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**Ethnic Minorities
in the Context of
Georgia's
European
Integration: Is
There a Room for
Skepticism?**

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Executive Summary

Ethnic minorities in Georgia maintain an ambivalent attitude towards European integration: on one hand, they value the practical improvements to their social and economic conditions which greater European integration promises. On the other hand, a majority of ethnic minority representatives feel skeptical towards European integration, which limits their engagement, including, by preventing various opportunities provided by the EU, such as visa liberalization, educational and economic programs. In this context, it is interesting to examine what structural and value-based challenges prevent ethnic minorities from fully comprehending the EU integration process and whether or not it is possible to manage the skepticism towards EU integration. To explore the issue thoroughly Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) conducted the research in the framework of which the relevant state institutions' representatives, civil society members and experts have been interviewed. In addition, the given policy brief is based on the focus groups organized in the two regions with the ethnic minorities settlements – Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti. Discussions have been taken place in six municipalities totally – Marneuli, Gardabani, Dmanisi, Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda. The research illustrates the following major findings: attitudes towards EU integration vary depending on age, gender and social status. In addition, skepticism is mostly directed towards real perspective of Georgia's successful EU integration, rather than the idea of Europe itself. Those attitudes are fueled by stereotypical perceptions of EU, and Russia, as a “historical partner”. These challenges make it difficult for ethnic minorities to fully comprehend European integration and therefore, prevents them from receiving benefits related to the process.

Key Words: Georgia, Ethnic minorities, EU integration, Euroscepticism.

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Introduction

Societal consensus around European integration is vitally important to receive the maximum benefit from the process and ensure the efficient interaction between Georgia and EU. As such, it is important for all segments of Georgian society to have equal access to the benefits provided by Europeanization. Attitudes towards EU integration in the Azeri and Armenian populated regions of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti are particularly worthy of attention in this context. To explore the issue thoroughly Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) conducted the research in the framework of which the relevant state institutions' representatives, civil society members and experts have been interviewed.² In addition, the given policy brief is based on the focus groups organized in the two regions with the ethnic minorities settlements – Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti. Discussions have been taken place in six municipalities totally – Marneuli, Gardabani, Dmanisi, Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda – comprising the discussion groups of women, men and the mixed locals (8-10 participants in each group). These communities talk about structural, bureaucratic, linguistic and other problems in the context of Georgia's EU integration.

The low level of integration of ethnic minorities in Georgia society is reflected in Georgia's bilateral relations with the EU: on one hand, Georgia's ethnic minorities face barriers to fully benefiting from the opportunities provided by the EU; on the other hand, this issue may become damaging as the process of Georgia's Europeanization continues. The following research attempts to analyze the structural and value-based challenges which prevent minorities from fully comprehending the EU integration process and whether or not it is possible to manage the skepticism towards the EU integration process.

