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Armenia and the Ukrainian Crisis: Finding the Middle Ground

By Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, Yerevan

Abstract:

This article examines the political implications of the Ukrainian crisis for Armenia and Armenians. Specifically, it discusses the peculiarities of the political upheavals in Ukraine and their relevance to Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh related issues. The questions of bilateral political and economic relations, as well as the state of the Armenian community in Ukraine are also addressed.

(De)Coupling Crimea and Nagorno Karabakh

After the Crimean referendum in March 2014 and Russia's seizure of the peninsula, there were mixed reactions in Armenia concerning its implications for the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh. The National Assembly and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the de-facto Nagorno Karabakh Republic (NKR) issued two separate statements welcoming the results of the Crimean referendum and interpreting it as yet another manifestation that the principle of territorial integrity does not prevail over the principle of self-determination.¹ After the results of the Crimean referendum were announced, mass celebrations were held in Stepanakert, the capital of NKR. People gathered in the central square of the capital to demonstrate their support for the people of Crimea in their struggle for self-determination. Interestingly enough, when Kosovo declared its independence in February 2008, referring to the same principle of self-determination, the people of Nagorno Karabakh were not allowed to gather in the central square of Stepanakert for celebrations, although such festivities had been initially planned.

The reactions from Armenian officials to the Crimean question were clearly different from the Karabakh ones and were more neutral. Armenia's Foreign Ministry issued a general statement endorsing the peaceful resolution of the Ukrainian crisis and uncoupling the Crimean case from Nagorno Karabakh conflict.² Furthermore, the head of the parliament's Standing Committee on Foreign Relations stated that it is inappropriate to draw parallels between Crimea and Nagorno Karabakh because each case should be treated differently³. By contrast, in 2008, the Armenia President Robert Kocharyan, stated that, "having the problem of Nago-

rno Karabakh, the precedence of Kosovo's independence is important for us."⁴

Although the Armenian government initially tried to follow a neutral approach towards the events unfolding in Ukraine and particularly in Crimea, that stance did not last long. During the UN voting on March 27, 2014, Armenia joined the 11 countries, which stood by Russia and voted against the UN General Assembly resolution supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty as well as naming the Crimea referendum on March 16 as invalid.⁵ Although Armenia initially announced its inclination towards abstention and reconfirmed it one day prior to the voting, at the last moment it changed its stance. Armenia's ambassador to the UN explained the vote by stating that Armenia has been a fervent proponent of "decolonization and self-determination" and therefore voted against the resolution.⁶ The Ukrainian envoy to Armenia was called back to Kiev for consultations. For his part, the Armenian envoy to Ukraine tried to further explain Armenia's position by stating that "Armenia did not betray Ukraine. Concerning Nagorno Karabakh, several times, Ukraine voted in favour of Azerbaijan's position. In 2008, when the UN General Assembly was discussing Azerbaijan's proposed resolution on Nagorno Karabakh, Ukraine supported Azerbaijan. We did not even issue a protest note to the Ukrainian MFA."⁷

Some circles in Armenia brought more arguments to support Armenia's position in the UN. They argued that Ukraine's position in the Karabakh war has been pro-Azerbaijani from the very beginning, Ukraine sold weapons to Azerbaijan, always supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity etc.⁸ The Ukrainian ambassador returned

1 Statement of the NA NKR, <<http://www.yerkirmedia.am/?act=news&lan=hy&id=19211>>; Statement of the MFA NKR, <<http://www.nkr.am/hy/news/2014-03-17/597/>>

2 Foreign Minister Nalbandyan's answer to the question of the "First News" program, <http://mfa.am/hy/interviews/item/2014/03/17/MFA_ukraine_crimea/>

3 Summary. How Armenian reacted to the "Crimea Question", <<http://ar.newsarmenia.ru/analytics/20140319/43031275.html>>

4 Robert Kocharyan, Having the Nagorno Karabakh issue, Kosovo's independence <<http://armenpress.am/arm/print/450717/>>

5 General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling upon States Not to Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region, 27 March, 2014, <<http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>>

6 Ibid

7 Andranik Manukyan, Armenia did not betray Ukraine, 5 April, 2014, <<http://www.segodnya.ua/world/posol-armeniya-ne-pre-davala-ukrainu-510265.html>>

