

Foreign policy priorities of the Muslim (ethnic Azerbaijani) population of Kvemo Kartli in the prism of Sunni-Shia divide, religiosity and economic status

Lasha Tughushi, assistant professor at Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, lasha.tughushi@tsu.ge

Malkhaz Gagua, invited lecturer at Black Sea International University, maxogagua@yahoo.com

Alexandra Kalatozishvili, invited lecturer at Ilia State University, alexandra.kalatozishvili@gmail.com

Abstract

The article describes the foreign-political priorities of the ethnic Azerbaijani population of Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia. In the paper, a special emphasis is placed on highlighting the characteristics that weigh on the attitudes of the research population towards NATO, EU, Russian-led Eurasian Union, USA, Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and some other countries in the region. In particular, these attitudes have been studied in relation to Sunni-Shia dichotomy, degree of religiosity and economic status of the population in question. The need for such an effort was determined by the fact that previous studies have shown the foreign-political priorities of the ethnic minorities in Georgia are somewhat different from those of the ethnically Georgian population - there is relatively more skepticism towards the West in general. Research has shown the foreign-political preferences of Kvemo Kartli Muslim population is strongly related to religiosity and economic status, and less dependent on denomination (Sunni-Shia) affiliation. The study also explicitly manifested the acute lack of information about expected benefits of Euro-Atlantic integration and such international actors as the USA, EU and, particularly, NATO.¹

Key words: Ethnic Azerbaijanis, Kvemo Kartli, Shiite-Sunni dichotomy

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has caused significant upheavals in Russia's neighborhood, including the South Caucasus, where repercussions of the Second Karabakh War are still felt. At the same time, dramatic events taking place in Ukraine have created a kind of "window of opportunity" for Georgia, which, unlike the other two countries in the region, has openly declared its desire to join the Euro-Atlantic structures (NATO and EU).² The

¹ Similar result, the lack of information, was showed by the previous study. See Liberal Academy Tbilisi, Political Attitudes and Foreign Policy Priorities in the Population of Kvemo Kartli, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3qwbZs7> (Accessed 09.10.2022).

² <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2022/3788> (accessed 09.11.2022).

Constitution of Georgia reads that “constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.”³ In order to achieve this goal, the involvement and active participation of the country's society is needed, including ethnic minorities, who make up 13.17% of the population of Georgia.⁴ This article examines the foreign priorities of ethnic Azerbaijanis, who represent the country's largest ethno-religious minority and make up 6.28% of the population of Georgia according to the latest 2014 census.⁵ This population is scattered in different regions, although they live compactly in KK, where they make up 41.8% of the region's population,⁶ and represent the majority in three municipalities (Marneuli, Dmanisi and Bolnisi).⁷

The ethnic Azerbaijani community in Georgia is usually perceived and studied as a homogeneous group ultimately resulting in neglecting and overlooking specifics that distinguish the two main, Shia and Sunni, sub-groups of this community. Moreover, there are no official statistics on the confessional affiliation of the Muslim population of Georgia in the context of the Shia-Sunni dichotomy. This is particularly striking in the context of the ongoing developments in the Middle East, where a wave of revolutions and civil strife in North Africa and Southwest Asia, the so called "Arab Spring", has fueled intra-confessional tensions between Shiites and Sunnis (Phillips, 2015; Abdo, 2017).

Fortunately, there is no potential of such a serious confrontation in Georgia, but an important question arises: when the gap between Shiites and Sunnis in the Islamic world deepens, what impact can this have on the foreign policy priorities of these groups in Georgia? This question is further aggravated by the fact that according to studies conducted in Georgia at different times, the foreign policy priorities of ethnic minorities, including ethnic Azerbaijanis, differ somewhat from the attitudes of ethnic Georgians - most of them are slightly more skeptical about European integration. This, in turn, prevents their involvement in national political processes (Samkharadze, 2020). In addition to the confessional, Shia-Sunni divide, we also wondered what factors determine the foreign-political priorities of the target population. To do this, we studied these influences in terms of the degree of religiosity and economic status, both of which, as will be presented below, gave us the most interesting results. Correlation analysis was also conducted in the age and gender dimensions, although the results were not consistent, so these components are not included in this article.

"Hypertrophied" Triad

³ Constitution of Georgia, Article 78. <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=36> (accessed 08.11.2022).

⁴ 2014 General Population Census Results, National Statistics Office of Georgia. <https://bit.ly/3Tm7zzG> (accessed 08.11.2022).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ In the article, "Ethnic Azerbaijanis", "Azerbaijani-speaking population" and "Muslim population" of Kvemo Kartli are interchangeable.

