

Georgia: Frontier Between Russia and the West

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In November 2024, Georgia experienced significant political unrest following the government's decision to suspend European Union (EU) accession talks until 2028. This move ignited widespread protests across the nation, reflecting deep-seated tensions between pro-West aspirations and historical ties with Russia.

Recent Protests and EU Membership Suspension

On November 28, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced the suspension of EU accession negotiations, citing “blackmail and manipulation”¹ by European politicians and the European Parliament. He also declared that Georgia would reject any budgetary grants from the EU until the end of 2028. This decision sparked immediate and widespread protests, with thousands gathering in Tbilisi and other cities to express their dissatisfaction. Demonstrators built barricades, broke windows, and set off fireworks outside the parliament building. Riot police responded with water cannons and tear gas, leading to numerous injuries and arrests.²

The protests have been characterized by a significant presence of young activists advocating for European integration, viewing EU membership as a pathway to freedom and protection against Russian influence. Despite the government's crackdown, including the detention of opposition leaders and activists, demonstrators maintain a pro-European preference.³

Georgia's Historic Relations with the West and Russia

Georgia's geopolitical orientation has long been a balancing act between Western aspirations and Russian influence. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia declared independence, seeking closer ties with the West. However, relations with Russia remained complex, culminating in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War over the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This conflict resulted in Russia recognizing the independence of these regions, further straining relations.⁴

In recent years, Georgia has pursued integration with Western structures, including aspirations for EU and NATO membership. However, the ruling Georgian Dream party has been accused of democratic backsliding and fostering closer ties with Moscow, leading to internal political tensions and public unrest.⁵



Evidence from Public Opinion Survey Data

Between Fall 2020 and Fall 2024, we conducted seven surveys to examine current Georgian attitudes toward Western policies, particularly those of the United States contrasting these with perceptions of Russian influence. These surveys aim to assess the extent of pro-Western and pro-Russian sentiment in the country today. More specifically, our recent surveys asked Georgian's whether policies from the United States (a key player for the West) benefit Georgia more than those from Russia. This data offers insights into very recent attitudes, allowing us to contrast demographic groups, such as differences between younger and older generations.

To add further context to these results, we draw on past data from the World Values Survey (WVS).⁶ The WVS asked Georgian's about their confidence in the European Union between 1994 and 2022. These datasets enable us to understand broad shifts in sentiment over the last 15–30 years, and how those relate to the more granular public opinion data from our recent surveys. As a whole, we gain insights into how Georgia may orient itself in the near future, particularly as doubts grow around its potential membership in the EU.

Results

As shown in Figure 1, since Fall 2021 there has been a decrease in the positive perceptions of U.S. policy's impact on Georgia. In Fall 2020, 49.9% of respondents felt that U.S. policy helped Georgia. In Fall 2021, 64.7% of respondents felt that U.S. policy helped Georgia. This number has steadily decreased since Fall 2021, reaching a low of 42.2% in Fall 2024. At the same time, there has been an increase in the number of participants who felt U.S. policy hurts Georgia, up 16.1% since Fall 2021 (9.6% to 25.7%).

There has also been a decrease in negative perceptions of Russian policy's impact on Georgia, although a much smaller change than that of U.S. policy perceptions. In Fall 2021, 76.1% of respondents felt that Russian policy hurts Georgia, while in Fall 2024, this number fell to 68.9%.

Figure 1 also reflects these results, showing that the distribution of perceptions of both U.S. (bottom right) and Russian policy (bottom left) in Georgia has widened, particularly starting in the Winter of 2023.

When breaking these opinions down by demographics, we find that there is no consistent trend. Although not consistently significant throughout the seven survey waves, age and education were most often related to both perceptions of U.S. and Russian policy. In Tables 1 and 2, we see that respondents that were younger and more educated were more likely to perceive U.S. policy as helping Georgia and Russian policy as hurting Georgia. Additionally - while again not consistent across all survey waves - respondents who did not practice Christian Orthodoxy were more likely to perceive Russian policy as hurting Georgia.