8 Interview with political expert Karen Bekaryan, April 05, 2014, Yerevan

to Yerevan at the end of May only after the Armenian president congratulated the newly elected president of Ukraine exactly two months after the UN vote.⁹

It is difficult to deny the existence of a number of similarities between the historical backgrounds of the Crimean and Nagorno Karabakh cases—both of them were transferred to Ukraine and Azerbaijan respectively based on the Communist party leadership decisions and according to their perceptions of peaceful coexistence and brotherhood, both had dominant ethnic Russian and Armenian populations and their consent was not sought. Areas where significant differences are found include the quality of federal structures that both of them enjoyed within the USSR, the extent of resource deposits, the strategic goals they pursued and ultimate the results they achieved (as Karabakh chose the road of independence and international recognition, while Crimea was annexed by Russia).

Armenians in Ukraine

Besides the frequently cited parallels between Crimea and Karabakh, there are other major implications of the Ukrainian crisis for Armenia. One of the first concerns that came to occupy Armenian society was the fate of ethnic Armenians in Crimea, Odessa, Donetsk and Lugansk. Armenians were also active participants in the Maidan protests. One of the first victims of the Maidan clashes in January was a 20-year old ethnic Armenian named Sergey Nigoyan.¹⁰ Moreover, an ethnic Armenian, Arsen Avakov, who was one of the leaders of the Maidan demonstrations, became the interior minister.

The number of Armenians living in Ukraine has been, and remains, quite substantial. According to the 2001 population census, they numbered around 100,000.¹¹ Since then, the number has increased significantly. According to the Ukrainian ambassador to Armenia, there are as many as 350,000 Armenians in Ukraine¹², whereas the Armenian ambassador to Ukraine claims that there are around 600,000 Arme-

nians live in Ukraine.¹³ To better serve the increasing number of Armenians, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs has opened five consulates in different parts of Ukraine. That number is as many as in the Russian Federation.

Irrespective of exact number of Armenians, they constitute a strong, well-organized and vibrant community, active in the political, social, cultural and business spheres of Ukraine. The “Union of Ukrainian Armenians” was founded in 2001 to coordinate the activities of the Armenians in Ukraine. Since then it has established 24 branches, set up its own publication, and established a research center.¹⁴ The Ukrainian eparchy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, established in 1991, has 11 church communities and 8 active churches in Ukraine.¹⁵ The Armenian Cathedral in Lvov, which was built 650 years ago, serves as a residence for the head of the Ukrainian eparchy of the Armenian Church. The first Armenian settlements in the territory of Ukraine were established in the 11th century¹⁶.

Many Armenians live in areas directly affected by the conflict. In the war-torn Donetsk and Lugansk regions, Armenians were successfully integrated into local social and business activities. Before the recent crisis, there were three ethnic Armenians in the Ukrainian Parliament. They also played an important role in serving as a bridge between the governments of Armenia and Ukraine. However, because of the crisis, dozens of influential Armenian entrepreneurs left the conflict zone thereby losing multi-million investments and lucrative contracts. Armenian families also fled Eastern Ukraine because of security concerns. These fears were exacerbated with the increasing tide of far-right nationalistic rhetoric by some political groupings in Ukraine, which contained anti-Armenian formulations.¹⁷ This trend has revived concerns among many in Armenia and in the Diaspora as they became yet another manifestation of

9 President Serzh Sargsyan Congratulated Ukraine’s Elected President Petro Poroshenko, May 27, 2014, <<http://www.President.Am/En/Congratulatory/Item/2014/05/27/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-Congratulation-To-The-President-Of-Ukraine/>>

10 The name of the person who was shot dead was released (in Russian): <http://society.lb.ua/accidents/2014/01/22/252572_stalo_izvestno_imya.html>

11 About number and composition population of Ukraine by data of All-Ukrainian population census, 2001 data, <<http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/rus/results/general/nationality/>>

12 Ukrainian ambassador. Ukraine has announced its position about Artsakh, <<http://www.aysor.am/am/news/2014/03/20/ukraine/?sw>>

