

Trust and Mistrust in the Caucasus

Anar Valiyev
& Khayala
Mustafayeva

Abstract

This article examines the trust level in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia to various political institutions. Annual nationwide survey data results from the Caucasus Barometer (CB) in 2010 show that trust level to the main branches of power significantly varies across all three countries. Trust level to executive branch of power and specifically to president is the highest in Azerbaijan, followed by Georgia and Armenia. Furthermore, the data shows that legislative and judicial branches of power are also highly trusted in Azerbaijan, although not at the same extent as executive. In Georgia and Armenia the trust level for two other branches of power is comparatively moderate. In contrast, the trust level to local governments, ombudsman office or banks is lower than in Georgia and Armenia. Trust level to various institutions highly correlates with the voter's turnout in Azerbaijan. The highest voter's turnout is observed with presidential, followed by parliament elections. The lowest turnout and trust level is associated with local governments. Thus, some political institutions in Azerbaijan are weak and vulnerable and a lot of trust-building measures have to be implemented in order to change the situation. Author suggests some measures for increasing the level of trust of those institutions. Higher trust level to those institutions is crucial for stability and sustainability of the political system of Azerbaijan.

** Dr. Anar Valiyev is Associate Dean of Academic Affairs at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. Khayala Mustafayeva is currently Research Associate at the CRRC*

There is a general understanding that trust in a political system is an important element for democratic reforms and development. Trust contributes to economic development and market economy, social integration, political reforms, democratic stability and even to good health and longevity¹. Political and social scientists usually distinguish two types of trust - political and social. While social trust covers the attitudes of people to each other as well as participation in civil and voluntary organizations, political trust measures the attitudes of the public to political institutions. For the last decade the connection between trust, social capital and democracy has occupied a significant place in the work of political scientists. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and emergence of new transitional states gave birth to and popularized theories of trust. Political scientists began to see the absence of trust as the main element of weakness in the political system. The weakness of political society and low levels of citizens' involvement in politics in former Communist societies usually connected to low levels of social capital (weak civil society and low levels of interpersonal trust) and the legacy of cooperation with Communism². In fact, several researchers

found that mistrust of political institutions comes from the disappointment from cooperation with Communist regimes and disbelief in a new democratic government³. Countries of the South Caucasus are not an exception to the rule. All three countries became independent at the same time and experienced more or less similar historical processes. While, Georgia and Azerbaijan were plagued by separatism and aggression, Armenia was left in isolationism and lacking economic development. But the presence of conflicts in all three societies contributed a great deal to the formation of trust in various institutions.

The following article examines the level of political trust among populations in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. It also provides an explanation for understanding the high or low level of trust. This article primarily employs data from the 2010 Caucasus Barometer (CB)—a nationwide survey that is annually conducted in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC). The CB uses multi-stage cluster sampling with preliminary stratification on nine geographically defined units in each country:

Trust, Membership, and Democratization in East-Central Europe. *Political Research Quarterly*, December 2004 vol. 57 no. 4 665-679

³ Howard, Marc (2003). *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

¹ Newton, Kenneth (2001). Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society, and Democracy, *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Apr., 2001), pp. 201-214

² Letki, Nathalie (2004). *Socialization for Participation?*

capital, urban-Northeast, urban-Northwest, urban-Southeast, urban-Southwest, rural-Northeast, rural-Northwest, rural-Southeast and rural-Southwest. The sampling frame in 2010 was the census in Azerbaijan and Georgia and electricity records in Armenia. The number of primary sampling units (PSUs) in each stratum was proportional to the population of each stratum. Fifty households on average were randomly selected in each PSU for an interview. The rough number of individual interviews per country was 2,001 in Azerbaijan, 2,089 in Georgia and 1,922 in Armenia. The average expected margin of error varies between settlement types [capital, urban non-capital, and rural], but none are greater than 5%.⁴

The article is divided into several sections. First, we will examine the trust level of populations to the three branches of power – executive, legislative and judicial. Second, the article will analyze the trust level of populations to some institutions such as ombudsman, army, banks, health care system and local governments. In conclusion, the article will focus on areas that governments should concentrate on in order to strengthen the process of democratic transformation.

