



UNIVERSITÀ POLITECNICA DELLE MARCHE
Dipartimento di Scienze Economiche e Sociali

DO EXTERNAL THREATS AFFECT
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS? EVIDENCE
FROM SMALL STATES NEIGHBOURING RUSSIA

TAMAR TARALASHVILI, ALESSANDRO BELMONTE, AND
DÉSIRÉE TEOBALDELLI

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of geopolitical shocks on public trust in international institutions, using the 2014 conflict in Ukraine as a quasi-natural experiment. Drawing on individual-level survey data from the Caucasus Barometer covering the period 2009-2019, we assess changes in trust in the European Union and the United Nations, as well as support for NATO membership, before and after the conflict among respondents in Georgia and Armenia. Although neither country was directly involved in the conflict, the crisis generated substantial geopolitical spillover throughout the South Caucasus. Employing a Difference-in-Differences design, we find a significant decline in trust toward these organizations in Georgia after 2014, a country characterized by a pro-Western foreign policy orientation and unresolved tensions with Russia, and therefore more exposed to the conflict's geopolitical consequences. In contrast, Armenia—more closely aligned with Russia and less directly affected—serves as a credible control case. We further examine how individual-level characteristics condition these effects. Our results show that individuals with a pro-Western identity, proxied by support for English as a mandatory school language, experienced smaller declines or even increases in institutional trust. Conversely, respondents with pro-Russian orientations exhibited significantly larger decreases in confidence. Overall, these findings highlight the polarizing effects of external geopolitical shocks and underscore the importance of cultural and political identity in shaping public attitudes toward international institutions in small states bordering Russia.

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Indirizzo: Tamar Taralashvili. *E-mail address:* tamar.taralashvili@uniurb.it. Department of Law, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Italy.

Alessandro Belmonte. Corresponding author. *E-mail address:* a.belmonte@staff.univpm.it. Department of Economics and Social Sciences, Marche Polytechnic University, Italy.

Désirée Teobaldelli. desiree.teobaldelli@uniurb.it. Department of Law, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Italy.

Do External Threats Affect International Relations? Evidence from Small States Neighbouring Russia*

*Tamar Taralashvili, Alessandro Belmonte, and
Désirée Teobaldelli*

1 Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 constituted a major shock to the European security order and highlighted the role of international institutions in managing geopolitical risk. Beyond its direct military effects, the conflict has altered citizens' beliefs in many countries, both within and beyond Europe, regarding the credibility and effectiveness of institutions such as the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—beliefs that underpin public support for international cooperation, security integration, and external economic relations.

Public trust in international institutions constitutes a key constraint on policy choices, particularly in small, open, and geopolitically exposed economies that lack the military and economic capacity to ensure security autonomously (Alesina and Spolaore, 2005). In such settings, citizens rely more heavily on international institutions and alliances, and their support for trade openness, foreign investment, and geopolitical alignment depends critically on perceptions of institutional credibility and effectiveness. These institutions, in turn, rely on public legitimacy to operate effectively, coordinate international cooperation, and enforce collective decisions (Torgler, 2008; Harteveld et al., 2013). Trust in international organizations is there-

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fore neither uniform nor automatic, but reflects assessments of institutional performance, procedural fairness, and cultural or identity congruence between citizens and global actors (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2015; Dellmuth et al., 2019; Ecker-Ehrhardt et al., 2025). Periods of geopolitical instability act as stress tests for this legitimacy: when international organizations fail to prevent or deter conflict, citizens update their beliefs about external protection, leading to declines in institutional trust even in countries not directly involved in military engagement.

In this paper, we examine how external geopolitical threats shape public trust in international institutions. We study the effects of the 2014 conflict in Ukraine—triggered by Russia’s annexation of Crimea—on institutional trust in post-Soviet countries in the South Caucasus, focusing on Georgia and Armenia, two states not directly involved in the conflict. Concentrating on non-belligerent countries reflects the fact that contemporary geopolitical crises generate substantial cross-border spillovers in expectations, risk perceptions, and information flows. For small post-Soviet states located at the margins of the European security order, which lack autonomous security capacity and face persistent uncertainty about international support, these spillovers constitute a primary channel through which citizens assess the credibility and protective capacity of international institutions. In such settings—characterized by unresolved territorial disputes and dependence on regional powers, often reinforced by identity cleavages—external geopolitical shocks therefore trigger belief updating about institutional reliability even without direct involvement. Individual responses to these shocks may vary systematically with cultural orientation, linguistic background, demographic characteristics, historical experience, and transnational ties. Despite the importance of these mechanisms, systematic evidence on how conflicts—and more broadly geopolitical shocks—affect institutional trust remains scarce in small, developing, non-EU, non-belligerent states that are nonetheless deeply exposed to their consequences.

