

# DO FEAR-BASED MESSAGES INFLUENCE ATTITUDES TOWARD THE EU IN GEORGIA?

**BLOG**

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### **Do Fear-Based Messages Influence Attitudes Toward the EU in Georgia?**

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## DO FEAR-BASED MESSAGES INFLUENCE ATTITUDES TOWARD THE EU IN GEORGIA?

### INTRODUCTION

In post-Soviet contexts like Georgia, geopolitical narratives are deeply connected to identity, values, and history. In recent years, fear-based messages about EU integration have become common tools in social media and propaganda. This study examines whether fear-based messages about EU integration in Georgia shape attitudes and perceptions of the likelihood of integration. Specifically, it focuses on two common anti-Western narratives: 1. EU integration will undermine traditional family values, and 2. EU integration will lead to mass youth migration.

Fear-based messaging, often called fear appeals, is widely used to influence attitudes and behavior by emphasizing potential negative consequences (Hovland et al., 1953; Witte, 1992). Early research suggested that stronger fear would lead to stronger persuasion, but experiments quickly showed this isn't always the case. High levels of fear can provoke defensive reactions, denial, or outright rejection of the message (Janis & Feshbach, 1953). For example, Janis and Feshbach demonstrated that moderate fear messages with clear guidance were significantly more effective than extreme fear messages.

However, the persuasive power of fear is limited when narratives are already well-established within a society. When audiences are saturated with a specific message and hold consolidated beliefs, they often engage in "motivated reasoning" to defend their existing attitudes rather than updating them (Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Furthermore, the influence of fear appeals is highly dependent on the content's relevance and sensitivity. Research indicates that when messages threaten core values or identity, creating high "issue involvement", audiences are prone to defensive processing, rejecting the threat to maintain their psychological stability (Lieberman & Chaiken, 1992; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Today, fear appeals are common in social media and propaganda. Emotionally charged content, especially messages evoking fear or anger, spreads quickly and sticks in memory, even when it isn't factually accurate (Brady et al., 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Corrective information can reduce the perceived credibility of misleading claims, but its effectiveness depends on timing, clarity, and audience characteristics (Guess et al., 2020; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

Despite a number of general research, there is limited evidence on how these dynamics play out specifically in Georgia. To address this issue, this study compares fear-only messages, fear-plus-correction messages, and a no-message control condition in order to understand the actual impact of fear and corrective information on public opinion.

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## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Data collection*

To address the research objectives, CRRC-Georgia conducted a nationwide telephone survey of the adult Georgian-speaking population in December 2025. The survey employed a simple probability sampling design using random digit dialing (RDD). A total of 2,240 interviews were completed. The response rate was 17%.

Descriptive analyses are based on weighted data to ensure the representativeness of the Georgian-speaking population. Consequently, the findings can be generalized to this population within accepted margins of sampling error.

### *Experimental Design*

The telephone survey incorporated an embedded experiment. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of five groups<sup>1</sup>. The assignment determined which narrative they heard (if any) and which specific outcome questions they were asked:

- Group 1: Fear-based message on Family Values (No correction).(N=421).
- Group 2: Fear-based message on Family Values + Corrective information.(N=431).
- Group 3: Fear-based message on Youth Migration (No correction).(N=415).
- Group 4: Fear-based message on Youth Migration + Corrective information.(N=407).
- Group 5 (Control): No message or scenario provided.(N=476).

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed information about the experiment is provided in the appendix.

Random assignment ensured equivalence across groups with respect to observable and unobservable characteristics.

### *Outcome measures*

Two dependent variables were used to assess the persuasive effect:

1. Perceived likelihood of the threat (e.g., threat to family values or youth migration), measured on a four-point ordinal scale;
2. Support for Georgia's accession to the European Union, also measured on a four-point ordinal scale

All respondents answered the outcome questions after being exposed to the assigned message (or, in the case of the control group, no exposure to a message was given).

### *Data analysis*

The data were analysed using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Mean differences across the experimental groups were tested separately for each dependent variable to identify statistically significant differences in perceived message credibility and EU support. This approach enabled a systematic comparison of fear-based messages, fear-plus-correction messages, and the control condition.