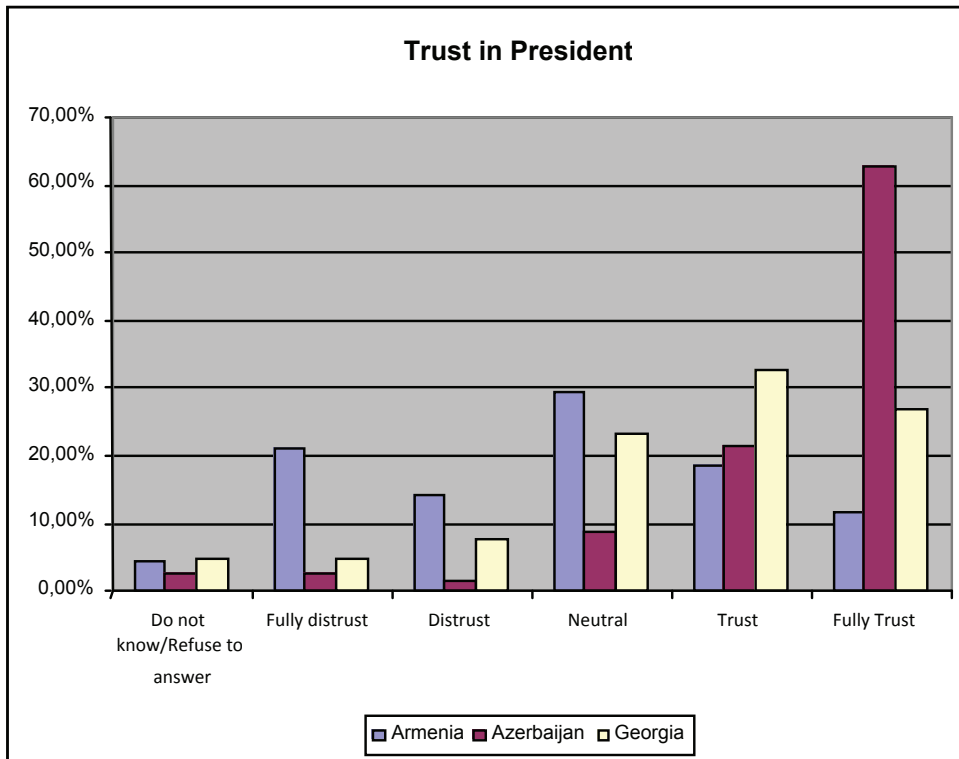
⁴ Caucasus Barometer 2010 Dataset. Caucasus Research Resource Center. Retrieved from <http://www.crrcenters.org/caucasusbarometer/> (April 22, 2011)

Executive Branch of Power

In the former Soviet Union republics and in the Caucasus in particular, the trust level in presidents and executive governments is one of the important indicators of legitimacy of power. Since all three countries are presidential republics, a low trust level in the executive branch of power would invite some doubt regarding the stability of the system. Many coups, government overthrows or so-called revolutions happened because of the low level of confidence a population had in its president. The history of Post-Soviet South Caucasus has several examples of such situations. Looking at the following graph, we can observe that the trust levels in presidents in the South Caucasus vary significantly.

The share of people who trust the president of Azerbaijan (fully trust and trust) comprises 84.1%.⁵ If we include those people who are neutral it could be said that almost 93% of Azerbaijan's population is either trusting or neutral to its president. This highly correlates with the results of the recent presidential election when president Aliyev got 87% of the votes with 75.6% voter turnout. It also proves many observations and theories that trust of institutions leads

⁵ The answers for this and all other questions were graded from 1 (fully distrust) to 5 (fully trust). The author has equalized grade 2 to distrust, 3 to neutral and 4 to trust.



“No other president in the Caucasus except the Azerbaijani one enjoys such a high trust level. The share of people who trust the Armenian president is around 30.3% while the number of people who fully distrust Serzh Sarkisyan reaches 35.5%. Meanwhile, the number of people who are neutral to the president reaches 30%.”

to higher voter turnout, especially in Azerbaijan. No other president in the

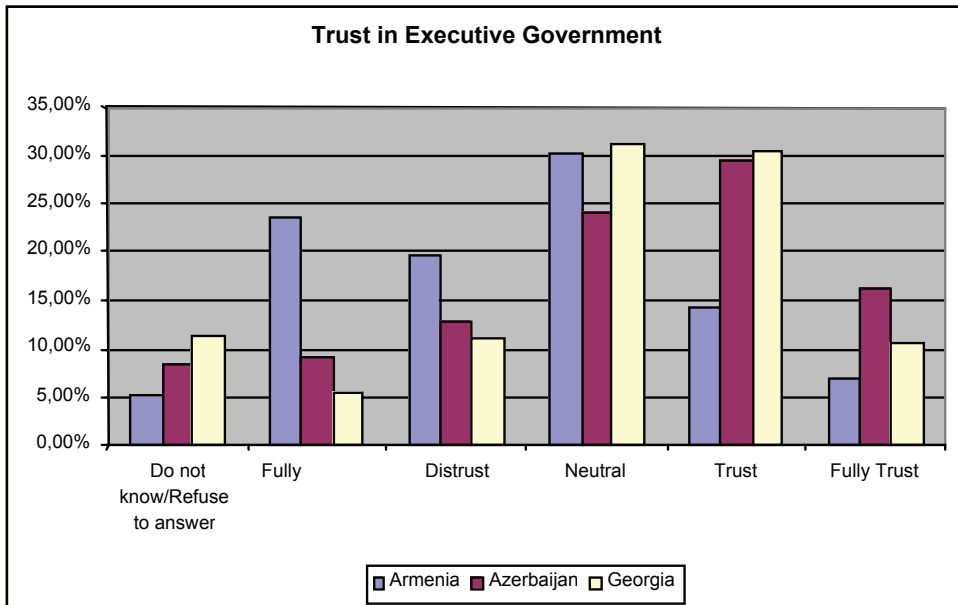
Caucasus except the Azerbaijani one enjoys such a high trust level. The share of people who trust the Armenian president is around 30.3% while the number of people who fully distrust or distrust Serzh Sarkisyan reaches 35.5%. Meanwhile, the number of people who are neutral to the president reaches 30%. The Georgian president, at the same time, is trusted by almost 60% of the population while the number of people who mistrust him is about 12.5%. Such sharp discrepancy in the trust level between the countries, especially between Armenia and Azerbaijan, is easily explainable. In Azerbaijan most of the re-