Using repeated cross-sectional survey data from the Caucasus Barometer covering the period 2009-2019, we study how trust in the EU and UN and support for NATO membership among citizens of Georgia and Armenia evolved before and after the 2014 Ukrainian conflict, and how these responses varied across individual characteristics. As discussed in greater detail below, Georgia and Armenia differ markedly in their geopolitical orientations: Georgia has pursued a pro-Western and Euro-Atlantic trajectory, while Armenia has remained more closely aligned with Russia. These differences help explain why citizens in the two countries may express trust in international institutions such as the EU, the UN, and NATO in systematically different ways. For many Georgians, these institutions are viewed as guarantors of independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders, as well as vehicles for Western integration. By contrast, Armenian public

opinion toward Western institutions is more heterogeneous and pragmatic, reflecting the country's dependence on Russian military and economic support.

Our analysis employs a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) framework. We first estimate a baseline specification to capture average changes in institutional trust in the EU, the UN, and support for NATO membership among citizens of Georgia before and after the 2014 conflict. The results provide preliminary evidence that the conflict was associated with a decline in public trust across all three institutions. We then examine heterogeneity in these effects across individuals with different characteristics. In our identity-based analysis, individuals who supported English rather than Russian as the mandatory language in schools exhibited higher baseline levels of trust in international institutions and experienced smaller declines—or even increases—in trust following the conflict. This pattern holds across all three institutions and is strongest for the EU and NATO. Additional heterogeneity analyses reveal similar patterns among individuals who supported interethnic marriage with Americans and those with relatives or friends abroad, proxies for openness to Western cultural and transnational influences. These groups display greater resilience in institutional trust, whereas individuals with Russian-aligned identity orientations experience sharper declines.

We extend our analysis by using Armenia as a control group in a Difference-in-Differences design with country-level treatment. This choice reflects the fact that Armenia shares many regional and institutional characteristics with Georgia but was less exposed to the 2014 conflict in Ukraine due to its closer alignment with Russia. Trust in the EU and UN, as well as support for NATO membership, declined significantly more after 2014 in Georgia (the treated country) than in Armenia. These effects are heterogeneous across individuals, consistent with the baseline estimates. Individuals in Georgia who supported English as the mandatory school language experienced smaller declines—or, in some cases, increases—in institutional trust following the conflict, relative to comparable individuals in Armenia. By contrast, individuals with pro-Russian or neutral identity orientations experienced larger declines in trust. While the estimated effect for trust in the UN is directionally consistent with this pattern, it is not statistically significant.

In sum, our findings show that geopolitical shocks interact with pre-existing societal divisions, amplifying polarization in attitudes toward international institutions. The decline in institutional trust following the 2014 conflict was not uniform, but systematically conditioned by identity-related characteristics, including language orientation and cultural openness to the West.

This paper relates to a growing literature in economics and political economy examining how external geopolitical shocks shape political attitudes, identity, and

institutional trust. Prior work shows that wars, terrorist attacks, and other security shocks can affect policy preferences and support for international cooperation, including in countries not directly involved in conflict (e.g., [Bozzoli and Müller, 2011](#); [Bauer et al., 2016](#); [De Vries et al., 2021](#)). While some studies document a “rally-round-the-flag” effect, whereby external threats increase support for political authorities and institutions ([Gilligan et al., 2014](#); [Bauer et al., 2016](#); [Knudsen et al., 2023](#)), others emphasize that such shocks can instead generate polarization and distrust, particularly when institutions are perceived as ineffective or biased ([Hetherington and Suhay, 2011](#); [Bove and Di Leo, 2020](#); [Belmonte, 2022](#)).

Closest to our study, [Gehring \(2022\)](#) shows that Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea increased European identity and trust in EU institutions among exposed EU member states. Our paper differs from [Gehring \(2022\)](#) in three key respects. First, while Gehring focuses on EU member states embedded in a strong supranational organization with explicit security guarantees, we study small, non-EU, non-belligerent states with ambiguous security arrangements. Second, whereas Gehring documents an increase in identity and institutional trust following heightened external threat, we show that similar shocks can generate declines in institutional trust outside such frameworks. Third, we emphasize the role of identity heterogeneity, showing that geopolitical shocks polarize trust rather than uniformly strengthening it.

Our paper is also related to the literature on trust, social capital, and the functioning of political and economic systems, in which trust is widely recognized as a central component of social capital and a key determinant of cooperation, transaction costs, and compliance with public authority ([Putnam, 1995](#); [Bjørnskov, 2012](#); [Becchetti et al., 2014](#)). This literature distinguishes between social trust—generalized trust among individuals—and political trust, which captures citizens’ confidence in governments, public institutions, and political authorities ([Alesina and La Ferrara, 2002](#); [Uslaner, 2007](#); [Newton and Zmerli, 2011](#)). Political trust, in turn, depends both on institutional performance and on citizens’ perceptions of how effectively institutions fulfill their mandates, particularly during periods of crisis ([Uslaner, 2018](#)).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides background on the study. Section 3 describes the data. Sections 4 and 5 present the empirical strategy and the main results. Section 6 concludes.

