



THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS EU OF YOUTH IN GEORGIA

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra15755>

DOI No: 10.36713/epra15755

ABSTRACT

Georgia's involvement with the EU has been reflected in the signing of political agreements, the contribution to the economy, the assurance of security, and institutional development since its independence in the 1990s. As this relationship continues to evolve, it is important to identify what attitudes towards the EU exist and how high the level of awareness about the organization is in general. When considering EU integration, the role of diffuse and specific support is noteworthy, according to which Georgian youth are considered Euro pragmatists. Economic factors are primarily responsible for attitudes towards the EU, which are cited by almost 60% in both cases, which illustrates the importance of a utilitarian model, consequently the EU is seen as a "cost-benefit" model.

KEYWORDS: EU, European integration, youth, Euro pragmatism, Euroscepticism, utilitarian model.

INTRODUCTION

Since achieving independence in the 1990s, the EU has been involved in Georgia through political agreements, economic contributions, security assurances, and institutional development. As this relationship continues evolving, it is important to identify attitudes towards the EU and assess the public's knowledge and commitment. It should be noted that Georgia has moved towards closer EU cooperation by signing agreements like the PCA. In 2006, it joined the EU's European Neighborhood Policy. Bilateral relations increased in the 2010s with the DCFTA and visa-free travel (MFA, 2022).

On the economic front, the EU is a key contributor to Georgia's economy. Over the past three decades, the organization's financial aid has exceeded two billion euros. As of 2021, the EU countries are Georgia's main trading partners, better than traditional trading partners such as Turkey and Russia. Since 2010, the EU countries have been considered the main investors in Georgia's economy. With 455 billion GEL in foreign direct investments in 2021, they contributed twice as much as Azerbaijan, 2.5 times more with the United Kingdom, 3.5 times more than Turkey and 5 times more than the US (Geostat, 2021). In 2019, approximately 7% of tourists who came to Georgia were EU citizens, making a significant contribution to the development of the country's tourism industry (European Commission, 2022).

In addition to economic development, the EU supports Georgia's security and institutional development. Since 2008, the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) has been defending peace and stability with Georgia's separatist regions along the administrative border with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Recently, the involvement of the organization has played a

significant role in mediating the political crisis and eliminating the political polarization between Georgia's main political parties (European Commission, 2017).

Based on EU support, the country's population has a cheerful outlook towards the EU, while the majority supported Georgia's EU membership. Furthermore, similar views are shared by the political elite of Georgia, including the representatives of the government and the main opposition groups (Kakhishvili, 2021).

Such enthusiasm has recently been confirmed in the form of amendments to the Constitution of Georgia. The updated document includes a transitional provision that obliges the constitutional authorities of Georgia to "take all measures to ensure Georgia's full integration into the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization."

The European Fund has played a crucial role in boosting civic engagement in Georgia's path towards European integration, fostering agreement on the EU-Georgia Association. Through various initiatives, the Fund has aimed to broaden civic participation in AA/DCFTA reforms and facilitate policy discussions between civil society and public sector representatives. A significant outcome of the Fund's work has been the establishment and strengthening of Georgia's food safety system, notably enhancing standards and practices. Consequently, the Georgian government has considered policy recommendations from nearly a hundred civil society and business associations, resulting in legislative and procedural improvements in food safety and consumer protection.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Public opinion towards the EU is at the center of almost every academic debate about the present and future of EU integration. Moreover, the attitude towards the EU is so extensively discussed in the literature that they are the object of study. Thus, researchers from various research fields related to media and political communication are interested in exploring public opinion towards the EU as it affects the behavior of citizens both in the EU community and nationally (Vries, 2007). Additionally, the EU is dominated by constant change and diversity in a way that follows a similar trend in relation to various EU issues. In this ever-changing context, there are two important interrelated topics to consider (Boomgard et al., 2011):

1. Public opinion towards the EU is at the core of political and academic debate about the present and future of European integration.
2. Secondly, favorable attitudes and opinions towards the EU have increasingly transformed into negative or skeptical attitudes in recent years.