spondents were more likely to feel that the policy of the country is going in the right direction and that they were treated fairly by the government. It is worth mentioning that in comparison with 2007 and 2008, the trust level in the Azerbaijani president grew to 82% in 2009. The major reason for that is believed to be the ability of the Azerbaijani president and government to preserve neutrality and stability during the Russia-Georgia crisis. In contrast, the continued worsening economic situation in Armenia significantly decreased the level of trust in the Armenian president to a record minimum.

A similar picture could be observed in the graph explaining the level of trust in the executive government. As in the previous case, the trust level

toward the executive government is higher in Azerbaijan than in any other country in the South Caucasus.

However, in Azerbaijani a significant minority of people is neutral to the executive government. It is worth mentioning that in reality the Azerbaijani people distinguish between the power of the president and executive government. When the people in Azerbaijan are asked about trust in the executive government they mostly consider the local executive powers of districts and regions. Thus, despite the high percentage of trust (45%) toward executive government, some share of the population (22%) distrusts them. Although the share of people who distrust executive government is much lower than in Armenia, it is still higher than in Georgia

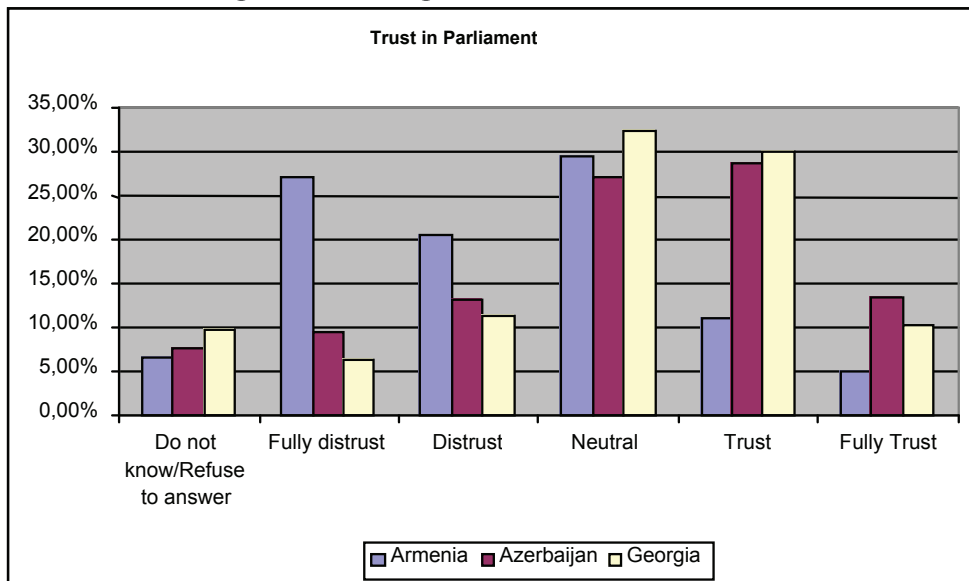


Legislative Branch of Power

The trust of parliament in Georgia and Azerbaijan is pretty high, varying between 40-42%. As in previous cases, the level of distrust in Armenia to a second branch of power is comparatively high - 47%. At the same time around 30% of respondents are neutral to activities of the Armenian National Assembly.