2 Background

The South Caucasus region, which includes Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, has complex geopolitical relationships with Russia and the West. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these newly independent states adopted various approaches to

their foreign policies. Although the economies of the South Caucasus countries are relatively small and offer limited direct economic appeal to the EU, their geopolitical significance cannot be overstated. This region serves as a crucial gateway between Europe and Asia, located at the crossroads of major global trade routes.

The EU's economic relations with the South Caucasus countries are shaped mostly by political developments and the foreign policy stances of these states. Under the EU's Eastern Partnership policy (EaP)¹, the three South Caucasus countries have pursued distinct paths for cooperation with the EU. Georgia chose an European future and made considerable efforts to align its legislation with EU standards, while Armenia opted to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Meanwhile, Azerbaijan, lacking convergence with European values, focused purely on developing energy cooperation with the EU. So it maintains a relatively neutral foreign policy, balancing between Russia, Turkey, and the West.

The 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a major turning point, not just for Ukraine but for the entire region. For countries like Georgia and Armenia, the conflict raised serious concerns about security, international alignment, and the credibility of global institutions. For Georgia, which had previously experienced a war with Russia in 2008 and continues to face Russian influence in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Ukraine crisis reinforced perceptions of renewed aggression. For Armenia, the reaction was more complex. Its close ties with Russia and ongoing tensions with neighbouring Azerbaijan prompted it to adopt a more cautious stance, balancing loyalty to its strategic ally with concerns over regional instability.

These differences in geopolitical positions help to explain why individuals in Georgia and Armenia may express their trust in international institutions, such as the EU, the UN, and NATO, in varying ways. For many Georgians, these institutions are seen as guarantors of independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within their internationally recognised borders, as well as Western integration. In contrast, Armenian public opinion is more varied and pragmatic towards Western institutions, largely due to its dependence on Russian military and economic support.

This study uses the 2014 conflict in Ukraine as a case study to explore how ordinary people in small, geopolitically exposed countries respond to external shocks.

¹"The EU's Eastern Partnership policy, initiated in 2009, covers six post-Soviet states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. It was created to support political, social and economic reform efforts in these countries with the aim of increasing democratisation and good governance, energy security, environmental protection, and economic and social development. All the participating countries (except Belarus whose membership is suspended) send delegations to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly" <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/172/three-eastern-partnership-neighbours-in-the-south-caucasus>.

More specifically, we examine how trust in international institutions shifted after the invasion and how these changes vary depending on individual-level identity characteristics, such as language preference, openness to Western culture, and connections abroad. By focusing on Georgia and Armenia, this study captures two contrasting yet culturally and historically connected cases to provide a clearer picture of how geopolitical shocks influence public opinion in small but strategically important states.

3 Data

The sample used for the empirical analysis focuses on surveys from the Caucasus barometer (CB)² conducted between 2009 and 2019 and encompass 8 waves for Georgia and Armenia. From 2013 through 2015, the survey included three countries of the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia; from 2015 onward, it was administered only in Georgia and Armenia, thereby limiting our sample. The resulting baseline sample comprises 39,943 observations.

It is worth highlighting that the CB dataset is structured as a repeated cross-section, not a panel. Each wave samples a different set of individuals, and respondents are not tracked over time. As such, our units of analysis are individuals observed at a single point in time, and comparisons over time are conducted at the population level within each country. This structure enables us to analyze how average levels of trust in international organizations evolve before and after the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which we treat as an exogenous geopolitical shock.

Outcome Variables Our main dependent variables are binary indicators of trust in the EU and the UN, and support for NATO membership. Survey responses to the question "How much do you trust or distrust the EU or UN?" are coded as 1 if the respondent answers "Fully trust," "Rather trust," or "Neither trust nor distrust," and 0 if they answer "Rather distrust" or "Fully distrust." In case of the question "To what extent would you support country's membership in NATO" survey responses are coded as 1 if the respondent answers "Fully support," "Rather support," or "Equally support and don't support," and 0 if they answer "Do not support at all," or "Rather not support."

²The CB is an annual (bi-annual since 2013) household survey that focuses on socioeconomic issues and political attitudes, conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center in the South Caucasus <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/datasets/>.

Individual Characteristics To identify heterogeneous treatment effects, we incorporate individual-level characteristics that serve as proxies for geopolitical orientation and identity. These variables are then interacted with a post-treatment binary variable (post, equal to 1 if the interview occurred after 2014) to construct our key interaction terms used in empirical analysis.

