

## Attitudes Toward the West in the South Caucasus

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### Abstract

This article examines the population's attitudes in the three South Caucasus states Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia towards Western states and organizations, drawing on opinion polls conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center. The results show that there is generally a positive attitude toward the West in the South Caucasus, with the Georgian respondents consistently expressing the most positive attitudes. In all three countries, both economic and political cooperation with Western countries and institutions is valued highly. Culturally, people seem to be comfortable about personal relationships with their Western counterparts, but also appear concerned about retaining their countries' cultural distinctiveness.

### Looking Westward

The West's presence is felt in the South Caucasus in many spheres: from the construction of oil and gas pipelines to the presence of Western NGOs to the "if, when and how" of NATO and EU membership. The question of whether the South Caucasus countries are orienting themselves toward the West became especially acute after the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict. But what do people in the South Caucasus really think about their countries' political, cultural and economic relations with the West, in particular with NATO, the U.S. and the EU? And how much do these attitudes vary by country? Findings from the 2007 and 2008 national Data Initiative (DI) surveys conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia offer detailed answers to these questions.\*

### Economic Cooperation

All three countries desire a fairly good economic relationship with the U.S. and the EU, with Georgians showing the most positive attitudes. In 2007, respondents were asked to rank the extent to which they thought their country should cooperate economically with a number of countries and organizations on a scale from "1" (no cooperation) to "10" (full cooperation). Seventy-one percent of Armenian respondents placed their wish for economic cooperation with the U.S. in one of the top five ranks, with 38 percent choosing the highest category. In Azerbaijan, attitudes were similar: 71 percent rated their wish for economic cooperation in one of the top five ranks, out of which 32 percent wanted full cooperation. In Georgia, these numbers were higher: 80 percent approved of economic cooperation (i.e. rating it in one of the five top ranks), and more than half of the

respondents (53 percent) were for full economic cooperation with the U.S.

The respondents' support in all three countries for economic cooperation with the EU is nearly the same as that for the U.S., with a slightly higher overall percentage in favor of full cooperation (i.e. "10" on the scale). Fifty-eight percent of the Georgian respondents wish to see full economic cooperation with the EU, in comparison to 43 percent in Armenia and 31 percent in Azerbaijan.

Personal business connections with Americans also received positive evaluations (DI 2007). In both Armenia and Georgia, 86 percent of the respondents approved of doing business with U.S. citizens, with Azerbaijanis somewhat behind at 72 percent. The 2009 EU survey conducted in Georgia echoed these results: Eighty-eight percent of Georgians would approve of people of their ethnicity doing business with Americans, placing Americans at the top of the list of nationalities with whom Georgians like to do business.\*\*

### Political Cooperation

Attitudes toward political cooperation with the U.S. and the EU follow a similar pattern as attitudes toward economic relations. Sixty-six percent in Armenia and 72 percent in Azerbaijan placed their support in one of the five top ranks of the ten-point scale, with 34 percent and 35 percent, respectively, seeking full cooperation. Georgian respondents were slightly more interested in a good political relationship: 78 percent were positively inclined (placing their attitudes to political cooperation with the U.S. in one of the five upper categories), and as much as 53 percent were fully supportive. The support for political cooperation with the EU is nearly the same. (see Diagram 1 on p. 13)

\* For information on the DI survey methodology and access to the datasets, see the CRRC's website ([www.crrccenters.org](http://www.crrccenters.org)).

\*\* The 2009 "Attitudes Towards European Integration," carried out by CRRC in Georgia. See [http://epfound.org/index.php?article\\_id=106](http://epfound.org/index.php?article_id=106) for more information.

The 2009 EU Survey on Georgians' attitudes toward European integration again highlights the Georgians' orientation toward the West. Eighty-three percent said that it is quite important or very important for the Georgian government to strengthen ties with the U.S. Furthermore, 71 percent agree that Georgia should have close political cooperation with the U.S., placing the U.S. at the top of a list of countries and organizations with which Georgia should have close political cooperation. Sixty-five percent agreed Georgia should have close political cooperation with the EU, and 54 percent said the same about Russia.