EU as Seen by the Ethnic Minorities

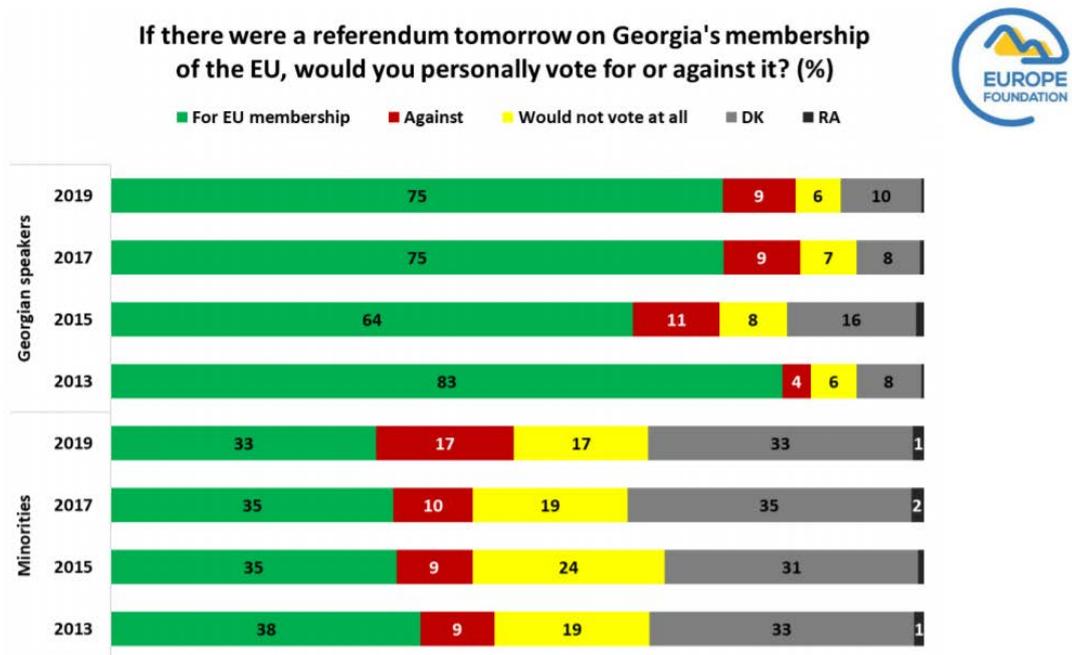
According to the focus group discussions held in both regions populated by ethnic minorities, the EU is mostly associated with positive or neutral concepts for part of the population: solidarity, equality, democracy, guaranteed rights, opportunities for career development, and quality education, healthcare, economic and social sectors. Research shows that according to the locals' perceptions ethnic minorities living in the EU face fewer daily obstacles than those living in Georgia.

According to the findings of research conducted using focus groups, we can conclude that part of the population feels positive about the EU's enhanced relations with Georgia. More importantly, they realize the benefits EU can bring to the country and its citizens in terms of the economy, level of democracy, and in spurring an improvement of policies focused on ethnic minorities. Research done by the Europe Foundation in 2019 illustrates that 78% of ethnic minority representatives have positive expectations towards the improvement of healthcare and higher education programs as a result of the EU integration. At the same time,

² Check the full list of respondents in the Appendix section

53% assesses the support provided by the EU as “important” or “very important” (ევროპის ფონდი, 2019). We can determine that there are noticeable incentives and general positive attitudes towards the EU in the regions with ethnic minority settlements.

In parallel, it is important to look at the other side of the bigger picture - skeptical attitudes towards EU integration. It is worth noting that by 2019, only 14% of ethnic minorities had heard of the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia (ევროპის ფონდი, 2019).³ Moreover, according to official data, a significant part of those communities are not considered to be supportive of Georgia’s EU membership (See Graph 1).



Graph 1: Europe Foundation. <http://www.epfound.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-EU-Attitudes-Survey-IV.pdf>

That positive and negative attitudes towards EU integration coexists in regions with ethnic minority settlements may be explained by the peculiarities of daily social-cultural or value-based experiences which, in some cases, relate to the perception of economic benefits by the local population.

³ Association Agreement was signed in 2016

Stratification of Attitudes Towards the EU Integration According to Social Groups

Mixed attitudes towards the EU integration process are related to various social groups: differences are visible among the young and elderly population, between men and women, and between urban and rural settlers.

In personal communications, local representatives of regional organizations state that elderly minorities who remember the life during the Soviet Union and the wide communication opportunities granted by using Russian as a lingua franca are suspicious about the EU.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, they do not benefit as much from the educational or economic programs offered by the EU, as the younger generations can. They cannot enhance professional skills as they have a limited knowledge of the Georgian language and therefore civic engagement and interacting with local officials is not among their priorities. Discussions held in Akhaltsikhe, a community with a significant Armenian population, illustrated that differences in attitudes is particularly obvious during interactions between different age groups, for example, between elderly school teachers lacking training and the new generation of students.