Kvemo Kartli (KK) partially borders the Republic of Azerbaijan, and various studies have shown a strong "nexus" connection of its ethnic Azerbaijani population with this state, especially in the informational and cultural dimensions (Tughushi, et al., 2022). However, unlike the classical model of the "triadic nexus", in this particular case there is another important player in the triangle, Turkey, with which the Azerbaijani-speaking population of the region has almost as much connection as with Azerbaijan. The research showed that the "hypertrophied" version of the triadic nexus (with the addition of Turkey as a fourth factor), which has become a kind of dominant paradigm for the study of ethno-politics in recent decades (Pettai, 2006), is also valid for the Azerbaijani-speaking population of KK.

Triadic nexus model, which was first used by Rogers Brubaker to describe complex ethno-political relations in Central and Eastern Europe, implies a "triangle of relations" "between national minorities, the states in which they live, and the external national "homelands" to which they belong, or can be construed as belonging, by ethnocultural affinity, though not by legal citizenship" (Brubaker, 1995). Some researchers believe that one important dimension of Brubaker's triad is missing - international community (Smith, 2002; Tesser, 2003). Various researchers, based mainly on the examples of the USSR and the countries of the former Soviet bloc (Estonia, Latvia, Romania and Slovakia), proposed a "quadratic" model, which includes international dimension as well (Kelley, 2004).

Østergaard-Nielsen, who investigated the triadic relationship on the example of migration, emphasizes the influence and benefits that "sending countries" receive from diasporas (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). In his opinion, sending country governments are often considered as passive players, because receiving countries are decisive in formulating the rules for visa policies, asylum or return of clandestine migrants. Increasingly, however, they are taking a more active role and exerting influence through diasporas, which they see as an asset that can be used to advance their own political agenda. Perhaps the most visible example of this is Turkey's policy in Europe, especially in Germany, towards the Turkish diaspora during the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Aydin, 2014; Aydin, 2016).

In general, the triadic nexus model is widely applied to the case examples of Eastern and Central European countries. Based on it, Fedorenko and Umland studied Ukraine-Russia relations (Fedorenko, Umland, 2021), and Cakmak and Huseyinoglu explored Turkey-Greece relations (Cakmak, Huseyinoglu, 2020). Dejan Stjepanović, who researches triadic relations on the example of the Balkans, introduced a new concept of 'claimed co-ethnics', which means people who are recognized by the citizenship (or ethnicity) conferring state as belonging to its main ethnic group, although they themselves do not embrace that definition (Stjepanovic, 2015).

In a broad sense, the triad's "national minority" component may be of two types - it can be an external diaspora (for example, ethnic Turks living in Germany) or a cross-border ethnic group (for example, the

Azerbaijani-speaking community of KK). Accordingly, the dynamics of ethnically kin state's relationships with diasporic and transborder groups will have different forms and intensity (Stjepanovic, 2015; Waterbury, 2010).

Both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study confirmed the strong connection of the Azerbaijani population of KK with the kin state, Azerbaijan. In addition, it was found that Turkey has similar indicators across almost all issues. For example, among the most friendly countries towards Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey lead by a large margin; In addition, Turkey is leading among the most Muslim-friendly countries/international organizations;⁸ Its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was almost unanimously named the leader of the hypothetical "Turkish world"; Among the main sources of received news and information, the frequency of Turkish media is behind only Azerbaijani media and informal sources.⁹

Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the study. In quantitative research, we used face-to-face interview method. The survey was conducted by ISSA with a questionnaire developed in cooperation with LAT in Georgian and translated into Azerbaijani.¹⁰ The 2014 census was used as the sampling model. A total of 800 respondents were interviewed in Kvemo Kartli region in December 2021 through face-to-face interviews. 400 of them are Shiites and 400 are Sunnis. Data are statistically representative for each group.¹¹ The research was supported by the Open Society of Georgia Foundation. From the qualitative methods of primary data collection, we used focus groups and in-depth interviews with ethnic Azerbaijani civil activists of KK. Both focus group sessions and interviews were conducted in Marneuli in January and February 2022. Categorization was done on the basis of gender and religious affiliation. A total of 4 focus groups were conducted, each with the participation of eight people - Sunni women, Sunni men, Shia women and Shia men. In-depth interviews were also categorized on the basis of denomination - four civil activists were selected from the municipalities of Marneuli and Bolnisi. Two reported being Sunni, one self-identified himself as Shia, and fourth person 1 stated that he was nominally Shia, although he preferred a supra-denominational affiliation, and considered himself simply Muslim.¹²

⁸ Azerbaijan was absent in the list.

⁹ These data are consistent with other studies conducted in the Kvemo Kartli region, where the focus was on information sources. See, for instance, Tughushi et al., 2022.

¹⁰ Although a small number of ethnically Georgian (Adjarian) Muslims also live in Kvemo Kartli, they did not participate in the survey. The research was conducted only among the ethnic Azerbaijani population living in Kvemo Kartli municipalities.

¹¹ According to the general population census of 2014, the ethnic Azerbaijani population of Kvemo Kartli is 177 thousand, of which, according to our data, 60% to 65% are Shia, and the rest are Sunni.

