

# Between the West and Russia: Explaining Individual Foreign Policy Preferences in the Small States

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This paper examines mass public opinion in three small states of the South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, to understand why some individuals in these states prefer a pro-Western foreign policy orientation—pursuing membership in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), while others do not. We draw on social identity theory to hypothesize the potential affinity some individuals feel toward the West. Using public data from the South Caucasus region where Russia has strongly attempted to block Western penetration, the paper demonstrates that *the commitment to democratic values* is central to the understanding of mass opinion over foreign alliances in small states: individuals who demonstrate pro-democracy attitudes and support democratic values are more likely to approve of pro-Western foreign policy orientation. These findings suggest that the study of foreign policy preferences in small states is important for our understanding of great power politics and alliance competition.

Este artículo analiza la opinión pública de masas en tres pequeños Estados del Cáucaso meridional, Armenia, Azerbaiyán y Georgia, con el fin de entender por qué algunos individuos de estos Estados prefieren una orientación prooccidental en su política exterior, que aspira a ingresar en la OTAN y la UE, mientras que otros no. Nos basamos en la Teoría de la Identidad Social para formular hipótesis sobre la posible afinidad que algunos individuos sienten hacia Occidente. Utilizando datos públicos de la región del Cáucaso meridional, donde Rusia ha intentado enérgicamente bloquear la penetración occidental, el artículo demuestra que el *compromiso con los valores democráticos* es fundamental para entender la opinión

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de las masas sobre las alianzas exteriores en los Estados pequeños: los individuos que demuestran actitudes favorables a la democracia y apoyan los valores democráticos tienen más probabilidades de aprobar la orientación prooccidental de la política exterior. Estos resultados sugieren que el estudio de las preferencias en materia de política exterior de los Estados pequeños es importante para comprender la política de las grandes potencias y la competencia entre alianzas.

Cet article s'intéresse à l'opinion publique de masse dans trois petits États du Caucase du Sud (l'Arménie, l'Azerbaïdjan et la Géorgie) pour comprendre pourquoi certaines personnes dans ces États préfèrent une orientation de politique étrangère en faveur de l'Occident, et donc d'une adhésion à l'OTAN et à l'UE, tandis que d'autres y sont opposées. Nous nous fondons sur la théorie de l'identité sociale pour émettre l'hypothèse d'une affinité potentielle de certaines personnes pour l'Occident. À l'aide de données publiques de la région du Caucase du Sud, où la Russie a fourni de gros efforts pour bloquer la pénétration occidentale, l'article démontre que l'engagement en faveur des valeurs démocratiques est essentiel pour comprendre l'opinion de masse sur les alliances étrangères de petits États. En effet, les personnes qui font preuve d'un comportement prodémocratie et soutiennent des valeurs démocratiques approuveront plus certainement une orientation de politique étrangère favorable à l'Occident. Ces observations suggèrent que l'étude des préférences en matière de politique étrangère au sein des petits États joue un rôle important dans notre compréhension de la politique des grandes puissances et de la concurrence des alliances.

## Introduction

While major powers and their alliance networks have attempted to exert power over small states to extend their spheres of influence, foreign policy preferences in small states remain understudied. It is not well understood or theorized why some individuals in small countries prefer closer ties with the West as opposed to Russia. Whereas the literature has extensively studied small state foreign policy behavior in conjunction with great power politics competition, we know little about why mass opinion in small states prefers alignment with certain alliances or economic blocs. This study explores individual foreign policy preferences with regard to major powers and alliances in three small states of the South Caucasus where the West and Russia have competed periodically.

The recent events demonstrated the study of the effect of public opinion on foreign policy matters. The disconnection between elites and public opinion in Ukraine led to the Euromaidan movement, which removed Ukrainian President Yanukovich from power. In February–March 2022, Russia attempted to take over Kyiv and remove the pro-Western government in Ukraine. However, strong anti-Russian sentiments led to resistance against Russian occupation and attracted assistance from Western democracies. In April 2018, massive protests forced Armenian President Sargsyan to step down (MacFarquhar, Pérez-Peña, and Netchepurenko 2018). In June 2018, antigovernment protesters in Tbilisi forced the Georgian Prime Minister to resign (Netchepurenko 2018). Public opinion played a central role in all these political events in Russia's "near abroad."

Given the increased importance of mass opinion in the South Caucasus, this study asks why some individuals support a pro-Western foreign policy orientation. We explore individual preferences for a pro-Western orientation in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, three small states of the South Caucasus region. We argue that *support for democratic values* is central to understanding pro-Western foreign policy

preferences in this region: individuals who demonstrate pro-democracy attitudes are more likely to approve of pro-Western foreign policy orientation. Building on social identity theory, we postulate that individuals committed to democratic values establish a desired social identity—a desire to be part of the Euro-Atlantic community. Support for democratic values leads individuals to perceive themselves in terms of social categories and differentiate themselves from others who hold pro-authoritarian attitudes (*social categorization*), identify with the West (*social identification*), compare themselves against out-group Russia (*social comparison*), and support Euro-Atlantic integration.

This study measures support for democratic values in two ways. The first is abstract support for democracy, which is measured by asking respondents directly and abstractly if they support a democratic form of government. We call this *abstract support for democracy*. Since the abstract measure of support for democracy leads to a validity issue as direct questions fail to “explicate the concrete ideas and ideals respondents associate with democracy” (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007, 637), this study also measures support for democracy in a contextual form by using an indirect survey question, which also forces respondents to choose between democratic and authoritarian values. We call this *contextual support for democracy*. These abstract and contextual measures allow our research to alleviate validity concerns. The use of both abstract and contextual measures is also necessary as individuals in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia might view democracy differently.

Using these two measures of *support for democratic values*, this study tests two hypotheses. First, individuals who believe that democracy is preferable to any kind of governance are more likely to support a pro-Western foreign policy orientation. Second, individuals who disapprove of paternalistic government and believe that government is like an employee rather than a parent tend to support a pro-Western foreign policy orientation. The first hypothesis refers to the abstract measure of pro-democracy attitudes. The second hypothesis is related to the contextual measure of support for democracy. Controlling for other determinants of public opinion on foreign policy preferences, this study tests the applicability of these propositions against four survey data collected in different years: the Caucasus Barometer (CB) regional 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019. The research finds statistically significant results consistent with the hypotheses.

We make three major contributions as a result of this research. First, we advance the literature on public opinion in policy in small states. Our research provides a value and identity-based explanation for individual foreign preferences in small states caught in great power politics. Second, studies have mainly provided materialist and instrumental rationalist explanations for foreign policy preferences in the post-Soviet area. Our analysis provides an indication that nonmaterial factors such as values and identity also influence public opinion on foreign policy in small states of the post-Soviet area. Third, we also make a theoretical contribution. While social identity theory provides an overall account of the steps through which individuals develop social identity, “there has been insufficient discussion of the process through which individuals construct identities for the collective in-group and the collective out-group” and it is not well studied “what building blocks are utilized” (Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero 2007, 748). Our analysis empirically demonstrates that democratic values play an important role in constructing collective in-group and out-group identities.

The rest of the paper proceeds through five sections. The first section reviews the literature on foreign policy preferences and then discusses a pro-Western foreign policy orientation. The second section introduces the theoretical framework. The third section describes data and methods. The fourth section presents the results. The final section discusses alternative explanations.

### Foreign Policy and Public Opinion

Previous research has mainly examined mass preferences over foreign policy in major powers. Initial studies argued that ordinary citizens are less likely to develop a systematic opinion on foreign policy issues (Almond 1950). However, studies later found the opposite: the Verba–Stanford surveys about the American military involvement in Vietnam demonstrated that ordinary citizens were well informed about foreign policy matters (Verba and Brody 1970).

Inspired by the research on public opinion toward American involvement in the Vietnam war, a new line of research started identifying factors that shape individual foreign policy preferences (Caspary 1970; Mueller 1973). Factors identified included religiosity (Daniels 2005; Baumgartner, Francia, and Morris 2008; Warner and Walker 2011), economic status (Gabel and Palmer 1995; Tucker, Pacek, and Berinsky 2002), fundamental beliefs about the use of armed force and war (Bartels 1994), threat perception (Gadarian 2010), and partisanship (Hellstrom 2008). Some studies suggested that religious individuals are more likely to support hawkish and nationalist foreign policy (Daniels 2005; Jacobson 2005). Other studies found that fundamental beliefs about war determined public opinion on defense expenses (Eichenberg and Stoll 2017). Furthermore, studies demonstrated that a significant level of insecurity and threat of terrorism caused Americans to approve of hawkish foreign policy and US involvement in Afghanistan (Huddy, Feldman, and Weber 2007; Gadarian 2010).