The perceptions of male ethnic minorities may be different from the attitudes of females due to several reasons. Participants of focus groups held in the Javakheti region focus on practical, economic factors, for instance, men migrating to work in Russia. Moreover, they have a strong nostalgia towards the Russian market, which used to be the sole source of income for many families before Russia withdrew its military bases from the region in 2007 (ლოკლოკაძე, 2007). Discussions held in Kvemo Kartli, may imply that there are cultural factors to be considered as well: in Azeri community traditional points of social interactions are tea-houses called Chai-khana which Azeri women usually do not visit. Because of this they miss an opportunity to attend discussions and exchange information and ideas which would impact their understanding of the issue.ⁱⁱⁱ As one of the participants of a Marneuli focus group stated, “here women think that they will get in trouble at home if they become active”.

The representative of the Information Center on NATO and the EU points out, Euroscepticism caused by everyday needs is more common in villages and small residential settlements than in regional centers.^{iv} Research conducted using focus groups illustrates that the reason is a visibly low level of education and information, a passive civil sector, and the lack of projects for the villages. People living in rural areas have a strong need for trade in agricultural products and cattle, which is not easily offered to them by the greater European integration. The same is evidenced by the findings of the discussions held in Akhaltsikhe and Dmanisi - “there is some level of information [on European integration] in the city, while there is no knowledge of it in the villages.” Similar differences are seen in the communities of Dmanisi and Marneuli as well as in Akhaltsikhe and the surrounding villages.

Based on this, it can be assumed that skeptical attitudes in regions with ethnic minorities are impacted by pro-Russian attitudes caused by Soviet nostalgia, a lack of information due to language barriers, disinformation, economic factors and various levels of intensity in social

communication. However, skepticism in these regions is characterized by other peculiarities which shape negative attitudes.

Self-Perception of Ethnic Minorities in the Context of Georgian State and European Integration

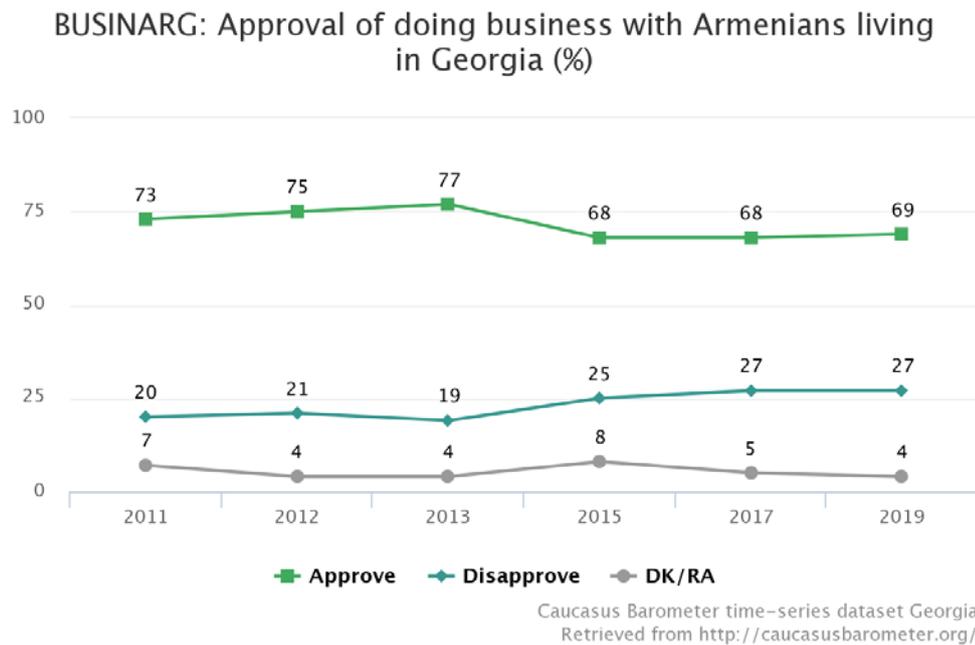
Unanimously positive attitudes towards Georgia's path towards European integration is important for the country. For this to happen it is essential that all Georgian citizens feel they are members of the same society. This is a particularly sensitive issue among ethnic minorities. Perception-based challenges are especially worthy of attention since positive transformation in these regards is a complex and a long-term process, while negative effects are easier and faster to be seen.^v

