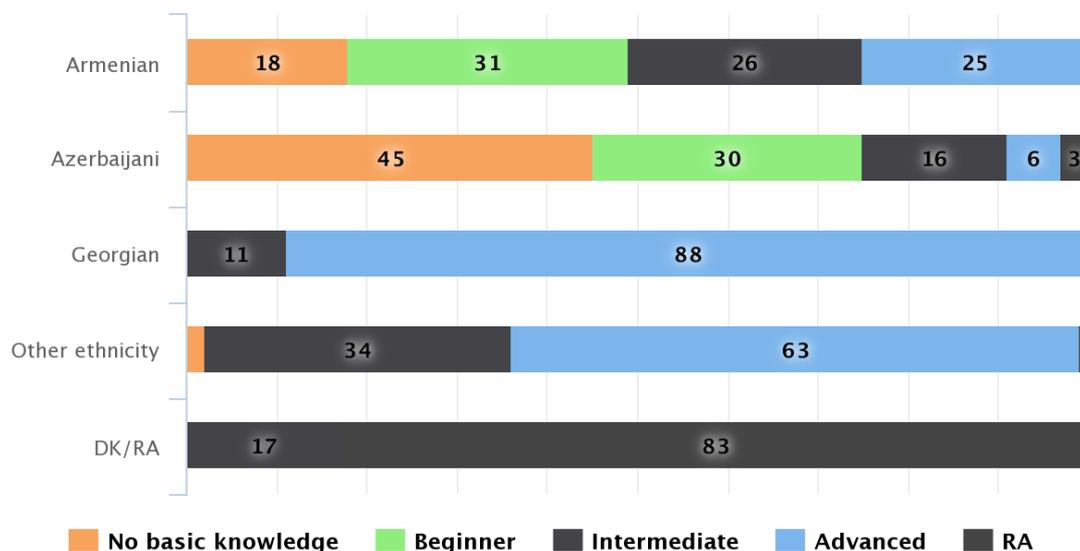
Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2019
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

This gap between ethnic Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis can be explained by the lack of information on the EU available for minority groups in Georgia due. This is due to multiple factors, including: the Georgian language problem; lack of quality information in ethnic minority groups language; the detachment from the center as well as general isolation from the rest of the Georgian society can be noted.

In compact settlements, an absolute majority of ethnic minorities do not speak the Georgian language (Institute of Social Studies and Analysis 2019). According to Caucasus Resource Research Center (CRRC) surveys, 49% of Armenians note that they have no or just basic knowledge of the Georgian language, while 75% of Azerbaijanis said the same (Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2019a). Knowledge of English is even lower. More than 70% of each population have no basic knowledge of English (Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2019b).

Graph 4: Knowledge of Georgian language by ethnic groups (CRRC, 2019)

KNOWGEO: Respondent's ability in Georgian by ETHNIC: Respondent's ethnicity (%)



Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2019
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

However, since a significant share of Armenians live in Tbilisi, and have a better level of Georgian language as well as English, the numbers for Armenians living in the regions (specifically in Samtskhe Javakheti) is expected to be lower than the average. Due to the lack of Georgian language skills, ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis do not have access to most of the information shared on Georgian media about the EU or EU-Georgia relations.ⁱⁱ They are also able to access alternative English-language sources on Internet. On the other hand, Georgian media hardly offers information in Armenian or Azeri languages. As an exception, the Georgian Public Broadcaster translates some of its news programs in minority languagesⁱⁱⁱ, however, this information is limited^{iv} and the share of the programs in the Armenian and Azeri languages is very small (Mikashavidze 2016). Locally produced media sources, including radio programs^v as well as some centrally funded print media in their languages are also limited (Piranishvili 2019).