Early public opinion polls on European integration have used the concept of EU support to characterize citizens' attitudes towards the EU, but recently the concept of Euroscepticism towards the same phenomenon has been utilized (Boomgard, Schuck, Elenbaas, & de Vreese, 2011). The concept of Euroscepticism was originally used to characterize the process of European integration of political parties (Taggart, 1998). Moreover, it is emphasized that the process of European integration has a multifaceted nature, therefore the same complex nature should be taken into account when considering the dependence on the process. That is why the authors of Euroscepticism interpret it as "opposition to a particular policy" or it is regarded as an "integration effort". Boomgard and colleagues propose that specific support entails backing policy outcomes, while diffuse support pertains to an assessment of the object itself rather than its functionality. Another perspective, similar to EU support, distinguishes utilitarian support, which revolves around the costs and benefits of membership, and affective support, which involves emotional responses to European unity ideals. They emphasize differences in attitudes towards both the regime and society. Regime-specific attitudes encompass principles, processes, and institutions, gauging general support and membership benefits. Approaches to regime support encompass approval of expansion, transfer of policy competencies to the EU level, trust in EU institutions, evaluation of regime functionality, and emotional response. Conversely, attitudes towards the EU relate to citizens' perception of it as either a societal driving force or a threat to national interests. Public attitudes are gauged through identification with the EU and attachment to the European community (Boomgard et al., 2011). From an empirical point of view, we must distinguish four dimensions of addiction that are "unique components of the common notion of EU dependence" (Thomassen, 2009). These dimensions include the following:

- Emotional responses – a feeling of the extent to which the EU is a threat to potential members.

- Feeling of European identity – gaining importance due to discussion about EU legitimacy
- Utilitarian attitudes - such as general support and benefit assessment towards the EU
- Strengthening the EU in the future – including supporting further European integration

We should also focus on an alternative vision that distinguishes diffuse and specific support for EU integration, which leads to four types of possible positions structured towards the EU (Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007):

1. Euro enthusiasts - who support both the integration process and its ideology.
2. Euro rejectors - who do not support anything related to EU integration.
3. Euro sceptics - who support the idea of a united Europe but reject further practice of EU integration and
4. Euro pragmatists – who oppose the idea of a united Europe but support the practice of further integration into the EU.

The question should be asked about what factors contribute to the development of specific attitudes towards the EU? The answer to this question is offered by Geibel and Palmer (Gabel & Palmer, 1995), who formulate an etiological model:

1. Utilitarian-authors show that the support of the European integration community varies according to the "mercantile or security benefits" of each member state, this model offers clear hints of the variability of public support in member countries - citizens who discover the real and immediate benefits of European integration are more likely to have positive attitudes towards the EU.
2. Identity-based – The source of Eurosceptic attitude is the constant need for citizens to find identity. While fear of losing national identity leads to lower levels of support for EU integration, this individual sense cannot have such a strong impact. Moreover, McLaren repeats the original idea using the following formula: "Less support generally means ambiguous feelings towards the EU, not explicit resistance to it" (McLaren, 2004).
3. Policy-based - attitudes are caused by citizens' confidence or distrust of the supranational political system directed from the center – Brussels. But as Leconte (Leconte, 2010) suggests, these political-based attitudes are implemented by materialistic force – both the elite and political parties are driven by forces that use the prospect of cost-benefit of EU integration as a national resource.
4. Cultural-based – conveys separation from the entire EU project, as EU integration plays an important role in changing the national cultural values of citizens of member states.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses the secondary data of the „Knowledge of Attitudes and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia 2021“, conducted in collaboration with CRRC and the European Fund. In total, 2,335 full interviews were collected, of which 587 were



young. The survey design is a stratified multi-stage cluster selection and ensures the representation of data for the population of Tbilisi, other cities, rural settlements, mainly ethnic Armenians, and Azerbaijani-populated areas.

Within the scope of the study, data was processed through SPSS 22 using the following statistical methods: frequency analysis and cross-tabulations, t test, Anova, indexing, Will Coxon statistics, correlation. Measurements of central trend and variation were also used to determine the results.