These studies have primarily explored public opinion on foreign policies of great or major powers. However, it is less understood what shapes foreign policy preferences within small states toward different alliances. Recent research shows that public opinion in small states influences their foreign policy decisions during the post–cold war period, which opened many opportunities for small states to engage in active foreign policy (Cooper and Momani 2011). New research demonstrated that small states are not completely constrained by external factors but have capabilities to exert agency, especially when their foreign policy is “based on flexibility, agility, and innovativeness” (Aaltola 2011, 258). In contrast to structural realism, which argued that “changes in small state foreign policies are considered isomorphic to fluctuations in the structure of the international system” (Elman 1995, 173), literature during the post–cold war period demonstrated that domestic level variables such as public opposition and political parties can account for small state foreign policy (Doesser 2011).

Studies demonstrated that “ideas, identities, and preferences over social orders ... play a greater role in explaining the foreign policy behavior of small states than has been generally appreciated” (Gvalia et al. 2013, 100). The “smallness” identity of small states “has been narrated at different times as both a restriction and an opportunity and facilitating condition” (Hey 2002; Browning 2006, 682). De Carvalho and Neumann (2015) challenge structural realist assumptions that small state foreign policy is only shaped by material benefits and demonstrate that small states also pursue ideational goals as they have status-seeking characteristics (Wohlforth 2015). Influenced by the constructivist turn, several scholars postulated that small states have the potential to act as “norm entrepreneurs” (Ingebritsen 2002).

Although these studies have emphasized the importance of ideational factors and public opinion as opposed to material incentives and external factors to account for small state foreign policy behavior, much of small state foreign policy scholarship lacks systematic public opinion data. Previous research has less explored why some individuals in small states tend to support certain foreign policy choices and how ideational factors such as democratic values as opposed to materialist incentives shape individuals’ foreign policy preferences. To advance research on foreign policy

preferences in small states, we explore pro-Western foreign policy preferences in the South Caucasus.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, small states such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Belarus faced difficult foreign policy decisions: whereas some elites in these countries advocated for closer ties with Russia and membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) at later period, others pressed for integrating into the West and pursuing North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) membership. While a lot has been written about why these elites have followed different foreign policy orientations, it is less known what shapes individual foreign policy preferences in these small states. This study explores individual foreign policy preferences in three small states, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, and examines why some individuals in these countries support a pro-Western foreign policy orientation, while others do not.

### *Pro-Western Foreign Policy Orientation*

A pro-Western foreign policy orientation means a foreign policy stance formulated by policymakers to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community by pursuing membership in NATO and the EU. Pro-Western foreign policy gained new momentum after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some post-Soviet countries attempted to integrate into the West by seeking membership in NATO and the EU. Some government officials and academics in Russia during the early 1990s also supported the idea of developing closer relations with the West. These pro-Western Russians, called the Atlanticists or Westernizers, believed that Russia belonged to the Western civilization and therefore the country should pursue a pro-Western foreign policy. However, the idea was quickly dismissed in favor of Eurasionism, a movement that promotes Russian–Asian greatness and prioritizes a foreign policy and economic system that is materialized with the expansion of Russian-led military and economic blocs such as the EEU and CSTO. The pursuit of a pro-Western foreign policy orientation means opposing alignment with these Russian-led blocks and integrating into the Euro-Atlantic area and joining NATO and the EU.

Previous research explored why some individuals support membership in these organizations. Studies have demonstrated that “economic winners” in postcommunist countries generally tend to express support for European integration (Tucker, Pacek, and Berinsky 2002). Others argue that perceived threats from Russia were an important reason for public support for NATO membership in East European countries (Kostadinova 2000).

While these studies have mainly examined individual preferences on membership in a single organization (Muller 2011) or mass attitudes toward relations with Russia and the United States in a single country (Siroky et al. 2017), individual foreign policy preferences in all states of the South Caucasus have not been examined. Great power politics and alliance competition over the South Caucasus occurs in the form of integration into Western-led organizations such as NATO and the EU versus membership in Russian-led organizations such as the EEU and CSTO. Armenia has joined these Russian-led organizations, Georgia has desired to be part of NATO and the EU, and Azerbaijan has been able to preserve its balanced foreign policy by avoiding membership in pro-Western or Russian-led organizations.

Although a lot has been written about why these small states chose a pro-Western or pro-Russian foreign policy stance, it remains undertheorized why some individuals in these states support membership in NATO and the EU, while others do not. Recent polls from Armenia demonstrate that there is a gap between elite-driven foreign policy and individual foreign policy preferences (Spina 2018). Public opinion surveys also show that there are many people in Azerbaijan who support integration into the Euro-Atlantic area (CB 2013).



This paper empirically demonstrates that there are identical causal processes in mass support for membership in both NATO and EU in the South Caucasus. Based on previous research, this study conceptualizes the pursuit of membership in these organizations as a pro-Western foreign policy orientation. To our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to develop a common conceptual framework to systematically analyze pro-Western foreign policy attitudes in all three states of the South Caucasus.

### Democratic Values and Foreign Policy Preferences

This section aims to develop a new theoretical framework to explain individual foreign policy preferences and argues that *support for democratic values* explains why some individuals prefer a pro-Western foreign policy orientation. A significant body of work has demonstrated that values not only shape mass opinion on domestic politics but also shed a light on individual attitudes toward foreign policy.

Previous research has found that some core values are the driver of mass opinion on foreign policy and international affairs. For instance, several studies have found that some underlying values influence Americans' attitudes toward important issues in international affairs (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999). Hurwitz and Peffley (1987, 1105) and Rathbun (2007, 379), Chittick, Billingsley, and Travis (1995, 314), and Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser (1999, 553) argued that "core values," "value orientations," and "core dispositional values," respectively, play an important role in shaping attitudes toward international affairs. Some scholars argued that values have an indirect effect on individual foreign policy attitudes (Chittick, Billingsley, and Travis 1995). However, Rathbun et al. (2016, 125) measure a direct impact of values and "hypothesize that foreign-policy dispositions derive from values that structure not only political life but social life in general." The authors conclude that "individuals ... connect their personal values to foreign policy preferences" and that they "take foreign policy personally" (Rathbun et al. 2016, 125). In this study, we explore how individuals connect their democratic values to their foreign policy preferences.

#### *Support for Democratic Values*

Support for democratic values has been found to drive individual attitudes (Lewis, Palm, and Feng 2019). Some of these values include freedom of the press, free elections, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, equal rights for women, and a lack of Internet censorship (Dahl 1998). The measure of mass support for democracy has been a major challenge for political scientists because of different cultural contexts (Heath, Fisher, and Smith 2005, 329; Inglehart 2003). Studies have mainly used abstract and direct standard survey questions to measure mass support for democracy. This measurement method is direct and abstract because the word "democracy" is used in survey questions without identifying its concrete attributes (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007). The abstract questions fail to "explicate the concrete ideas and ideals respondents associate with democracy" (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007, 637) and may lead to "an illusionary appearance of comparability" across countries (Heath, Fisher, and Smith 2005, 321). The abstract measure of democracy can also potentially bring about a differential item function as individuals might understand democracy differently (Erllich and Garner 2021).

The abstract measure of democracy leads to four measurement problems (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007). First, *interviewer effects* might push the respondents to give "right" responses under perceived pressures of social values (Seligson 2004). Second, *vacuous conceptions* of democracy might lead individuals to demonstrate rhetorical support for democracy. Third, *competing conceptions* of democracy may cause individuals to "flirt with authoritarian alternatives, entertain vague ideas of

democracy” (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007, 639). Fourth, *conflicting values* may lead individuals to attach different meanings to democracy.

To avoid these possible measurement problems, this study measures mass support for democracy both directly and indirectly. Indirect measurement “allows identification of complex and inconsistent configurations of attitudes” (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007, 637). Rather than using factor analysis or constructing additive indicators that aggregate different measures of support for democracy into one “summary indicator” (Gibson and Duch 1993, 321), this study uses both abstract and concrete survey questions separately to measure indirect and direct support for democratic values.