The lack of information about the EU reflects another general problem of detachment and isolation of ethnic minorities from the rest of Georgian society, living in “kind of autonomous regimes” (Institute of Social Studies and Analysis 2019). Their participation in political as well as civic life in Georgia is extremely low and Georgian political parties lack interest in recruiting ethnic minority representatives (ibid). Despite some government programs that promote greater inclusion, specifically in education, these issues have persisted over the years^{vi}. In addition, many minority settlements are located rather far from the capital, especially the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, which means generally less activities and opportunities, including those related to the EU and NGOs.^{vii}

Issues surrounding language and their general detachment from the major ongoings in the country put ethnic minorities in an information vacuum, which could account for their lack of familiarity with the EU and thus, lack of support for membership. As a journalist from Ifact media source, who works on ethnic minority issues, noted, “knowledge of the EU is so low that it is hard to have an opinion on the EU.^{viii}” A representative from the Kvemo Kartli local NGO also mentioned that, “people in the region know that Georgia has a goal of Euro^{ix}integration but they do not know why Georgia is striving for the EU membership and what would be the positive sides of this membership.”

This explains why the largest group among ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis hold a neutral perception of the EU. Only 12% of Armenians and 8% of Azerbaijanis express a negative opinion. Our respondents also noted that the EU is widely perceived in positive tones.^x Focus group discussions conducted in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti confirm these views. The participants’ associations about the EU are overwhelmingly positive. Among other qualities they list: democracy, development, equality among citizens, high level of education, freedom of speech, gender equality, solidarity, economic development, tolerance, good life and work, rule of law and protection of ethnic minority rights.

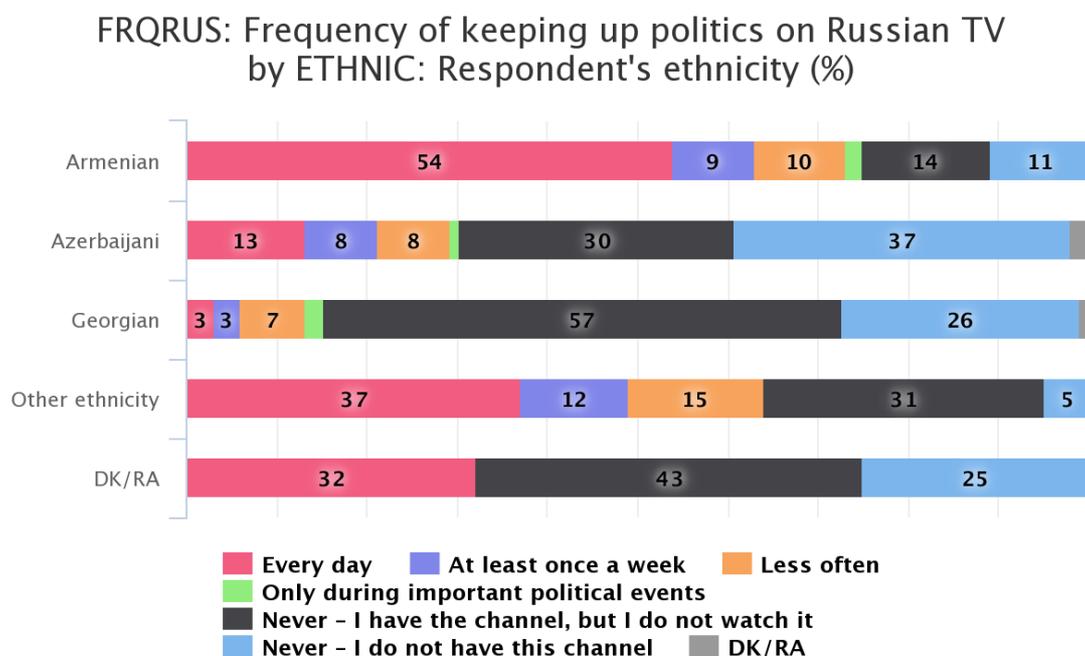
Despite these positive attitudes, the idea, that the EU or its benefits are unattainable not only for Georgia but especially for them, as minorities, is widely spread among these groups. As an NGO representative from Javakheti noted, “people don` t believe that we can become members, they think that acceptance is unrealistic because of conditions in Georgia.” At the same time, the benefits of EU membership are also considered as only accessible for small groups and not for ordinary farmers like themselves. This is because minorities believe membership is exclusively the Georgian government`s choice and beneficial for only specific groups of people, especially those who are closer to Tbilisi.^{xi} These ideas were also voiced in the focus group discussions. A participant from Akhalkalaki focus group (Female, 18 years old) noted that “people, especially the older generation, don` t believe in the opportunities (such as traveling possibility to the EU).” Another participant from Marneuli focus group mentioned that it is anyway impossible to keep up with EU standards, thus they will “never manage to export their goods” (Male, 31 years old). It was also mentioned that “even though there were a few possibilities, the aid does not reach them” (Female, Akhalkalaki, 6 March 2020) and “it benefits those who are closer to the city and are better informed” (Female, 37 years old, Akhalkalaki, 6 March 2020). Moreover, other focus group discussion participants noted that “ordinary people do not benefit from the EU programs since they don` t know the language and cannot afford to travel to Europe” (Marneuli, 29 February 2020, Male, 25 years old) and “it is ethnic Georgians who receive grants and visa liberalization is a privilege also reserved for ethnic Georgians” (Male, Ninotsminda, 17 March 2020, Male).