Purpose: The aim of the study is to determine the attitudes of Georgian youth towards the EU.

Objectives

1. Identify the causes of attitudes towards the EU.

2. Determine how informed young people are about the EU.
3. Examine the advantages and disadvantages of the European integration process.
4. Identify the main contributing and hindering factors of European integration.

DISCUSSION

Attitude towards EU and European integration

Most young people have a positive view of the EU. In total, 51% of Georgians have an incredibly positive (21%) or quite positive (30%) attitude towards the EU. 44% of young people are neutral, and 5% are described as negative or extremely negative (see diagram 1). However, there is a statistically significant connection between these variables ($\chi^2=14.8, df=8, p<.05$).

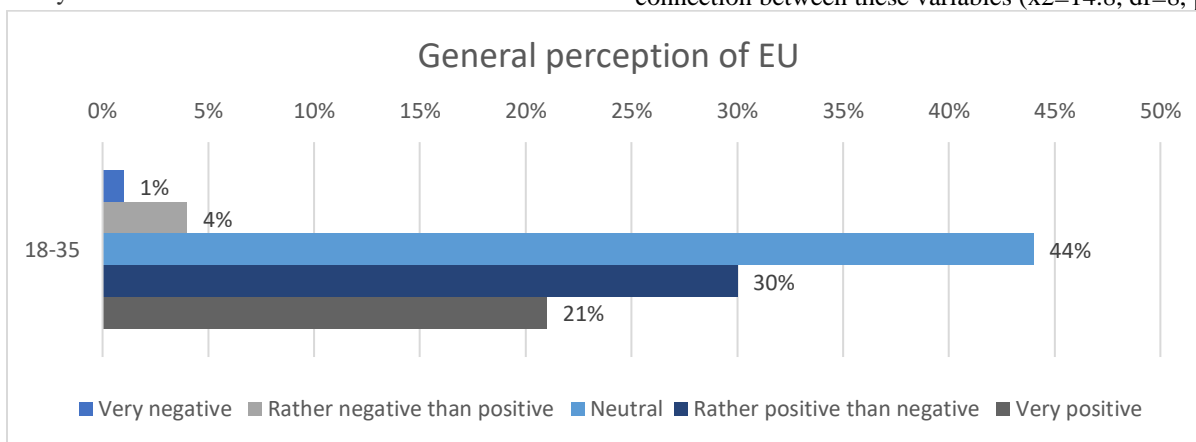


Diagram 1. General perception of EU

It is important to understand this issue in the demographic context, depending on the type of settlement, the positive or very cheerful outlook is mainly expressed by young people living in the capital (54%), and the least ethnic Armenian youth (38%). Moreover, statistically significant link between the EU and NATO attitudes was established, Sig (2-tailed) <.05. There is a strong positive correlation between those variables $R=.69$, and the determination coefficient $r^2=.476$ means that 47.6% of the variation of one variable is due to the variation of the second

variable, indicating that young people have a Euro-Atlantic aspiration.

More than half of young people fully (11%) or partially (43%) trust the EU (see Diagram 2). About 35% have a neutral attitude; Only 12% do not fully or partially trust the EU. Trust in the EU correlates with the general perception of the organization ($r=.52, p<.05$).