As in the previous case, a significant minority of people in all three countries is neutral to the activities of parliament while some share of people distrusts this institution. It is quite understandable to see such a response. In most societies, even in democratic ones, the legislative branch of power is always seen as an inactive body and the level of trust in this institution in presidential repub-

lics is usually not high. Even in the U.S., polls usually show that the significant majority of people disapprove of the work of the Congress.⁶ Although some researchers could claim that there is a difference between trust and approval, in the case of the South Caucasus the difference is marginal. However, it still does not explain why the Armenian parliament is distrusted more than the parliaments in Georgia and Azerbaijan. We could explain it with events that happened in the Armenian parliament in 1999, when armed terrorists killed the speaker and vice-speakers of the parliament. That shocking event could for years undermine the trust in the legislative branch of Armenia. It is interesting again to mention that voter turnout in Azerbaijan's parliament elections was 50.1%, which reinforc-



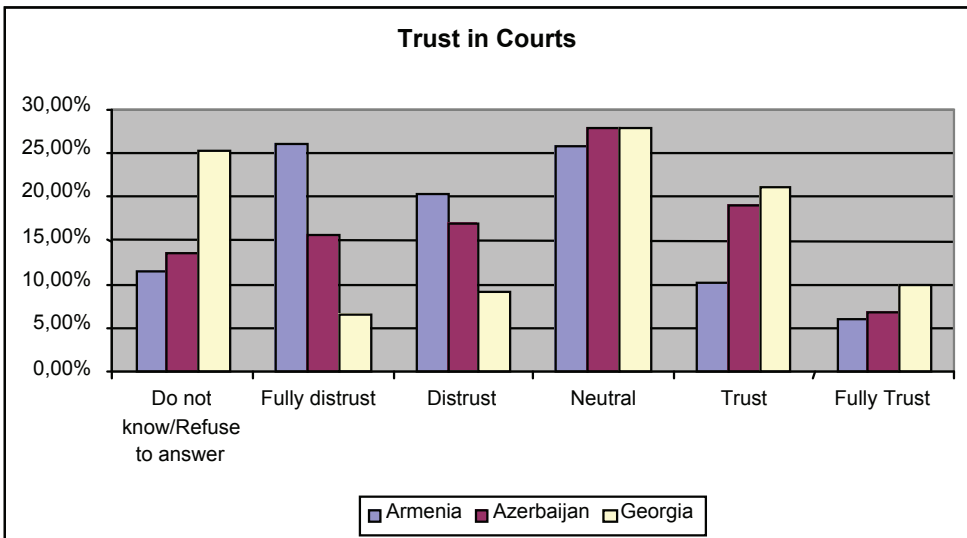
es our claim that trust is positively correlated with voter turnout.

Judicial Branch of Power

Independence and trust in the judicial system is also considered as one of the important elements of emerging democracies. In that context, Azerbaijan and Georgia are proceeding on the same path. The share of people who trust courts is around 26% to 31%. Meanwhile, the share of people who distrust courts in Azerbaijan is higher than in Georgia. Around 32% of respondents in Azerbaijan distrust courts. Such a high share of distrust among respondents in Azerbaijan could be explained by the fact that the Azerbaijani public is slowly getting used to the court system and due process procedures. Unfortunately, trust of the judicial system cannot be built overnight and is a difficult and

long process involving reforms and educating citizens.

In this context trust in law-enforcement agencies such as the police is highly dependent on trust in the judicial system. In the example of Georgia we can see that thanks to reforms of the police system, the trust level of Georgian citizens to law-enforcement agencies is very high: 66.6% of Georgian respondents trust the police while 20% are neutral. In Azerbaijan, however, the level of trust toward police is much lower and reaches only 38%. In Armenian, in turn, the level of distrust of police is very high. Around 50% of respondents distrust Armenian police. Such high levels of distrust could be explained by the memory of Armenians of the events in March 2008 when the police and army were shooting demonstrators in



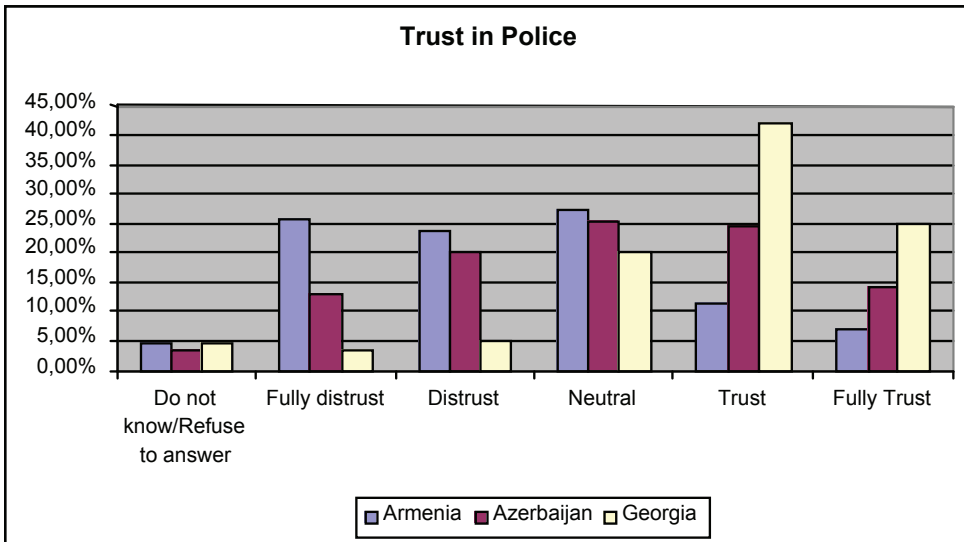
the streets. In Azerbaijan, meanwhile, the level of distrust toward police is moderate but still not insignificant. That is why recent anti-corruption reforms started by the Azerbaijani president began with changes mostly in the police and judicial systems. For the period since January of 2011, a number of police officers and judges were relieved from their duties for irregularities in their work. It is believed that the level of trust in this important element of government will significantly increase by the end of the year.