13 Andranik Manukyan, They are Ukrainians, we are Armenians, <<http://www.armtimes.com/hy/read/48460>>

14 Armenian Community of Ukraine, Ministry of Diaspora, <<http://www.mindiaspora.am>>

15 The Structure of the Armenian Apostolic Church, <<http://www.armenianchurch.org/index.jsp?sid=1&cid=92&pid=19>>

16 For the history of Armenian–Ukrainian relations see Ya. Dashkevich, Armenian settlements in Ukraine in the primary sources and literatures in the 15–19th centuries (Historiographical account), Yerevan, Academy of Sciences Press, 1962 (in Russian); Harutyunyan Shmavon, The Friendship of Armenian and Ukrainian nations, Yerevan, 1954 (in Armenian); Ya. Isayevich, The question of Armenian–Ukrainian relations established in Lvov in the 15–18th centuries, Historical-philological journal, 1963, nos. 101–114 (in Armenian).

17 The Armenian Face of the Ukrainian Drama. Armenian killed in Donetsk region hailed as hero by pro-Russia protesters, <http://www.armenianow.com/commentary/analysis/53654/armenia_ukraine_situation_analysis>

the claim that ethnic Armenians living outside of Armenia are under the constant threat of extinction.¹⁸ Brutal actions and atrocities against ethnic Armenians in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and the North Caucasus in recent years have come to solidify that generalization. Overall, the events in Ukraine once again underscored the claim that Armenia has to develop a long-term, viable and better strategy to support those ethnic Armenians who live outside of Armenia, especially in conflict zones.¹⁹

Moreover, as a result of recent snap parliamentary elections held in October 2014, none of the Armenian MPs of the previous parliament was re-elected to the legislative branch. This can be explained by the fact that 15 constituencies of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, and 12 constituencies of the Crimea did not vote during the elections. Currently there is only one ethnic Armenian representative in the Ukrainian parliament.

Economic Implications and Western Sanctions against Russia

The Armenian economy has been noticeably affected by the Ukrainian crisis. According to various estimates, import volumes from Ukraine have dropped significantly. For years, Ukraine ranked second among CIS countries, after Russia, for sending remittances to Armenia. Since the crisis erupted, that volume of individual bank transfers has declined significantly. For years, Ukraine had been one of the top destinations for seasonal migrants from Armenia. However, the ongoing economic crisis in Ukraine is forcing Armenians to seek jobs in other countries, typically Russia, although the latter may also become a less attractive destination for labor migrants if Western sanctions persist.

The Western sanctions against Russia and Armenia's trade and financial exposure to Russia have also caused a slowdown in the Armenian economy. On the other hand, the Russian ruble has decreased in value, which for Armenia meant that the remittances sent from Russia have decreased in value as compared to the same period from last year. Moreover, because of the ruble's devaluation, the price of Armenia's exported products to Russia will increase, which, in turn, will make it difficult for them to compete on the Russian market and will have a negative impact on the trade volumes and net exports.²⁰ According to a report prepared by the European Bank

for Reconstruction and Development, because of the Ukrainian crisis and the economic slowdown in Russia, the growth of Armenia's GDP will slow down in 2014 and will be around 3 percent, as opposed to 3.5 percent in 2013.²¹ Citing the same reasons, the Moody's Investors Service's forecast was more sceptical; in September 2014 it projected only 2.1 percent GDP growth in 2014, instead of the previously announced 3.2 percent.²²

Finding Both Inspiration and Distraction

Ukraine and Armenia are also on different pages when it comes to integration projects. Armenia started off with Ukraine on its way to an EU Association Agreement, as both were hopeful to further their relations at the Vilnius summit in November 2013. However, just two months before the summit, the Armenian president declared his intention to lead Armenia towards the Russia-led Customs Union. For a period, Ukraine also backpedalled from the European path, a move which led to political instability, the overthrow of the government and political unrest. However, Ukraine eventually returned to the European path by signing the political (March 21) and economic (June 27, 2014) components of the Association Agreement with the EU. The Association Agreement was simultaneously ratified in the Ukrainian and European Parliaments.²³ This success eventually led some members of Armenian civil society to praise the determination of the Ukrainian people who fought for a European future.