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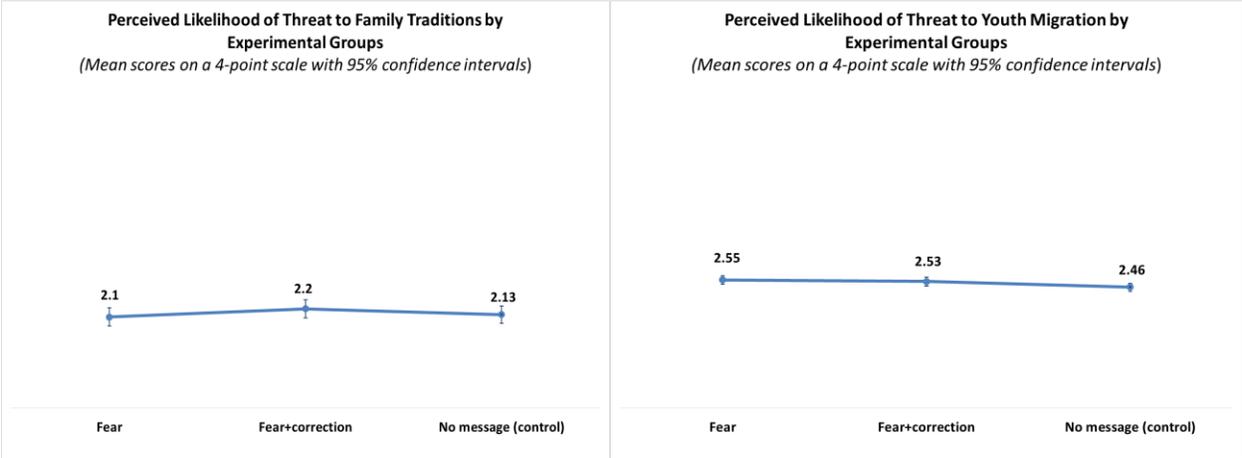
## **RESULTS**

### *Perceived likelihood of threats of the message on undermining family traditions and increasing youth migration*

A consistent pattern is observed in terms of the perceived likelihood of threats concerning both family traditions and youth migration. There are no statistically significant differences in mean credibility scores between groups. As Chart [1] shows, respondents in the fear-only groups (M = 2.10 for family traditions and M = 2.55 for youth migration), the fear-plus-correction groups (M = 2.20 and 2.53), and the control groups (M = 2.13 and 2.46) reported similar levels of perceived likelihood. Adding corrective information did not meaningfully increase or decrease the scores compared to those of the fear-only or control groups.

Overall, exposure to fear-based messages, whether presented alone or with corrective information, did not alter the perceived likelihood of these claims. These anti-Western narratives are already somewhat prevalent in society, with 52% of respondents considering the youth migration narrative to be likely and 36% considering the undermining of family traditions to be likely. This stability was reflected in the experimental analysis, where the mean belief score remained consistent across all conditions. These results suggest that fear-based messages have no statistically significant impact on existing public attitudes towards these narratives.

Chart 1



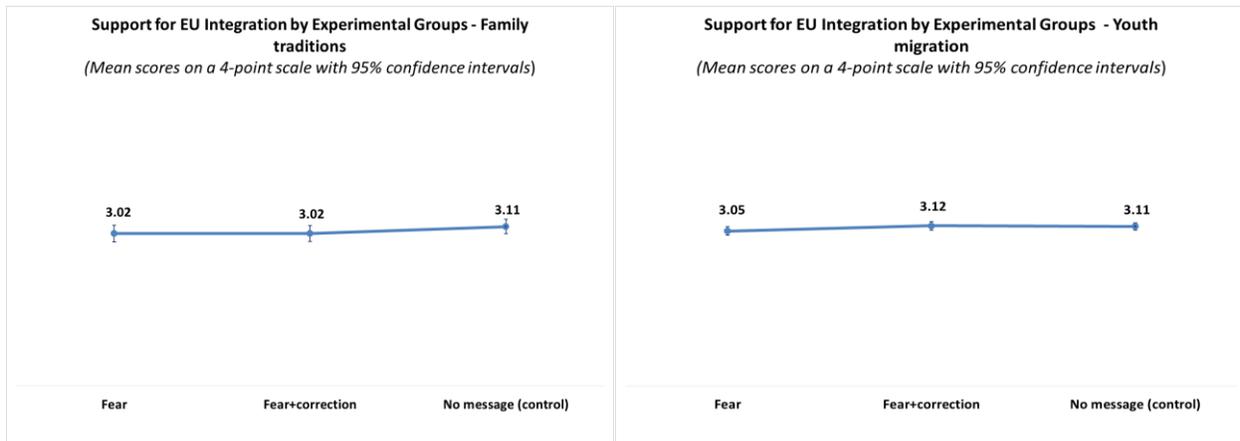
**Support for Georgia’s Accession to the European Union**

A similar pattern is observed across both types of fear-based messages, whether about family traditions or youth migration. There are no statistically significant differences in mean levels of support for EU integration between the groups. Respondents in the fear-only groups (M = 3.02 for family traditions, M = 3.05 for youth migration), the fear-plus-correction groups (M = 3.02 and 3.12), and the control group (M = 3.11 for both topics) reported very similar levels of support. The confidence intervals for all groups overlap substantially, suggesting that the small differences in means are likely due to random variation.

Overall, exposure to fear-based messages, whether presented alone or with corrective information, did not reduce support for EU integration. Support for EU accession remained high and stable, with 73% of respondents reporting that they support Georgia joining the EU. This robustness was reflected in the experimental analysis, where mean support scores across groups

ranged from 3.02 to 3.11 on a 4-point scale (where 4 = fully support). These results indicate that the fear-based messages had no statistically significant effect on public attitudes.

Chart 2



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## CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest that fear-based messages about EU integration, whether focused on youth migration or family traditions, had no statistically significant impact on public attitudes in Georgia. Neither fear-only messages nor fear-plus-correction messages influenced the perceived likelihood of these claims or the level of support for Georgia joining the European Union.

