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RUSSIA-GEORGIA RELATIONS

- After the EU War Report: Can There Be a “Reset” in Russian–Georgian Relations? 2
By Cory Welt, Washington, DC
- Georgia’s Policy towards Russia and the Conflict Regions: Options Now 5
By Ghia Nodia, Tbilisi
- Georgian Attitudes to Russia: Surprisingly Positive 8
By Hans Gutbrod and Nana Papiashvili, Tbilisi
- OPINION POLL
- Russian Popular Opinion on the Conflict with Georgia 2004–2009 13
- Opinion Polls by the Levada Center 13
- “South Ossetia, Abkhazia ... Who Is Next?” Opinion Polls by VTsIOM 16
- OPINION POLL
- Cui Bono?* Opinions of the Population of the South Caucasus States 19
on the August War
- READING TIP
- Identities and Politics During the Putin Presidency 21
The Foundations of Russia’s Stability

After the EU War Report: Can There Be a “Reset” in Russian–Georgian Relations?

By Cory Welt, Washington, DC

“[T]here can be no peace in the South Caucasus as long as a common understanding of the facts is not achieved.”
Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG)

Abstract

Contrary to what is commonly presumed, the Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia did not definitively answer the question of why the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia began. Rather than promote a “common understanding of the facts,” the Report aspired to produce a collective *mea culpa*: in effect, recognition by all parties that waging armed conflict and violating human rights are bad, and that all are to blame for taking part. Those seeking to promote rapprochement between Russia and Georgia, and to normalize the situation around South Ossetia and Abkhazia, would be better off taking the Mission’s words to heart, and to continue to strive for a “common understanding” of the war’s origins based not on the aggressive intentions of Russia or Georgia, but on a precarious security environment that teetered over the brink. If such a common understanding can be achieved, it could facilitate progress toward resolution of this complex and multilayered conflict. In the postwar environment, such progress must inevitably be linked to a “status neutral” approach to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which would include in its initial stages a multilateral agreement on the non-use of force, a liberalization of *de facto* border regimes, and protection of the rights of Georgia’s citizens in, and new internally displaced persons (IDPs) from, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Still No Common Understanding

For all its effort, the EU’s Fact-Finding Mission failed to produce a common narrative regarding the causes of the war.¹ This is neither an abstract point nor one to be obscured by excessive detail and elaborate timelines. The main source of contention between Russia and Georgia is not really who was the first to launch a “large-scale military operation,” as the Mission deemed important to uncover. Rather, it is whether Georgia’s military operation in and around Tskhinvali on the night of 7–8 August 2008 was a “disproportionate” escalation to a low level “intra-state” conflict with South Ossetians, as the EU report concluded, *or* a response to an illicit and accelerating Russian military presence in South Ossetia – a presence that, given Georgia’s own political, military, and demographic presence in the region, had uncertain and potentially ominous implications. Although the Mission casually cites evidence regarding “the presence of some Russian forces” in South Ossetia hours and even days before Georgia launched its military operation, it attributes no significance to this point.

It is, however, a key element of Georgia’s justification for its military action: not that Russia launched a “large-scale” invasion of Georgia prior to the latter’s offensive but that regular Russian military forces were, for whatever reason, already on the move in South Ossetia. While illicit Russian military movements into South Ossetia were almost certainly not without precedent, they were of particular concern to Georgia by 7 August 2008, given the ongoing escalation of armed conflict within the region. In the days before, the South Ossetian leadership had lambasted Georgian forces for taking positions on heights above strategic roads within South Ossetia. Denouncing such maneuvers as a “silent annexation” of South Ossetian territory, *de facto* president Eduard Kokoity demanded that Georgia withdraw its armed forces (including, presumably, its established peacekeeping contingent) or South Ossetians would begin to “clean them out.” As the promised fighting between Ossetian and Georgian forces raged, Georgian officials say they feared that new Russian troop movements were part of a coordinated strategy to support, or at least provide cover to, a full-scale effort by South Ossetia to carry out its threat – thereby risking the loss of Georgian sovereignty over more than a third of the region.

Georgia’s claim is supported by its own intelligence reporting as well as by numerous statements of Russian military personnel or their family members, who have

1 On 30 September 2009, the Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia was presented to the parties to the conflict, the Council of the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the United Nations. The report can be viewed in full-text at <http://www.ceiig.ch/Report.html>.

told Russian journalists that regular Russian forces were in South Ossetia prior to the afternoon of 8 August, the time Russia has fixed for the entry of its non-peacekeeping forces into South Ossetia. Even the *de facto* president of Abkhazia, Sergey Bagapsh, reported on Russian television on the evening of 7 August that “a battalion of the North Caucasian [military] district” was already in South Ossetia. Instead of refuting these claims, Russia only insists that its non-peacekeeping forces began moving into South Ossetia on 8 August at 2:30 PM, more than 12 hours after the Georgian operation began.