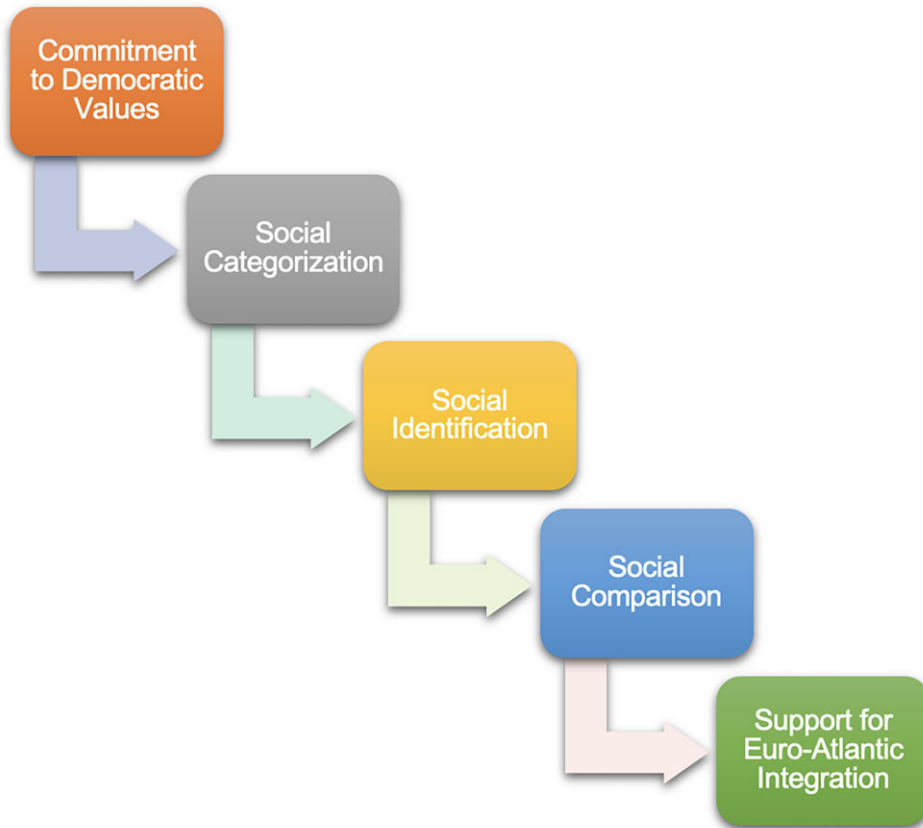
This study theorizes that the core value of orientation toward democracy is an important driver of pro-Western foreign policy attitudes: it argues that individuals who value democratic principles will want to join NATO and the EU. Commitment to democratic principles leads individuals to identify with the West and consequently support joining NATO and the EU since they associate these organizations with democratic values. Individuals committed to democratic principles develop a social identity—a desire to be part of the Euro-Atlantic community. In other words, individuals who value democratic principles want to join NATO and the EU because they believe that they share democratic values with the Euro-Atlantic community and this belief motivates them to identify with and therefore be a part of this community.

Studies demonstrate that there are four general steps of opinion formation in response to survey questions. This is called the four-step model of opinion formation (Sudman, Bradburn, and Schwarz 1996). First, respondents interpret questions. Second, respondents generate an opinion by evaluating salient considerations and propositions from their memory (Zaller 1992). Third, respondents format their responses to fit close-ended survey questions. Fourth, respondents can also edit their responses. When asked if they support NATO or EU membership, individuals’ values act as salient considerations and lead them to interpret the survey question and format their opinion accordingly. Individuals who support democratic values tend to approve of membership in NATO and the EU as they socially categorize themselves and others based on these values, identify with the Euro-Atlantic community, and compare themselves to out-group Russia.

Our theory suggests that three causal processes can explain how democratic values lead individuals to support membership in NATO and the EU. First, individuals use democratic values as a criterion for *social categorization* by which they perceive themselves and others based on their social group values and characteristics. Social identity theory postulates that people tend to socially categorize themselves and others into certain social categories. Social categorization is a “natural cognitive process that occurs in any social setting” (Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero 2007, 747). Individuals who hold democratic values perceive the Euro-Atlantic community as a community of democratic values versus Russia which promotes authoritarianism. Democratic values lead the social group to categorize themselves as “self” as opposed to “other” (Neumann 1999; Tsygankov 2008). Pro-democracy attitudes become a defining factor for *social categorization* of people into different groups.

Second, by *social identification* individuals tend to define their social identity—a sense of what group they belong to (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Carrying democratic values and believing that the Euro-Atlantic community is also built upon these values lead individuals to identify with this community. Perceiving that they have identical values makes individuals internalize their social group memberships and believe that their country belongs to Europe. Identical values motivate individuals to have a desire to be part of Europe, which becomes their in-group identity (Wendt 1999, 305).

Third, once people place themselves and others into social categories based on democratic values and identify with the Euro-Atlantic community, they start



**Figure 1.** Causal processes between support for democratic values and support for Euro-Atlantic integration.

*Note.* The figure illustrates three causal pathways through which support for democratic values and support for Euro-Atlantic integration are connected.

to socially compare their group to others. This third cognitive process is a *social comparison* by which individuals tend to determine social standing of groups. Compared to people who support closer ties with Russia, individuals with pro-democracy attitudes view themselves as progressive, democratic, and modern and believe that Euro-Atlantic integration is better positioned to accomplish future development of the country. Democratic values direct individuals to form a view about which social order their country should prefer. Individuals who are committed to democratic values believe that the West represents democratization and modernization, while Russia is the locus of authoritarianism and traditional values. Social comparison reinforces support for pro-Western foreign policy. Individuals with democratic values believe that their countries should prefer Western social order and align with pro-democracy organizations of the West against Russia, a promoter of authoritarianism and traditional values. [Figure 1](#) demonstrates causal processes through which democratic values lead to support for Euro-Atlantic integration. It illustrates that support for democratic values acts as a determining factor in *social categorization*, *social identification*, and *social comparison* processes establishing collective in-group and out-group identities.

Thus, democratic values lead individuals to identify with the West, distinguish themselves from others supporting pro-Russian foreign policy orientation, and



believe that their country belongs to the West. Individuals who value democracy want their country to join NATO and the EU since they view them as pro-democracy organizations and the community of democratic values. Individuals who value democratic principles such as individual choice, limited government, and people making decisions view these as organizations that make member states implement similar political systems—the hope that if their country joins, the state will adopt similar laws. Based on our theory, we advance two hypotheses.

**H1:** *Individuals who believe that democracy is the best form of governance are more likely to support a pro-Western foreign policy orientation.*

**H2:** *Individuals with a paternalistic view of the government are less likely to support pro-Western foreign policy orientation.*

## Data and Methods

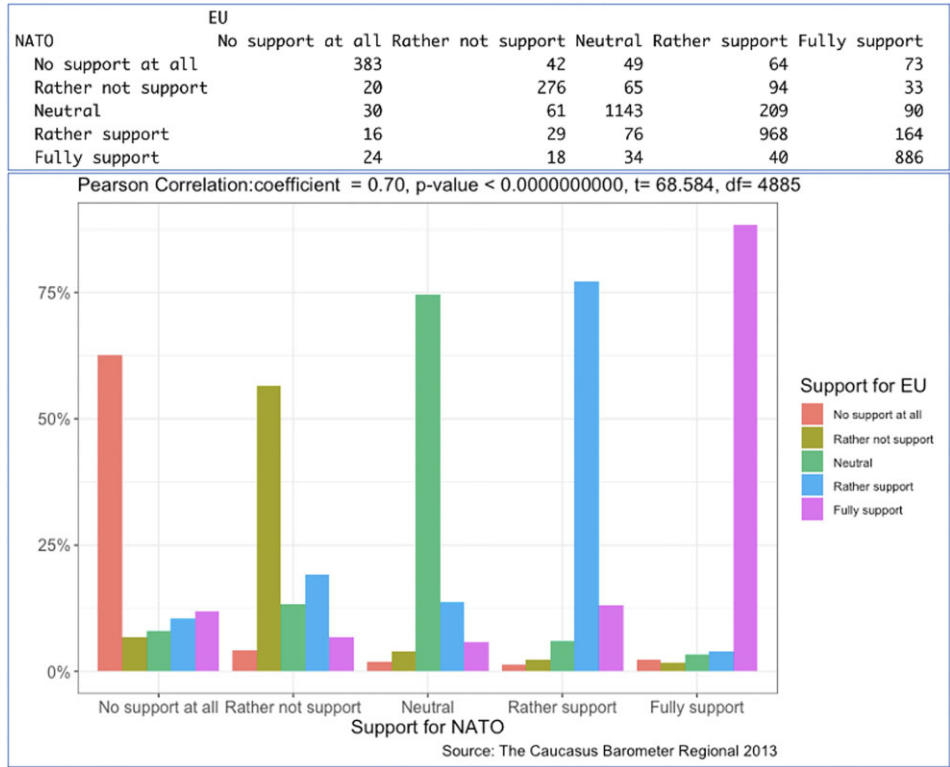
### Data

This study utilizes nationally representative surveys conducted by Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRRC): the CB regional 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019. The first dataset is collected in all three states, while others contain data only from Armenia and Georgia. The results of the 2015, 2017, and 2019 surveys are given in online appendixes D, E, and F, respectively. We also analyze the 2013 survey by excluding Azerbaijan and present the results in online appendix C. Furthermore, we use two additional surveys, *Knowledge of and Attitudes toward the EU in Georgia 2021 (EU Survey)* and National Democratic Institute (NDI) *Public Attitudes in Georgia March 2022*, to explore causal processes and evaluate the role of future economic incentives in driving foreign policy preferences. Both surveys have data from only Georgia. In total, we analyze six surveys with observations ranging from 2,000 to 6,000.

The use of data collected in different years helps the study to alleviate the disadvantages of observational data, bypass the effect of regional political issues on individual preferences, and test if the evidence for the theory is consistent across time. There is a possibility that the 2016 Four-Day War between Armenia and Azerbaijan might influence public opinion. For instance, [Spina \(2018\)](#) finds that war may lead individuals to prefer security integration over economic integration.