The other negative implication of the Ukrainian crisis has to do with its consequence on the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. The Minsk group co-chairmanship, which deals with the resolution of the Karabakh conflict, is composed of Russia, France and the USA. In the face of the deterioration in relations between Russia and the West, some circles in Armenia and Karabakh voiced concerns about the future efficiency of the Minsk group, arguing that it will not meet regularly and live up to expectations.²⁴ However, in spite of the gen-

18 Vahram Hovyan, Security challenges of Armenian Diaspora, *Globe Research Journal*, no. 5, 2014

19 Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, Armenian Needs a New Security Strategy, *Regional Affairs*, 2013, vol. 1, no. 3, p. 12

20 Samvel Avagyan, Possible implications of the Ukrainian crisis on Armenia's economy, <<http://hetq.am/arm/news/32918/ukrainakan-tchgnazhami-hnaravor-azdecutyuny-hayastanintnesutyany-vra.html/>>

21 Olga Rosca, Recovery in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus Affected By Russia-Ukraine Crisis, <<http://www.ebrd.com/pages/news/press/2014/140514c.shtml>>

22 Global Credit Research, Moody's: High reliance on Russia affects Armenia's economy, but fiscal prudence supports government's creditworthiness, 16 September, 2014, <https://www.moodys.com/research/Moodys-High-reliance-on-Russia-affects-Armenias-economy-but-fiscal-PR_308664>

23 European Parliament ratifies EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, <<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/content/20140915IPR62504/html/European-Parliament-ratifies-EU-Ukraine-Association-Agreement>>

24 How the Minsk Group will work in the conditions of the Ukrainian crisis. Opinions, 13 March, 2013, <<http://www.tert.am/am/news/2014/03/11/eahk/?sw>>

eral scepticism, the Minsk group co-chairs managed to keep the process going and carry out their job as usual.

As was the case during the previous revolutions in the post-Soviet space, the political opposition in Armenia and some circles found inspiration from the Maidan demonstrations. There were open calls to launch an “Armenian Maidan” in order to topple the government.²⁵ However, Armenia’s first president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan calmed down the overall excitement by elaborating on the reasons why a Maidan did not (and could not) take place in Armenia. These included the lack of anti-Russian tendencies and the nation’s disappointment with the West.²⁶ Initially the Armenian government did not reveal any particular concerns about the opposition’s activities,

however, in April 2014, a new government was formed and a new prime minister was appointed, which was largely interpreted as a calculated step to please society.

At any rate, the Ukrainian crisis is not over yet. The devastation that the civil war brought to Eastern Ukraine has profound implications going beyond the borders of Ukraine and Russia. Recent events in Ukraine have injured the national psyche and the scenario that seemed a distant, infeasible, unthinkable notion just a year ago, now appears to be a part of daily reality. Being constrained by countervailing interests, the conflicting parties are also united by myriad circumstances. Enduring peace remains a perplexing challenge for Ukraine and it is not within sight.

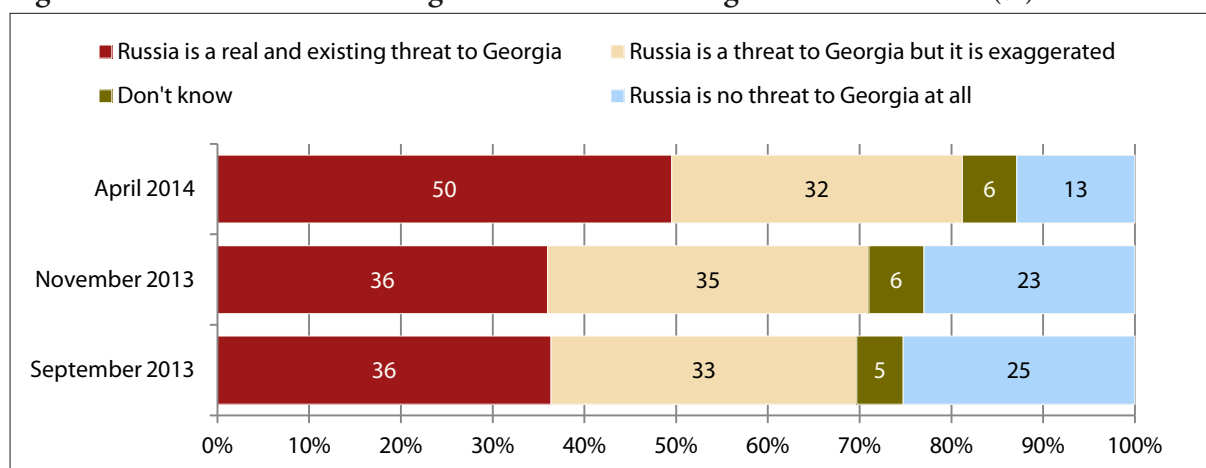
About the Author

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OPINION POLL

Georgian Attitudes Towards the Ukrainian Crisis (April 2014)