These null findings can be largely attributed to the saturation of the information environment. As noted in the introduction, Georgian society has been exposed to these specific anti-Western narratives for years. The high repeatability of claims regarding "undermining family traditions" and "mass migration" over time has likely led to consolidated attitudes that are resistant to modification. When beliefs are firmly crystallized, audiences often engage in motivated reasoning, rejecting a single experimental message that contradicts their established point of view.

On the other hand, the absence of observed effects may also stem from methodological limitations. It is possible that the experimental design did not establish sufficient differentiation between the groups in terms of message intensity. The "fear" and "fear-plus-correction" texts may not have been distinct enough to trigger different psychological responses. Furthermore, participants in the correction groups may have focused disproportionately on the initial threat (the

fear component) while ignoring the subsequent correction - a phenomenon where the emotional salience of fear overshadows factual rectification.

Overall, this study highlights the resilience of public support for EU membership in Georgia. It suggests that while fear-based propaganda is a common feature of the political landscape, its ability to shift consolidated public opinion, at least through short-term exposure, remains limited.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **1. The “Fear Experiment” Protocol**

The study utilized a five-arm randomized controlled design. Four experimental groups were exposed to specific narratives (two regarding family values, two regarding migration), while a fifth control group received no scenario and answered only the outcome questions.

#### **Experimental Stimuli**

##### **Theme A: Family Values**

Group 1: Fear Only

"I will now read a short piece of information. On social networks, it is claimed that if Georgia becomes a member of the EU, it will lead to changes in family-related laws and the devaluation of the traditional roles of men and women."

Group 2: Fear + Correction

"I will now read a short piece of information. On social networks, it is claimed that if Georgia becomes a member of the EU, it will lead to changes in family-related laws and the devaluation of the traditional roles of men and women. However, facts show that this information does not correspond to reality, as every country adopts its own family-related laws independently."

##### **Theme B: Youth Migration**

Group 3: Fear Only

"I will now read a short piece of information. On social networks, it is claimed that if Georgia becomes a member of the EU and Georgians can freely work in Europe, this will lead to mass migration of young people, and the country will be emptied of its youth."

Group 4: Fear + Correction

" I will now read a short piece of information. On social networks, it is claimed that if Georgia becomes a member of the EU and Georgians can freely work in Europe, this will lead to mass migration of young people, and the country will be emptied of its youth. However, facts show that

EU membership improves the country's economic conditions, which, in turn, reduces youth migration."

### Outcome Measures (Survey Questions)

Respondents were asked the following questions based on their group assignment:

**Q1. Perceived Threat to Family Traditions** *Asked to: Control Group, Groups 1 & 2* "In your opinion, how likely or unlikely is it that Georgia's accession to the EU will threaten family traditions and values?" (1) Not likely at all; (2) Somewhat unlikely; (3) Somewhat likely; (4) Very likely. (-1 Don't know; -2 Refusal)

**Q2. Perceived Threat of Youth Migration** *Asked to: Control Group, Groups 3 & 4* "In your opinion, how likely or unlikely is it that Georgia's accession to the EU will encourage the mass migration of young people?" (1) Not likely at all; (2) Somewhat unlikely; (3) Somewhat likely; (4) Very likely. (-1 Don't know; -2 Refusal)

**Q3. Support for EU Accession** *Asked to: All Five Groups* "To what extent do you support or oppose Georgia's membership in the European Union?" (1) Not support at all; (2) I don't support it more than I support it; (3) I support it more than I don't support it; (4) Fully support it. (-1 Don't know; -2 Refusal)

### Experimental Design Summary

Group	Narrative Theme	Corrective Information	Outcome Measures
1	Family Values	No	Q1, Q3
2	Family Values	Yes	Q1, Q3
3	Youth Migration	No	Q2, Q3
4	Youth Migration	Yes	Q2, Q3
5 (Control)	None	None	Q1, Q2, Q3

## 2. Descriptive Statistics (Frequencies)

**Table 1: Perceived Threat to Family Traditions (%)**

"In your opinion, how likely or unlikely is it that Georgia's accession to the EU will threaten family traditions and values?" Asked to: Control Group, Groups 1 & 2

Response Category	Percentage (%)
1 - Not at all likely	37.30
2 - Not very likely	26.80
3 - Somewhat likely	21.26
4 - Very likely	14.63
Total	100.00

**Table 2: Perceived Threat of Youth Migration (%)**

"In your opinion, how likely or unlikely is it that Georgia's accession to the EU will encourage the mass migration of young people?" Asked to: Control Group, Groups 3 & 4

Response Category	Percentage (%)
1 - Not at all likely	17.40
2 - Not very likely	30.68
3 - Somewhat likely	34.79
4 - Very likely	17.13
Total	100.00

**Table 3: Support for EU Accession (%)**

"To what extent do you support or oppose Georgia's membership in the European Union?" Asked to: All Five Groups

Response Category	Percentage (%)
1 do not support	14.19
2 Rather do not support than support	12.72
3 Rather support than not support	26.03
4 Fully support	47.05
Total	100.00