### Variables

We use two dependent variables: support for NATO membership and support for EU membership. We conceptualize a pro-Western foreign policy as a foreign policy stance formulated by policymakers to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic area by pursuing membership in NATO and the EU. Our theoretical framework suggests that identical causal processes occur in individual support for both organizations. The top part of [figure 2](#) demonstrates a two-way table of support for EU membership and support for NATO membership. The bottom part of [figure 2](#) illustrates percentages of each category of support for EU membership by percentages of categories of support for NATO membership. The figure overall demonstrates that individuals who constitute a certain category of support for the NATO membership variable are also more likely to be the same individuals who support the identical category of support for the EU membership variable. For instance, [figure 2](#) demonstrates that most observations are located diagonally in the two-way table and that approximately 90 percent of individuals who fully support membership in NATO also fully support membership in the EU. Pearson's correlation coefficients also suggest that individuals who support NATO membership are also more likely to support EU membership or vice versa.



**Figure 2.** Support for NATO membership by support for EU membership 2013.  
*Note:* The figure demonstrates individual support for NATO membership by support for the EU membership based on the CB 2013 data.

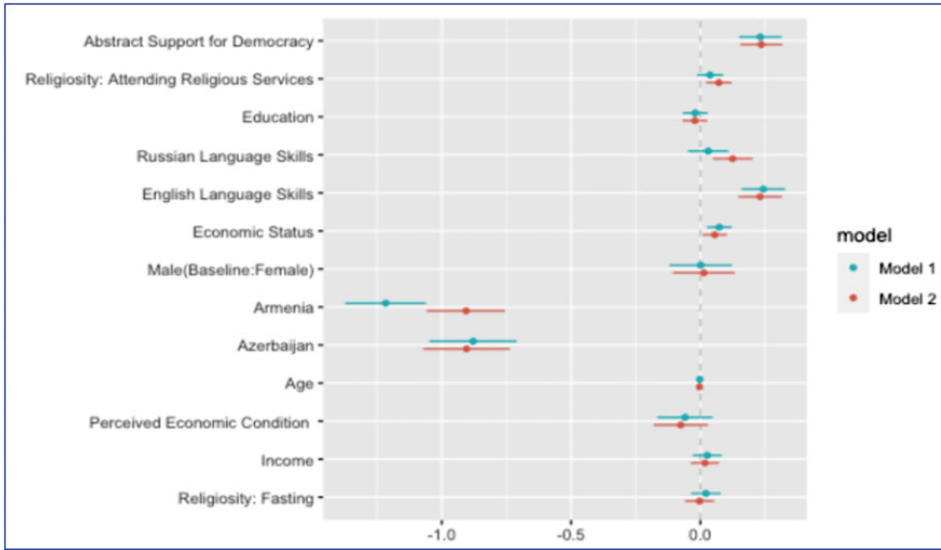
Two independent variables are used: *abstract support for democracy* and *contextual support for democracy*. The study also controls for measures of respondent-level education, language skills, gender, income, economic status, religiosity, and age as potential confounders. Online appendix A describes the survey questions used to measure all variables.

Models

Because the dependent variables are ordinal and the distances between their categories are not the same, ordered logistic regression is best suited to estimate the effect of *commitment to democratic values* on *foreign policy preferences*. We provide model metrics in regression tables given in online appendixes.

Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the results of regression models with a 95 percent confidence interval. All models provide statistically significant evidence that pro-Western foreign policy preferences are associated with abstract and contextual support for democracy. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the factors influencing support for NATO and EU membership. Both figures provide evidence that individuals who demonstrate pro-democracy attitudes are more likely to support membership in NATO and the EU. Figure 3 indicates that those who think that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government tend to support both NATO and EU membership.



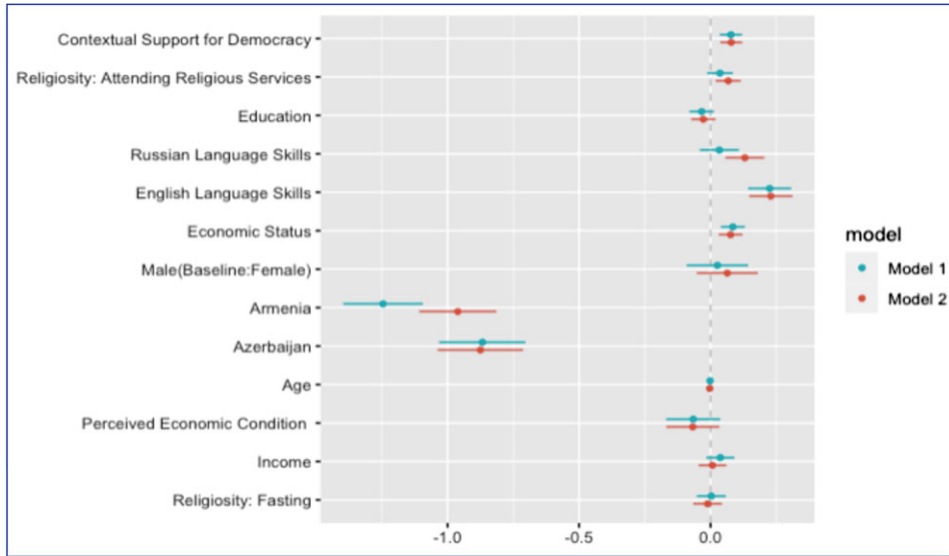
**Figure 3.** Factors influencing support for NATO and EU membership 2013: abstract support for democracy.

*Note.* The figure illustrates the results based on the analysis of the CB regional 2013 survey, which contains data from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (baseline). It demonstrates the relationship between abstract *support* for democracy and support for NATO and EU membership. The coefficients plot is based on model 2 (support for NATO membership) and model 6 (support for EU membership) in online appendix B. Bars illustrate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Similarly, [figure 4](#) suggests that individuals who are against the paternalistic government and who believe that the government is like an employee and that people should be the bosses who control the government are more likely to support their country's membership in NATO and the EU. Full models of the 2013 data are given in online appendix B. We also analyzed the 2013 survey without data from Azerbaijan and found significant results consistent with the hypotheses (online appendix C).

Further tests of our theory against the CB 2015, 2017, and 2019 datasets provide evidence consistent with our argument at a 95 percent confidence interval except in one case: only model 4 based on the analysis of the 2017 data demonstrates that the effect of contextual support for democracy on support for NATO membership is on the borderline but significant at 90 percent interval. The results of the CB 2015, 2017, and 2019 surveys are given in online appendixes D, E, and F, respectively.

To empirically evaluate the possible validity of causal processes, we analyzed the *EU Survey 2021* and presented the results in [table 1](#). First, we examine how support for democracy leads to *social categorization* and *social identification* with Europe. We include only the *contextual support for democracy* variable since the question for the measure of *abstract support for democracy* is not available in the survey. For the measure of identification with Europe, we use two survey questions: individuals who agree to the statement that “*I am Georgian and therefore I am European*” and who believe that they belong to their “*ethnic group, but also European*.” Both are coded in binary terms (yes—1, otherwise—0). The second survey question allows us to measure (non)identification of all ethnic groups in Georgia with Europe. Models 1–4 of [table 1](#) suggest that individuals who support democracy are more likely to develop a European identity along with their Georgian or ethnic identity. Based on



**Figure 4.** Factors influencing support for NATO and EU Membership 2013: contextual support for democracy.

*Note:* The figure illustrates the results based on the analysis of the CB regional 2013 survey, which contains data from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (baseline). It demonstrates the relationship between contextual support for democracy and support for NATO and EU membership. The coefficients plot is based on model 4 (support for NATO membership) and model 8 (support for EU membership) in online appendix B. Bars illustrate 95 percent confidence intervals.

our theory, we believe that this result is present because democratic values lead to *social categorization* and *social identification* by which individuals socially categorize themselves and others based on their democratic values and identify with Europe.

Second, we also empirically explore if identification with Europe leads to support for NATO and EU membership, which are coded in binary terms (yes—1, otherwise—0) based on survey questions about whether individuals would vote for membership in these organizations if there was a referendum tomorrow. Models 5–12 of table 1 suggest that identification with Europe is a significant driver of support for both NATO and EU membership. The data are only from Georgia and only one measure of support for democracy is used. However, we believe that the analysis of the data from Georgia is important for two reasons. First, Georgia is the least ethnically homogeneous Caucasian country where both large ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities live. Although they are influenced by domestic political processes in Georgia, they are also strongly connected to their ethnic kin country. Second, compared to *abstract support for democracy*, the use of *contextual support for democracy* is a hard test for our theory. Overall, the correlational analysis suggests that causal processes suggested by our theory may be valid.

Next, we present shifts in predicted probabilities of support for membership in NATO and the EU given the highest and lowest values of abstract and contextual support for democracy with a 95 percent confidence interval. Figure 5 demonstrates predicted probabilities in four plots. The two plots on the top of figure 5 illustrate the predicted probabilities of support for NATO membership given the highest and lowest values of *abstract* (left) and *contextual* (right) support for democracy. The two plots on the bottom of figure 5 illustrate the predicted probabilities of support for the EU membership given the highest and lowest values of *abstract* (left) and *contextual* (right) support for democracy. All plots provide statistically significant

Table 1. Factors influencing identification with Europe and support for NATO and EU membership: the analysis of EU survey in Georgia 2021.