The sense of cultural-political identity towards Georgia and Georgian society is high among ethnic minorities (სარეკომენდაციო დოკუმენტი, 2019). As an illustration, ethnic Azeri citizens voice their discontent about the fact that higher education in Georgia is supported by the Azeri company "SOCAR", while other mechanisms of financial support for studies are limited. For instance, the attitude of participants involved in discussions in Marneuli expressed the following sentiment: "We are not diaspora, SOCAR must not pay for our education". At the same time, ethnic Armenians living in Samtskhe-Javakheti region refer to Armenia as a "neighboring country", which highlights the appeal to consider Georgia as "their country".

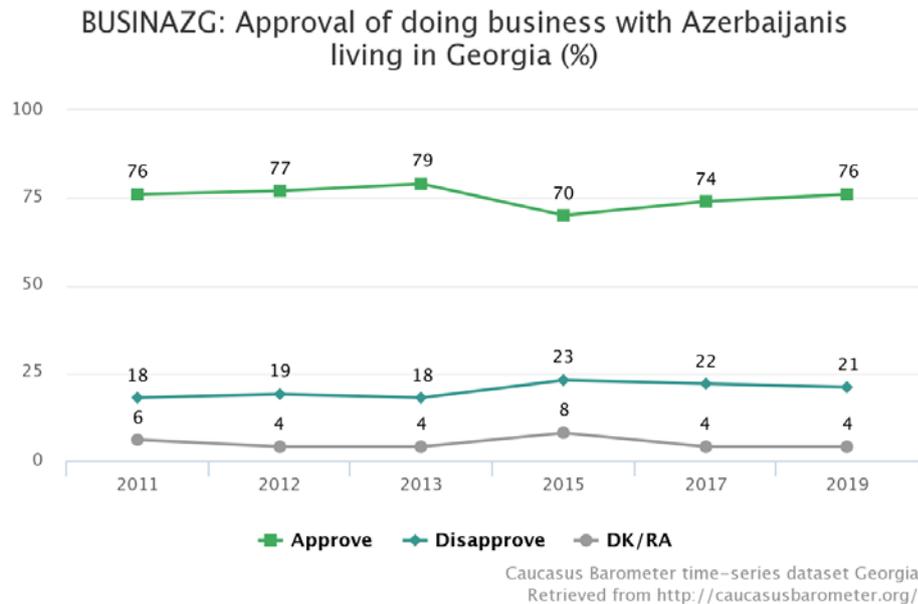
For ethnic minorities, the problem with civic integration is related to the fact that they do not have communication with Georgian society and do not know Georgian culture. The State Strategy of Civic Equality and Integration (2015-2020) is focused on the preservation of local culture, as well as on integration processes (სტრატეგია, 2015). In reality this does not sufficiently support intercultural communication - *coexistence* and *exchange*. According to the report on the policy of Marneuli Culture Center, representatives of the center view cultural integration as a one-sided endeavor, by only putting forward Georgian culture and not as a two-way process, which implies an emphasis on local culture as well (შალვაშვილი, 2019). The deficiencies of state policy in terms of *coexistence* is highlighted by the attempt to use exclusively Georgian visuals during the Azeri celebration - Dmanisoba in 2019 (შალვაშვილი, 2019). When it comes to the practice of *exchange*, the lack of internal mobility matters, particularly for the ethnically Armenian population living far away from Tbilisi, majority of whom have never visited other parts of Georgia outside of Samtskhe-Javakheti region. Therefore, communication with Georgian society and the environment is practically nonexistent. According to representative of the Public Defender's Office, that is why these communities become such closed.^{vi}

At the same time, two-way integration is no less important - an exchange of information about Georgia among ethnic minorities, as well as an exchange of information on minorities among the rest of Georgia. As the discussions in Marneuli highlighted, ethnic Azeris and Armenians

do not see their role in Georgian state-building in textbooks at schools or in other educational institutions. Moreover, personal communications during the research illustrated the problem with media coverage, according to which the media reports on these regions only in negative or political contexts. As a result, a perception is created in Tbilisi that these are “wild regions” as said by the focus group participants. This is a result of lack of communication between two parts of the society in which one views the other as strangers. Indeed, about 20-25% of Georgia’s population does not approve of business relations with ethnic Azeris and Armenians living in Georgia (see Graphs 2 and 3).