Trust to Other Institutions

Army

Since the independence of all three countries, the army was considered important for the countries' security. All three societies have high levels of

trust in military institutions compared to other institutions. However, there are certain differences among the three countries. Azerbaijan has the highest level of trust in the army compared to Georgia and Armenia. It could be explained by the fact that a significant majority of the population believes that a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict lies in the hands of the army and that only the military institution can resolve this situation. Meanwhile, significant investments in the army have built confidence among the public. In contrast, in Armenia the trust level is lower than in Azerbaijan; that could be partly explained by the army's involvement (especially regiments stationed in Karabakh) in bloody events in Yerevan in the aftermath of presidential elections in 2008. Moreover, the high death toll in the Armenian

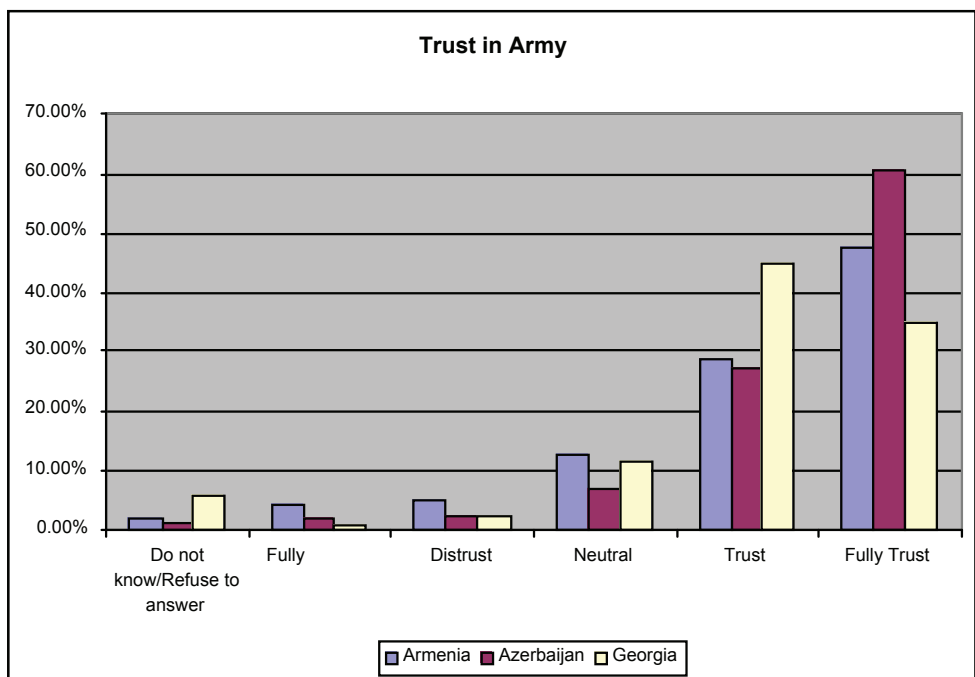


army due to irregularities and *dedovschina*, made this institution less trustworthy. Georgian trust of the army was rebuilt during the last two years since the Russia-Georgian war, when the Georgian army was beaten by the Russian army and public confidence was shaken.

Local Governments

Local government is another institution that requires building trust. Despite the fact that in Azerbaijan the share of respondents trusting local governments or municipalities is around 38%, a significant minority is still neutral. It could be explained by the fact that this institution is still young and undergoing reforms.

Meanwhile, many dissatisfied people tend to see municipalities as incapable of solving problems. In addition, the local governments do not have many functions since the major power rests with the executive branch. Thus, we can see that people tend to trust the executive power rather than local governments since the executive power could really solve the people's problems. Thus, voter turnout in Azerbaijan for municipal elections is very low compared to other elections. Turnout for the 2009 municipal elections comprised 31.8% while in previous elections this figure was around 45%. In contrast, in Georgia the trust in local government is a bit higher than in Azerbaijan while still a



significant number of people are neutral to local governments.

Health Care and Education

Both education and health care systems in Azerbaijan enjoy a high level of trust. In Azerbaijan around 60% of respondents trust the education system while 55% believe in health care. In comparison with 2009, the number of people who trust the education system grew by 7% and those trusting health care rose by 9%.

