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# Joining the club: explaining alliance preferences in the South Caucasus

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## ABSTRACT

Foreign policy alliance formation among small states in the aggregate has been extensively examined in the literature, but mass opinion and preferences on alliance formation in these states remains understudied. To address this gap, this article examines individual alliance preferences in two small states in the South Caucasus region: Georgia and Armenia. While most Armenians seem to support Armenian membership in CSTO and most Georgians appear to believe that Georgia should pursue NATO membership, some Armenians and Georgians prefer equal relations with both security alliances. The paper suggests that threat perception influences alliance formation preferences at the individual level and advances three testable pre-registered propositions. First, individuals who perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as the primary threat to their state tend to support alignment with the Russian-led CSTO. Second, individuals who view the main threat to their state coming from Russia are predisposed to support NATO membership. Finally, individuals who believe that tensions between Russia and the West are detrimental to their country are more inclined to support equal relations with both NATO and CSTO. In general, the evidence is consistent with these conjectures. We conclude with important qualifications and key implications for the study of mass opinion on alliance formation.

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## Introduction

Since Armenia and Georgia restored their independence after the fall of Soviet Union, both countries have been forced to seek alignments with external powers to enable their survival in the region. While Georgia has sought to join the Euro-Atlantic area, particularly after Saakashvili came to power in 2003, Armenia has instead closely aligned with Russia and became a party to the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Armenia's recent decision to extend the treaty on Russian military bases in Armenia, to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and to establish a common defence system over Armenian airspace, have brought it even closer into Russia's orbit. By contrast, Georgia has attempted to distance itself from Russia and integrate into the Western security architecture. Although Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze had been coerced to sign CST, he refused to renew the treaty, and attempted

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to formulate a more balanced foreign policy involving closer ties with the West. Later, President Mikheil Saakashvili moved the country even farther away from Russia and made consistent efforts to obtain NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP).

Although Armenia's alignment with Russia and Georgia's aspiration for NATO membership has been studied at the state and elite levels (e.g. Gvalia et al. 2013), public opinion on foreign policy alliance formation in these states remains largely understudied (Siroky, Simmons, and Gvalia 2017; Mueller 2011). However, the growing influence of public opinion on Armenian and Georgian domestic politics is becoming harder to ignore. Although the role of public opinion in domestic politics was minimal during the early years of Armenian and Georgian independence, its impact has grown considerably in recent years. In 2003, for instance, public opinion and mass demonstrations forced President Shevardnadze to resign and propelled Mikheil Saakashvili to power in Georgia. The impact of public opinion was also apparent when President Saakashvili was forced to call early elections because of public opposition against corruption allegations in 2007.

President Saakashvili applied for NATO's MAP during the Bucharest Summit, in part, because many Georgians approved of the Georgian government's goal to join NATO during the national referendum. In response to the Russian soldier's murder of seven local Armenian family members, Armenians protested in front of the Russian consulate in the Armenian city of Gyumri, where the Russian military base is stationed. The protests led Armenian courts to issue a life imprisonment for the Russian soldier (BBC 2016). Armenians also gathered in Yerevan's streets to protest against the rise in electricity prices, which is regulated by the Russian power network. The mass demonstrations, called "Electric Yerevan," were so severe that some speculated that even in pro-Russian Armenia there would be a colour revolution. The Kremlin was compelled to make several concessions to the Armenian government. As a result of the demonstrations, electricity prices decreased (Danielyan 2015). Recent mass demonstrations in both Yerevan and Tbilisi, and the subsequent high-level resignations in both Armenia and Georgia, show just how important public opinion has become in these small largely elite run countries, even in the area of foreign policy, which has traditionally been more immune to public opinion than domestic politics.<sup>1</sup>

Given the increased importance of public opinion in Armenia and Georgia, it is worthwhile to investigate the factors that seem to govern differences in individual foreign policy alliance preferences in the South Caucasus. We argue that threat perception is central to the war-torn South Caucasus. While Georgians have attempted to pursue NATO membership to counter the Russian threat, particularly after the Georgian-Russian war, Armenians have expressed support for Armenia's membership in CSTO to balance against Azerbaijan and Turkey. Meanwhile, other Armenians and Georgians believe the best path is to have equal relations with both alliances. To systematically address these arguments, we pre-specified and pre-registered three testable propositions.<sup>2</sup> First, we hypothesize that the respondents in Armenia who perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as a threat are more likely to express support for CSTO membership and less likely to prefer alignment with NATO. Second, we conjecture that respondents in Georgia who perceive Russia as a threat are more likely to express support for NATO membership and less likely to support CSTO membership. Finally, individuals who perceive tensions between Russia and the West as detrimental to their country are much more likely to support equal relations with both security alliances.