¹² Nevertheless, he will also be referred to as a "Shia civil activist" in a footnote below.

Key Findings

- The Muslims of KK consider Azerbaijan and Turkey to be the most friendly countries or international associations to Georgia, the EU is in the third place and significantly behind the first two. It should be noted that the fourth place is Russia, ahead of both the USA and NATO. Iran's rate is insignificant. On this issue, Shiites and Sunnis have practically identical views.
- The highest percentage of respondents names Russia as the most hostile country to Georgia, followed by Armenia by a small margin. Iran is on the third place. The rest of the countries and international organizations have a measly rate.
- Pro-Prussian sentiments are stronger among religious and economically disadvantaged respondents. Pro-Western sentiment is therefore strong among non-religious and relatively wealthy people.
- The majority supports Georgia's accession to the EU and expects economic benefits from it. In this regard, Sunnis and Shiites are in a similar position. A clear inverse correlation with the degree of religiosity was revealed - the more religious the respondent is, the less he or she is in favor of joining the European Union and the less he/she expects economic benefits from it for his/her family.
- More people support Georgia joining the Russian-led Eurasian Union than those who oppose it. It should be noted that a quarter find it difficult answer this question. The more religious and poor the respondent is, the more he/she supports Georgia's entry into the Eurasian Union. Strongly religious people prefer Eurasian Union over the EU.
- Paradoxically, when only a small part of the respondents perceive the West (in particular, the USA and the EU) as a friend, the majority of respondents support Georgia's integration into NATO, although a large share of them, more than a quarter, find it difficult to answer this question. The attitude of the Shiites in this matter is a little more skeptical, although the majority of them also answer this question positively.
- Non-religious respondents are more in favor of joining Georgia NATO, compared to strongly religious. Almost half of the latter category find it difficult to answer this question. Many respondents find it difficult to answer questions related to NATO membership and economic benefits stemming from it, which indicates a severe lack of information. Respondents from relatively affluent families express the most optimism regarding joining NATO. This indicator is significantly smaller among respondents with low economic status.
- The ethnic Azerbaijanis of KK almost unanimously name Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as the leader of the Turkish World. Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev has an insignificant rate. Other leaders do not actually appear.

- A significant part of the respondents consider Russia to be the most friendly non-Muslim country towards Muslims, and the US and China to be the most hostile. The poorer the respondent is, the more he/she perceives Russia as a friendly country for Muslims, and the USA, accordingly, as an enemy. The attitude towards the EU is more neutral.
- A third of the respondents are against the deployment of foreign troops in Georgia, a quarter welcomes NATO troops, and a sixth welcomes Turkey's. The more religious a person is, the less he/she wants to see the armed forces of NATO in Georgia.
- Most of the respondents receives news about Georgia through Azerbaijani media, followed (in descending order) by Georgian media, informal sources and Turkish media. The influence of Russian news sources is low.

Religiosity and economic status

At the first stage of processing the results of the representative survey, the indices of religiosity and economic status were calculated, which became an important prerequisite for the organization of other variables. This was based on the assumption that these two characteristics (religiosity and economic status) are noteworthy markers that represent differences in the views of the study population.

In terms of religiosity, three groups were distinguished: 1. Strongly religious; 2. Averagely religious; 3. Non-religious, whom we will tentatively refer to as "non-religious" below. For each of these groups, an index of religiosity was calculated, which was based on variables of two orders. The first-order variables involved subjective self-identification, where respondents had to answer the question, "Do you consider yourself a religious?", and the second represented participation in religious activities. Here the respondents were offered to say whether they go to a mosque, attend prayers, fast, have a spiritual leader (mullah or akhund) and do religious charity.

Taking into account the index of religiosity, the Muslim population of KK was distributed as follows: the smallest share belongs to the group of non-religious people, every third is strongly religious, and the largest is the group of averagely religious. In addition, the Shiites turned out to be more religious than the Sunnis (*table 1*):

Table 1. Religiosity among KK Muslim population (%)

Level of religiosity	KK Muslims	Sunni	Shia
Strong	32.7	27.3	38.2
Average	40.0	42.3	37.7

Non-religious 27.3 30.4 24.1

According to the economic status of the families, three groups were distinguished: 1. families of above average/high economic status ("affluent"); 2. Families of average economic status; 3. Families of below average/low economic status ("poor").¹³ An economic status index was calculated for each group, which was also based on two series of variables: the first was a subjective self-assessment of the economic status of the own household, and the second was an open question about the total income of family members (including benefits) in the month before the survey.

The majority of respondents are poor; the specific share of families of average economic status is almost a third, and the share of affluent people is the smallest. It should be noted that the Sunnis turned out to be a more economically disadvantaged group than the Shiites (table 2).