However, this does not exclude the possibility that some of the lack of support is indeed caused by skepticism towards the EU. Despite their mostly undecided position about the EU membership, some of the ethnic minority representatives oppose membership (28% Armenians and 12% Azerbaijanis). Stereotypes, often stemming from alternative sources of information, can lead to skeptical attitudes and lack of support for membership.

Exposure to alternative sources of information

Language is the root of another issue, which is exposure to alternative information sources that are often Eurosceptic. Since Georgian media is not the major source of information for minorities, ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis mostly receive information about the EU from Russian media, which includes anti-Western propaganda.^{xii} While they do not speak much of Georgian or English, Russian is in fact the most advanced foreign language among these communities, as 79% of Armenians and 42% of Azerbaijanis note intermediate to advanced knowledge of Russian language (Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2019a). Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia keep up with politics on Russian TV significantly more frequently than ethnic Georgians. While 54% of Armenians and 13% of Azerbaijanis watch Russian TV every day, this number is only 3% for ethnic Georgians (ibid).

Graph 5: Frequency of watching Russia TV by ethnic groups (CRRC, 2019)



Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2019
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

Kvemo Kartli ethnic minorities also watch Azerbaijani and Turkish TV. A journalist from Gardabani noted that these sources are also heavy on anti-Western propaganda.^{xiii} Higher exposure to these neighboring countries, whether directly or by exposure to their news, also shapes their attitudes.^{xiv} Since neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia are striving for relations with the EU, and Armenia is deepening relations with Russia, ethnic minorities in Georgia are also influenced by these choices. For example, a representative of the Information Center on NATO and the EU^{xv} noted in the interview how Azerbaijani President, Alyev`s rejection of the Association Agreement (AA) also caused some Azerbaijanis in Georgia to doubt Georgia`s commitment to the AA. Another representative^{xvi} also mentioned the effect of Armenia`s pro-Russian policy, but also noted an example of the Velvet Revolution in Armenia, which has increased pro-European attitudes among Georgian Armenians.

As a result of their exposure to different media sources, minorities are more exposed to fake news or negative information about the EU. The threat of Russian propaganda in these regions that portrays the west negatively is also widely recognized among our respondents and those researching the issue, as well as those engaged in EU-related policy-making in Georgia.

Disinformation about the EU revolves around the incompatibility of local values with European values, especially with regards to family, religion and traditions.^{xvii} In a few cases, even young people have expressed the idea about excessive freedom in the EU, which they usually dislike (ibid). Allowing same sex marriage as a demand from the EU for closer relations is another stereotype (ibid). In addition, some think that Europeans are more individualistic and as a result, less family-oriented and the concept of family has lost its value in the EU.^{xviii} Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda focus group discussion participants also mentioned these stereotypes. Some participants listed “different mentality”, “different way of thinking”, “gays” and “different human relations with less hospitality” when they listed what they associated the EU with. Other stereotypes include the views on the EU`s deteriorating economic condition and its material interests in Georgia.^{xix} According to CRRC data, 35% of Armenians and 17% of Azerbaijanis believe that the EU supports Georgia because it wants to influence the country. While 43% of Armenians and 29% of Azerbaijanis who would not vote for EU membership believe that membership would worsen life conditions in Georgia, because the EU has its own economic problems (Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2019a).