Graph 2. Approval of Doing Business with Armenians Living in Georgia. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/cb-ge/BUSINARG/>



Graph 3. Approval of Doing Business with Azerbaijanis Living in Georgia.
<https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/cb-ge/BUSINAZG/>

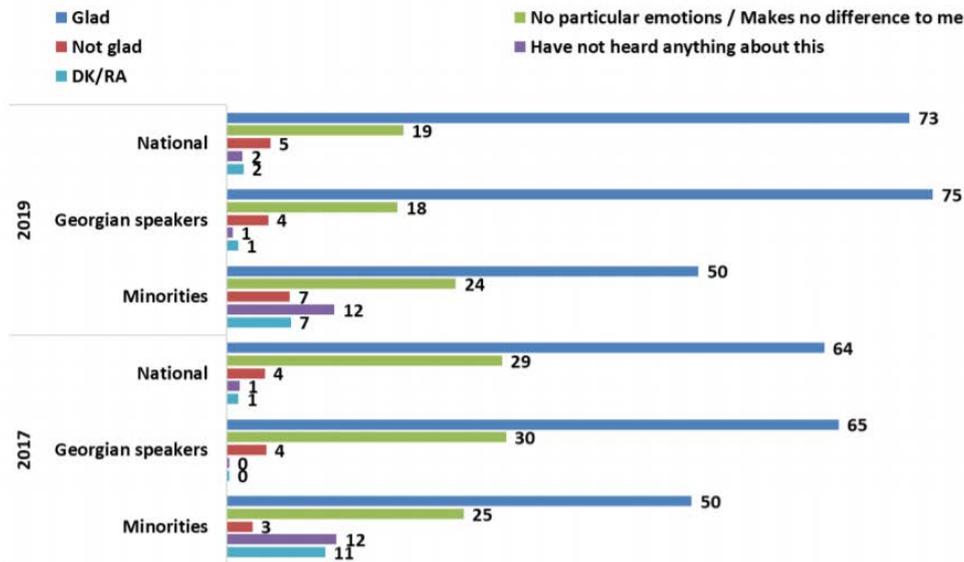
As such, integration of ethnic minorities into Georgian society is characterized by ambivalence: on the one hand there is some progress in terms of developing multiculturalism and a common sense of self-perception (აფხაზიძე, 2019); while, on the other hand, distrust and in some cases aggression towards minorities is evident in the context of state building (სამხარაძე, 2020).

There are fundamental challenges to the civic integration of ethnic minorities into Georgian society which creates the room for EU integration-related risks in three directions: local communities do not trust the government in terms of its ability to deliver tangible and practical progress to on the path towards the European integration. Secondly, resisting Russia is becoming more complex in isolated societies. Additionally, countering traditional stereotypes is increasingly less effective.

Who Is the (Euro)skepticism Directed at?

Based on the tendencies outlined in the research, it may be concluded that ethnic minorities in Kvemo Kartli, as well as in Samtskhe-Javakheti regions more or less realize the benefits which can be achieved in future: justice, improving the quality of production, and forcing the government to implement effective reforms. However, at this stage, access to education and freedom of travel are among the most popular achievements (see Graph 4). Erasmus and visa liberalization are the topics that have been highlighted the most by the participants of the discussions in both of the regions.

**After March 28, 2017 citizens of Georgia can travel to the Schengen zone countries of Europe visa-free.
Are you glad or not to have such a possibility? (%)**



Graph 4: Europe Foundation. <http://www.epfound.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-EU-Attitudes-Survey-IV.pdf>

Against this background, Eurosceptic attitudes among ethnic minorities is still strong, as had already been evidenced (ვეროძის ფონდი, 2019). Therefore, it is interesting to examine where the lack of trust is directed.