We assess these pre-specified conjectures using the 2017 Caucasus Barometer and model the choice between alliances using a Bayesian multinomial regression framework. The results suggest that threat perception in South Caucasus is absolutely fundamental to understanding domestic politics and alliance preferences in the region. Russian state-supported media has been very active in influencing regional domestic politics. For instance, the Armenian ethnic minority in Georgia has been deeply influenced by Russian media claiming that once Georgia becomes the member of the NATO, Turkish military bases will settle in Georgia.<sup>3</sup> As a result, Armenians in Georgia have strongly opposed Georgia's aspiration for NATO membership (Seib 2014).

The rest of the paper proceeds in four parts. The first part briefly examines Armenia's alignment with Russia and CSTO and Georgia's attempts to move closer to NATO membership. The second part reviews some of the most relevant literature on public opinion and foreign policy and presents the major hypotheses. The third part describes the research design. The fourth part discusses the main results. The final part concludes and considers the paper's implications, limitations and future directions.

## Threats and alliances in Georgia and Armenia

The geostrategic importance of the South Caucasus in linking the east (Central Asia) to the west (Europe) and the north (Russia) to the south (Middle East) – as well as its pivotal role in the delivery of the Caspian hydro-carbonates to the western markets as opposed to the war-torn Middle East energy route – have increased external interest in the region. The divergent external interests also have made the region one of the most “coveted pieces of territory in the World” (Aydin 1999, 118). Since the South Caucasus region has been a locus of rivalries and competition among many external players, including Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the West, the small states of the region (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) have been compelled to figure out how best to survive, using foreign policy alignments to further their interests. In response to these power dynamics in the South Caucasus, Georgia has attempted to drag itself out of Russia's orbit and join NATO, whereas Armenia has sided with Russia and joined Collective Security Treaty (Cornell 2001, 354).

The agreement between Armenia and Russia on Russia's protection of Armenia's non-CIS borders has allowed Russia to exert its political influence in the South Caucasus (Trenin 1996, 97). The agreement entitled “Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance” (1997) provided a formal framework for military ties between Armenia and Russia (Allison 2001, 446), and established a mechanism for mutual military support. Under this mechanism, the parties agreed to mutual consultation and to provide military support when one party “is attacked or considers itself threatened by a third party” (Mirzoyan 2010, 38). By contrast, Georgia refused to renew the CST and withdrew from it (Cornell 2001, 365), because the treaty “exist[ed] on paper and there ... [were] no real practical results” (quoted in Saat 2005, 3). At the same time, Georgia began aspiring for NATO membership<sup>4</sup> (Trenin, Malashko, and Lieven 2004, 170).

When the CST was renewed and became the CSTO, Armenia strengthened its military ties with Russia and imported many Russian weapons.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Saakashvili's Georgia sought NATO membership, and applied for NATO's MAP during the 2008 Bucharest Summit. Although Georgia's attempt to move out of Russia's sphere of influence brought deadly consequences, the Georgian government has continued to insist on

getting the MAP (Gvalia et al. 2013).<sup>6</sup> While many studies examined Armenia's alignment with Russia and Georgia's stated goal in joining NATO, individual preferences on alliance formation in these states remain something of a black box. Next, we review some theories that may help shed light on individual alliance preferences.

## Theories of public opinion on threats and alliances

Conventional wisdom holds that ordinary citizens are not interested in foreign policy and they lack sufficient information about foreign policy issues to develop coherent opinions (Lippmann 1922; Almond 1960; Converse 1964). However, the research on attitudes of ordinary Americans about the American involvement in the Vietnam War suggests that American public had sufficient knowledge of foreign policy issues to form reasonable attitudes (Verba et al. 1967, 319–320; Verba and Brody 1970). This opened a new research avenue in study of public opinion, which attempted to identify the determinants of public preferences (Caspary 1970; Mueller 1973; Shapiro and Page 1988).