Language preference: Respondents are asked, “Which foreign language should be mandatory in secondary schools?” We construct a binary variable (eng_mandatory) coded 1 for those choosing English and 0 for Russian. This serves as a proxy for pro-Western vs. pro-Russian orientation.

Attitudes toward inter-ethnic marriage: Respondents state whether they approve or disapprove of women of their ethnicity marrying an American. We construct a binary variable (marry_usa) equal to 1 if the respondent approves of marrying an American and 0 otherwise, capturing openness to Western cultural integration.

Transnational ties: Respondents are asked, “Do you have a close relative or friend currently living abroad?” We construct a binary variable (someone_abroad) coded 1 for yes, indicating personal links to migration and international exposure.

These proxies help identify individuals with stronger orientations toward the West and explore whether trust in international institutions changed differently for individuals with varying geopolitical and cultural alignments.

Control Variables We also include a set of demographic and socioeconomic indicators to account for other factors that may influence respondents’ answers. These comprise standard control variables such as age, gender, religion, educational attainment, employment status, household income, levels of debt and savings, and rural versus urban residence, which are included to adjust the estimated effects for potential confounding influences.

To provide an overview of the sample, Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all key variables employed in the analysis. These include the main outcome variables, individual-level identity proxies, and standard control variables described above. The observed variation across these variables reflects the sample’s heterogeneity and underscores their relevance for estimating differential effects in subsequent empirical models.

Table 1: Summary Statistics.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<i>Outcome Variables:</i>					
Trust in EU	25308	0.7805	0.4139	0	1
Trust in UN	24745	0.7794	0.4147	0	1
Support for NATO membership	25952	0.7880	0.4088	0	1
<i>Geopolitical Alignment:</i>					
eng_mandatory1	28137	0.6339	0.4817	0	1
marry_usa	30492	0.3969	0.4893	0	1
someone_abroad	31584	0.3765	0.4845	0	1
<i>Control Variables:</i>					
Age	22900	49.6662	18.2807	18	102
Gender	31562	0.6097	0.4878	0	1
Educational Attainment	31536	0.8699	0.3365	0	1
Orthodox Religion	30451	0.4644	0.4987	0	1
Armenian Religion	30451	0.4564	0.4981	0	1
Savings	31221	0.0864	0.2810	0	1
Debts	31320	0.4663	0.4989	0	1
Employment Status	14266	0.7798	0.4144	0	1
Urban Residence	31606	0.3221	0.4673	0	1
Rural Residence	31606	0.4015	0.4902	0	1
Houshold Income	27549	0.0338	0.1807	0	1

Note: This table presents descriptive statistics for the full sample covering the period 2009-2019. It reports the number of observations, mean values, standard deviations, as well as minimum and maximum values for all key variables used in the analysis, including outcome variables, identity proxies, and control variables.

4 Trust in international organization and pro-Western orientation

We begin by estimating a baseline model to capture the average change in trust in international organizations before and after the 2014 conflict as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta Post_t + \lambda' X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where Y_{it} is the outcome variable, a binary variable that takes the value 1 if the respondent trusts the EU or the UN or declares support for NATO. $Post_t$ is a binary variable that equals 1 if the interview was conducted after the Russia invasion of Ukraine in 2014. ε_{it} denotes the error term, capturing unobserved factors that

affect the outcome variables. X_{it} is a vector of individual characteristics including age, gender, religion, educational attainment, employment status, household income, debts and savings, and rural or urban residence. The coefficient of interest is β that captures the average change in trust after 2014.

It is likely that individuals with various pro-Western cultural orientations and varying levels of international exposure responded differently to the threat posed by Russia. To address this source of heterogeneity in responses and isolate the role of identity-linked orientations, we next estimate a DiD specification that includes interaction terms between the post-2014 period and individual-level characteristics that serve as proxies for geopolitical alignment:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Post}_t + \beta_2 Z_{it} + \beta_3 (\text{Post}_t \times Z_{it}) + \lambda' X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad (2)$$

where Z_{it} is a binary characteristic of individual identity, such as preference for English over Russian as a mandatory school language, approval of marrying an American, or having a close relative or friend living abroad. The coefficient β_3 captures whether the effect of the 2014 conflict on institutional trust differs for individuals with pro-Western orientations.

Table 2 presents the baseline results from the estimation of Regression 1. The table has three columns, one for each outcome variable (trust in the EU, UN, and support for NATO membership). The results highlight that, across the full sample, individuals interviewed after the 2014 conflict in Ukraine reported lower levels of trust in the EU and the UN, and less support for NATO membership, relative to those interviewed before 2014. All coefficients are negative and statistically significant. These findings provide preliminary evidence that the 2014 conflict corresponded with a broad decline in public trust in international organizations.