Table 2. Economic status of KK Muslim population (%)

	KK Muslims	Sunni	Shia
Poor	53.5	58.2	48.7
Average economic status	30.8	26.4	35.3
Affluent	15.7	15.4	16.0

These two indices are used below for correlation analysis of the survey and better identification of similarities and differences. However, correlations are included only when statistically reliable. If no correlation is established, in such case, no relation to the index is indicated.

"Friendly" and "enemy" countries and international organizations

The majority of the Muslim population surveyed in KK, in response to the question of which country or international organization they consider to be the friendliest towards Georgia, name Azerbaijan (36.5%) and Turkey (33.3%). The European Union is in third place with 9.3%. However, it should be noted that Russia is in fourth place with 6.6%, ahead of the USA (6.0%) and NATO (4.5%). The rate of Iran is insignificant (1.5%). Regarding this issue, Shiites and Sunnis have practically the same attitude. Both groups name Azerbaijan and Turkey as friendly countries, and among international organizations they prefer the European Union compared to NATO.

¹³ Here, "affluent" and "poor" do not mean a high or low economic status in an absolute dimension, it is more about the category of people and families whose means are above or below average, although there are, of course, rich and poor families as well.

Table 3. Which of these countries/international organizations is most friendly to Georgia (%)?

Azerbaijan	36.5
Armenia	.5
Azerbaijan	36.5
Turkey	33.3
Russia	6.6
Iran	1.5
EU	9.3
NATO	4.5
USA	6.0
Refuse to answer	.4
Don't know	1.4

On the mirror question, which country or international organization do they consider to be the most hostile to Georgia, the highest percentage of respondents named Russia (31%), followed by Armenia with 27.6%. Iran is third with 6.8%. The rest of the countries and international organizations have a measly rate. However, unlike the previous question, where 1.4% found it difficult to answer, here this figure is very high - 21.3%, i.e. more than a fifth of the respondents. Interestingly, more Sunni (31.4%) consider Armenia as a hostile state than Shia (23.6%). As for Russia, in this case the situation is the opposite: Shiites (34%) consider Russia to be a hostile country more than Sunnis (28.4%). Also, it is more difficult for Shia (23.5%) respondents than Sunnis (19.2%) to name the most hostile country/international organization.

Table 4. Which of these countries/international organizations is most hostile to Georgia (%)?

Azerbaijan	1.9
Armenia	27.6

Turkey	1.6
Russia	31.0
Iran	6.8
EU	1.0
NATO	.7
USA	2.2
None	0.1
Refuse to answer	5.8
Don't know	21.3

According to the correlation analysis, the number of those who consider Russia a friendly country positively correlates with the level of religiousness. Respondents with strong (14.3%) and moderate (9%) religiousness consider Russia a friendly country more than non-religious ones (2.8%). Non-religious (28.5%) and moderately religious (27.7%) respondents perceive Armenia as a hostile state more than strongly religious (14.1%) respondents. At the same time, affluent respondents consider Russia as a hostile country (41.6%) more than middle-income (30.2%) and low-income (31.6%) ones.

During focus groups sessions and interviews, it was repeatedly noted that part of the population has a negative attitude towards NATO and the USA. The reasons for this were cited by the focus groups' participants as their war in the Middle East, including Afghanistan, and support for Israel (which to some extent explains the more loyal attitude towards the EU compared to NATO).¹⁴ Two interviewees believed that the lion's share here is attributed to the propaganda produced by the Muslim clergy.¹⁵

Most friendly and most hostile countries/international organizations towards Muslims

When the respondents answered the questions, which is the most friendly and hostile large country or international organization towards Muslims, an unexpected result was observed for the first question. Although among the friendly countries/unions, Turkey took the first place, as expected, with 31.4%, but Russia came second, unexpectedly, with 23.5%. The EU (8.1%) and the USA (3.5%) are significantly behind these two. An insignificant share of respondents, 0.9%, considers NATO to be most friendly towards Muslims. It should be noted that 24% found it difficult to answer this question. From a confessional point of view, there is no significant difference between Sunnis and Shiites in this respect.

¹⁴ Focus group, Sunni men. 14.02.2022; and Shia men. 28.01.2022.

¹⁵ Shia civil activists. 23.01.2022.

Table 5. Which of these countries/international organizations is most friendly to Muslims (%)?

Russia	23.5
USA	3.5
China	0.7
EU	8.1
NATO	0.9
Turkey	31.4
Refuse to answer	7.9
Don't know	24.0

Correlation analysis revealed that the poorer the respondent, the more he/she perceives Russia as a Muslim-friendly country. Among the poor respondents this figure is 28.3%, while this is 19.4% among average and 14.2% among affluent ones.

A third of respondents (34%) found it difficult to name the country or international organization that is most hostile to Muslims. However, among those who were named, the USA (20.4%) and China (15.6%) lead by a large margin. Only 8.6% of the respondents have a similar attitude towards Russia. Here, too, no significant difference was found in terms of denomination.

Table 6. Which of these countries/international organizations is most hostile to Muslims (%)?