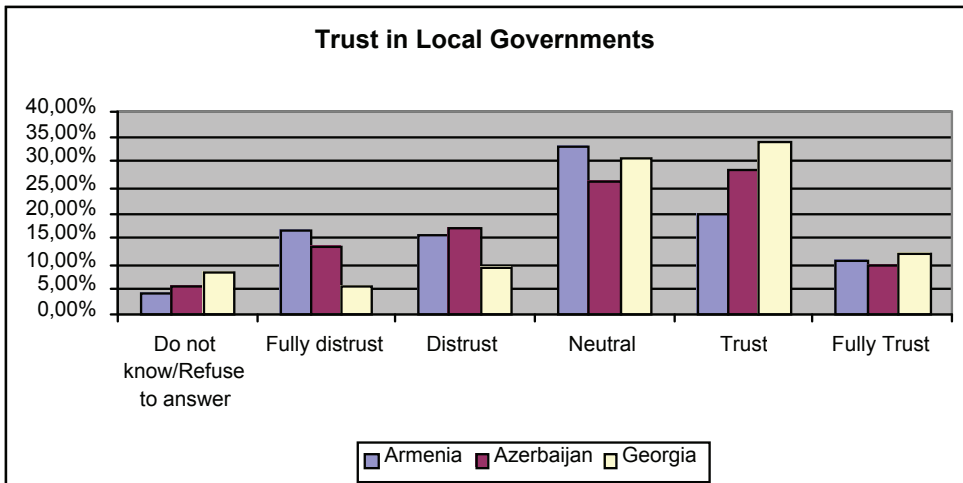
Ombudsman

The trust level in the ombudsman in Azerbaijan is low compared to other countries. Thus, only 24% trust this institution in Azerbaijan compared to 34% in Armenia and 39% in Georgia. However, the low level of trust in the ombudsman does not necessarily mean that more people distrust this

office. In fact the number of respondents distrusting the ombudsman is equal in Armenia and in Azerbaijan. It is interesting to observe that around 32% of respondents in Azerbaijan actually did not know (or refused to answer) about such a position. It shows that in Azerbaijan, and to a lesser extent in Armenia and Georgia, people are not aware of this institution or do not know about its activities.

Media

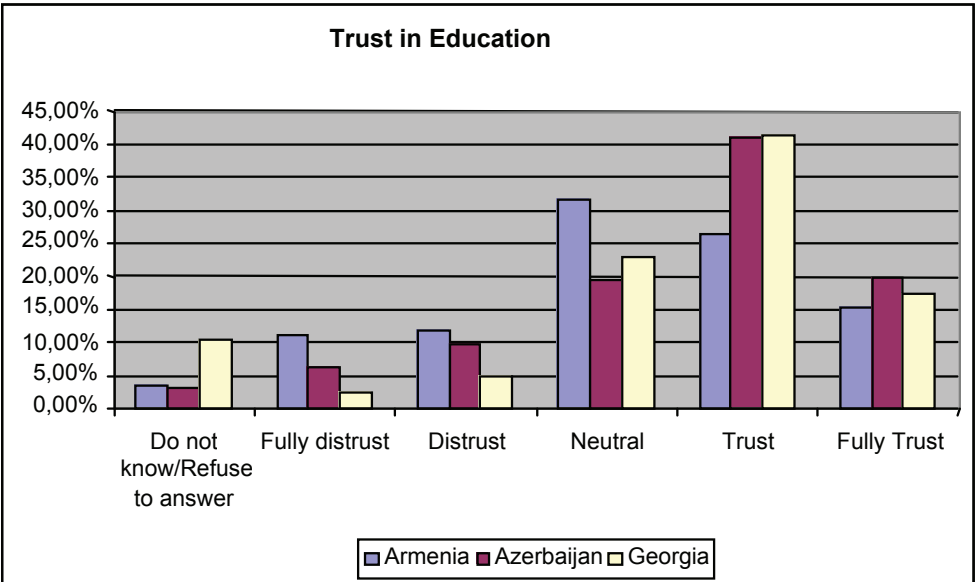
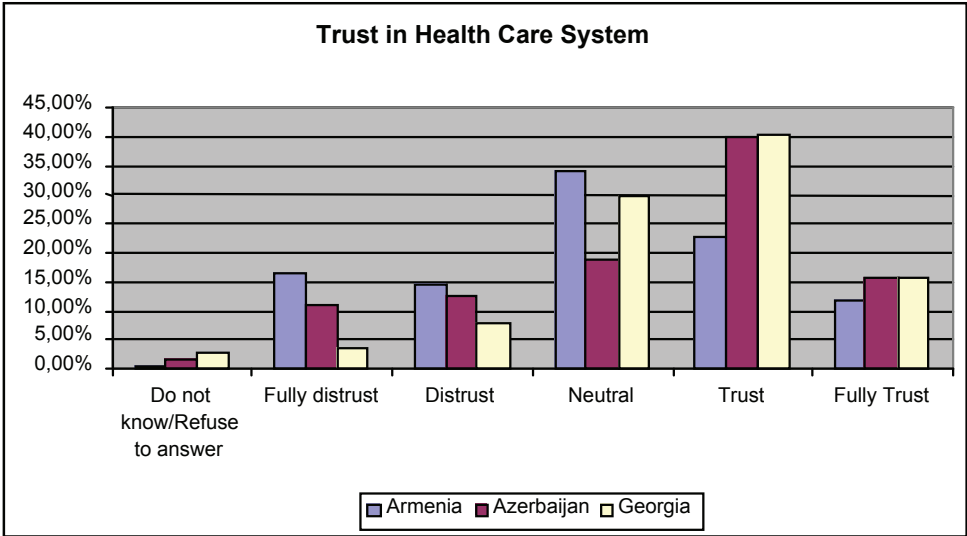
Media, often considered as a fourth branch of power, have high levels of trust in Azerbaijan and Georgia. In Armenia in contrast more people distrust the media. Meanwhile, a significant minority of respondents in all three countries - from 33% to 42% - are neutral or undecided toward the media.