In Table 3, we explore how this effect varied across subgroups with differing geopolitical orientations. The table presents DiD estimates comparing individuals who believe that English should be mandatory in secondary schools (a proxy for Western alignment) with those who support Russian. The estimated coefficients for the variable “English mandatory” are positive and statistically significant across all three outcomes, suggesting that, prior to 2014, pro-English individuals already exhibited higher baseline levels of trust in the EU, UN, and support for NATO membership. This reflects underlying attitudinal differences between identity groups, with English-language supporters more inclined toward Western institutions. The estimated coefficient on post remains negative and significant, confirming that trust declined overall in the post-conflict period, regardless of subgroup. This decline in trust is sensibly lower for pro-English individuals, as compared to pro-Russian indi-

Table 2: Average change in trust in international organizations after 2014

	(1) EU	(2) UN	(3) NATO
Post	-0.025*** (0.005)	-0.013** (0.005)	-0.064*** (0.005)
Constant	0.762*** (0.003)	0.749*** (0.003)	0.813*** (0.003)
Observations	31995	31387	32703
R-squared	0.001	0.000	0.005

Note: This table presents estimates from one difference model expressed in Equation 1. All estimates are obtained for the period 2009-2019 using repeated cross-sectional data from the CB. The dependent variables are binary variables of institutional trust, as defined in Section 3. Column (1) reports results for trust in the EU, Column (2) for trust in the UN, and Column (3) for support for NATO membership. The main independent variable is a binary variable equal to 1 for individuals surveyed after the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, and 0 otherwise. All Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

viduals, as documented by a positive and statistically significant coefficient on the interaction term. In other words, while institutional trust declined on average, the decline was less severe, or even reversed, for identity-aligned individuals.

These results highlight the polarising effects of geopolitical events. Individuals with stronger cultural ties to Russia may have viewed international institutions like the EU, UN, and NATO more negatively after 2014, interpreting the conflict as a breakdown in international order. In contrast, pro-Western individuals may have interpreted these institutions as defenders of regional stability and thus maintained or increased their trust.

Next, we test whether these patterns hold for other dimensions of geopolitical orientation. In Table 4, we use marriage preference as the identity variable. Specifically, we test whether respondents' approval of women from their ethnic group marrying an American (versus not) moderates the effect on public trust in international organizations. Results indicate that those who support marrying Americans show higher baseline trust in international institutions and experience a less negative, or even a positive, shift after 2014, in a manner similar to that observed for language preference.

In Table 5, we use a third proxy for geopolitical orientation: whether the respondent has a close relative or friend living abroad. This indicator captures transnational ties, which are often associated with greater openness to international norms. Again, the interaction term is positive, suggesting that those with stronger international

Table 3: Differential Change in trust in international organizations after 2014 by Language Preference (English vs. Russian)

	(1) EU	(2) UN	(3) NATO
English mandatory	0.045*** (0.012)	0.044*** (0.012)	0.081*** (0.011)
Post	-0.091*** (0.020)	-0.098*** (0.020)	-0.099*** (0.020)
English mandatory \times Post	0.041* (0.022)	0.056** (0.022)	0.088*** (0.022)
Observations	8799	8669	9025
R-squared	0.043	0.046	0.062
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: This table presents estimates DiD regressions of Equation 2. All estimates are obtained for the period 2009-2019 using repeated cross-sectional data from the CB. The dependent variables are binary variables of institutional trust, as defined in Section 3. Column (1) reports results for trust in the EU, Column (2) for trust in the UN, and Column (3) for support for NATO membership. The key independent variable is the interaction between two variables, where eng_mandatory is a binary variable equal to 1 if the respondent believes that English, rather than Russian, should be mandatory in secondary schools, and post equals 1 if the respondent was surveyed after 2014. This interaction term captures heterogeneous effects to the 2014 conflict based on language preferences. All regressions include individual-level controls: age, gender, religion, educational attainment, employment status, household income, debts and savings, and rural or urban residence. All Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

exposure were less negatively affected by the geopolitical shock in terms of their institutional trust.

Together, these results demonstrate that responses to geopolitical conflict are not homogeneous. Individuals with pro-Western cultural orientations and international exposure show greater resilience, or even increased confidence, in international institutions, while others respond with disruption in trust. These patterns reinforce the interpretation that the 2014 Ukraine conflict served as a polarising event, intensifying existing divides in public trust. For policymakers and international actors, this underlines the importance of understanding and addressing identity-based differences in how geopolitical events are perceived and internalised by the public.

Table 4: Differential Change in Institutional Trust After 2014 by Marriage Preference (American).