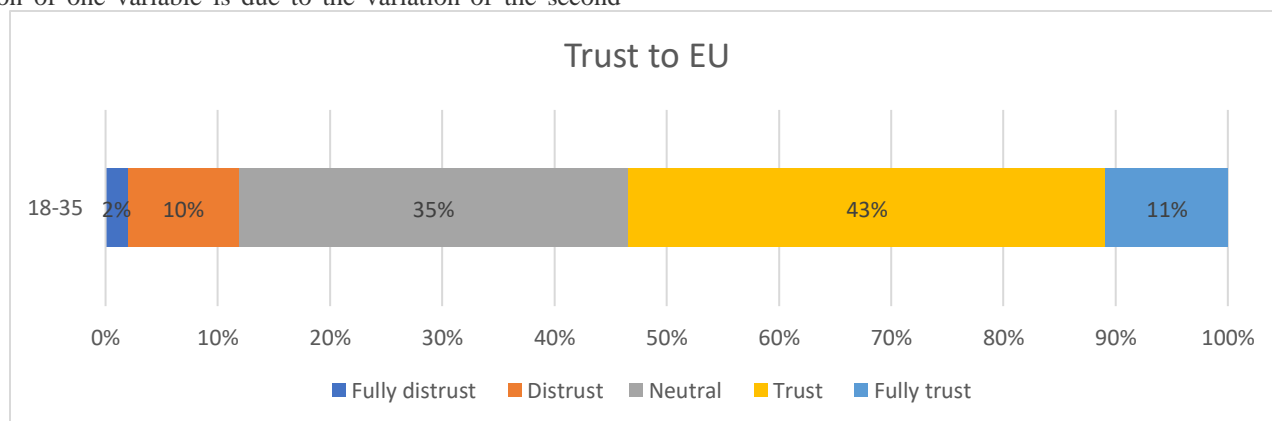


Diagram 2. Trust to European Union



Based on the indexing, local social and political instances were separated, although the trust of the EU was compared to political institutions such as the Prime Minister, Parliament, and political parties. In the case of political institutions, the central trend measures are as follows (Min=4.0, Max=20.0, MD=12.0, Mean=11.8), and in case of confidence in the EU (Min=1.0, Max=5.0, MD=4.0, Mean=4.4)

To determine the difference, the Will Coxon criterion was also used, we compared the respondents with respect to the EU and

political institutions, so the null hypothesis was that they had the same confidence, although Sig. < at 0.05, so we can reject the null hypothesis. Trust in the EU is highly correlated with trust in political institutions ($r=.79, p<.05$).

Respondents were asked to express their opinion on what the EU represents. About 42% of young people say that the EU is an international organization. 25% consider the EU as a political union and 26% as an economic union, only 4% are military, 2% cultural and 1% non-governmental organization (see diagram 3).

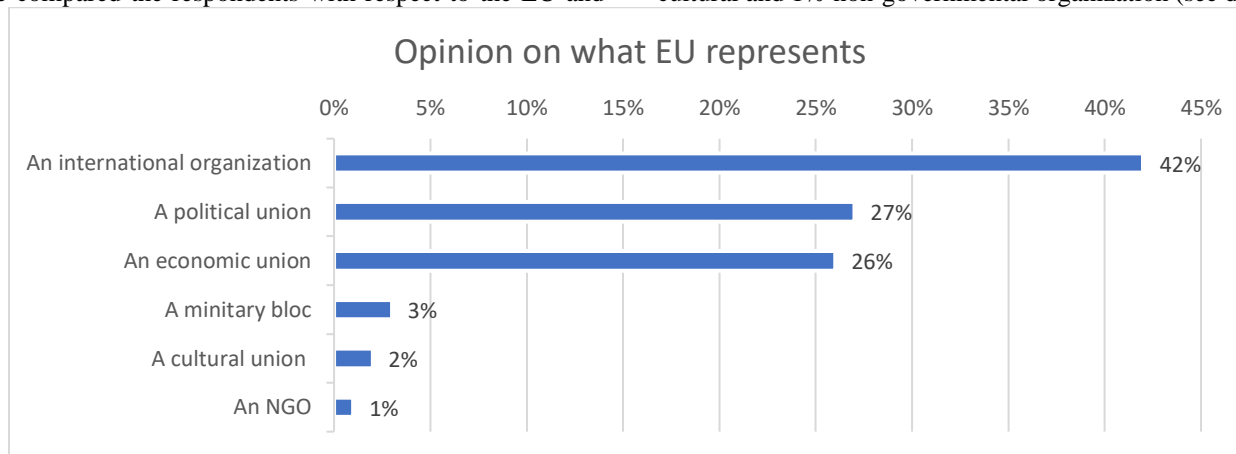


Diagram 3. Opinion on what the EU represents.