Existing stereotypes and trust of minorities

One of the major factors feeding skepticism among the Georgian population, and ethnic minorities in particular, are the stereotypes about Europe. The findings of the focus group meetings held in both of the regions demonstrated “excessive freedom”, “perversion”, and a “lack of family relations” to be the most widespread stereotypes. However, representatives of the Information Center of NATO and the EU point out that similar attitudes do not significantly differ from the stereotypes raised by Georgian society, which leads us to the conclusion that stereotypical attitudes are common regardless of ethnic identity.^{vii} However, there are peculiarities in terms of countering these stereotypes and the mechanisms for disregarding and replacing them with accurate information. This process is challenged by the lack of information and civic integration within these communities.

These negative stereotypes coexist with positive perceptions frequently related to economic well-being: according to the discussions, these are “high salaries”, “high quality of life”, and “social services”. Hence, the analysis of stereotypical perceptions enables us to conclude that various segments of Georgian society have similar attitudes, which is illustrated by the fact that the level of distrust towards the EU does not differ greatly among ethnic minorities and

the rest of the society (13% and 16% respectively). However, there is a difference between the level of trust towards the EU with minorities groups showing lower levels of trust compared to the Georgian speaking population - 36% and 45% respectively (ევროპის ფონდი, 2019).

State progress in EU integration process and trust of minorities

A significant segment of ethnic minorities cannot benefit from the opportunities provided by the EU to Georgia. According to youth in Marneuli this is due to the fact that both educational programs and visa free travel are designed for higher income groups against whom they cannot compete because of a lack of knowledge of the Georgian language or a lack of information.

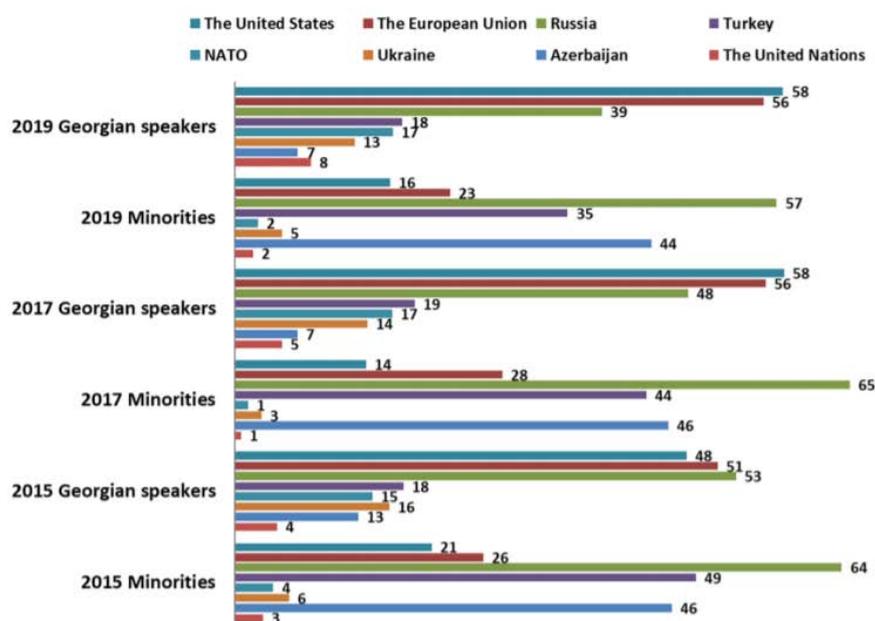
An analysis of the focus group discussions illustrates that skeptical attitudes are directed towards the government, not towards Europe or European integration per se: there is a distrust towards the progress the government has achieved which will prepare the country for greater integration, as well as towards future progress, even in event of membership. Discussions held in both of the regions characterized the government's efforts to fulfill its commitments as "fictitious", or superficial.

Perception that various standards are not being met by Georgia plays an important role in feeding skepticism towards EU membership (ევროპის ფონდი, 2019). It is especially visible when respondents discuss the commitment to fulfill the provisions of the Framework Convention on Protecting Ethnic Minorities (ჩარჩო-კონვენცია, 1995). In this case, skepticism is directed towards Georgia's progress in EU integration more than the EU itself. This context applies not only to the failures of the government, but also to the lack of readiness among the Georgian society. To illustrate this, various conservative approaches were highlighted during the discussions.