Figure 1: Which of the Following Statements Do You Agree With the Most? (%)

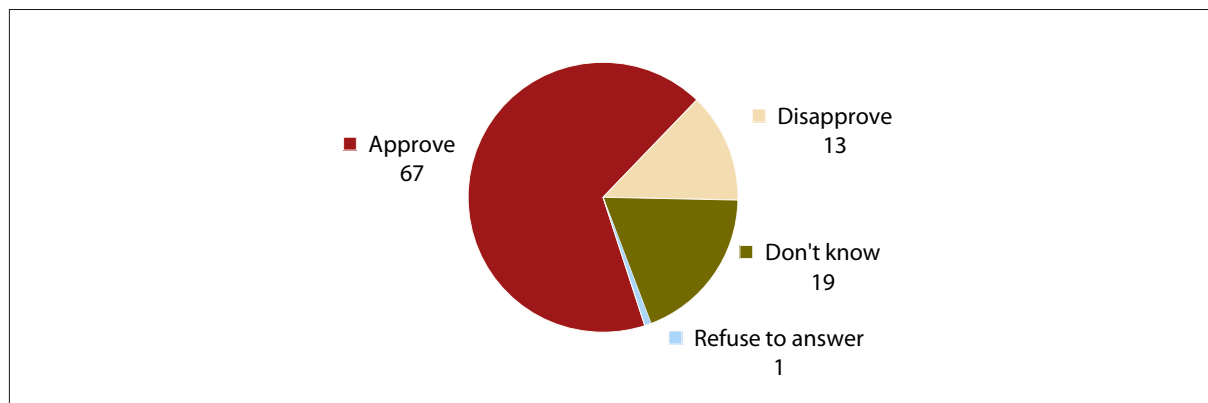


Source: representative opinion poll carried out by Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 26 March–18 April 2014, <<http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2014/NDI-PoliticalRatings-April2014.pdf>>

25 Vladimir Karapetyan, Ukraine, Abkhazia... next is Armenia, 03 June, 20014, <<http://www.ilur.am/news/view/30355.html>>; Ani Zakaryan, Armenian Maidan is unavoidable, 01 March, 2014, <<http://mediamall.am/?id=29511>>

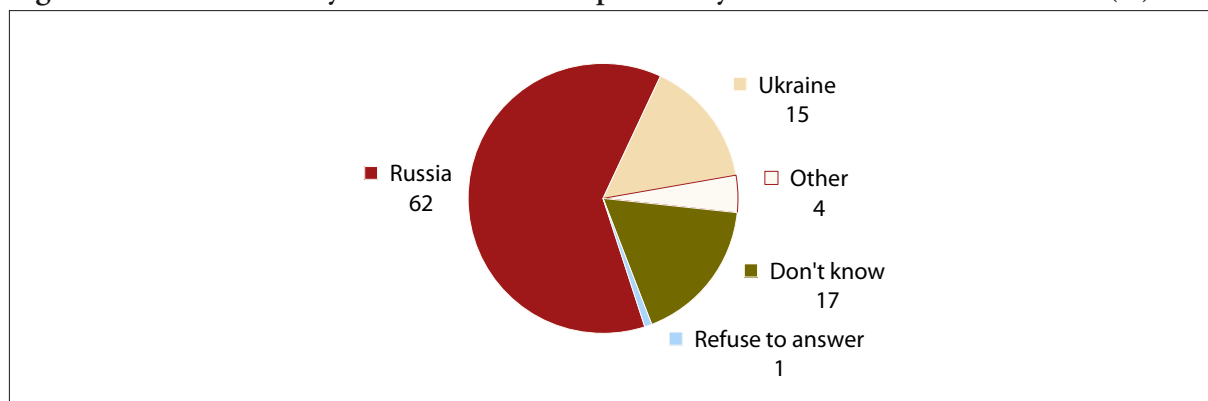
26 Ter-Petrosyan presented his explanation for the reasons that “Armenian maidan” did not take place, 21 December, 2013, <<http://www.azatutyun.am/content/article/25208377.html>>