The lack of information and misinformation issues are also recognized whether at the state^{xx} or the civil society level in Georgia. Several existing programs aim at spreading information on the EU. For example, since 2017 the program of “Young European Ambassadors” has invited young people from ethnic minorities to attend thematic schools on the EU, who later conduct informational meetings with locals.^{xxi} The Ministry of Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia and the Information Center on NATO and the EU also conduct meetings with ethnic minority groups and spread information brochures. However, the

information campaigns are not enough, which is clear by the lack of information on the EU that the surveys demonstrate.^{xxii} Moreover, information spread by the government whether by brochures, informational campaigns or educational videos is criticized for being one-sided without the possibility for these communities to communicate back (ibid).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Georgia is persistently following the Europeanization course and bringing all its citizens on board is important. Ethnic minorities should be engaged in this process so they feel they are part of the decision-making processes. Even though Georgia's EU-oriented foreign policy currently lacks majority support among the largest ethnic minority groups, there also exists a window of opportunity to reverse minority attitudes towards European integration. In fact, a majority of Armenians and Azerbaijanis are indecisive about EU membership, rather than opposing it. While negative stereotypes about the EU do contribute to Euroscepticism, lack of information about the EU can explain these attitudes. On the positive side, in the surveys every third ethnic Azerbaijani and almost every second ethnic Armenian noted that they would like to hear more about the EU, especially about the EU-Georgia trade relations.²

This paper proposes recommendations to target the problem of lack of information among ethnic minorities taking into consideration the flaws in existing strategies.

— To the government of Georgia:

- Ensure that the AA Action Plan has specific mechanisms for delivering EU benefits such as free trade and visa liberalization to ethnic minorities.
- Support and fund the establishment of local media sources in ethnic minority regions.
- Refine information campaigns with the feedback and participation from ethnic minority groups.
- Increase the frequency and intensity of information campaigns and activities on the EU in the regions populated by ethnic minorities.
- During information campaigns, deliver as detailed information as possible in minority languages about using the benefits from the existing programs related to EU-Georgia relations.
- Extend the target group of information campaigns and activities from youth to also include older generations who are usually less informed and more Eurosceptic.
- Target not only the central settlements of each region but also remote villages.

² Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRRC). (2019). Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia 2019. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu2019ge/EUINFMOR-by-ETHNIC/>

— **To the Georgian media and especially the Georgian Public Broadcaster:**

- Instead of simply translating existing media programs, launch more programs in Armenian and Azerbaijani languages with participation and feedback from the ethnic minorities.
- Encourage journalists with ethnic minority backgrounds to apply for journalist positions.

— **To civil society and the international community in Georgia:**

- Support and fund training programs for local journalists in ethnic minority communities.
- Increase the frequency and intensity of information campaigns on EU-Georgia relations in the regions populated by ethnic minorities with increased feedback and participation from these groups.
- Increasingly target the most isolated groups among ethnic minorities. For example, those living in remote areas and older generations.
- Encourage and spread information about the tools with which ethnic minorities can deliver their say to the local or central governments and participate in policy-making.

— **To the local governments in ethnic minority regions:**

- Increase the number of informational meetings with locals on state central and local policies and listen to feedback from the participants.
- Invite experts in specific fields of Europeanization to deliver information about using benefits from the EU.
- Encourage and support local NGOs and media outlets in their EU-related programs.

ⁱ Council for Ethnic Minorities under the Public Defender's Office, personal communication, 19 May 2020.

ⁱⁱ Public Defender's Office, personal communication, 19 May 2020; Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 22 May 2020; 19 May 2020; fact media source, personal communication, 20 June 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ European Delegation in Georgia, personal communication, 19 May 2020.

^{iv} Center for the Studies of Ethnicity and Multiculturalism, personal communication, 21 May 2020.

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- ^v Public Defender`s Office, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
- ^{vi} Council for Ethnic Minorities under the Public Defender`s Office, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
- ^{vii} Public Defender`s Office, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
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- ^{xi} Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
- ^{xii} Public Defender`s Office, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
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- ^{xv} Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
- ^{xvi} Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 22 May 2020.
- ^{xvii} Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 19 May 2020; 22 May 2020.
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