

# Servabo Fidem

## Dissecting the Georgian Population's High Support for the EU

On December 15, 2023, the European Council decided to award Georgia the status of an EU candidate state. This announcement sparked widespread celebrations in Tbilisi's streets and across Georgian social media. The Georgian public, eagerly anticipating this development, played a crucial role in influencing the EU's decision. The EU institutions were swayed more by the strong pro-EU sentiment among the Georgian populace than by the government's implementation of reforms.

**A resounding 77% of Georgian citizens would vote to join the EU if given the chance in a referendum.**

To understand this pro-European senti-

ment of Georgians, we will examine the findings of a public opinion [survey](#) conducted by the Europe Foundation between March and May 2023. Similar to earlier surveys, this recent poll reveals that a resounding 77% of Georgian citizens would vote to join the EU if given the chance in a referendum. Since 2009, this popular support has consistently stayed above 61%, with opposition peaking at a mere 11% in 2015.

The European Union took notice of Georgia's fervent support for EU membership during its first-ever [evaluation](#) of the country as part of the EU enlargement process. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [highlighted](#) the strong backing of the Georgian population for the



**Vano Chkhikvadze**  
Contributor

Vano Chkhikvadze is an EU Integration Programme Manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), specializing in EU-Georgian relations and advancing projects for Georgia's European integration. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation in various areas. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.



EU in her statement. She affirmed that the European Commission “fully supports the genuine aspirations of the overwhelming majority of its citizens to join the European Union. These aspirations need to be better mirrored by the authorities who should engage more with the opposition and civil society on matters of national interests.”

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, also expressed similar views. Mr Borrell tweeted on the X platform that “the Georgian people have shown their unshaken commitment to European values many times.”

### **52% of Georgians believe EU membership would enhance their economic situation.**

Survey results show that 52% of Georgians believe EU membership would enhance their economic situation, while 25% think being part of the EU would offer better protection against external threats. Regarding obstacles, one in three Georgians sees political instability within the country as the primary hurdle to joining the EU. The second significant challenge is perceived to be Georgia’s occupied territories, followed by a lack of political will from the national government to join the EU, with Russia being the fourth concern.

## **Trust Toward the EU Increased...**

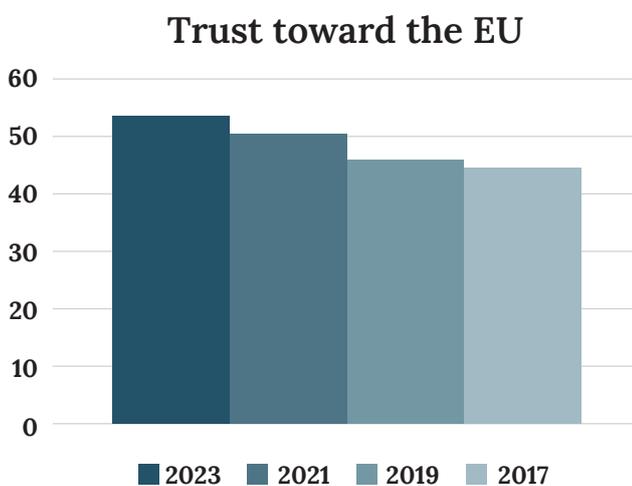
Trust in the European Union has grown in Georgia, mirroring the public sentiment as the country moves closer to the EU. Since the initiation of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2013, the percentage of Georgians with positive or somewhat positive views of the EU rose from 36% to 54% by the autumn of 2023. Georgian society appears to have responded to the ruling party’s manipulation and interference against the EU and its values and verbal assaults on EU institutions and officials. Consequently, the proportion of the public perceiving EU-Georgia relations as excellent decreased from 48% in 2011 to 21% in 2023, while those considering the relationship bad in some way grew from a mere 1% in 2011 to 12% in 2023.

Despite attempts by the ruling Georgian Dream party and the People’s Power political group to undermine EU trust, public confidence in the EU has not wavered. In fact, it has strengthened: from 44% in 2017 who trusted the EU fully or partially, the number climbed to 53% in 2023. Remarkably, the EU often enjoys greater trust than various domestic institutions, including the Georgian government (34%), the healthcare system (42%), courts (39%), the police (51%), the President’s office (20%) and the office of the Public Defend-

er (26%). Regarding barriers to Georgia's EU membership, an increasing number of people believe the primary obstacle is the Georgian government's lack of political will. This belief surged from 6% in 2013 to 23% in 2023.

**A 2021 survey revealed that most Georgians considered the EU a threat to Georgian traditions.**

This high level of trust poses a challenge for the EU as sustaining trust requires ongoing effort. One must not forget that a 2021 [survey](#) revealed that most Georgians considered the EU a threat to Georgian traditions. However, only 35% of those with higher education concurred or strongly concurred with this view, and only one-third of young adults aged 18 to 34 also shared this sentiment. These attitudes provide a potential base for anti-Western propaganda efforts and also showcase how fragile the increasing trust toward the EU could be.