Banks

It was mentioned in the literature before that the trust of people in financial institutions is one of the main factors in economic development. In many countries in Europe and the

U.S. the people’s trust of financial institutions and especially banks is very high. Meanwhile, based on that trust, financial institutions have developed systems allowing the population to gain access to cheap credit and loans. Thus, the interest on credit cards in

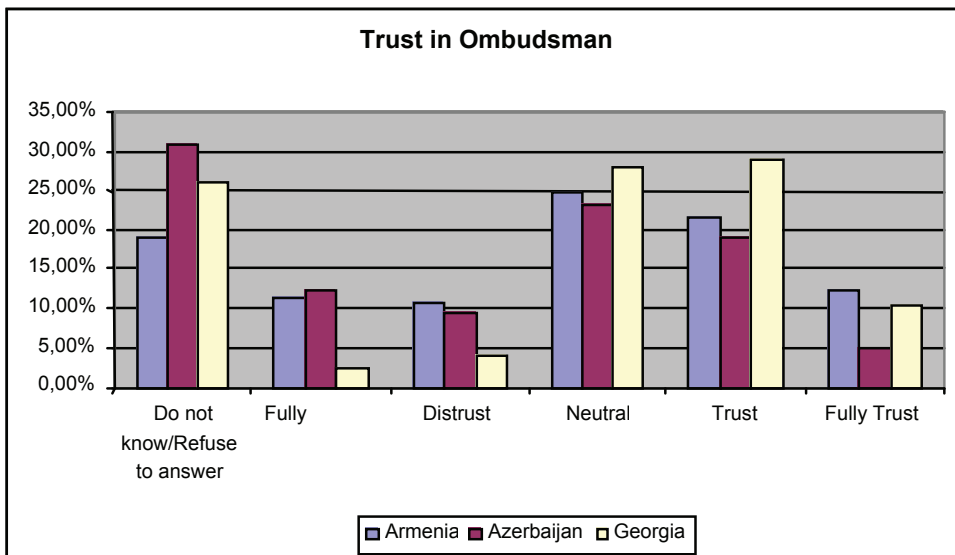


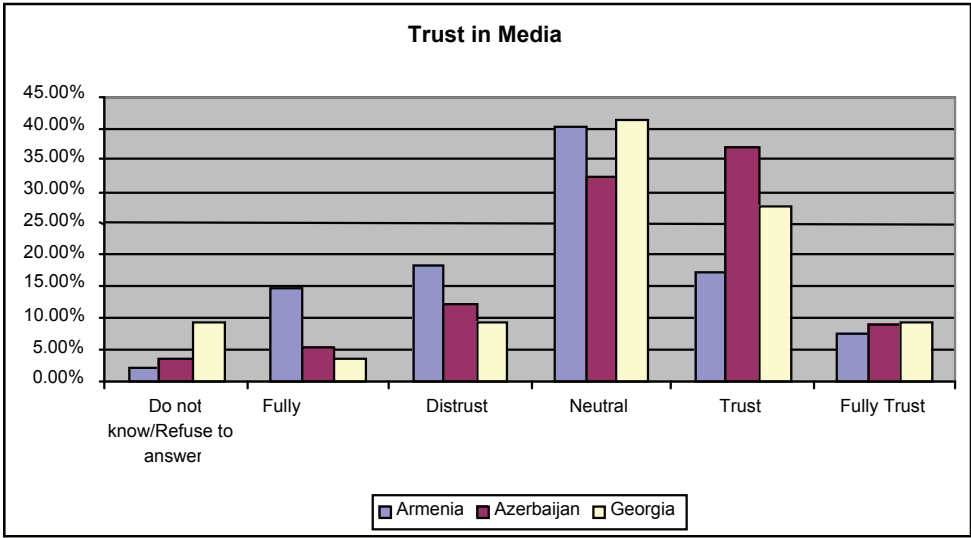
the U.S. could vary from 9% to 12% while mortgages of under 6-8% annually, could be available for average citizens. In contrast, in Azerbaijan and other republics of the Caucasus there is still a high level of distrust or neutrality toward financial institutions that eventually leads to very expensive credit and loans. Despite the fact that the number of banks and amount of banking capitalization in Azerbaijan is much higher than in Georgia and Armenia, still around 22% (higher than in Armenia and twice as high as in Georgia) of Azerbaijani respondents distrust banks. This fact could be easily explained by the negative history of banking development in Azerbaijan when during the last years of the Soviet Union and at the dawn of the country's independence many banks went