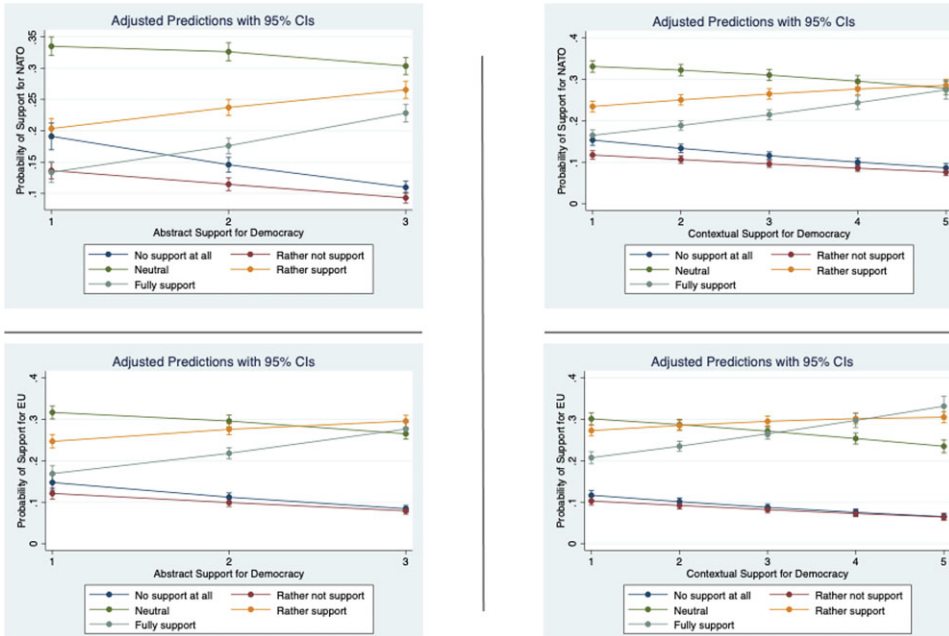
	Dependent variable:											
	Georgian and European identity			Ethnic and European identity			Support for NATO			Support for EU		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Contextual support for democracy	0.268 <sup>***</sup> (0.025)	0.183 <sup>***</sup> (0.031)	0.251 <sup>***</sup> (0.031)	0.123 <sup>***</sup> (0.037)								
Religiosity: attend religious services		-0.153 <sup>***</sup> (0.045)		-0.034 (0.054)		-0.050 (0.049)		-0.105 <sup>**</sup> (0.045)		0.096 <sup>*</sup> (0.052)		0.029 (0.048)
Education		0.264 <sup>***</sup> (0.037)		0.146 <sup>***</sup> (0.042)		0.140 <sup>***</sup> (0.041)		0.230 <sup>***</sup> (0.038)		0.136 <sup>***</sup> (0.044)		0.223 <sup>***</sup> (0.042)
Russian language skills		0.040 (0.064)		0.068 (0.079)		0.150 <sup>*</sup> (0.070)		0.147 <sup>**</sup> (0.064)		0.197 <sup>***</sup> (0.073)		0.195 <sup>***</sup> (0.068)
English language skills		0.364 <sup>***</sup> (0.079)		0.240 <sup>***</sup> (0.082)		0.060 (0.086)		0.181 <sup>**</sup> (0.079)		0.023 (0.093)		0.121 (0.088)
Economic status		0.030 (0.041)		0.011 (0.049)		0.003 (0.046)		0.012 (0.042)		0.049 (0.048)		0.052 (0.046)
Male (baseline: female)		0.155 (0.113)		-0.022 (0.135)		-0.027 (0.123)		0.024 (0.113)		0.021 (0.128)		0.082 (0.121)
Age		0.005 (0.003)		-0.004 (0.004)		-0.009 <sup>**</sup> (0.004)		-0.005 (0.003)		-0.002 (0.004)		0.001 (0.004)



Table 1. Continued

	Dependent variable:											
	Georgian and European identity			Ethnic and European identity			Support for NATO			Support for EU		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Perceived economic condition		-0.179* (0.108)		0.033 (0.135)		0.227* (0.119)		0.098 (0.108)		0.209* (0.123)		0.086 (0.115)
Income		0.039 (0.046)		0.185*** (0.052)		0.016 (0.050)		0.018 (0.046)		0.019 (0.054)		0.011 (0.050)
Both Georgian and European identity					2.237*** (0.097)	2.055*** (0.120)			2.097*** (0.103)	1.996*** (0.132)		
Both Ethnic and European identity							1.532*** (0.132)	1.024*** (0.154)			2.046*** (0.180)	1.743*** (0.220)
Constant	-0.634*** (0.079)	-1.912*** (0.434)	-2.119*** (0.110)	-3.629*** (0.539)	-0.819*** (0.065)	-1.710*** (0.470)	0.013 (0.047)	-1.227*** (0.431)	-0.243*** (0.060)	-2.173*** (0.488)	0.409*** (0.048)	-1.697*** (0.462)
Observations	2,283	1,683	2,251	1,676	2,335	1,715	2,301	1,708	2,335	1,715	2,301	1,708
Log likelihood	-1,521.256	-1,045.241	-1,092.907	-788.425	-1,289.568	-909.551	-1,491.087	-1,044.160	-1,251.097	-842.983	-1,367.670	-926.402
Akaike information criterion	3,046.512	2,112.481	2,189.813	1,598.851	2,583.136	1,841.102	2,986.173	2,110.320	2,506.195	1,707.967	2,739.341	1,874.803

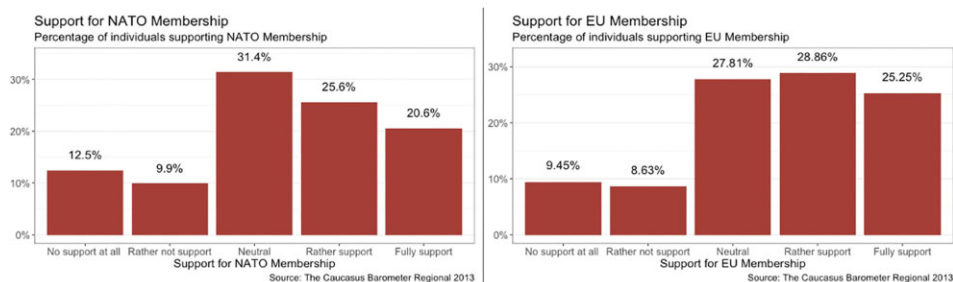
Notes: Models 1 and 2 show factors affecting individual identification with both Georgian and European identities. Models 3 and 4 demonstrate factors influencing identification with both ethnic and European identities. Models 5–8 and 9–12 illustrate the effects of several predictors on support for NATO and EU memberships, respectively. All are logit models. \*,  $p > 0.1$ , \*\*  $p > 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p > 0.01$ .



**Figure 5.** Predicted probabilities of support for NATO and the EU membership.  
*Note.* Based on the CB regional 2013 data, the plots illustrate how the probabilities of five outcomes of support for NATO (top) and EU (bottom) memberships change across the highest and lowest values of abstract (left) and contextual (right) support for democracy.

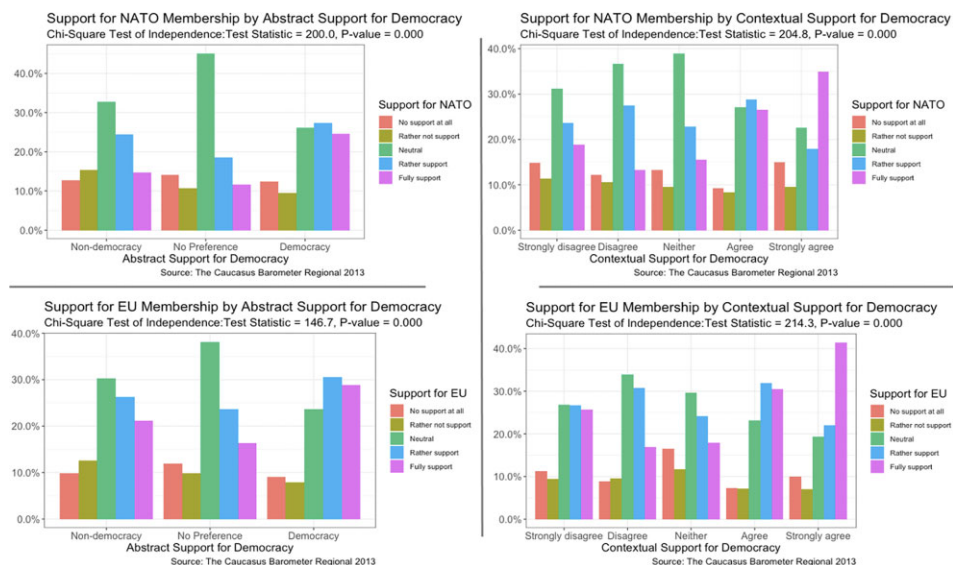
evidence that the probability of support for NATO and EU memberships increases when two independent variables go from their lowest values to their highest values. For example, the left top of figure 5 shows that the probability of the highest category (fully support) of *support for the NATO membership* increases around 6 percent while the probability of its lowest category (no support at all) decreases around 5 percent when we move from the lowest value of *abstract support for democracy* (preference for authoritarian governance) to its highest value (preference for democratic governance). The right top of figure 5 demonstrates that the respective percentage changes are 5 and 3 in the case of the *contextual support for democracy*. The two plots at the bottom of figure 5 provide similar probability changes for EU membership. All plots provide statistically significant evidence that the probability of support for NATO and EU memberships increases when two independent variables go from their lowest values to their highest values.