The 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict made the U.S.'s political involvement in the Caucasus a subject of intense interest, both in the region and the rest of the world. Data from the DI 2008, carried out shortly after the war ended, show that the opinion that the war was in the interest of the U.S. government is much more prevalent in Armenia and Azerbaijan than in Georgia. Seventy-one percent of Armenian respondents agreed that the Russia-Georgia war was in the interest of the U.S. government, followed by 40 percent of the respondents in Azerbaijan, but only 19 percent thought so in Georgia.

### Attitudes Toward NATO

NATO cooperation and accession figure prominently in debates about the South Caucasus' relationship with the West. Respondents' attitudes toward NATO membership vary considerably between the three countries: Armenians have the most skeptical attitude, while in Azerbaijan and Georgia respondents are much more enthusiastic. In 2007, respondents were asked to assess their support for NATO membership on a five-point scale, ranging from no support at all to full support. In Armenia, 21 percent of the respondents said they did not support NATO membership at all, while 15 percent gave their full support. In Azerbaijan, however, the amount of full support was almost double (39 percent), with only two percent completely withholding support. Even more Georgians approved of NATO membership: 47 percent gave their full support, whereas only 3 percent gave none.

In 2008, the support for NATO membership decreased in all three countries. Georgians remained the most positive, despite NATO's lukewarm response to the Georgia-Russia conflict, with nearly half of the respondents saying they were fully in favor of membership (42 percent), and only four percent showing no support at all. The Armenian respondents were again the least enthusiastic about NATO, with 10 percent fully

in favor of membership and 20 percent fully against it. In Azerbaijan, support for NATO accession dropped to 21 percent (and 3 percent totally opposed). (see Diagram 2 on p. 14)

### Culture and Relationships

On a more micro level, people from the South Caucasus countries tend to be congenial about personal relationships with individuals from the U.S., with Georgians expressing the most positive attitudes. The DI 2007 showed that 87 percent of the Georgian respondents approve of being friends with Americans, followed by 83 percent in Armenia and 70 percent in Azerbaijan.

As for a willingness to be friends with European nationalities, the respondents' attitudes are also quite positive. For example, a high amount of the Georgian and Armenian respondents would approve of being friends with Greeks (90 percent and 81 percent, respectively). However, some attitudes toward personal relationships seem to be colored by religious and geopolitical factors – for example, only 52 percent of Azerbaijani respondents approve of being friends with Greeks. And while 94 percent of the Azerbaijani respondents and 76 percent of the Georgians respondents approve of being friends with Turks, only 27 percent of Armenians do.

Concerning the idea of marriage to other nationalities, the approval rates are much lower than for friendship. Armenians have the most positive views of marrying Americans, with 42 percent approving, closely followed by the Georgian respondents at 38 percent. Approval among Azerbaijanis trails behind at 18 percent. Despite having a positive view of cooperation with the U.S. in foreign policy or commerce, support among Azerbaijanis is lower for personal relationships with Americans, perhaps due to greater perceived cultural or religious differences.

Moreover, in 2008 the respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement that their country's culture is increasingly threatened by Western cultural influences. There is a significant difference in responses between the three countries. Twenty-four percent of the Georgian respondents strongly agree or somewhat agree with this statement, in comparison with 63 percent in Azerbaijan and 64 percent in Armenia. Only 19 percent of the Georgian respondents also say that globalization has a positive impact on Georgia, in comparison with 32 percent in Armenia and 40 percent in Azerbaijan – all numbers that suggest that people are still keen to retain a high degree of cultural distinctiveness. (see Diagram 3 on p. 14)

### Conclusion

In general, the findings show that citizens in the South Caucasus view the West in a generally positive light. They tend to be interested in both economic and political cooperation, and this support has remained stable over the past years. While the figures from the respondents in Georgia are usually the highest, there are no serious indicators of troubled relations between NATO, the EU

or the U.S. and the South Caucasus countries. Instead, there are areas of relations in which the degree of cooperation desired with one of these institutions or countries is slightly higher or lower. Moreover, while many citizens across the South Caucasus feel a cultural affinity to the West, they want to maintain their distinctive cultures in a context of multilateral political and economic cooperation.