Source: Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward the EU in Georgia – 2023 Survey Results

## But the Ethnic Minorities Think Differently

Conversely, enthusiasm for the European Union among Georgia's ethnic minorities has waned. As per the latest national census in 2014, Azerbaijanis and Armenians constitute the largest national minority groups in Georgia, making up 6.27% and 4.53% of the total population of 3.7 million, respectively. Surveys indicate a decline in support for Georgia's EU membership among these minority groups, dropping from 52% in 2021 to 43% in 2023. Simultaneously, the percentage of ethnic minorities opposing Georgia's accession to the EU in a potential referendum rose from 6% to 15%.

Despite this, Georgia's ethnic minority groups still favor EU membership over joining the Russia-initiated Eurasian Union. However, the preference for the Eurasian Union has grown within these communities, increasing from 28% in 2021 to 33% in 2023. Concurrently, opposition to joining the Eurasian Union among these groups declined from 22% in 2021 to 17% in 2023.

The decreased support for Georgia's EU integration among ethnic minorities may be attributed to language barriers, especially among the older population, which does not speak Georgian and relies on Russian television for news. Ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis residing in Geor-

Georgia predominantly [get](#) political news from Russian TV channels. Channel One Russia is the most popular of these channels, with Russia Today and Rossiya also widely viewed. These channels frequently portray the internal conflict in Ukraine and its ambitions to join the EU and NATO as the primary causes of the war with Russia.

It is difficult to overlook that the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, echoed a similar sentiment at the Global Security Forum (GLOBSEC) in May 2023. Addressing the motivations behind Russia's hostilities against Ukraine, he [suggested](#) that "one of the reasons was Ukraine's will and determination to become a member of NATO. Therefore, we see the consequence."

***The growing disenchantment with the EU among ethnic minorities in Georgia might also be influenced by the Georgian government's narrative that leverages the trauma from the 2008 war with Russia.***

The growing disenchantment with the EU among ethnic minorities in Georgia might also be influenced by the Georgian government's narrative that leverages the trauma from the 2008 war with Russia. The narrative that the "global war party," which includes the EU, is pulling Georgia towards a conflict with Russia had its impact. Consequently, the percentage of Georgians who feel that deepening ties with the European Union would adversely affect Georgia-Russia relations rose from 20% in 2021 to 28% in 2023.

## People vs Government on Russia and China

Amid concerns about Russia, Georgian society prioritizes bolstering economic relations with the European Union more than with any other nation or trading bloc. Survey results [show](#) that 63% of Georgians favor the strongest economic ties with the EU, with the United States ranking second at 46% preference and Turkey third at 35%.

Support towards Georgia having the closest economic cooperation with ... %

	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
EU	48	54	56	43	48	47	59	63
Russia	53	50	68	56	54	39	35	21
China	3	13	3	7	6	7	5	9

[Source:](#) Knowledge of and Attitudes Towards the EU in Georgia; 2023 Survey Results; Europe Foundation

While only a small fraction of the population, 9%, is in favor of Georgia forming a close relationship with China, Georgian officials went ahead and [signed](#) a declaration in 2023 to initiate a strategic partnership with China. This move followed the earlier [signing](#) of a free trade agreement with China in 2017.

In a similar vein, even though public backing for enhanced trade and economic relations with Russia is waning, the Georgian Dream has persisted in fostering economic and trade connections with Russia. In 2013, a higher number of Georgians (68%) supported closer economic ties with Russia over the European Union (56%). By 2023, this support for closer economic ties with Russia had plummeted from 68% to just 21%, while the endorsement for more engagement with the EU rose to 63%. In a move that goes against the preferences of the Georgian populace, the proportion of Georgia's total exports going to Russia [increased](#) from 2% in 2012 to 11.7% in 2022. Moreover, the Georgian government's decision to resume direct flights with Russia led to the EU [issuing](#) a formal protest to the Georgian administration.

## EU Benefits and Public Perceptions

**Georgia stands out as the only country in the region to benefit from visa-free access to the European Union beginning in 2017.**

Georgia stands out as the only country in the region to benefit from visa-free access to the European Union beginning in 2017, a move anticipated to enhance its citizens' familiarity with the EU. This expectation was only somewhat met as 680,000 Georgians visited EU and Schengen countries within the last five years. A significant 80% of the population reports they have not set foot in any EU member state, and [62%](#) of the youth between 14 and 29 years of age have never traveled internationally, suggesting that not all Georgians fully utilize the advantages of visa-free travel.