To contextualize the substantive significance of these percentage changes in predicted probabilities, we provide summary statistics in Figures 6 and 7. Figure 6 illustrates that approximately 50 percent of the population in the South Caucasus supports membership in NATO and the EU. Figure 6 also shows that variations within the support for NATO membership and support for EU membership variables are similar. Figure 7 illustrates the percentages of individuals supporting NATO and EU membership by abstract and contextual support for democracy. For instance, Figure 7 shows that only 14 percent of individuals who support non-democracy have full support for NATO Membership. However, this number rises to 24 percent for individuals who prefer a democratic form of government. Other graphs in Figure 7 also illustrate similar results. They overall demonstrate that individuals who support democracy are more likely to support EU and NATO membership compared to those who prefer nondemocracy and a paternalistic government.



**Figure 6.** Percentages of support for NATO and EU membership.

*Note.* The figure illustrates that percentages of individuals supporting membership in NATO and the EU.



**Figure 7.** Support for NATO and EU membership by support for democracy.

*Note.* The figure illustrates the percentages of individuals supporting NATO and EU membership by abstract and contextual support for democracy.

### Alternative Explanations

In this section, we discuss alternative explanations. First, we use two survey questions to measure *religiosity* and evaluate its role in shaping foreign policy preferences: *attending religious services* and *fasting*. Previous studies have used these two survey questions to measure religiosity in the South Caucasus (Charles 2010; Siroky et al. 2017). The analysis of the CB 2013 demonstrates that individuals who attend religious services are more likely to support EU membership. However, the analysis of the CB 2013 without data from Azerbaijan demonstrates that religiosity does not play a role in determining foreign policy preferences. These results suggest that individuals who attend religious services in Azerbaijan tend to support membership in the EU. The Azerbaijani government has been cautious about religious groups and has taken a keen eye on a possible religious infiltration from Iran Islamic Republic and therefore has kept access to religious places at bay. The control of religious places has prevented some people from attending and performing religious services. Leaders of the Muslim Unity Movement, a major Shiite Islamic group in Azerbaijan, have been imprisoned (Souleimanov 2015). People's Front, the major opposition party

that advocates for Euro-Atlantic integration, has attempted to align with religious groups to get support against the government. Since Azerbaijan has limited people's attendance in religious services, individuals who attend religious services frequently are likely to prefer the EU membership in a hope that it will provide them with religious freedoms and access to religious places without governmental restrictions. The EU membership for these people means religious freedoms and rights.

Attending religious services is also significant in the analysis of the CB 2017 (online appendix E): Individuals who attend religious services frequently are more likely to support NATO membership. The possible reason for this result could be associated with people's desire for the protection of religious places, which are highly valuable in both Armenian and Georgian societies. Qualitative data demonstrate that some religious places in Armenia and Georgia have been at the center of interstate tensions. For instance, one special monastery that lies on the Azerbaijani-Georgian border has been a source of a dispute between Azerbaijan and Georgia (Bacchi 2019). Although the Georgian Orthodox Church does not support Euro-Atlantic integration and prefers closer ties with Russia (Siroky, Simmons, and Gvalia 2017), individuals who frequently visit these religious places to perform religious services might be interested in joining NATO, since NATO membership brings security, especially the protection of national borders.

Furthermore, attendance in religious services has national cultural importance in the South Caucasus. The CB surveys demonstrate that many Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Georgians attend religious services on special holidays having national traditional significance. People usually perform religious services in religious places, which have national importance. Armenian Apostolic Church and Georgian Orthodox Church have played essential roles in Armenian and Georgian national identity construction, respectively (Sulkhanishvili 2012, 139; Matsuzato and Danielyan 2013, 18). Christianity has historically been an essential part of Georgia's European identity (Beacháin and Coene 2014).

In contrast, very few people fast as required by religious tradition. The CB 2019 survey demonstrates that 79 percent of Armenians and 62 percent of Georgians never fast. The survey also demonstrates that 10 and 19 percent of individuals in Armenia and Georgia, respectively, rarely fast. This means approximately 15 percent of people sometimes or often fast. The CB 2015 survey also demonstrates similar statistics. Individuals who fast are mostly very conservative and strongly oppose Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+) rights. The analysis of the CB 2015 and 2019 surveys demonstrates that *religiosity* measured as fasting makes individuals less likely to support EU membership since they associate the EU integration with homosexuality. Georgian Orthodox Church has "clashed with Western-leaning governments over progressive social issues" and supported the 2021 anti-gay marches, which forced the organizers to cancel a planned Pride march (France24 2021). The Church has recently been an essential player in ideological polarization and propagandized that the EU membership brings homosexuality and promotes LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia. To comply with the Euro-Atlantic integration preconditions, some have called to build a Georgian national identity based on secular values and improve LGBTQ+ rights. These calls have polarized Georgian society further and discouraged religious individuals to identify with Europe. The analysis of the *EU Survey 2021* in table 1 provides some evidence for that. Overall, the relationship between religiosity and support for Euro-Atlantic integration is mixed in the South Caucasus. While some religious people have advocated for integration into the Euro-Atlantic community because of historical national religious identities or desire for religious freedoms, they have also been cautious about the erosion of traditional and conservative values.

Second, results demonstrate that better-educated individuals are overall more likely to support pro-Western foreign policy. Higher degrees allow individuals to learn more about NATO and the EU. These results could also be associated with the

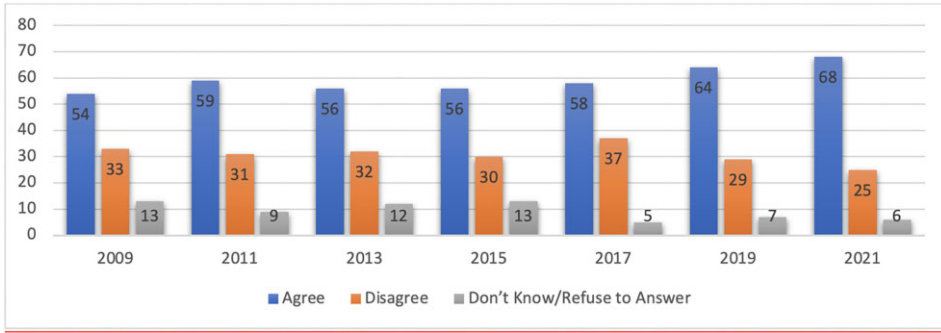
increasing importance of European-style education in the South Caucasus where people are also getting more opportunities to get an education in Western universities. Higher education also gives people ample opportunities to join different networks and groups that advocate for Euro-Atlantic integration. Previous research has demonstrated that higher education enables individuals to have access to social networks (Asadzade 2022).

Third, language skills also influence support for Euro-Atlantic integration. Most of the models demonstrate that individuals with good English skills are more likely to support a pro-Western foreign policy. English language skills allow individuals to interact with people from the Euro-Atlantic community and obtain more political information about NATO and the EU. There are also many training programs organized by civil society organizations, which champion integration into the West. Most of these training programs are held in English and therefore individuals with English language skills are more likely to attend and obtain more information about Euro-Atlantic integration. English language skills also allow people to join youth networks. The literature has widely discussed the role of social networks in bringing people together (Marwell, Oliver, and Prahl 1988).

Meanwhile, we found mixed results for Russian language skills. To unpack these results, we first explore the Russian language skills variable further and then examine previous literature, which has also found mixed results for this variable (Siroky, Simmons, and Gvalia 2017). First, Pearson's correlation matrixes based on all surveys used in this research demonstrate that individuals with good Russian skills are more likely to be better educated. Since educated individuals tend to support pro-Western foreign policy orientation, we should expect that individuals with good Russian language skills will also express support for membership in both NATO and the EU. Some models demonstrate empirical support for this expectation in case of EU membership. However, several models also illustrate that individuals with good Russian skills tend to disapprove of membership in NATO. We rely on previous studies to explore this finding further. Some studies find limited evidence that Armenians with good Russian skills are less likely to support NATO membership (Abbasov and Siroky 2018). Spina (2018, 242) finds that individuals who believe that the Russian language should be mandatory at school are less likely to support NATO membership. Similarly, some models in our research demonstrate that individuals with good Russian language skills tend to disapprove of NATO membership. In some years, individuals with good Russian skills might be convinced that Russian security concern for NATO enlargement is reasonable and therefore they might disapprove of NATO membership. While educated people, in general, are more likely to support membership in NATO, possible exposure to Russian media might convince Russian speakers that Russian security concerns for NATO enlargement are legitimate. However, the results suggest that there is no consistent belief among Russian speakers that Russian opposition against NATO enlargement is justified. Indeed, the analysis of the EU survey 2021 in table 1 demonstrates that individuals with good Russian skills tend to support membership in both NATO and the EU. This result could be associated with rising Russian aggression, which might have led individuals to change their minds about the legitimacy of Russian security concerns and demonstrate support for NATO membership.