Russia	8.6
USA	20.4
China	15.6
EU	1.8
NATO	0.5
Armenia	0.2
France	0.1
None	9.7
Refuse to answer	9.0
Don't know	34.1

A correlational analysis revealed a clear inverse correlation between the perception of the US as a hostile country and economic status. That is, the poorer the respondent is, the more he/she perceives the USA as the most hostile to Muslims. By the way, the same trend can be observed regarding attitudes towards China.

Table 7. Economic status and most hostile country/international organization towards Muslims (%)

Which of these is most hostile towards Muslims?	Poor	Average	Affluent
Russia	11.1	4.2	14.2
USA	27.9	13.5	13.3
China	20.4	15.8	12.4
EU	1.9	1.4	2.7
NATO	-	1.4	0.9
Armenia	-	0.9	-
France	-	0.5	-
None	9.8	12.1	8.0
Refuse to answer	7.2	7.4	8.0
Don't know	21.8	42.8	40.7

Support for joining Georgia in the EU

A clear majority of respondents, 78.4%, support Georgia's accession to the European Union (63.5% fully support it, and 14.9% support it more than not). 14.2% find it difficult to answer this question. Sunnis and Shiites share a similar position on this issue, with 77.2% of Shiites and 79.4% of Sunnis either fully supporting it or more supportive than not. However, the share of those who fully support EU accession is higher among Sunnis (65.8%) than among Shiites (61.1%). Correlation analysis showed that the degree of religiosity affects the attitude towards this issue. The more religious the respondent is, the less he/she favors joining the EU. 40.5% of strongly religious, 63.5% of averagely religious and 69.3% of non-religious respondents support Georgia joining the EU.

Table 8. Do you support the joining of Georgia in the European Union (%)?

Fully support	63.5
Somewhat Support	14.9
Somewhat against	3.9

Fully against	3.4
Refuse to answer	0.2
Don't know	14.1

In addition, the majority of respondents (58.9%) believe that Georgia's accession to the EU will change the financial well-being of their families for the better. 14.7% think that their economic situation will not change, and 24.3% find it difficult to answer the question. The share of those who believe that joining the EU will worsen the economic situation of their families is insignificant. The majority of Shiites (59.7%) and Sunnis (57.7%) have the same stance on this issue. On the other hand, Sunnis have a more moderate attitude in the sense that about a fifth of them (18.6%) believe that the economic situation of their families will not change after joining the EU (11% of Shiites share this position).

Table 9. Religiousness and economic increments for the one's family if Georgia joins the EU (%)

How will the economic situation of your family change if Georgia joins the European Union?	Strongly religious	Averagely Religious	Non-religious
Improve	41.7	55.3	56.9
Worsen	3.7	2	2.2
Remain the same	7.4	19.6	23.4
Refuse to answer	0.6	-	-
Don't know	46.6	23.1	17.5

According to the correlation analysis, the non-religious respondents (56.9%) expect the improvement of their family's economic situation after joining the EU more than the averagely (55.3%) and strongly religious respondents (41.7). On the other hand, 23.4% of non-religious and 19.6% of averagely religious respondents believe that Georgia's accession to the EU will not affect their economic parameters (strongly religious - 7.4%). The more religious the respondent is, the more difficult it is to him/her to evaluate Georgia's EU perspective: this rate is 46.6% among strongly religious; 23.1% among averagely religious; and, 17.5% among the non-religious.

Support for joining Georgia in the Eurasian Union established by Russia and expected economic benefits

Paradoxically, a larger number of respondents (41.2%) support Georgia joining the Eurasian Union (25.3% of them fully support) than do not support it (32.7%). It should be noted that a quarter (24.3%) find it difficult to take a stance on the mentioned issue. Based on these numbers, it is clear that a part of the interviewees

is in favor of simultaneously joining both the antagonistic organizations, the European Union and the Eurasian Union. Sunnis (34.7%) are slightly more negative towards the Eurasian Union, compared to Shiites (31.1%).

Table 10. Do you support the joining of Georgia in the Eurasian Union established by Russia (%)?

Fully support	25.3
Somewhat Support	15.9
Somewhat against	11.9
Fully against	20.8
Refuse to answer	1.1
Don't know	24.9

Data processing revealed that there is a direct correlation between religiosity and the desire to join the Eurasian Union - the more religious the respondent is, the more he/she supports it. In particular, the percentage of joining Eurasian Union is 46.6% among strongly religious respondents, 39.7% among averagely religious, and 36.7% among non-religious people. It is noteworthy that strongly religious respondents more support the Eurasian Union than the EU.

Table 11. Religiosity and support of joining Eurasian Union (%)

Do you support Georgia joining the Eurasian Union established by Russia?	Strongly religious	Averagely Religious	Non-religious
Support	46.6	39.7	36.7
Do not support	22.7	34.7	36.7
Refuse to answer	1.8	0.5	0.7
Don't know	28.9	25.1	25.9

Correlation analysis also showed the poor respondents support the accession to the Eurasian Union more (47.2%) than the average (32.6%) and affluent (31.2%) ones.