Figure 2: Do You Approve or Disapprove of the Georgian Government's Response to the Crimean Crisis? (%)



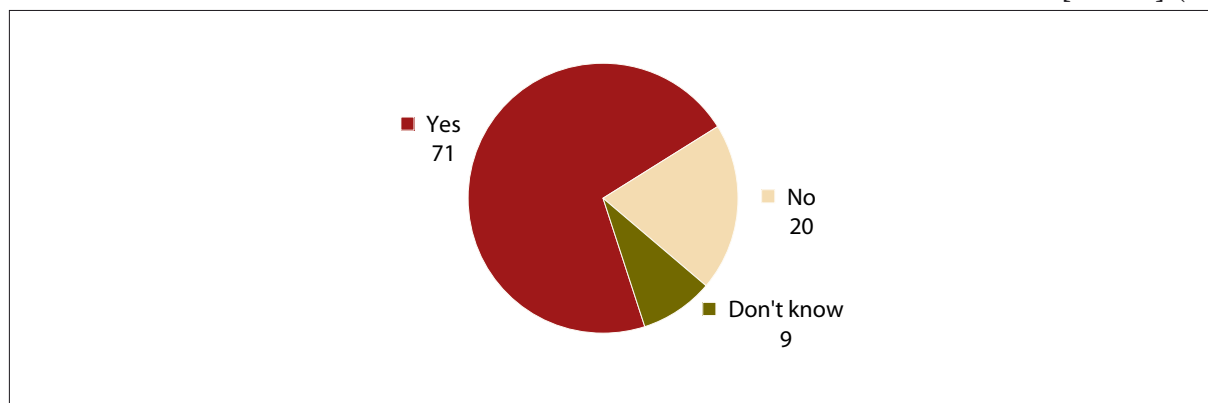
Source: representative opinion poll carried out by Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 26 March–18 April 2014, <<http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2014/NDI-PoliticalRatings-April2014.pdf>>

Figure 3: Which Country Bears the Most Responsibility for the Crisis in the Crimea? (%)

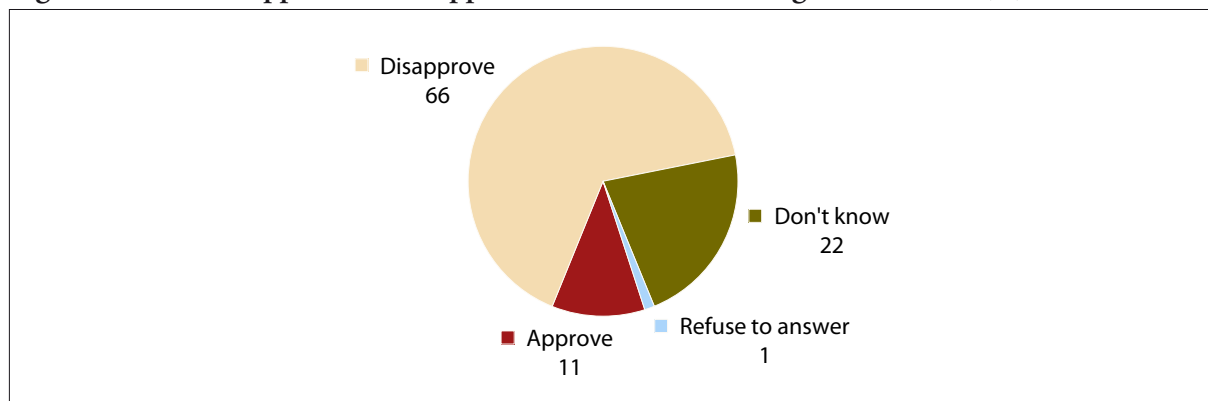


Source: representative opinion poll carried out by Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 26 March–18 April 2014, <<http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2014/NDI-PoliticalRatings-April2014.pdf>>