Russian factor as challenge

A number of factors related to Russia have important long-term effects on European integration for Georgian society. 57% of ethnic minorities believe Russia should be the country or union that Georgia should have the closest political cooperation with (see Graph 5).

Which of the following countries and unions should, in your opinion, Georgia have the closest political cooperation with? (%) Part 1



Graph 5: Europe Foundation. <http://www.epfound.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-EU-Attitudes-Survey-IV.pdf>

Even without Moscow’s involvement, common cultural and historical experiences have had a significant impact on ethnic minorities facing the challenge of language barrier (both toward Georgian and English).^{viii} Because they speak Russian, and consider Russia an accessible market for their economic activities, a major segment of ethnic minorities priorities Russia over “distant” Europe. They fear competition on the European market and because of that are hesitant to engage with it. Similar discomfort feeds into their distrust towards the EU. In addition, youth who are hesitant to pursue higher education in Tbilisi because of the language barrier, go to either Armenia or Azerbaijan for the education programs supported by Russian initiatives like the “Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia” (БФУ, 2019), which, according to the representative of the Information Center, has helped over 100 students in 2019 to continue their studies in Russia.^{ix} Therefore, Russia’s accessibility and historical-geographic proximity plays an important role in nurturing doubts about European integration.

It can be concluded that skepticism reflected in research is not necessarily directed towards Europe or the idea of the European Union as certain segments of ethnic minorities approve of enhanced relations with the EU due to various pragmatic reasons. The major source of their skepticism derives from doubts over Georgia’s progress on the path towards the European integration, Russia’s geographic-historical proximity and the dominance of stereotypical perceptions.

Can (Euro)skepticism Be Managed?

For ethnic minorities living in Georgia, the perception of European integration is ambivalent: positive and negative attitudes coexist and develop side-by-side. The latter prevents some segments of local society from fully benefiting from the economic, social or educational opportunities offered by the EU. Various components of skepticism do not necessarily imply direct distrust towards the EU, rather they relate to the factors nourishing doubts, such as managed stereotypes, Russia as a counterpart of Europe and a major player, and distrust towards Georgia's practical progress in the process of the European integration.

As for the positive perceptions, tolerance and solidarity are among the attitudes most frequently associated with the EU by the ethnic minorities as these are the challenges that ethnic minorities face on a daily basis. Freedom of movement and the educational opportunities feed into positive attitudes which creates the grounds for arguing that strengthening pro-European attitudes have a real and solid foundation among ethnic minorities.

When representatives of ethnic minorities discuss the benefits of the EU, they feel hopeful about the future despite the fact that currently they cannot benefit from educational programs or visa liberalization highlighting the acceptability of Europe. Considering all the factors encouraging (euro)skepticism among ethnic minorities, various mechanisms for managing similar attitudes can be put into action. This includes meetings with people living in villages, intensive intercultural communication and mobility, information policy based on experience, and practical social outcomes which would balance the nostalgia towards the Soviet Union. The government should constantly express its readiness for European integration both in terms of democracy and specifically in its approach to minorities. All of the aforementioned measures will contribute to strengthening positive perceptions on the EU, which will gradually reduce (euro)skepticism.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Ethnic minorities' attitudes towards EU integration is important since it provides tangible impact on benefiting from the process and Europeanizing successfully. That is why the issue requires particular attention from both the state and the society. According to the research it can be determined that the skeptical attitudes towards the EU integration in ethnic minorities is highlighted with the distrust towards the government's progress in this process. This factor is catalyzed by lack of opinion-sharing with the rest of the society. Cultural integration particularly influences on the ethnic minorities' attitudes towards the state and its foreign policy vector. This is mostly reflected on the especially sensitive segments of the local communities such as women, elderly people and the rural habitants being particularly vulnerable towards spreading the skepticism about Europeanization. As a result of comprehending these factors it is possible to manage (euro)skepticism by halting its core motivations and implementing relative measures.