bankrupt, and many people lost their savings. But the positive fact is that the trust in banks for the last couple of years is increasing. In 2007 only 37% of Azerbaijani respondents trusted banks while 30% distrusted this financial institution.

Conclusion and Recommendations

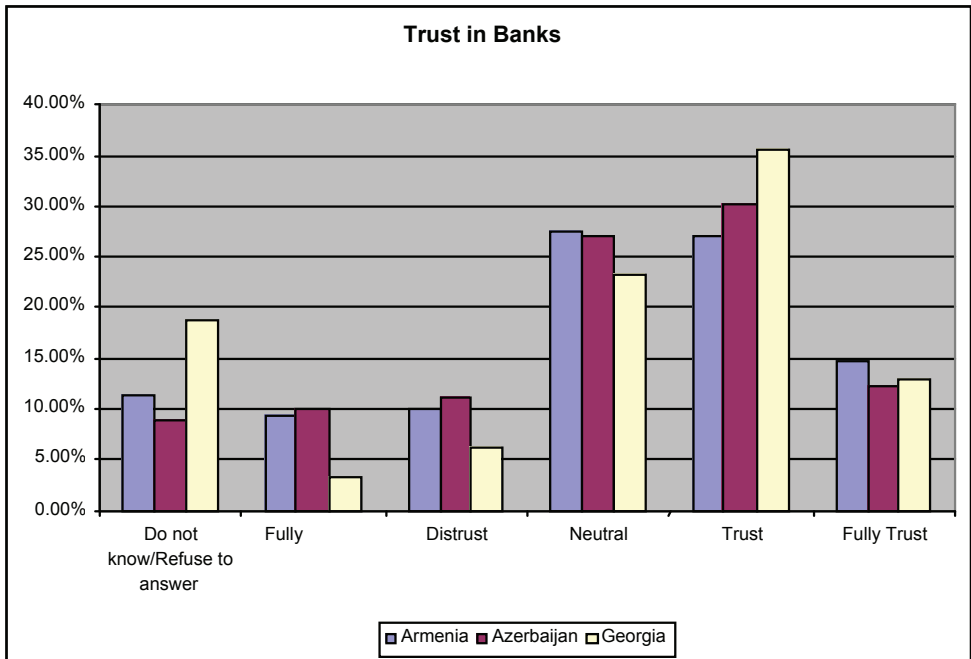
The results of the survey show that the situation regarding trust is much better in Azerbaijan than in Armenia and Georgia. The trust level in the major political institutions in the country is comparatively high and there is not much public disappointment with government's policies that could lead to massive social or political processes. However, it is understandable that some political institutions in Azerbaijan are weak and vulnerable and a lot of trust-building





measures have to be implemented in order to change the situation. For example, despite the fact that the majority of Azerbaijani public trust is neutral to courts, still when asked about

the fairness of the court system, approximately 56% of respondents answered that courts favor some citizens and only 14% believe that courts treat all citizens equally (a similar



situation is observed in Armenia and Georgia). It is very important for government to build the people's trust in the courts, elect the right judges and set up mechanisms for firing people involved in irregularities.⁷ The same policies could be developed for law-enforcement agencies or the office of ombudsman that has the lowest trust level in society. Part of the distrust could come from the fact that people do not know much about the work of the ombudsman. Through publications, TV programs and other resources, government should raise people's awareness about the roles of law-enforcement and the ombudsman. Another important area for development is local governments or municipalities. Decreasing voter turnout in municipality elections is an alarming trend indicating that people do not see this important body of self-governance as decisive for solving their problems. Part of it comes from the fact that local governments do not have enough resources or abilities to implement policies. Thus, executive governments should be interested in developing and strengthening municipalities in order to ease the burden in delivering services.

The Azerbaijani president and government have very high levels of trust that no other country in the Caucasus has. This is mostly explained by having prudent domestic and foreign policies. Such a level of trust is also very crucial for stability and sustainability of the political system of the country. Thus, today the Azerbaijani government has a unique chance to deepen reforms in many areas from education to local government, and the outcome of these reforms could strengthen the country's stability and statehood.

⁷ On April 21, 2011 President Aliyev signed a decree to dismiss Imishli district judge Gubadali Ali oglu Rzayev from the occupied position ahead of the term for repeated violation of legislative requirements during consideration of cases.