Recent literature on public opinion and foreign policy has focused on several factors. First, fundamental beliefs about the use of armed force and war have been found an important determinant of individual preferences on foreign policy issues. Bartels (1994) studied the opinions of American citizens on defence expenses and found that the individual beliefs on the use of armed forces for the resolution of international problems were the primary factor that determined their preferences on defence expenses. Likewise, Eichenberg and Stoll (2015) concluded that the opinions of Americans and Europeans on defence expenses and their support for military budgets were strongly and consistently correlated with their fundamental beliefs about war. Fundamental beliefs on war are also a major determinant of individual opinions on external military intervention. For instance, Everts and Isernia (2015) concluded that individual support for military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan was strongly correlated with whether they had a dovish or hawkish foreign policy orientation. In short, ideology is thought to be an essential determinant of individuals' fundamental beliefs about war and their preferences on foreign policy issues (Eichenberg and Stoll 2015). Other scholars have emphasized the importance of threat perception. Huddy, Feldman, and Weber (2007) find that the sense of insecurity among some Americans increased with threat perception, originating from possible future terror acts and this led to a rise in individual support for stricter US visa policy and American involvement in Afghanistan. Gadarian (2010) finds that "individuals who perceive more threat from terrorism support more hawkish foreign policy". Gordon and Arian (2001) and Landau et al. (2004) argue that when the individuals have strong feelings of threat, anxiety, and risk, they express greater support for strong leadership that takes punitive measures. Gordon and Arian (2001) also suggest that when individuals perceive an external threat, they are disposed to support governmental instruments that are used to tackle the external threat and provide protection. The rise of group solidarity (Turner et al. 1984), a firm reliance on enemy perception (Hermann 1986), ethnocentrism (Feldman and Stenner 1997), and support for NATO membership (Kostadinova 2000) are also linked to threat perception. Kostadinova (2000) argues that threat perception from Russia has been an essential reason why many individuals in East European countries have supported NATO membership.

## Hypotheses

Building on these threat based arguments, we pre-specified three primary hypotheses and test them using data from the 2017 Caucasus Barometer.

H1a: Respondents in Georgia who perceive Russia as the main threat are more likely to express support for NATO membership (compared to a preference for equal relations with both NATO and CSTO).

H1b: Respondents in Georgia who perceive Russia as the main threat are less likely to support CSTO membership (compared to a preference for equal relations with both NATO and CSTO).

Although support for NATO membership has slightly declined among Georgians, it is still relatively strong (Gilbreath and Shubladze 2017). In June 2017, a public attitudes survey, which CRRC-Georgia conducted for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), demonstrated that 66% Georgians approved “Georgian government’s stated goal to join NATO” (NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2017). This number is quite high compared to favourable public view of NATO among NATO members<sup>7</sup> (Stokes 2017). The recent decline in support for NATO membership among Georgians has been linked to “less confrontational views [of Georgians] towards Russia” (Gilbreath and Shubladze 2017). The NDI Public attitudes survey series in 2017 found that Georgian public support for Georgia’s stated goal of joining NATO declines (NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia April, June, December 2017). While Caucasus Barometer 2013 indicates that 58% Georgians supported Georgia’s NATO membership, this number became 38% in Caucasus Barometer 2015. If this decrease in support for NATO membership is associated with Georgian’s decreased threat perception from Russia, as fewer Georgians now view Russia as the main enemy of Georgia, we should observe this pattern also at the individual level.<sup>8</sup>

The second set of hypotheses is the same as H1a and H1b, but concern Armenia.

H2a: Respondents in Armenia who perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as the main threat are more likely to express support for CSTO membership (compared to a preference for equal relations with both NATO and CSTO).

H2b: Respondents in Armenia who perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as the main threat are less likely to support NATO membership (compared to a preference for equal relations with both NATO and CSTO).

Armenian public opinion has backed Armenia’s alignment with Russia. While the data (the Caucasus Barometer 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015) demonstrate that Armenians’ support for Armenian membership in the EU and their trust for the EU declined before and after Armenian government signed the Eurasian Customs Union,<sup>9</sup> Armenians have generally viewed Russia as their security guarantor and supported Armenia’s alignment with Russia. Kempe maintains that “... Russia still matters much more for Armenia as far as hard security is concerned” (quoted in CRRC 2014). Delcour also insists that “Russia is widely seen as the security guarantor by the general Armenian public...” (quoted in CRRC 2014), and the 2017 Pew Research survey indicates that the majority (83%) of Armenians view Russia as a protector (Diamant 2017). The four-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2016, which resulted in an Azerbaijan’s victory, has only

increased Armenians' threat perception of Azerbaijan and pushed Armenia closer to CSTO.<sup>10</sup>

Third, Armenians and Georgians have been caught in the rivalry between Russia and the West. The Georgian-Russian War and the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is arguably one of the deadly consequences of tensions between the West and Russia. In response to the US's recognition of Kosovo, Russia recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (The New York Times 2008). Those individuals who see tensions between Russia and the West as the main source of their insecurity will prefer to have *equal* relations with both CSTO and NATO. Equal relations with both organizations will both provide them security against external threats, it is thought, while avoiding getting embroiled in great power rivalry between the West and Russia that could threaten their security. This leads to the final hypothesis.