Table 12. Economic status and support of joining Eurasian Union (%)

Do you support Georgia joining the Eurasian Union established by Russia?	Poor	Average	Affluent
Support	46.2	32.6	31.2
Do not support	30.5	39.0	39.3
Refuse to answer	1.3	0.5	-
Don't know	22.0	27.9	29.5

Respondents' attitudes are diversified regarding the issue of whether or not joining the Eurasian Union will bring economic benefits to their families. In particular, a third (33.9%) find it difficult to answer this question (this position is more or less leading); about a quarter (26.7%) think that joining the Eurasian Union will change the economic situation of their families for the better, while almost as many (26.8%) indicate that this prospect will not affect their families' well-being. 11% of the respondents gave a negative answer to the question. The positions of the Shiites and Sunnis participating in the study are close regarding the mentioned issue, although the Shiites look at this perspective a little more positively. 28.4% of Shiites and 26.1% of Sunnis expect positive results from the Eurasian Union.

Data analysis revealed the hope of economic increments is more widespread among the poor family members (30.4%), while the opinion of with average income (23.1%) and affluent (23.9%) families is almost the same.

Support for joining NATO and expected economic benefits

The majority of Muslims interviewed in KK (58.7%) support Georgia's integration into NATO (46% of respondents declare their full support), while 12.1% are against it. More than a quarter of the respondents (27.7%) find it difficult to answer the question. This figure is 57.6% among Shiites, and 60.1% among Sunnis. 29% of Shiites and 26.4% of Sunnis find it difficult to evaluate the process of integration into NATO.

Statistical processing of the data revealed a very strong inverse correlation in terms of religiosity. It was found that non-religious (51.1%) and averagely religious (47.7%) respondents are fully in favor of joining Georgia in NATO, while this figure among strongly religious ones is significantly lower, only one fifth of them (19.6%) fully agree with this. The difference remains when we add the response "somewhat support". In particular, if in general 69.3% of non-religious respondents support Georgia's entry into NATO ("fully support" and "somewhat support" combined), this figure among strongly religious is only 28.2%, that is, almost 2.5 times less. It is worth noting separately that almost half of strongly religious (49.1%) find it difficult to answer this question.