Fourth, we find a positive effect of *economic status* on pro-Western foreign policy preferences although this effect declines over time. This could be because of generational change after postcommunist transformation. Many young Georgians and Armenians who did not experience the sudden fall of the communist economy and therefore did not have a feeling of “losing” under postcommunist transformation are still in lower economic status. Their lack of communist experience makes them less likely to compare economic benefits of the Soviet period to the losses from postcommunist transformation and therefore less likely to oppose pro-Western foreign policy. However, the role of *income* and *perceived economic condition* in driving





**Figure 8.** Percentages of responses to the statement “I am Georgian, and therefore I am European.”

*Source.* Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia time series (EU survey), CRRG.

individual foreign policy preferences increases over time. The next subsection examines economic incentives further.

Furthermore, the CB regional 2017 contains a survey question about threat perception. We included this variable in our models to examine if threat perception also drives pro-Western foreign policy preferences. Online appendix E illustrates the results from the CB 2017. The results demonstrate that threat perception drives individual foreign policy preferences. Individuals who believe that tensions between Russia and Western European countries and the United States are detrimental to their country tend to support membership in the EU. Tensions between Russia and the West have been increasing since the 2013 Euromaidan movement in Ukraine. Russian military interventions in post-Soviet countries have urged ordinary people to press for speedy integration into the Euro-Atlantic community.

Fifth, compared to Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Georgians are more likely to support membership in NATO and the EU. Georgia is the only Caucasian country that has been officially pursuing a pro-Western foreign policy orientation since the 2004 Rose Revolution. It also had the State Ministry for Euro-Atlantic Integration from 2004 to 2017. Meanwhile, most Armenians view Turkey, a NATO member, as an enemy state and therefore are less interested in joining this organization (Gvalia et al. 2013). In addition, most models show that the older generation tends to be less supportive of Euro-Atlantic integration most probably because of communist experience, while women tend to express support for membership in NATO and the EU.

We also evaluate three possible theoretical explanations: individual-level instrumental rationality, reverse causation, and personality traits. First, while individuals who support democracy might favor joining the EU as a means of promoting democracy in their country, we argue that the picture is much bigger: empirical evidence demonstrates that ideational factors play a critical role in foreign policy alignments in the South Caucasus (Gvalia et al. 2013). A close empirical analysis provides a strong indication that identifying with Europe is a primary factor shaping support for Euro-Atlantic integration. For instance, Georgians have famously reiterated the following statement: “I am Georgian and therefore I am European.” Figure 8 demonstrates that the percentage of Georgians who agree with this statement tends to increase over years. Support for democracy has led Armenians and Azerbaijanis to oppose the Russian social order built upon pro-authoritarian values and identify with Europe. Studies demonstrate that “large majorities of Armenians consider themselves part of a wider European culture” (Spina 2018, 235). The CB

2015 shows that only 8 percent of Armenians believe that Armenian traditions have a close alignment with Russian traditions.

Second, the idea that individuals who believe that they will be secure when their country joins NATO tend to support democratic values also lacks empirical support. NATO is not solely viewed as a security guarantor in the South Caucasus. Armenians who support NATO membership are less likely to do so because they perceive threats from Azerbaijan and Turkey, which is already a NATO member. If Georgians did believe that they would be secure under NATO, they should have supported membership in this organization against Russian aggression. However, [table 2](#) in the next subsection demonstrates that individuals who believe that Russian military aggression against Georgia is likely do not necessarily support membership in NATO. This is not to say that NATO is not viewed as a security guarantor at all. It is rather that most individuals see NATO membership as a part of broader Euro-Atlantic integration, support for which is mostly shaped by ideational factors. It is also not established that public support for democracy in the South Caucasus is linked to the lack of security in the region. Third, a possible reverse relationship tells little about support for membership in the EU, which is less seen as a security guarantor.

Third, while personality traits have been found to shape political participation in democratic regimes ([Hetherington and Weiler 2009](#); [Bakker, Rooduijn, and Schumacher 2015](#)), they are less likely to explain individual foreign policy preferences in the South Caucasus. For instance, agreeableness, an important factor for “positive evaluations of the existing political regime” ([Greene and Robertson 2017](#), 1809), fails to explain differences among Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians. Relying on agreeableness, we should see congruence between a government’s foreign policy decision and public support for that decision. The opposite is true in Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Azerbaijan, those who oppose the government’s balanced foreign policy and violation of human rights are more likely to support Euro-Atlantic integration. In Armenia, those who have been against the government’s pro-Russian orientation, support a pro-Western foreign policy. While public opinion and foreign policy decisions align in Georgia, they differ in Azerbaijan and Armenia. Agreeableness cannot account for this variation. For similar reasons, we cannot explain variations in support for democratic values based on personality traits: While we could potentially observe that agreeableness makes Georgians possess some democratic values, the same is less likely for Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Therefore, the idea that pro-democracy values are endogenous to personality traits lacks empirical support.

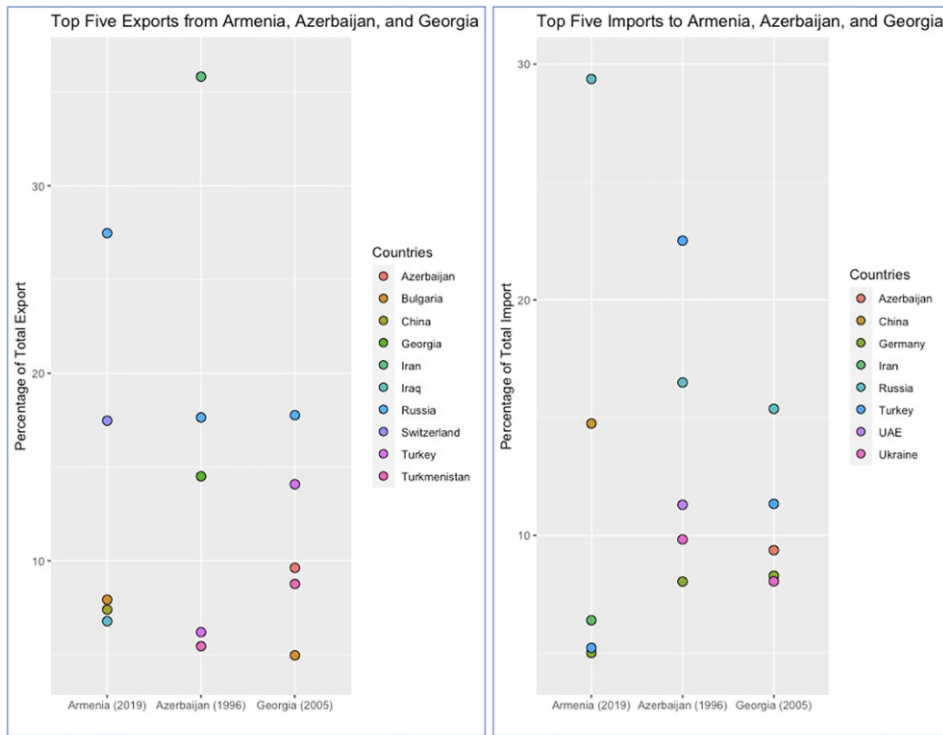
#### *Material and Economic Incentives at National and Individual Levels*

Security concerns and economic incentives have been given as primary explanations for small state foreign policy. First, structural realism contended that the international system has placed substantial constraints on small states leaving them with “less room for choice in the decision-making process” and a “smaller margin of error” in their foreign policies ([Handel 1991](#), 3). Inability to balance against powerful states and geographical proximity to great powers coerce small states to bandwagon with great powers ([Walt 1987](#)). However, these material factors fail to account for foreign policy decisions in the South Caucasus. Structural realism leads us to predict that Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia should follow similar foreign policies pursuing closer ties with Russia since they are located in Russia’s geographical proximity and have fewer capabilities to balance against Russia. However, they have tended to follow different foreign policy stances: Armenia has joined Russian-led organizations; Georgia has pursued Euro-Atlantic integration despite the threats from Russia; and Azerbaijan developed a balanced foreign policy. Even the arrival

Table 2. Factors influencing support for Euro-Atlantic integration and integration to Russia. NDI public attitudes in Georgia March 2022