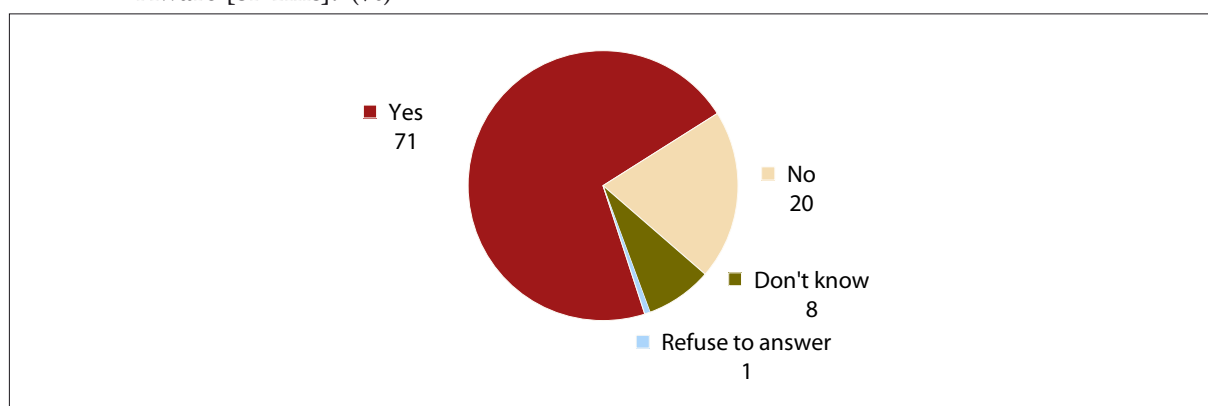
Figure 4: On March 16 [2014], a Referendum Passed which Declared That the Crimea Should Be Reunited with Russia as Part of the Russian Federation. Were You Aware [of This]? (%)



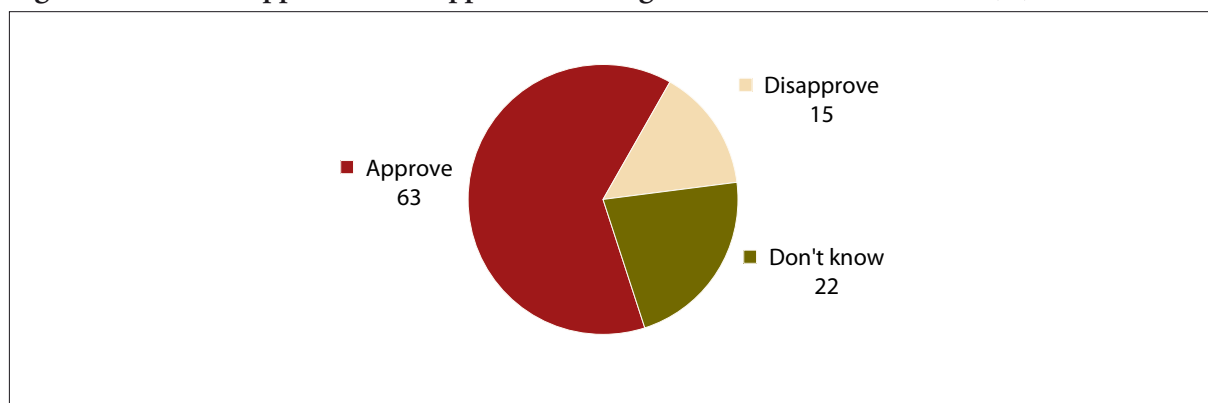
Source: representative opinion poll carried out by Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 26 March–18 April 2014, <<http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2014/NDI-PoliticalRatings-April2014.pdf>>

Figure 5: Do You Approve or Disapprove of Crimea Reuniting with Russia? (%)