H3a: The greater Georgian respondents perceive that tensions between Russia and the Western European countries and the US are detrimental their country, the more likely they are to support equal relations with both CSTO and NATO (compared to a preference for closer relations with either NATO and CSTO).

H3b: The greater Armenian respondents perceive that tensions between Russia and the Western European countries and the US are detrimental their country, the more likely they are to support equal relations with both CSTO and NATO (compared to a preference for closer relations with either NATO and CSTO).

In short, we suggest that the study of *threat perception* – in the form of “main enemy” and “alliance tensions are detrimental” – is central to understanding individual preferences on alliance formation. First, the more respondents in Armenia perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as a threat, the more likely they are to prefer alignment with CSTO *and* the less likely with NATO. Second, the more respondents perceive Russia as a threat, the more likely they prefer alignment with NATO *and* less likely with CSTO. Third, the greater respondents perceive the Russia-West rivalry as detrimental, the more likely they prefer *equal* relations with CSTO and NATO.<sup>11</sup>

## Research design

The study utilizes data collected by Caucasus Research Resource Center in 2017 through a nationally representative survey of public opinion in both Armenia and Georgia (Caucasus Barometer 2017).

### The dependent variable

The outcome of interest is individual-level support for NATO, CSTO, or both equally (a multinomial outcome with three choices), which we measure with the following question from the 2017 Questionnaire: “In your opinion, what would be the best choice for /Armenia/Georgia to ensure its security?” This question allows the respondents to choose among: “joining CSTO,” “joining NATO,” “having equal relationships with both,” “don't know/refuse to answer.”<sup>12</sup>

### **The independent variables**

The primary hypotheses will be assessed using two survey questions. The first question is “in your opinion, which country is currently the main enemy of /Armenia/Georgia?” This question is open-ended. The respondents had four choices to this question: name a country (no given list), none (–5), don’t know (–1) and refuse to answer (–2). We recoded this into an indicator variable that equals 1 if respondents in Georgia named Russia, or if respondents in Armenians named Azerbaijan or Turkey.

To measure H3 – that Russia-West tensions are detrimental to their country – we use the question “Please tell me how much would you agree or disagree with the following statement: Tensions between Russia and the Western European countries and the US are detrimental to Armenia/Georgia/. Do you (1) completely agree, (2) somewhat agree, (3) somewhat disagree, (4) completely disagree, (5) DK/RA?” We recoded this variable so that completely agree was 5 and completely disagree was 1, and recoded DK as the middle category.<sup>13</sup>

### **Control variables**

We include measures of respondent-level educational background, religiosity, language skills and income level as potential confounders, drawing on previous research studies. For education,<sup>14</sup> we use the question of “What is the highest level of education you have achieved to date?”<sup>15</sup> Religiosity has also been studied as a factor influencing individual foreign policy preferences (Jelen 1994; Guth 2004; Jacobson 2005; Baumgartner, Francia, and Morris 2008). Siroky, Simmons, and Gvalia (2017) maintain that religious Georgians are more likely to support closer relationships with Russia, all else equal. We use the following question to control for religiosity: “Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?”<sup>16</sup> Language skills may also influence the individual attitudes about foreign policy orientation, since these skills allow the individuals to access to information about a certain country (White et al. 2002). To control for the language skills we utilize the following question: “using this CARD, please tell me which one of these levels best describes your ability in the following [language].”<sup>17</sup> To control for income level, we use the following question: “Household income is a sum of monetary income of all household members. Speaking of monetary income of all your household members last month after all taxes are paid, to which of the following groups does your household belong?”<sup>18</sup> We recoded the income level in increasing order to make the interpretation more intuitive.

### **Model**

We use a (Bayesian) multinomial logistic regression framework to assess the relationship between individual threat perception and alliance preferences. We use “equal relations” (with both NATO and CSTO) as the base category against which to compare preferences to “align more with CSTO,” and “align more with NATO”.<sup>19</sup> Relative to the “equal” position, in which a respondent prefers that his/her country align equally with CSTO and NATO, we estimate the effect of our primary covariates (derived from H1–H3) on alignment toward either NATO or CSTO.