	(1) EU	(2) UN	(3) NATO
Marrying Americans	0.041*** (0.011)	0.037*** (0.011)	0.030*** (0.010)
Post	-0.078*** (0.014)	-0.063*** (0.014)	-0.066*** (0.014)
Marrying Americans \times Post	0.038** (0.019)	0.023* (0.014)	0.051*** (0.018)
Observations	9870	9713	10092
R-squared	0.042	0.041	0.051
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: This table presents estimates DiD regressions of Equation 2. All estimates are obtained for the period 2009-2019 using repeated cross-sectional data from the CB. The dependent variables are binary variables of institutional trust, as defined in Section 3. Column (1) reports results for trust in the EU, Column (2) for trust in the UN, and Column (3) for support for NATO membership. The key independent variable is the interaction between two variables, where marry_usa is a binary variable equal to 1 if the respondent approves of women of their ethnicity marrying an American, and post equals 1 if the respondent was surveyed after 2014. This interaction term captures heterogeneous effects to the 2014 conflict based on openness to Western cultural integration. All regressions include individual-level controls: age, gender, religion, educational attainment, employment status, household income, debts and savings, and rural or urban residence. All Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

5 Comparative Analysis Using Armenia as a Control Group

To strengthen causal inference, we extend the regression model by introducing Armenia as a control group. While both countries share many regional, cultural, and post-Soviet institutional characteristics, Armenia is more closely aligned with Russia and maintains a relatively neutral stance in regional geopolitics. It is therefore less affected by the 2014 Ukraine conflict, making it a suitable comparison group for isolating the effect of the Ukrainian conflict on institutional trust.

We take advantage of this circumstance using a standard DiD with country-level treatment as follows:

$$Y_{ijt} = \beta_1 \text{Post}_t + \beta_2 \mathbf{1}[\text{Georgia}]_j + \beta_3 (\text{Post}_t \times \mathbf{1}[\text{Georgia}]_j) + \lambda' X_{it} + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{ijt}, \quad (3)$$

where Y_{ijt} is a binary variable of trust for individual i , living in country j during

Table 5: Differential Change in Institutional Trust After 2014 by Whether Respondent Has Close Relatives or Friends Abroad.

	(1) EU	(2) UN	(3) NATO
Someone abroad	-0.022** (0.011)	-0.027** (0.011)	-0.019* (0.010)
Post	-0.071*** (0.014)	-0.056*** (0.015)	-0.047*** (0.014)
Someone abroad \times Post	0.033* (0.019)	0.020 (0.019)	0.018 (0.018)
Observations	10058	9895	10311
R-squared	0.039	0.040	0.048
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: This table presents estimates DiD regressions of Equation 2. All estimates are obtained for the period 2009-2019 using repeated cross-sectional data from the CB. The dependent variables are binary variables of institutional trust, as defined in Section 3. Column (1) reports results for trust in the EU, Column (2) for trust in the UN, and Column (3) for support for NATO membership. The key independent variable is the interaction between two variables, where someone_abroad is a binary variable equal to 1 if the respondent has a close relative or friend currently living abroad, and post equals 1 if the respondent was surveyed after 2014. This interaction term captures heterogeneous effects to the 2014 conflict based on transnational ties. All regressions include individual-level controls: age, gender, religion, educational attainment, employment status, household income, debts and savings, and rural or urban residence. All Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

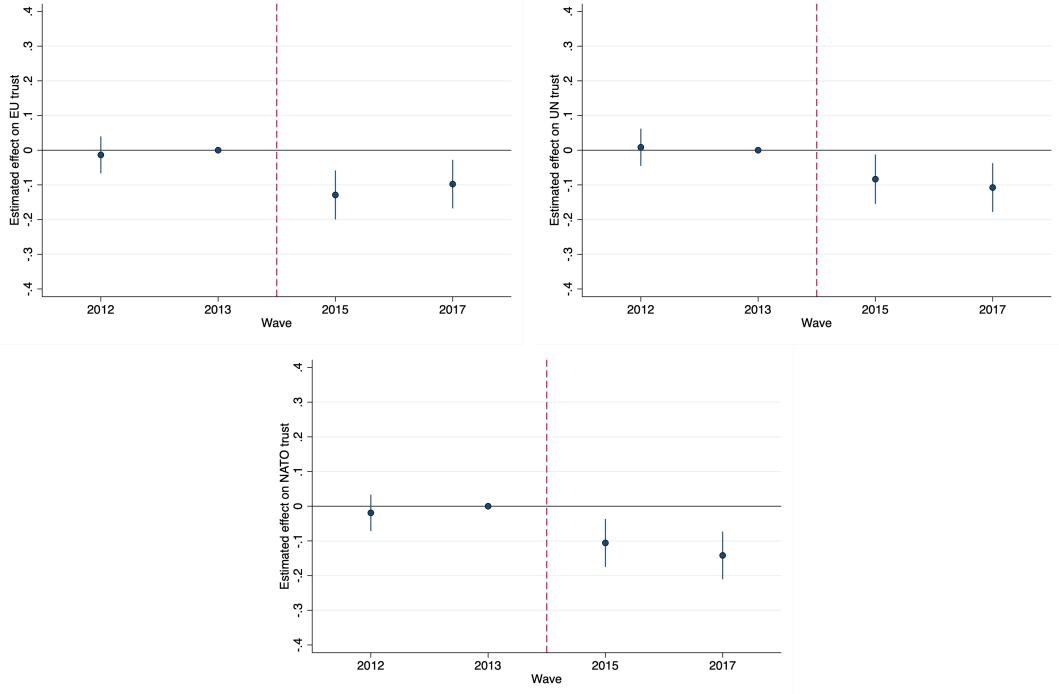
the survey wave t . $\mathbf{1}[\text{Georgia}]_j$ is a binary variable that equals 1 if individual i is from the treated country Georgia and 0 for the control country Armenia. $Post_t$ is a binary variable that equals 1 if the interview was conducted after 2014 and 0 otherwise. The interaction term captures the average treatment effect of the conflict on trust in international organizations in Georgia, relative to Armenia. γ_t is a year fixed effects (FEs) to account for common shocks across survey years. ε_{ijt} denotes the error term, capturing unobserved factors that affect trust.