Maintaining visa-free travel status is a strategic objective of Georgia's foreign policy, and considerable efforts have been made to prevent the activation of the EU's visa liberalization suspension mechanism, which has been a topic of [discussion](#) in

Support towards Georgia having the closest political cooperation with ... %

	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
EU	64	66	65	49	54	53	61	64
Russia	54	47	65	54	50	41	31	20

[Source:](#) Knowledge of and Attitudes Towards the EU in Georgia; 2023 Survey Results; Europe Foundation

recent times. However, data [indicates](#) a misuse of the visa-free privilege, with Georgian asylum applications jumping from 14,630 in 2021 to 26,450 in 2022. The EU and certain member countries have urged Georgia to initiate an extensive informational campaign on visa-free travel rules. In response, Georgian authorities have employed various communication strategies to educate the public. Surveys reveal that awareness of visa-free travel requirements is still lacking: in 2017, only a quarter of Georgians thought visa-free travel granted them work rights in the EU, but by 2023, this misconception rose to 57%. Almost half of the Georgian population seeks more details on the European Union, particularly regarding EU-Georgia trade relations and educational opportunities for Georgian students.

## The EU Must Work on Its Image, but Not among the Youth

Surveys indicate that the European Union could enhance its promotional efforts in Georgia as the Georgian public is largely unaware of the EU's contributions to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in the region. The role of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), established in Georgia following the 2008 war with Russia, is not well known; nearly 50% of Georgians are unclear about the EUMM's activities, while 25% mistakenly think its purpose is to aid Georgia in

adopting democratic and economic market reforms.

**27% of the population suspects that European aid primarily benefits government officials and politicians.**

Additionally, the EU must strengthen its communication about its support to Georgia. The EU, along with the United States, stands as one of Georgia's largest benefactors. From 2021 to 2024, the EU will [contribute](#) EUR 340 million to the country. Nevertheless, a quarter of Georgians (26%) are keen to learn more about the distribution of EU funds. Moreover, 27% of the population suspects that European aid primarily benefits government officials and politicians.

**A vast majority of the Georgian youth supports European integration.**

Georgia has greatly benefited from the International Credit Mobility and Erasmus+ programs with 6,509 Georgian students studying in universities across EU member states between 2015 and 2020. This may have influenced the perception that 22% of EU assistance benefits students. A vast majority of the Georgian youth supports European integration, with 79% [viewing](#) the EU's role in their country positively. Young Georgians are also more resistant to anti-Western propaganda with

Georgia's cooperation with which of the following countries will threaten national values?

Russia	72%
EU	8%
Turkey	8%
USA	6%
Iran	6%
Azerbaijan	4%
Armenia	4%

[Source:](#) Youth Study Generation of Independent Georgia: In Between Hopes and Uncertainties; Friedrich Ebert Foundation; 2023

only 8% concerned that cooperation with the EU could endanger national values as compared to [37%](#) of the general population holding this concern.

**A mere 1% of young Georgians view Russia as a close ally, while a significant majority, 72%, perceive Russia as the primary danger to their national values.**

A mere 1% of young Georgians view Russia as a close ally, while a significant majority, 72%, perceive Russia as the primary danger to their national values. The youth in Georgia largely hold favorable views of the European Union, with 45% associating it with the rule of law and democratic principles and 38% recognizing it as a center of cultural and scientific progress. Furthermore, two-thirds of the young population in Georgia (66%) consider the collapse of the Soviet Union to have been beneficial for their country.

## Succisa Virescit

Recent surveys in Georgia reveal that despite the Georgian government's attempts to mislead its citizens and distort European values, trust in the European Union has significantly increased, especially among the youth. They consider the EU a positive influence and consider Russia, not the EU, a threat to Georgian national values. This sentiment led to active opposition in March 2023, mainly by Generation Z, against the Russian-influenced foreign agents' law proposed by the Georgian authorities.

The general confidence in the EU often surpasses the trust towards the Georgian state institutions. Steady public support for Georgia's EU membership remains high, with a 77% approval rate. The main reasons for wanting to join the EU are security and social welfare. However, ethnic minorities, constituting about 11% of the population, are more susceptible to an-

ti-Western propaganda due to language barriers and reliance on Russian TV for information, which frequently accuses the EU and the West of instigating the conflict with Russia in Ukraine.

There is a notable demand for more information on Georgia's EU integration process and its advantages. The EU must also intensify its efforts to inform Georgian citizens about peacebuilding activities.

Considering that every third citizen of Georgia supports the statement that the EU represents a threat to Georgian tradition, more needs to be done in this direction. The EU and civil society organizations have to plan and implement creative campaigns to convince Georgians that this is compatible with keeping the EU path and preserving traditions simultaneously. Leaving this behind might lead to anti-Western forces using it against Georgia's will to join the EU. There is also a risk that they might play with the territorial integrity of Georgia, causing its citizens to make an artificial choice between EU accession and territorial integrity.