## Data analysis and discussions

To test the pre-specified hypotheses, we first run multinomial models and then present our results in the form of the first differences with 95% confidence intervals. At the end of this section, we also provide a table that indicates whether our pre-specified hypotheses are consistent with the data. The results of the data analysis are presented in the following tables. Tables 1–3 present the first differences in Georgia, the first differences in Armenia and the list of hypotheses respectively. Tables 4 and 5 present the results of the multinomial models. To address the survey design effect on the standard errors, we also estimated three versions of model 1, in which the survey design effects were taken into consideration. Table 6 (Georgia) and Table (7) compare the results of these versions of model 1. Meanwhile, the results of the first differences are graphed in Figures 1 and 2. While the first three tables are given in the main body of the text, Tables 4–7 are presented in Appendix B and Appendix D respectively. Both figures are given in Appendix C.

The multinomial models provide two sets of coefficients, each set for the effect of the independent variables on preferring alignment with CSTO or NATO relative to the reference category. Tables 4 and 5 present the results of analysis about Georgian and Armenian public views on foreign policy alliance formation respectively. Tables 4 and 5 are given in Appendix B. Table 4 demonstrates that Georgians who perceive Russia as the main threat are significantly *more* likely to prefer alignment with NATO relative to preferring *both* CSTO and NATO, consistent with H1a. They are also significantly *less* likely to prefer alignment with CSTO relative to preferring both CSTO and NATO, consistent with H1b. Thus, as expected, we find that threat perception is an important predictor of alliance preferences in Georgia. Regarding the third hypothesis, the results show that the Georgians who see tensions between the West and Russia as detrimental to their country are significantly *less* likely to prefer CSTO (relative to both). Although they are also less likely to prefer NATO (relative to both), the effect is not statistically distinguishable from zero.

Table 5 provides the results of the analysis for Armenia. It indicates that Armenians are significantly *less* likely to prefer alignment with NATO (relative to both). However, despite our expectations, Armenians who perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as the most threatening are not significantly *more* likely to prefer alignment with CSTO. Thus, while the results are consistent with H2b, they do not support H2a. Regarding the third hypothesis, the results indicate that Armenians who see the tensions between the West and Russian as detrimental to their country are significantly *less* likely to prefer NATO (relative to both). Although they are also less likely to prefer CSTO (relative to both) when they view tensions between

**Table 1.** First differences in Georgia.

	Threat perception of Russia		Tensions are detrimental	
	CSTO	NATO	CSTO	NATO
First differences	−0.32	0.34	−0.07	0.01
	(−0.37, −0.27)	(0.30, 0.38)	(−0.13, −0.01)	(−0.11, 0.07)

Note: Table provides information about the first differences in preferring alignment with CSTO and NATO. Each cell contains information about the first differences and the upper and lower bounds of these differences with 95% interval. For example, both first differences indicator (−0.32) and its upper (−0.37) and lower (−0.27) bounds for the effect of threat perception in preferring CSTO are negative, because Georgians are expected to less likely support alignment with CSTO when they perceive threat from Russia.

**Table 2.** First differences in Armenia.

	Threat Perception of Azerbaijan/Turkey		Tensions are Detrimental	
	CSTO	NATO	CSTO	NATO
First differences	0.13 (0.00, 0.26)	-0.17 (-0.30, -0.03)	0.07 (-0.02, 0.15)	-0.07 (-0.14, -0.01)

Note: Table provides information about the first differences in preferring alignment with CSTO and NATO. Each cell contains information about the first differences and the upper and lower bounds of these differences with 95% interval. For example, both first differences indicator (-0.17) and its upper (-0.30) and lower (-0.03) bounds for the effect of threat perception in preferring NATO are negative, because Armenians are expected to less likely support alignment with NATO when they perceive threat from Azerbaijan or Turkey.

the West and Russia as detrimental to their country, the effect is not statistically distinguishable from zero. In sum, Armenians who perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as a threat are less likely to prefer closer ties with NATO, while those who see tensions between Russia and the West as detrimental are most likely to prefer aligning their country with both NATO and CSTO. Table 3 summarizes whether the data are consistent with the proposed hypotheses. Our findings also suggest that language skills have a significant effect on whether Armenians and Georgians are more likely to prefer alignment with CSTO or NATO. In both Armenia and Georgia, the people with high English language skills prefer alignment with NATO.