Before reporting the DiD regression results, we assess the validity of the parallel trends assumption by estimating an event-study model where differences in trust between Armenia and Georgia are allowed to vary across survey waves:

$$Y_{ijt} = \alpha \mathbf{1}[\text{Georgia}]_j + \sum_{t \neq 2013} \beta_t (\mathbf{1}[\text{Georgia}]_j \times \gamma_t) + \lambda' X_{it} + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{ijt}. \quad (4)$$

The interaction term captures the year-specific difference in institutional trust between the treated group (Georgia) and the control group (Armenia) for each survey

Figure 1: Dynamic treatment effect.



Notes: This figure plots coefficients from regressions of institutional trust in the EU, UN, and support for NATO membership on interaction terms between country (treated = 1 for Georgia) and survey year dummies, with 2013 as the baseline. The coefficients represent yearly differences in average trust in the EU, UN, and support for NATO membership between Georgia and Armenia, adjusted for demographic and economic controls. The dashed vertical line marks the first post-treatment wave (2014).

Source: Authors' elaboration on CB data.

year, relative to a base year (e.g., 2013). We report the estimated coefficients β_t for each outcome variable in Figure 1. The estimates compare average trust in international institutions in Georgia relative to Armenia for each survey wave between 2012 and 2017, controlling for individual-level characteristics. The pre-2014 coefficients are close to zero, supporting the parallel trends assumption. Importantly, a sharp negative shift in trust in Georgia relative to Armenia is observed beginning in 2015, bringing evidence of a genuine effect of the Russian invasion rather than a declining trend in trust.

In Table 6, we report the estimated average treatment effects, that is, the estimates of Equation 3. As one can see, the coefficient on the interaction term is negative and statistically significant across all three institutions, indicating that trust in the EU, the UN, and support for NATO membership declined more in Georgia than in Armenia after 2014. This indicates that the observed decline in trust is not merely due to a general temporal trend or a region-wide shock, but is specifically tied to

Table 6: Difference-in-Differences Estimates of Institutional Trust: Georgia vs. Armenia (Average Treatment Effect).

	(1) EU	(2) UN	(3) NATO
Georgia	0.189*** (0.027)	0.182*** (0.027)	0.118*** (0.035)
Post	0.092*** (0.022)	0.098*** (0.022)	0.091*** (0.022)
Georgia \times Post	-0.142*** (0.020)	-0.141*** (0.020)	-0.141*** (0.019)
Observations	7902	7754	8113
R-squared	0.054	0.046	0.072
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: This table presents estimates DiD regressions of Equation 3 comparing institutional trust in Georgia (treated) and Armenia (control) before and after the 2014 Ukraine conflict. All estimates are obtained for the period 2009-2019 using repeated cross-sectional data from the CB. The dependent variables are binary variables of institutional trust in the EU, UN, and support for NATO membership, as defined in Section 3. Column (1) reports results for trust in the EU, Column (2) for trust in the UN, and Column (3) for support for NATO membership. The key independent variable is the interaction between two variables, where treated equals 1 for Georgia and 0 for Armenia, and post equals 1 if the respondent was surveyed after 2014. This interaction term captures the average treatment effect of the 2014 conflict on institutional trust in Georgia relative to Armenia. All regressions include individual-level controls: age, gender, religion, educational attainment, employment status, household income, debts and savings, rural or urban residence, and year fixed effects. All Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

the conflict's localised impact.