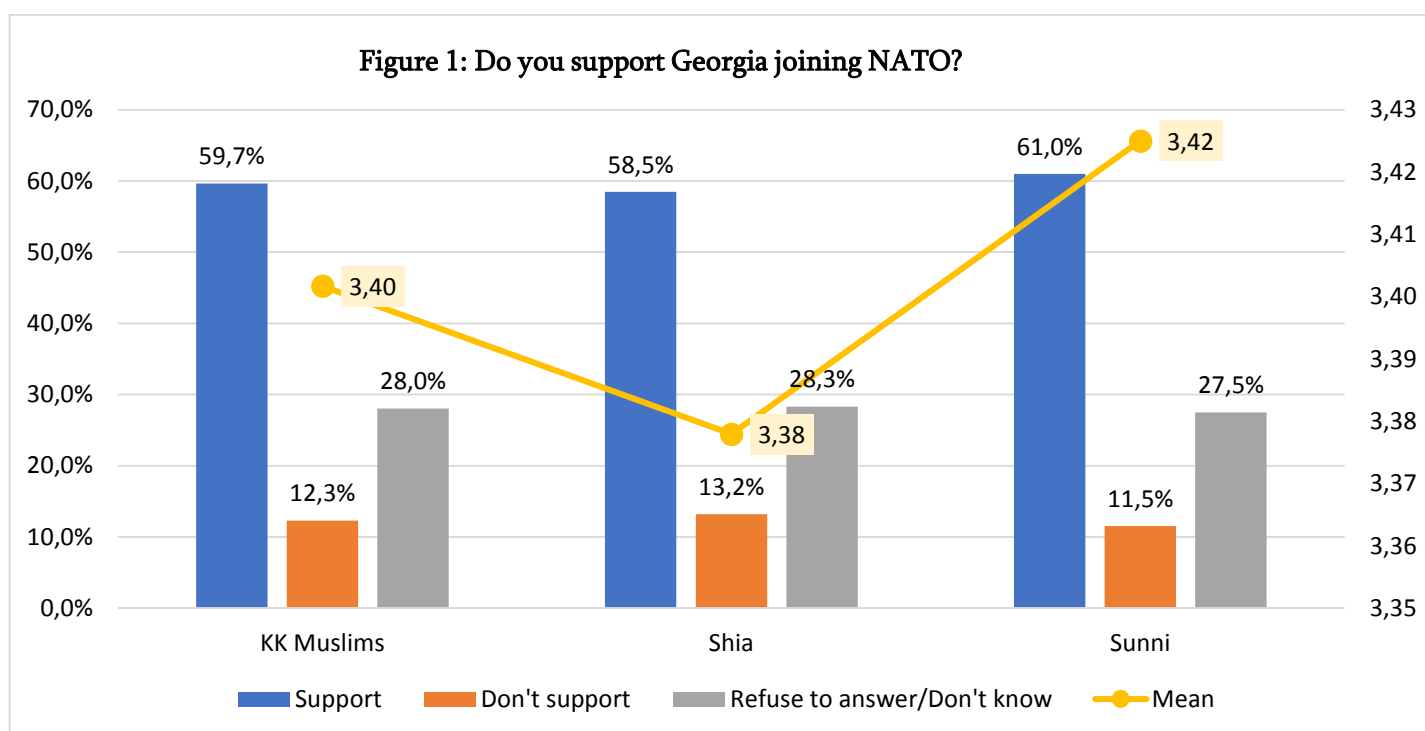


Table 13. Religiousness and support of joining NATO (%)

Do you support Georgia joining NATO?	Strongly religious	Averagely Religious	Non-religious
Fully support	19.6	47.7	51.1
Somewhat Support	8.6	10.1	18.2
Somewhat against	10.4	7	8.8
Fully against	10.4	4	1.5
Refuse to answer	1.8	1	1.5
Don't know	49.1	30.2	19

More than a third believe that their economic situation will improve after Georgia's accession to NATO (36.6%), 25.1% believe it will not affect their family's economic indicators, and more than a third, 34.9%, find it difficult to answer, which is noteworthy in itself. The share of those who are resistant ("will get worse") is very small (1.6%).

The Shiites are somewhat more pro-NATO in this regard. 39.3% of them expect positive economic results, while among Sunnis, this figure is 34%. It is also interesting that Sunnis have a more indifferent position - 29.6% believe that joining NATO will not affect their financial situation, while only 20.8% of Shiites think so.

Correlational analysis showed that religious respondents are also less pro-Western here, although the trend is not clearly defined. Instead, it was clearly revealed that the most optimistic about economic increments after joining NATO was expressed by affluent respondents. 53.2% of them expect economic benefits, while this figure is 36.3% and 36.6% among poor and people with average economic status, respectively.

Deploying the troops of other countries/international organizations for the security of Georgia

As part of the survey, the respondents were asked which country or international organization's troops should be stationed on the territory of Georgia for its security. It is interesting that the largest part of the respondents, a third (33%), think that no foreign troops should be stationed in the country. A quarter (26.4%) favors the deployment of NATO units, followed by fellow NATO member Turkey with 16.7%. The opinions of Shiites and Sunnis participating in the survey are almost identical on this issue.

Table 14. Which of these country/international organization's troops should be deployed in Georgia for its security (%)?

USA	3.8
Russia	.7
NATO	26.4
Turkey	16.7
Iran	.3
None	33.0
Refuse to answer	4.2
Don't know	14.9

Focus group sessions and interviews revealed that a significant part of the population of the region does not welcome the placement of foreign troops on the territory of Georgia. They note that this may provoke protests. "In general, we welcome NATO, we support if Georgia joins NATO, but the entry of a foreign army here can cause excitement, or be used by outside (hostile forces from abroad) for provocation."¹⁶

As a result of the correlational analysis, it was found that the number of respondents who welcome the placement of NATO troops on the territory of Georgia increases along with the decrease in the degree of

¹⁶ Shia women. 28.01.2022.

religiosity. If the armed forces of the alliance are welcomed by only 7.4% of strongly religious, this figure is 22.9% among “moderates”, and 34.8% among the non-religious.

The leader of the “Turkic World”

The clear majority of respondents (80.3%) consider President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey to be the leader of the Turkic World.¹⁷ Respondents had an opportunity to choose other proposed leaders or to name their own priorities. Nevertheless, the respondents, apart from Erdogan, do not perceive practically anyone as the leader of the Turkic World. The rate of President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev is almost insignificant (0.5%). It is worth noting that 16% of the respondents had difficulty or did not name anyone, and up to 3% indicated that such a leader does not exist at all. Analyzing the issue from a Sunni-Shia point of view, no significant difference was found - the leader of Sunni-dominated Turkey is perceived as the leader of the Turkic World almost as much by the surveyed Shia (79.3%) as by the Sunnis (81.4%). Data analysis showed that the degree of belief affects the attitude towards Erdogan. Averagely (90%) and strongly religious (84%) respondents are more likely than non-religious (70.8%) to see Erdogan as the leader of the Turkish world.