To illustrate the substantive effects of these factors in explaining individual preferences on alliance formation, we present our results in the form of first differences with 95% confidence intervals. Figure 1 (Georgia) and Figure 2 (Armenia) illustrate these first differences between preferring CSTO, NATO or both organizations when the respondents perceives threat from these countries (versus when they do not) and when the respondent views tensions as very detrimental versus not very detrimental. These first differences are calculated from model 1. The vertical axis is the probability that a respondent is in

**Table 3.** Hypotheses.

	Hypotheses	Whether Confirmed by the data analysis
H1a	Respondents in Georgia who perceive Russia as the main threat are more likely to express support for NATO membership (compared to a preference for equal relations with both NATO and CSTO)	Yes
H1b	Respondents in Georgia who perceive Russia as the main threat are less likely to support CSTO membership (compared to a preference for equal relations with both NATO and CSTO)	Yes
H2a	Respondents in Armenia who perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as the main threat are more likely to express support for CSTO membership (compared to a preference for equal relations with both NATO and CSTO)	No <sup>a</sup>
H2b	Respondents in Armenia who perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as the main threat are less likely to support NATO membership (compared to a preference for equal relations with both NATO and CSTO)	Yes
H3a	The greater Georgian respondents perceive that tensions between Russia and the Western European countries and the US are detrimental their country, the more likely they are to support equal relations with both CSTO and NATO (compared to a preference for closer relations with either NATO and CSTO)	Yes
H3b	The greater Armenian respondents perceive that tensions between Russia and the Western European countries and the US are detrimental their country, the more likely they are to support equal relations with both CSTO and NATO (compared to a preference for closer relations with either NATO and CSTO)	Yes

<sup>a</sup>Although this hypothesis is not confirmed by the data, the first differences suggest that Armenians are predicted to prefer alignment with CSTO when they perceive threat from Azerbaijan or Turkey.

that category, and the horizontal line represents the three categories of the dependent variable. The top of each figure shows the substantive effects of *threat perception* on the predicted outcome while the bottom of the each figure shows the effect of *tensions*. Figures 1 and 2 are given in Appendix C.

The top graph in Figure 1 indicates that the predicted probability of preferring NATO increases when Georgians perceive Russia as a threat. The top graph in Figure 1 also shows that there is a significant decrease in the predicted probability of preferring CSTO when Georgians perceive Russian as a threat. The first differences are significantly different from zero with 95% confidence intervals. The bottom graph in Figure 1 suggests that there is a slight decrease in the predicted probability of preferring CSTO or NATO (relative to both), when Georgians believe that the tensions between Russia and the West are detrimental to Georgia's security. Georgians prefer aligning with both organizations when they view the Russian-West tensions harmful to the security of Georgia. Thus, while the predicted probabilities of preferring NATO and CSTO decrease, the predicted probability of preferring both organizations increases when respondents view tensions as detrimental.

Figure 2 illustrates the same for Armenia. First, Armenians are more likely to support CSTO and disapprove of alignment with NATO when they perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as their main threats. Armenians who perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as the most threatening prefer alignment with CSTO. When respondents perceive the main threat coming from Turkey or Azerbaijan, they are also less likely to prefer alignment with NATO. Second, as expected, the bottom graph of Figure 2 suggests that Armenians are more likely to prefer to align with both organizations when they believe that tensions between the West and Russia are detrimental to Armenia's security. The bottom graph indicates that Armenians' support for NATO membership (relative to both) declines when they view tensions between the West and Russia as detrimental to their country. However, contrary to our expectation, the predicted probability of preferring CSTO also rises when Armenians believe that tensions between Russia and the West are harmful for the security of Armenia.

Tables 1(Georgia) and 2(Armenia) summarize the first differences results with 95% confidence interval. The numbers within the parentheses are the upper and lower bounds of the confidence interval. Table 1 illustrates the first differences for the effect of the *threat perception* and *tensions* variables on the individual foreign policy alliance preferences in Georgia. The table demonstrates that the first differences indicator for the *threat perception* variable in preferring CSTO (relative to preferring both organizations) is negative and the same indicator in preferring NATO is positive, because Georgians' threat perception from Russia makes them less likely support alignment with CSTO and more likely express support for NATO membership. The Table 1 also shows that the first differences indicator in the *tensions* variable for preferring CSTO (relative to both) is negative, because when Georgians view the West-Russian tensions as detrimental to Georgia, they tend to support alignment with both organizations rather than just CSTO. However, despite our expectations the *tensions* variable does not significantly affect individual preferences on NATO membership.

Table 2 illustrates the first differences in the effect of the *threat perception* and *tensions* variables on the individual foreign policy alliance preferences in Armenia. The table demonstrates that the first differences indicator for the threat perception variable in preferring CSTO is positive and the same indicator in preferring NATO is negative, because

Armenians' threat perception from Azerbaijan or Turkey makes them more likely support alignment with CSTO and less likely express support for NATO membership. The [Table 2](#) also shows that the first differences indicator in the *tensions* variable for preferring NATO is negative, because when Armenians view the West-Russian tensions as detrimental to Armenia, they tend to support alignment with both organizations rather than just NATO. However, despite our expectations the *tensions* variable does not significantly affect individual preferences on alignment with CSTO.