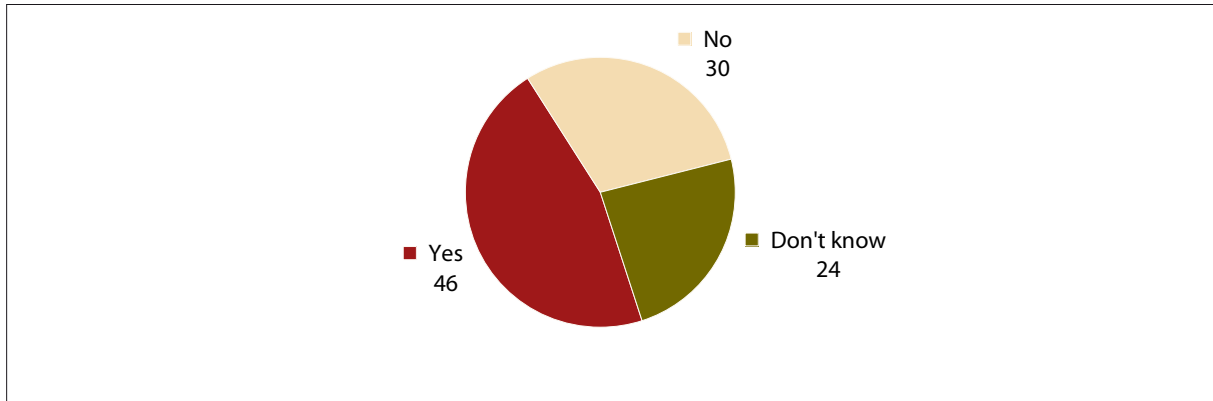
Source: representative opinion poll carried out by Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 26 March–18 April 2014, <<http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2014/NDI-PoliticalRatings-April2014.pdf>>

Figure 6: The Government of Georgia Has Condemned Russia's Actions in Crimea. Were You Aware [of This]? (%)

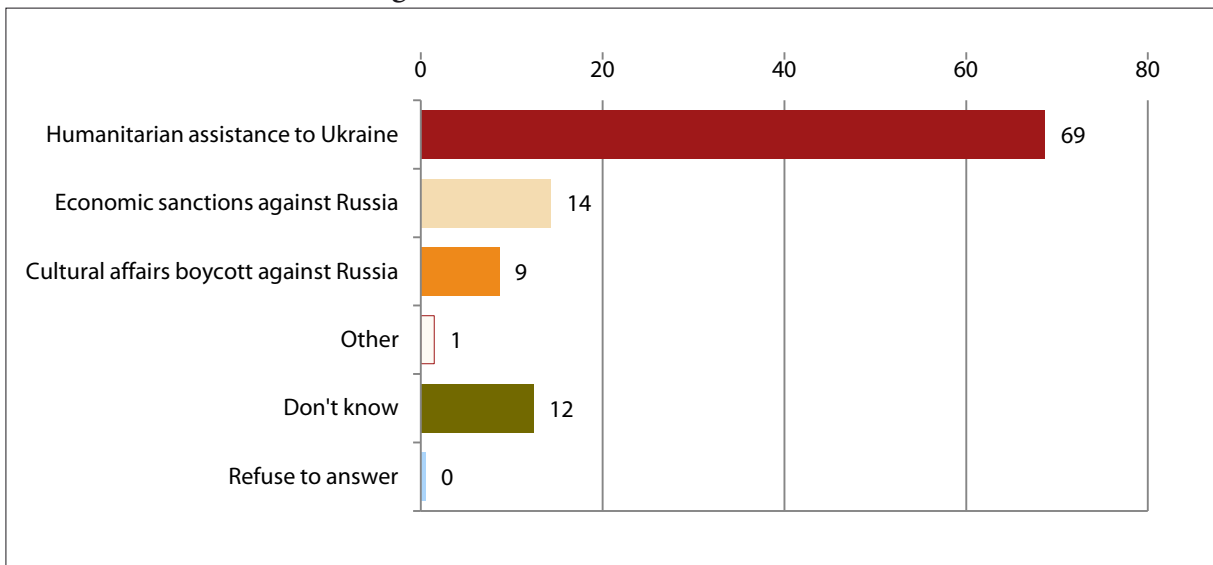
Source: representative opinion poll carried out by Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 26 March–18 April 2014, <<http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2014/NDI-PoliticalRatings-April2014.pdf>>

Figure 7: Do You Approve or Disapprove of Georgian Government's Action? (%)

Source: representative opinion poll carried out by Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 26 March–18 April 2014, <<http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2014/NDI-PoliticalRatings-April2014.pdf>>

Figure 8: Should Georgia Take Any Additional Action in Support of Ukraine? (%)

Source: representative opinion poll carried out by Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 26 March–18 April 2014, <<http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2014/NDI-PoliticalRatings-April2014.pdf>>

Figure 9: If Yes, What? (of the 46% of Respondents Who Think Georgia Should Take Additional Action, See Figure 8) (%)

Source: representative opinion poll carried out by Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 26 March–18 April 2014, <<http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2014/NDI-PoliticalRatings-April2014.pdf>>