Recommendations for the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality

- **Representatives of the civil society members operating in local communities should be involved in discussing the new State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration** in order to reflect their specific challenges, attitudes and needs in the document.
- **Practical activities comprehending the minorities about the state's progress in the EU integration process to be intensified**, especially the ones about visa liberalization, educational exchange programs and the grant opportunities, which are of the particular interest of ethnic minorities. This will support to enhance public trust towards the state's progress in the EU integration process among the local communities.
- **Internal educational, professional and informational exchange programs must be ensured** for ethnic minorities living in the Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions in order to support information sharing and halt skepticism triggered by isolation.
- **Cooperate intensively with the state institutions responsible for infrastructural and social improvement projects** in the two regions in order to work on locals' daily challenges to make easier for them to have accessibility on the benefits of Georgia's Europeanization.

Recommendations for the Local Government

- Support the local traditional cultural markers to be advanced, **encourage the activities ensuring ethnic minorities to see their role in Georgian state-building process**, which will enhance their trust towards the state's progress in the EU integration process.
- **Encourage locals, more particularly, the youth minorities, to participate in internal exchange camps, professional visits throughout Georgia** helping to feel themselves being part of the entire society.
- **Increase the intensity of the field visits promoting the successful stories of implemented enterprises and export in EU in the rural areas**, in order to make the agrarian production opportunities created by the Europeanization process more realistic and accessible.
- **Communication with the elderly minorities to be intensified** in order to balance the skepticism triggered by the Soviet nostalgia.

- **Ensure alternative discussion spaces for women** representing minorities providing communication areas to share the opinions about EU integration processes by preventing the social-cultural barriers.

Recommendations for CSOs and Analytical Organizations

- **It is necessary to enhance the research on the core motivations of (euro)skepticism - Soviet nostalgia, social difficulties and the stereotypes**, which will support to develop the specific result-oriented project ideas.
- **It is necessary to narrow down CSOs' and analytical organizations' attention on specific societal groups - the rural citizens, the elderly and women - being particularly vulnerable towards the EU-integration skepticism and the long-run projects with them to be planned.** It will make the CSOs' activities more focused and bringing more stable outcomes in terms of halting the sources of skepticism among the local communities.
- **Positive aspects of the EU integration process - visa liberalization, economic benefits and European educational opportunities - currently understood by ethnic minorities should be accentuated strongly** when planning projects taking into the consideration the specific linguistic, human rights-related or other necessities.
- **To keep monitoring Georgia's progress and ongoing challenges during the EU integration process and provide specifically relevant findings to the ethnic minorities in a clear and plain manner.**
- **To develop the trust toward the CSOs and stable communication with them by planning and implementing the local long-run projects**, which can enhance their interest in those organizations' activities and, relatively, successful implementation of the concrete local projects.

Recommendation for International Community and Donors

- **Projects oriented on the ideas to integrate the minority women's societal-cultural integration must be accentuated** while discussing the project proposals.
- **Attention towards the social and economic projects focused on rural settlers** in the regions of Kvemo Kartli and Samktskhe-Javakheti must be enhanced.
- **Support for the ideas oriented on balancing the Soviet nostalgia among the elderly minorities** must be enhanced.
- **Projects oriented on positive aspects of the EU integration process - visa liberalization, legal improvements and European educational opportunities - must be supported.**

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- ⁱ Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
- ⁱⁱ Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 22 May 2020.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Council for Ethnic Minorities under the Public Defender`s Office, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
- ^{iv} Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
- ^v Center for the Studies of Ethnicity and Multiculturalism, personal communication, 21 May 2020.
- ^{vi} Council for Ethnic Minorities under the Public Defender`s Office, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
- ^{vii} Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
- ^{viii} Center for the Studies of Ethnicity and Multiculturalism, personal communication, 21 May 2020.
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Focus Group, Dmanisi, Males, 27 June, 2020.

Focus Group, Gardabani, Females, 22 June, 2020.