	Dependent variable:									
	Support for NATO logistic					Euro-Atlantic integration logistic				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Future economic decline	0.078 (0.122)	-0.173 (0.170)	0.003 (0.163)	-0.151 (0.221)	0.102 (0.112)	-0.186 (0.168)	0.038 (0.145)	-0.145 (0.198)	-0.219 (0.204)	-0.092 (0.294)
Favorable view of Russian government		-1.010*** (0.115)		-0.934*** (0.126)		-1.220*** (0.120)			-0.720*** (0.162)	1.012*** (0.177)
Russian fault		0.845*** (0.178)		0.826*** (0.223)		0.827*** (0.171)			0.435** (0.216)	-1.007*** (0.298)
Russian aggression		0.152 (0.109)		0.135 (0.139)		0.128 (0.107)			0.152 (0.125)	0.079 (0.189)
Male (baseline: female)		0.354** (0.164)		0.189 (0.211)		0.238 (0.156)			0.280 (0.184)	0.144 (0.285)
Age		-0.247** (0.107)		-0.205 (0.139)		-0.251** (0.102)			-0.226* (0.119)	0.090 (0.190)
Education		0.076 (0.075)		0.327*** (0.097)		0.153** (0.072)			0.092 (0.085)	-0.191 (0.131)
Constant	1.407*** (0.345)	2.223*** (0.706)	2.335*** (0.461)	2.090** (0.901)	1.074*** (0.316)	2.303*** (0.693)	1.808*** (0.412)	0.105 (0.556)	2.569*** (0.836)	-0.905 (1.221)
Observations	1,700	1,374	1,782	1,434	1,764	1,428				
Log likelihood	-760.365	-520.219	-528.922	-347.353	-893.554	-562.293				
Akaike information criterion	1,524.731	1,056.438	1,061.844	710.706	1,791.109	1,140.587				
Bayesian information criterion	1,535.607	1,098.242	1,072.815	752.852	1,802.059	1,182.699				

Note: The table presents the results of logistic and multinomial models. Models 1 and 2 show factors affecting individual support for NATO membership. Models 3 and 4 demonstrate the effects of several predictors influencing EU membership. Models 5 and 6 illustrate which factors have an impact on individual preferences about the Euro-Atlantic integration (alignment with NATO and the EU). Numbers 7, 8, and 9, 10 are multinomial basic and full models, respectively. The dependent variable has three outcomes: *Euro-Atlantic Integration*, *Integration with Russia*, and *Neither*, which is the baseline. \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .



**Figure 9.** Top five trade partners of the South Caucasus states.

*Note:* The figure illustrates top five trade partners of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia based on the data from World Bank World Integrated Trade Solution.

of Russian troops within twenty-five miles of the Georgian capital did not convince Tbilisi to abandon its pro-Western foreign policy (Gvalia et al. 2013).

Second, research has also stressed that balancing against a great power becomes costly for small states when they are economically dependent on the great power. Hirschman (1945) illustrated that asymmetric trade relations between large and small states provide political benefits to larger ones. While a small state usually accounts for a small portion of a larger state's trade, the latter becomes a primary player in the former's trade volume. This asymmetric relationship gives the larger country an advantage of having "coercive power over the smaller because an interruption of the relationship would cause much greater distress" for the smaller (Abdelal and Kirshner 1999, 120).

Economic dependency theories led us to expect that asymmetric trade relations between the Caucasus states and Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union would shape national interests and foreign policies in the region. Russia became a top country for Georgian exports and imports in 2005 while Georgia was a very small market for Russia (figure 9). Russia supplied 100 percent of Georgian natural gas needs until 2006. Theories linking economic incentives to foreign policy alignment predicted that these asymmetrical trade relations would shape Georgian national interests and foreign policy. However, Georgia pursued a pro-Western foreign policy and applied to be a candidate for NATO membership in 2008. Studies also show that Georgia's "intensified political relations with the West, post-Rose Revolution, are neither the result nor a side effect of economic benefits from trade with the West" (Gvalia et al. 2013, 123).

Economic dependency theories also failed to explain foreign policy changes in Azerbaijan. While the Azerbaijani Popular Front followed an anti-Russian foreign policy, the Haydar Aliyev administration invested in formulating a balanced foreign policy despite threats from Russia. Figure 9 illustrates that Azerbaijan's primary trade partners in 1996 were Iran and Russia. We chose 1996 because it was an important year for Azerbaijan to shift toward a balanced foreign policy. Russia closed its borders with Azerbaijan to inflict economic costs and consequently pressure Baku to abandon rapprochement with the West. Despite Russian pressures, Azerbaijan signed the Ankara Declaration in 1998 to balance against Russia (Nassibli 1999). Likewise, Armenia has recently attempted to develop closer ties with the EU. Despite its economic dependence on Russia (figure 9), Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan jailed pro-Russian figures in Armenia. The Pashinyan government's attempts to drag Armenia out of Russian orbit and bring the EU in were viewed as the main reason why Russia was reluctant to support Armenia during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war (de Waal 2022).

Material factors also failed to explain temporal variations within Azerbaijan and Georgia, which followed different foreign policy orientations under different administrations despite continuity in their external security environment. Studies demonstrate that ideological factors can account for these variations. Euro-Atlantic integration has been "an external affirmation of Georgia's European identity" (Gvalia et al. 2013, 116). Georgian president Saakashvili believed that pro-Western foreign policy is "not a new path for Georgia but rather a return to our European home and our European vocation—which is deeply enshrined in our national identity and history" (Saakashvili 2007).

We use the *NDI Georgia March 2022* survey to evaluate economic incentives and security concerns at the individual level. We employ a survey question about whether individuals think economic decline/hardship is likely in the future as a proxy to measure individuals' beliefs about future economic situations. If future economic benefits are the primary motivating factor for support for NATO and EU membership, individuals who think that economic decline is likely should support membership in these organizations to offset economic hardship. However, table 2 illustrates that individual beliefs about future economic decline have no significant effect on foreign policy preferences. Table 2 also demonstrates that believing that Russian aggression against Georgia is likely in the next year does not have a significant effect on support for Euro-Atlantic integration. Thus, results suggest that economic incentives and security concerns are not the primary factors driving pro-Western foreign policy preferences.

Although the *NDI March 2022* provides data from only Georgia and does not have questions to measure *support for democracy*, we believe that it helps us to rule out future material factors for two reasons. First, Russian aggression should make Georgians (relative to Azerbaijanis and Armenians) more likely to seek membership in NATO to offset possible Russian military aggression. All CRRC datasets show that most Georgians view Russia as an enemy state. Second, because Georgia has economically suffered under Russian sanctions, economic incentives should make Georgians more interested to seek membership in the EU compared to Azerbaijanis and Armenians for whom Russia has been a primary employment destination. Thus, Georgia is a hard case to evaluate whether security concerns or economic incentives drive pro-Western foreign policy preferences.

We also find empirical evidence for the possible validity of our causal mechanism: individuals who have an unfavorable view of the Russian government tend to support Euro-Atlantic integration. This result suggests that individuals who favor Euro-Atlantic integration attach negative images to out-group Russia. Table 2 also shows that individuals who believe that the Russian-Ukraine war is Russia's fault are more likely to approve of Euro-Atlantic integration and less likely to support closer



ties with Russia. The occupation of Ukraine has increased anti-Russian sentiments (Asadzade and Izadi 2022).

### Conclusion

With wider implications for a mass opinion on foreign policy preferences in small states, this study examined public opinion on foreign policy and explored what explains individual foreign policy preferences in the South Caucasus region. The large-scale anti-government protests in the South Caucasus region and the consequent changes in Armenian and Georgian leadership make the study of public opinion in the region important. The study specifically asked why some individuals support pro-Western foreign policy orientation in three small states, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, while others do not. Drawing on social identity theory, we argued that commitment to democratic values is central to understanding individual pro-Western foreign policy preferences: individuals who support democratic values and oppose a paternalistic form of government are more likely to approve pro-Western foreign policy orientation. Democratic values lead individuals to socially categorize themselves and others into collective identities, demonstrate identification with the Euro-Atlantic community, and compare their in-group against out-group. These three causal processes illustrate how democratic values cause individuals to support membership in NATO and the EU.

The tensions between the West and Russia have increased recently. Moscow has been aggressively attempting to keep its influence in its “near abroad” and preserve its geopolitical interests over small states in the post-Soviet area. Meanwhile, some qualitative evidence suggests that Russian intervention in Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan has contributed to the rise of anti-Russian sentiments and public support for pro-Western foreign policy in the post-Soviet area. Moscow has used its military power to aid its authoritarian allies to preserve their regimes. Experts have warned about the “real chance that we could see the rise of anti-Russian sentiment in Kazakhstan, along the lines of Ukraine or Georgia” because of President Putin’s attempts to use military means to restore or maintain Russian clout in post-Soviet countries (Light 2022). In response to Russia’s aggression, many ordinary people in Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, and recently Armenia have turned their faces toward the Euro-Atlantic community. Once data become available, future research should examine how Russian military intervention and demonstration of military power in post-Soviet countries contribute to the rise of anti-Russian sentiments and possible public support for pro-Western foreign policy. The study of pro-Western foreign policy preferences in small post-Soviet countries has been very important as public opinion has been influential in shaking the directions of political events after the Russian occupation of Ukraine.

### Supplementary Data

Supplementary information is available at the *Foreign Policy Analysis* data archive.

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