If they participated in hypothetical elections, the vast majority, namely 88%, would support Georgia's EU membership, 7%

would not support it, 5% would not participate in the elections at all (see table 1).

N	Hypothetical referendum about EU membership	%
1	I would vote for EU membership	88.0
2	I would vote against EU membership	7.0
3	Would not vote at all	5.0

Table 1. Hypothetical referendum about EU membership

36% of Georgian youth believe that Georgia has the prospect of becoming a member of the EU within 5 years, 33% are 6-10 years

old, 21% name more than 10 years, only 10% think that Georgia will never become an EU member state (see diagram 4).

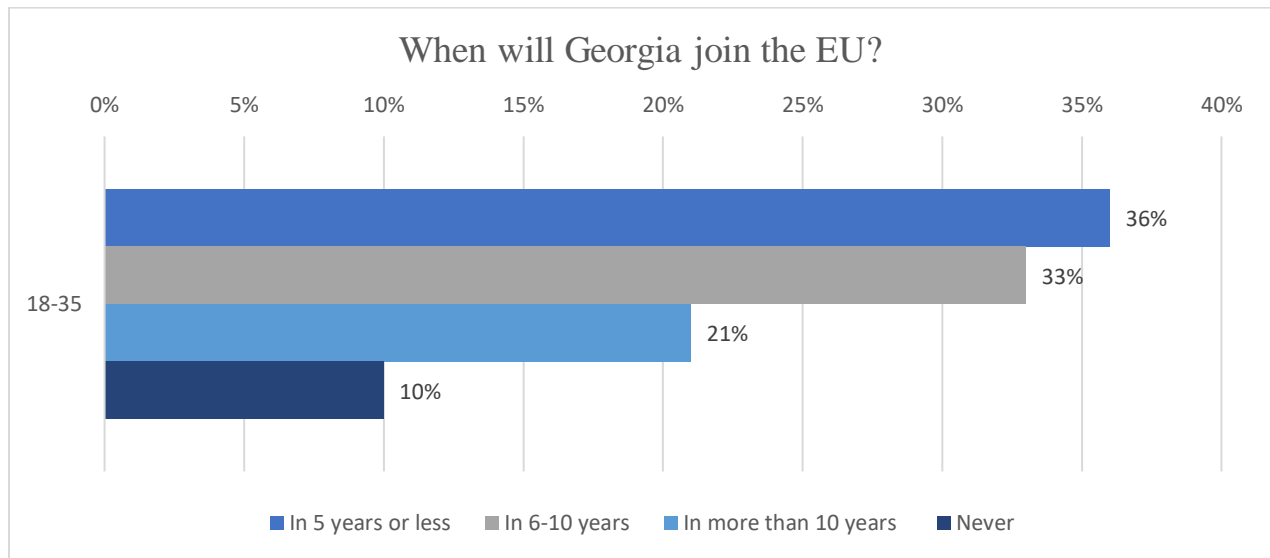


Diagram 4. When will Georgia join the EU?

Reasons for the EU's attitude towards European integration:
 It is noteworthy that only 9.7% of young people completely

agreed with the provision "EU threatens Georgian traditions" while 68.6% disagreed (see diagram 5).