Table 15. Naming the leader of Turkic World in the prism of religiousness (%)

Who is the leader of Turkic World?	Strongly religious	Averagely Religious	Non-religious
Recep Tayyip Erdogan	84	90	70.8
Ilham Aliyev	0.6	0.5	0.7
Nursultan Nazarbayev	-	1.5	-
None	0.6	0.5	4.4
Refuse to answer	3.7	4	8.8
Don't know	11	3.5	15.3

Data statistical analysis revealed that the respondents' economic situation also affects the attitude towards Erdogan. Respondents from poor (85.4%) and averagely wealthy families (82.9%) are more likely to see Erdogan as the leader of the Turkic World than affluent ones (68.8%).

Sources of information about current events in Georgia and abroad

¹⁷ The term "Turkic world" refers to the states inhabited by Turkic-speaking peoples and their compactly settled areas in other countries. See also Köstem, Seçkin. When Can Idea Entrepreneurs Influence Foreign Policy? Explaining the Rise of the “Turkic World” in Turkish Foreign Policy. Foreign Policy Analysis, Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2017, pp. 722–740.

The survey showed that the respondents get more information about Azerbaijan (almost daily - 54.2%; several times a week - 19.3%; at least once a week - 11.8%) than about Georgia (respectively, 39.7%; 15.1%; 14.8%). In third place, as expected, is Turkey (19.2%; 30.2%; 16.8%), followed by Russia (5.3%; 12.0%; 11.3%) and Iran (1.3%; 1.8%; 3.5%). The correlation analysis showed that the higher the economic status of the respondents' families, the higher the share of those who receive information about Georgia and Azerbaijan almost daily.

The vast majority (81.5%) of respondents receive information about socio-political and religious events in Georgia in the Azerbaijani language. Only 12% get the information in the Georgian language. According to religious groups, the general trend is maintained, although the share of Sunnis (14.4%) among those who received information in Georgian is slightly higher, compared to Shiites (9.7%). As a result of the data analysis, it is clear that along with the increase in the economic status of the respondents' families, the share of respondents who were informed about the socio-political and religious issues of Georgia in the Georgian language increases significantly.

Table 16. Economic status and the language in which respondents receive information about Georgia (%)

In what language do you receive information about socio-political and religious events in Georgia?	Poor	Average	Affluent
Georgia	7.3	14.0	24.1
Azerbaijani	88.8	74.9	68.5
Russian	0.9	6.1	2.8
Turkish	2.7	4.5	4.6
Don't know	0.3	0.6	-

The respondents were also asked to name the sources from which they get information on current socio-political events in Georgia. As it turns out, the main source of information for the respondents is Azerbaijani media, followed by Georgian media, informal sources and Turkish media.

Table 17. Economic status of KK Muslim population (%)

	KK Muslims	Shia	Sunni

Georgian TV channels	16.3	16.3	16.2
Georgian print media	0.4	0.7	0.1
Georgian online media	6.8	5.9	7.8
Georgian radio stations	0.6	0.5	0.7
Russian media	4.6	4.0	5.2
Azerbaijani media	35.6	36.1	35.1
Armenian media	0.2	0.2	0.1
Turkish media	16.9	17.1	16.6
Informal sources	17.7	18.0	17.3
Do not get information	0.5	0.7	0.3
Refuse to answer	0.4	0.5	0.2
Don't know	0.2	-	0.4

Conclusion

A representative population survey conducted among the Muslim population of KK, as well as focus groups, in-depth interviews and data analysis showed that the difference between Shiites and Sunnis is expressed more in demographic characteristics than in foreign priorities, where differences are less pronounced and consistent. Shiites, who represent the majority of the ethnic Azerbaijani community and predominate in the economic and cultural center of the region (the city of Marneuli), are more integrated in the urban information space, more informed and economically wealthy than the Sunnis. At the same time, a higher degree of religiosity was observed among Shiites. They perceive more deprivation and the degree of conformity is less in this group.

In terms of the triadic nexus, the opinions of Shiites and Sunnis about the two ethnically kin states, predominantly Shiite Azerbaijan and predominantly Sunni Turkey, are almost identical, and this similarity is consistent across the entire range of indicators. This clearly points to the fact that the formation of foreign political priorities of the research group is more influenced by the ethnic factor, while the influence of the Shiite-Sunni dichotomy is less manifested.

The most interesting and, at the same time, thought-provoking result of the research is the lack of proper awareness towards such important institutions as the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance. A very large part of the interviewees have not formed their own opinion on joining these organizations, as well as on the economic benefits received from it, which should become a kind of action incentive for both the government and the civil sector.

In addition, the share of respondents who consider the EU and, especially, the USA as Georgia's main friend, is remarkably small. Alarming, many respondents perceive the USA as the main enemy of Islam, and

Russia as its main friend. Also, there are more people who support Georgia joining the Russian-led Eurasian Union than oppose it.

The research showed that the foreign priorities of an individual in the ethnic Azerbaijani community of KK are less dependent on his/her age and gender. Here the degree of religiosity and economic status are decisive - the more religious and poorer the respondent is, the more pro-Russian and anti-western he/she is, and on the contrary, pro-western sentiments are much higher among the affluent and non-religious people.

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