Finally, to assess whether identity-based alignments, such as a preference for English, moderate the effect of the conflict, we estimate a triple interaction model which allows us to distinguish whether pro-Western Georgians were less likely to reduce their support for international organizations after the Russian threat. The estimation results are presented in Table 7. The coefficient on the triple interaction is positive and significant for trust in the EU and support for NATO membership. This suggests that individuals in Georgia who supported English as the mandatory school language were less likely to experience a decline in institutional trust and, in some cases, to experience increased trust following the conflict, relative to their counterparts in Armenia. In contrast, individuals aligned with pro-Russian or neutral identity experienced larger declines in trust after the conflict. The effect for UN trust is directionally consistent but not statistically significant.

These findings confirm our earlier conclusions: the decline in institutional trust following the 2014 conflict was not uniform. Rather, it was conditioned by identity, such as language orientation and cultural openness to the West. These findings highlight how geopolitical shocks interact with pre-existing societal norms, deepening polarisation in attitudes toward international institutions.

6 Conclusion

This study provides robust evidence that the 2014 conflict in Ukraine had a significant and heterogeneous effect on public trust in international institutions across the South Caucasus. Using repeated cross-sectional survey data from the Caucasus Barometer (2009-2019) and a DiD strategy, we show that individuals in more directly affected countries experienced a notable decline in trust in the EU, UN, and support for NATO, relative to Armenia. These results suggest that geopolitical shocks can erode public trust in global institutions, even in the absence of direct military involvement.

Our baseline results show that, across the full sample, individuals surveyed after 2014 reported lower levels of trust in all three institutions. However, the overall decline masks important variation. In our identity-based analysis, we find that individuals who supported English, rather than Russian, as the mandatory language in schools consistently expressed higher baseline levels of trust in international institutions. More importantly, they experienced smaller declines—or even increases—in trust after the 2014 conflict. This pattern held across all three institutions, but was strongest for the EU and NATO.

Additional heterogeneity analyses revealed similar patterns among those who supported inter-ethnic marriage with Americans and those who had relatives or friends abroad, two proxies for openness to Western cultural and transnational influences. Individuals showed greater resilience in their trust, while those with Russian-aligned identity orientations experienced sharper declines.

The DiD model using Armenia as a control confirms that these shifts were not part of a broader regional trend. In Georgia, which is situated closer to the front-line of geopolitical conflict and is more actively pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration, trust in international institutions declined more sharply than in Armenia. Furthermore, estimates from our extended triple-difference model further confirm that the identity-based difference is more pronounced in Georgia than in Armenia.

Overall, our findings highlight the importance of identity and international alignment in shaping public opinions on geopolitical events and suggest that restor-

ing trust in global institutions requires targeted, identity-based approaches. Pro-Western individuals responded to the conflict with sustained trust in international institutions, perhaps viewing them as protectors of national sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity within their internationally recognised borders. In contrast, individuals with closer cultural ties to Russia became more sceptical, possibly perceiving these institutions as biased or ineffective in preventing conflict.

Table 7: Triple Interaction Estimates: Effect of the 2014 Ukraine Conflict on Institutional Trust by Identity Alignment in Georgia vs. Armenia.

	(1) EU	(2) UN	(3) NATO
Georgia	0.170*** (0.030)	0.147*** (0.031)	0.128*** (0.039)
Post	-0.001 (0.026)	-0.023 (0.026)	0.017 (0.027)
Georgia × Post	-0.218*** (0.038)	-0.180*** (0.038)	-0.266*** (0.039)
English mandatory	0.036* (0.019)	0.021 (0.019)	0.067*** (0.020)
Georgia × English mandatory	0.012 (0.024)	0.038 (0.024)	-0.002 (0.025)
Post × English mandatory	0.001 (0.033)	0.044 (0.033)	0.039 (0.034)
Georgia × Post × English mandatory	0.110** (0.045)	0.056 (0.046)	0.156*** (0.046)
Observations	7177	7059	7364
R-squared	0.056	0.049	0.086
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: This table presents estimates DiD regressions of Equation 3 with a triple interaction term comparing institutional trust in Georgia (treated) and Armenia (control) before and after the 2014 Ukraine conflict and capturing identity-based heterogeneity in the effect. All estimates are obtained for the period 2009-2019 using repeated cross-sectional data from the CB. The dependent variables are binary variables of institutional trust in the EU, UN, and support for NATO membership, as defined in Section 3. Column (1) reports results for trust in the EU, Column (2) for trust in the UN, and Column (3) for support for NATO membership. The key independent variable is the interaction between three variables, where where treated equals 1 for Georgia and 0 for Armenia, post equals 1 if the respondent was surveyed after 2014, and eng_mandatory is a binary variable equal to 1 if the respondent believes that English, rather than Russian, should be mandatory in secondary schools. The triple interaction term identifies whether individuals with pro-Western orientations in Georgia experienced a differential shift in institutional trust compared to similar individuals in Armenia. All regressions include individual-level controls: age, gender, religion, educational attainment, employment status, household income, debts and savings, rural or urban residence, and year fixed effects. All Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

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