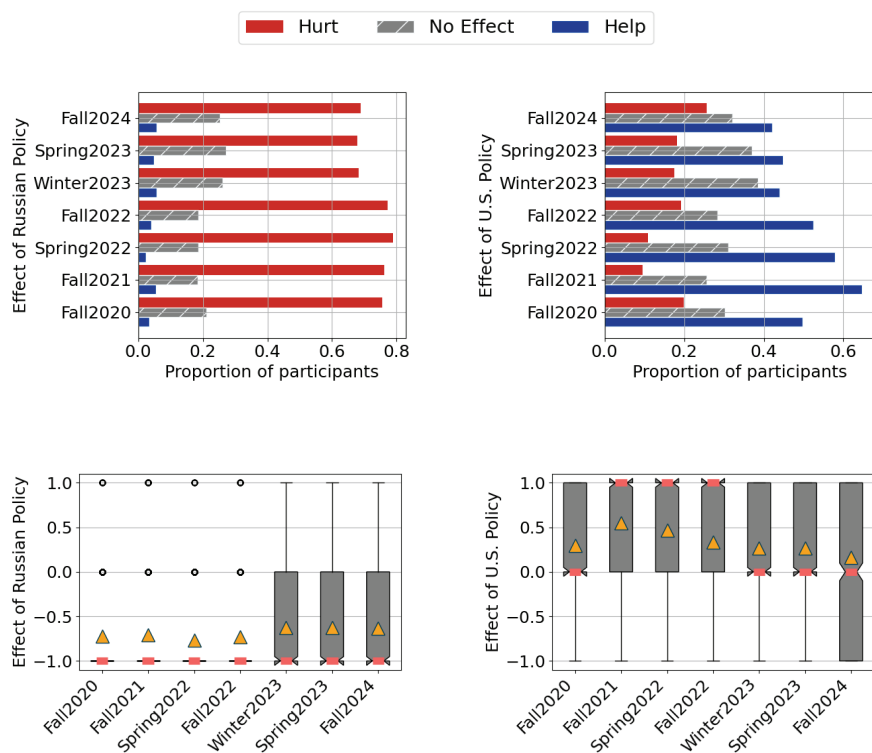


Figure 1 (Top): Proportion of survey participants per survey wave who said Russian policy hurts, helps, or has no effect on Georgia (top left) and U.S. policy hurts, helps, or has no effect on Georgia (top right). According to a Chi-Squared test of independence, the frequency of answers does depend on the wave of the survey ($p < 0.001$), both for Russian policy and U.S. policy.

Figure 1 (Bottom): Distribution of survey participants per survey wave who said Russian policy hurts, helps, or has no effect on Georgia (bottom left) and U.S. policy hurts, helps, or has no effect on Georgia (bottom right), where -1 is hurts and 1 is helps. The yellow triangle represents the mean and the orange line represents the median.



	All Waves	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Fall 2022	Winter 2023	Spring 2023	Fall 2024
Intercept	0.52***	0.28*	0.37***	0.40***	0.36**	0.23	0.55***	0.38***
Wave	-0.04***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age	-0.00***	-0.00**	0.00	-0.00*	-0.00	-0.00	-0.01***	-0.01***
Gender	-0.00*	0.00***	0.00*	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Education	0.01*	0.01	-0.01	0.04*	0.01	0.05**	-0.00	-0.00
Region	0.01	-0.15***	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.06
Religion	0.05	0.26*	0.17*	0.07	-0.05	-0.02	0.00	0.00
Language	0.00	0.04	-0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.05**	0.01	0.02

Table 1: Results from General Linear Model where perceptions of U.S. policy are the dependent variable and demographic are the independent variables. We show this across all survey waves in dependently and combined. Significance: *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.

	All Waves	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Fall 2022	Winter 2023	Spring 2023	Fall 2024
Intercept	-0.60***	-0.53***	-0.44***	-0.59***	-0.62***	-0.60***	-0.57***	-0.41***
Wave	0.02***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age	0.00***	0.00**	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00*	0.01***	0.00*
Gender	0.00***	0.00	-0.00**	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00*
Education	-0.02***	-0.03*	-0.04**	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.05**	-0.03*
Region	-0.05***	-0.02	-0.09***	-0.04*	-0.03	-0.04	-0.02	-0.05*
Religion	-0.13***	-0.25***	-0.10	-0.14*	-0.04	-0.11	-0.09	-0.18*
Language	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.01	-0.02	-0.00

Table 2: Results from General Linear Model where perceptions of Russian policy are the dependent variable and demographic are the independent variables. We show this across all survey waves in dependently and combined. Significance: *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.

Context from the World Values Survey

While the WVS did not ask Georgians about Russian or western influence, we can gain some insight by examining general trends in Georgian's confidence in the European Union. As shown in Figure 3 on the next page, this data shows that Georgian's confidence in the European Union has remained consistent over the past 30 years, which approximately 50% of respondents reporting 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in the European Union across time. In fact, in the most recent WVS wave (2017 to 2022), there was an increase in respondents who had 'a great deal' of confidence in the European Union. These broad trends align with our survey data that shows relatively consistent pro-Western perceptions until 2023.



Conclusion

While Georgia’s geopolitical orientation has historically been a balancing act between Western aspirations and Russian influence, Georgian’s confidence in the West remained relatively consistent between 1994 and 2022. However, our recent survey data suggests that this confidence has begun to shift away from the West and towards Russia since 2023. Despite this shift being small in magnitude – with most Georgian’s still perceiving Russian policies as hurting their country, it marks a potential transition in Georgian’s geopolitical perceptions that have remained consistent for many years prior. Hence, this report suggests that both researchers and policy makers should closely monitor Georgian’s geopolitical perceptions, its relation to current events, and its relation to information campaigns in the coming years.

Importantly, support by the population for Euro-Atlantic integration remains high. A recent poll conducted by ISSA (Institute of Social Studies and Analysis) in Georgia⁷ showed strong support for the protests, with many blaming Georgian Dream for the ongoing political crisis. Despite the political turmoil, support for the Euro-Atlantic integration remain high, with 74.2% of respondents in Georgia favoring the country’s accession to NATO and 86.3% supporting EU membership. At the same time, 67% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the government’s moves to distance the country from the US.

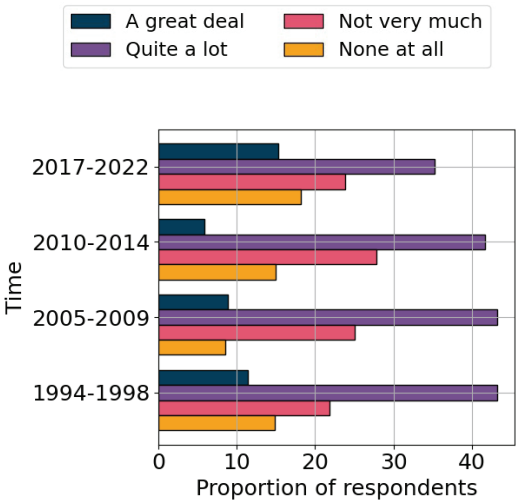


Table 2: Confidence in the European Union from the World Values Survey.

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