## Conclusion

The recent demonstrations in both Georgia and Armenia and the subsequent resignations of Georgian and Armenian Prime Ministers suggest that the study of public opinion in these countries, which has often been ignored, does indeed matter in studying their foreign policy and alliance behaviour. While the alliance formation behaviour of small states has been studied widely in academic literature, the study of the individual preferences on alliance formation in these states has been subject to less theorizing and analysis. To address this gap, we asked why some Armenians seem to support alignment with Russia and Armenian membership in CSTO and some Georgians appear to believe that Georgia should pursue NATO membership, while other Georgians and Armenians prefer equal relationships with both security alliances.

We theorized that this variation is partly due to threat perception, namely who they perceive as the country's main threat, and beliefs about whether tensions between the West and Russia are detrimental to their country. The results of the analysis indicate that threat and tension perceptions are central to understanding public opinion on foreign policy alliance formation in these two small states of the South Caucasus. In line our expectations, we found that Armenians who perceive Azerbaijan or Turkey as the main threat are significantly less likely to support alliance with NATO. Similarly, the analysis demonstrates that Georgians who perceive Russia as the main threat are significantly more likely to express support for NATO membership and less likely to support CSTO membership. In particular, the analysis suggests that the effect of threat perception variable is larger among Georgians than among Armenians.

While Georgians have attempted to pursue NATO membership against the Russian threat, particularly after the Georgian-Russian war, Armenians have expressed support for closer ties with Russia and Armenia's membership in CSTO because of a fear of Azerbaijan or Turkey. However, the analysis gives an indication that some Armenians and Georgians who believe that the tensions between the West and Russia are detrimental to their country are slightly more inclined to prefer equal relations with both alliances, although this effect is not statistically significant.

The results suggest two implications: one theoretical and one policy oriented. In terms of theoretical implications, the study is among the first contributions to theory building and testing individual alliance preferences in small states. While academic scholarship has consistently studied small state foreign policy behaviour after the fall of the Soviet Union, the study of public opinion in small states has been largely ignored until recently. This study contributes to our understanding of public opinion in small states, which are caught in the great power rivalry similar to one in South Caucasus, and the role of threat perception.

The pre-registration of these hypotheses played an essential role in the development of this article, guiding the data analysis in a clear direction and preventing post-hoc theorizing. Although we deviated from what we had pre-specified (e.g. recoding one of IVs (*tensions*), changing/dropping some of control variables (*the effect of media*) because we lacked the relevant survey questions in the Caucasus Barometer 2017 Questionnaire), the pre-registration largely held us to what we had promised.

In terms of policy implications, the research results imply that addressing regional threat perception in the South Caucasus is critical to understanding and influencing domestic politics of the region's small states. For example, the results imply that Russia should attempt to decrease its threatening image among Georgians and create a positive image. Consistent with the findings of another study in this special issue ("Threats to National Security and Public Support for Integration: The Case of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh"), our findings suggest that security concerns play an essential role in shaping public opinion about unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus.

These results indicate that the study of individual preferences in the South Caucasus has become more important as public opinion gains in influence in Armenian and Georgian domestic or foreign politics. As we suggested in the pre-registration, the study of threat perception in South Caucasus is not only fundamental to the understanding public preferences over foreign policy in the region, but also raises new questions and opens new research avenues in the study of public opinion in the South Caucasus region and elsewhere in the world of small states.

## Notes

1. The mass demonstrations in Armenia and Georgia in June 2018 forced Prime Ministers in both countries to resign.
2. The pre-registration is available at <https://osf.io/9myb2/register/565fb3678c5e4a66b5582f67#q4>.
3. The presentation of a state as an enemy in the media, and framing news in line with the historical hostilities and grievances associated with this state leads the individuals to perceive a threat. Whereas pro-Russian media in Georgia has recently produced pro-Russian sentiments and caused anti-Western attitudes in Georgian public, the government-controlled media in Armenia has played an essential role in keeping Armenians' threat perception from Azerbaijan alive, mainly, after the four-days war between the sides. However, because of the lack of available data (absence of the survey questions in the 2017 Caucasus Barometer about the ways the individuals obtain political information) about which media outlets the individuals use to get obtain political information, we do not measure the presumed role of media in the individual threat perception.
4. Georgia was also unwilling to renew the agreement with Russia on border protection: according to this agreement, Russia had agreed to protect Georgia's border with Turkey. This border agreement expired in 1999, and Georgia did not extend it. Russia also diminished the size of its military forces in Georgia following the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe that OSCE members signed during the OSCE's 1999 Istanbul summit.
5. Later, Armenia also joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and refused to sign the EU's Association Agreement, which coincided with massive protests in Yerevan (The Guardian 2014).
6. Armenian's alignment with Russia and Georgia's goal for NATO membership has led many to label these states as pro-Russian and pro-Western, respectively. In particular, Armenia's

decision to join the Eurasian Customs Union and militarily collaborate with Russia within CSTO, and Georgia's decision to sign the Association Agreement with EU and its persistent attempts to obtain NATO's MAP are the crucial elements in Armenia's pro-Russian and Georgia's pro-western foreign policies.