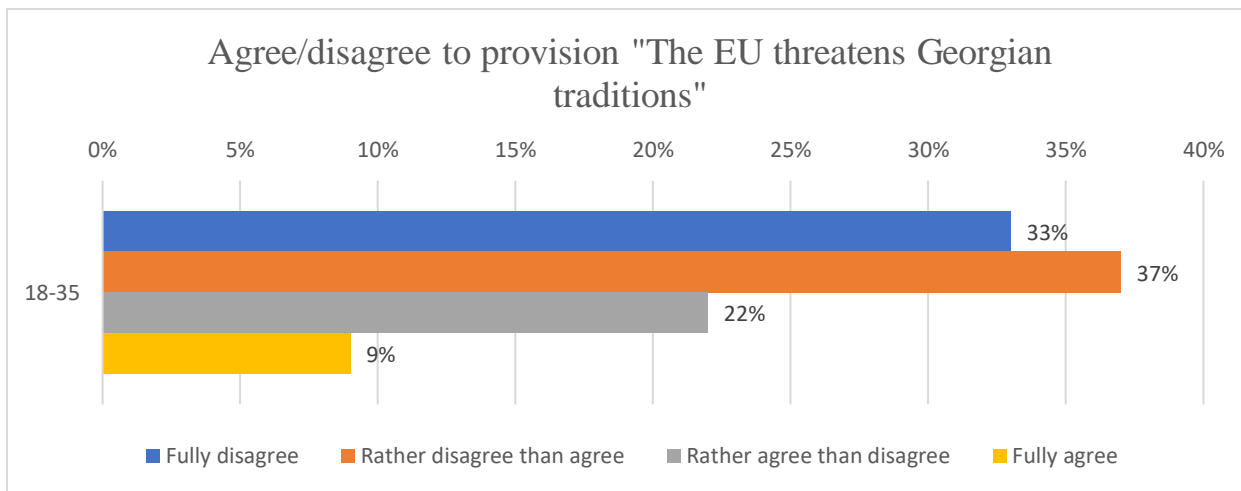


Diagram 5. Agree/Disagree to provision "The EU threatens Georgian traditions."

When they were asked which countries or unions Georgia should have the closest political cooperation with 59.9% of young people

supported EU, 57.5% - United States, and 32.6% - Russia (see diagram 6).

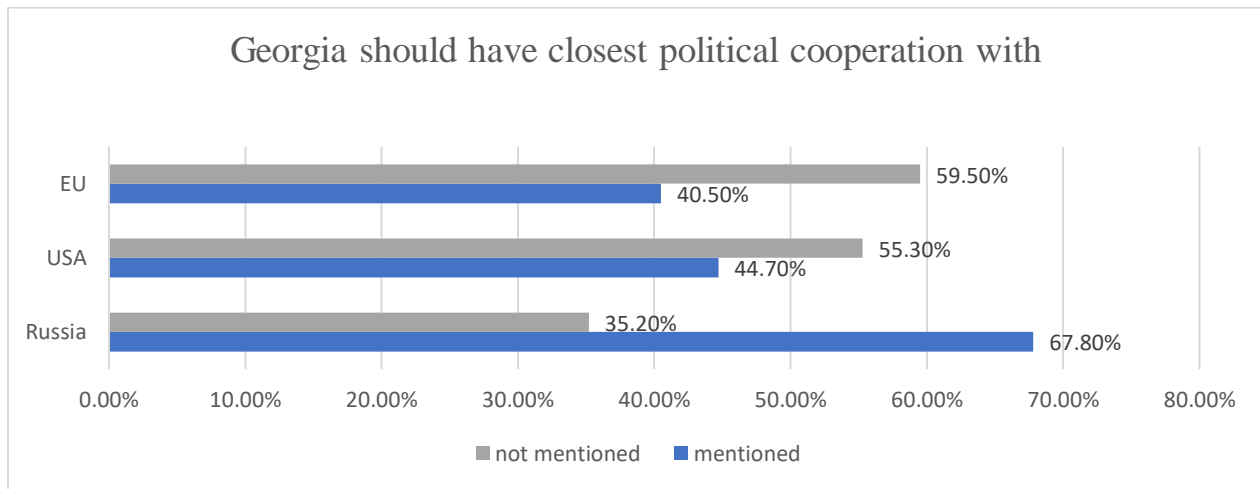


Diagram 6. Which countries or unions Georgia should have the closest political cooperation with?

When we asked which countries or unions Georgia should have the closest economic cooperation with 59.5% of young people,

57.3% supported the United States, and 35.2% supported Russia (see diagram 7).