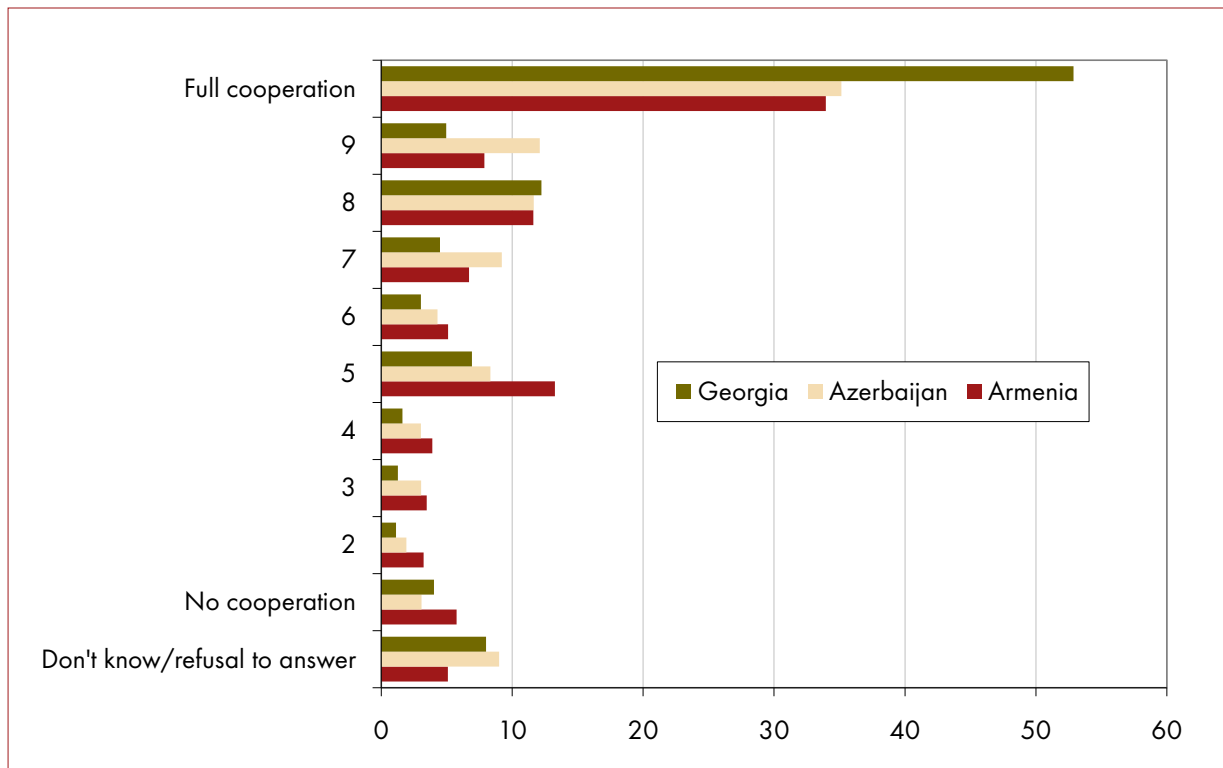
#### About the Authors

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### Diagrams

## Public Attitudes towards the Relationship with the West in the Countries of the South Caucasus

### Respondent's Perception of Political Relations with the U.S. (in percent)



Source: representative opinion poll conducted by CRRC, DI, 2007