7. Recent Pew Research Center survey found the following favourable views of NATO: Poland 79%, Netherlands 79%, Germany 67%, Canada 66%, UK 62%, US 62%, France 60% (Stokes 2017). Thus, Georgians' support for NATO membership is greater than the French's, the American's and the English's favourable view of NATO.
8. Russian propaganda media have played an essential role in reducing Georgians' threat perception from Russia (Avaliani 2016). The 2015 "Anti-Western Propaganda" report published by Tbilisi-based Media Development Fund (MDF) suggests that fake and unchecked news were publicized in Georgia. This news was propagated by pro-Russian media outlets like TV Obiektivi and it contained anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments (MDF 2015).
9. Armenians' trust in the EU declined during 2011–2015 from 37% to 27% (the Caucasus Barometer 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015). For more info, see <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-am/TRUSTEU/>.
10. The Armenian media, mainly controlled by the pro-Russian government, have played an essential role in increasing Armenians' threat perception from Azerbaijan and Turkey (Media Report 2009). The report indicates how the media used clichés to shape enemy image.
11. The magnitude of threat perception in Armenia and Georgia is also linked to the media environment in both countries. Many studies have revealed that media plays an important role in shaping the opinions of the public on foreign policy issues (Jentleson 1992; Baum and Potter 2008) by delivering elite opinions to the public (Kuypers 1997). Media framing is a significant way of redefining foreign policy issues, which plays a decisive factor in how the individuals perceive the story, and accordingly what preferences they develop (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). We suggest mass media have a role in modifying the individuals' threat perception and their preferences for alliance formation in both Armenia and Georgia. While the availability of pro-Russian media outlets has diminished Georgians' threat perception from Russia (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili 2015; Janashia 2015), the government-controlled media in Armenia have increased Armenians' threat perception from Azerbaijan, specially, after four-days war.
12. The NA/DK ( $n = 234$  in Armenia,  $n = 491$  in Georgia) were removed. The rest of the distribution of the dependent variable is as the following. In Georgia, NATO = 647, CSTO = 256, both = 799. In Armenia, NATO = 89, CSTO = 448, both = 830.
13. As Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski (2000) argue, recoding in this way helps to prevent data loss and it does not lead to biased results.
14. On the relationship between education and individual foreign policy orientation, see Anderson and Reichert 1996; Hooghe and Marks 2005; Lubbers and Jaspers 2011.
15. This question is coded as (1) No primary education, (2) Primary education (either complete or incomplete), (3) Incomplete secondary education, (4) Completed secondary education, (5) Secondary technical education, (6) Incomplete higher education, (7) Completed higher education (BA, MA, or Specialist degree), (8) Post-graduate degree, (–1)(Don't know), (–2)(Refuse to answer). We multiply imputed DK and RA.
16. This question is coded as (1) Every day, (2) More than once a week, (3) Once a week, (4) At least once a month, (5) Only on special religious holidays, (6) Less often, (7) Never, (–1) Don't know, (–2) Refuse to answer. We multiply imputed DK and RA. Religious Georgians, who are the followers of Orthodox Christianity and regularly visit religious services, are predisposed to prefer closer bonds with Russia, since the Georgian Church is the supporter of closer ties with Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. People who attend church regularly hear pro-Russian speeches in Georgian churches, and tend to align with church leaders more than those who do not attend church or attend less regularly. Although the Armenian Gregorian Church is different from Russian Orthodox Church, there is a historical rapprochement between these two. More religious Armenians and Georgians are thus more likely to prefer alignment with the Russian-led CSTO.

17. The respondents are asked to rate their English, Russian and other language abilities (1) No basic knowledge, (2) Beginner, (3) Intermediate, (4) Advanced, (–1) Don't know, (–2) Refuse to answer. We multiply imputed DK and RA.
18. There are 8 categories of income in decreasing order.
19. 186 Georgian and 47 Armenian respondents answered “neither” voluntarily, but these responses are excluded in the analysis.

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