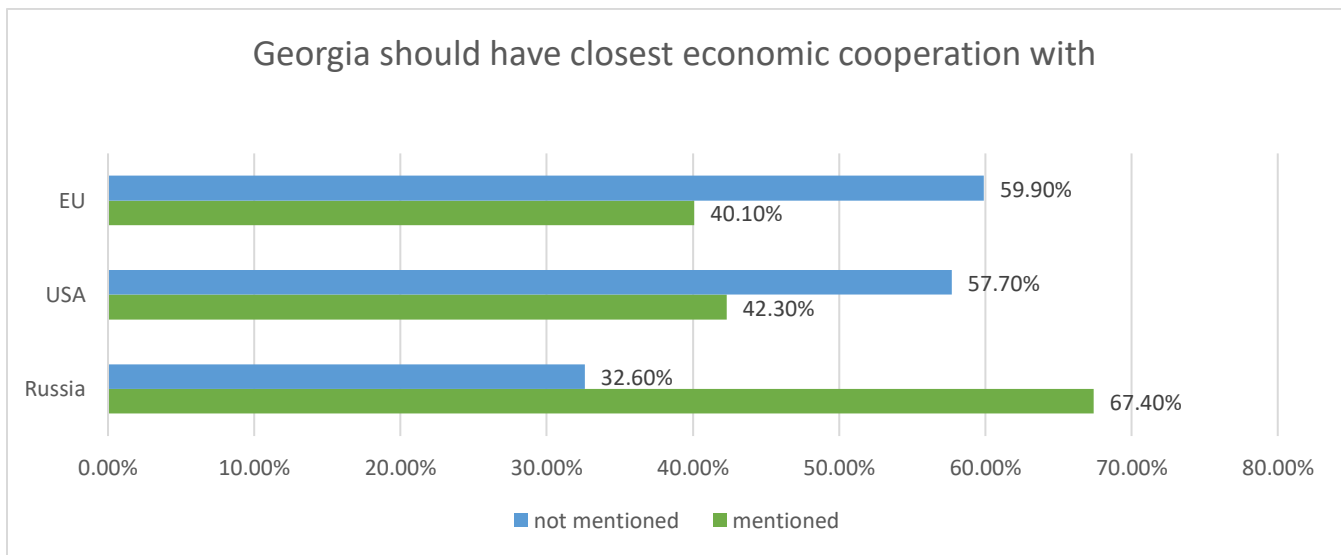


Diagram 7. Which countries or unions Georgia should have the closest economic cooperation with.

The survey highlighted 5 reasons for supporting EU membership, namely:

1. My economic situation will improve.
2. I will be able to travel to Europe without a visa.
3. Many countries will get to know Georgian culture and traditions.
4. Georgia would be better protected from foreign threats.
5. Georgia would have a better chance to restore its territorial integrity.

These reasons were recoded into the following categories: socio-economic, cultural, political. The socio-economic factor is considered significant by 52% of young people, 20.7% -cultural and 27.3% - political.

Level of awareness and sources of information

To determine the level of awareness, an index was created on issues related to knowledge about the purpose of EU member states and the EU in general, the number of its members (Min=1, Max=9, Mean=5.27, MD=5, SD=1.65).

The difference between knowledge scores was checked by gender using t test, $t(141) = .148, p < .05$, and when checking according to settlements we used Anova, $F(4,138) = 2.44, P < .05$.

As for the sources of information, in this case three main sources of information have been identified: Social networks (56.6%), TV (50.3%) and interpersonal contacts (40.3%) (see table 2).



N	Sources of information about EU	%
1	Social networks	56.6
2	TV	50.3
3	Friends, relatives, colleagues	40.3

Table 2. Sources of information about EU

CONCLUSION

In order to measure public attitudes in this study, we rely on Bumgarden's and his colleagues (Boomgard et al., 2011), which says we need to focus on the feeling of identification with the EU and the European community. Youth have an overall positive EU attitude shown through their support for membership, trust in the EU, and belief Georgia will join within 10 years. Euro pragmatism dominates over Euroscepticism. Diffuse/specific support shows the importance of utilitarian benefits versus limited cultural identity impacts. The utilitarian model drives both EU and integration attitudes, viewing the EU as a "cost-benefit" model. The cultural model has little influence. While knowledgeable about the EU, youth lack some key information. Top information sources are social networks, TV, and interpersonal contacts.

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