The EU report acknowledges this and other “open contradiction[s]” between Georgian and Russian accounts. As a result, the Mission’s assertion that it is unaware of any deliberate falsifications by either side has to be a diplomatic fiction. Georgia told the Mission that its first engagement with Russian forces occurred in the early morning of 8 August (6:35 AM), with “targeted attacks on the Gupta bridge and the moving Russian column.” While Russia mentions a Georgian “strike against military bases [of unknown provenance! – CW] in the towns of Dzhava and Didi-Gupta” (and in an August 2008 timeline actually mentioned an early morning Georgian strike against an unidentified “column with humanitarian assistance for South Ossetia”), it insisted to the Mission that Russian troops moved into South Ossetia only in the mid-afternoon of 8 August. Likewise, Russia insists that the first direct military engagement (and official justification for intervention) was between Georgian troops and Russian peacekeeping forces just before noon, resulting in the deaths of two peacekeepers. Georgia remains conspicuously silent about this incident, while agreeing that an Ossetian gunman was killed on the roof of peacekeeping headquarters in the early morning.

Such discrepancies are not a consequence of the usual fog of war, but of the fog that one side or the other has intentionally generated in the war’s aftermath, and which the EU’s Fact-Finding Mission was unable to penetrate. In the end, for all its evenhandedness, the Report essentially, but groundlessly, vindicates Russia’s position – that Georgia launched its operation for no legitimate security reason. Georgians, for their part, have yet to receive a convincing rebuttal to their claims of Russian troop movements in South Ossetia before the war and, perhaps more importantly, no explanation as to why the EU Mission and, more generally, the international community seem to think such claims irrelevant.

If the Mission is correct that peace in the South Caucasus “requires a common understanding of the facts,” then more attention needs to be paid to the ba-

sic incompatibility between the Russian and Georgian versions of the war. In particular, existing evidence suggests that Russia needs to come clean as to the extent and nature of its troop movements in South Ossetia prior to 2:30 PM on 8 August. What is at stake is not whether Russia was launching an invasion of Georgia but whether the facts of its military intervention, in the context of the ongoing Ossetian–Georgian clashes, were sufficiently ambiguous that Georgia plausibly launched its military operation out of an acute sense of insecurity, rather than a mere desire to seize control of South Ossetia by force. At the same time, if Russia were to acknowledge prewar troop movements in South Ossetia, it might be able to more convincingly establish that its intentions at the time were not as imminently threatening as Georgians feared.

Paving the Way for “Status Neutral” Progress

On this basis, a “common understanding of the facts” that so eluded the EU’s Fact-Finding Mission could be constructed. Such an understanding would be based on the premise of an essentially unintended war: one based on legitimate Georgian security concerns, an attempt by Georgia to address these concerns using excessive means of questionable effectiveness, and a disproportionate counterreaction by Russia. Such an understanding would overturn the existing polarized narratives, whereby either Russia was intent on conquering Georgia or Georgia was intent on conquering South Ossetia. Neither of these narratives offer much hope for eventual rapprochement.

Instead, they reinforce a deep freeze of Russian–Georgian relations in the mold of victor and victim. Supremely self-confident, Russia seeks to entrench its gains in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and opposes retreating in ways that would cast doubt on the legitimacy of its wartime actions or weaken its ability to deter Georgia from seeking to retake territory or instigate armed resistance within South Ossetia or Abkhazia. In turn, Georgia is unwilling to make any formal concessions that could help normalize the situation but which would lend an appearance of consent to Russian military occupation or the separation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia.

A common narrative of the war will not easily undermine this status quo. Even if Russia were to acknowledge Georgia’s prewar security concerns, this will not suddenly make Moscow sympathetic to the notion of Georgian territorial integrity. Russia is unlikely to soon fulfill the terms of the cease-fire agreement, withdraw

from newly occupied territories, retract its recognition of independence, and send its soldiers and border guards home. Georgia, for its part, is bound to view even the most benign interpretation of prewar Russian military actions in South Ossetia as a manifestation of illegal Russian militarization of the region and a transgression of Georgian state sovereignty.

Still, agreement on a narrative in which Russia acknowledges that Georgia had reason to believe it had to act militarily, and in which Georgia admits that the level of escalation it settled on was predictably disastrous, could provide a valuable symbolic opening for more productive discussions regarding the normalization of the Russian-Georgian relationship and the situation around South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Specifically, it could make it easier to formalize a process of rapprochement that would have, at its foundation, an “agreement to disagree” on the political status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. A “status-neutral” approach to conflict resolution would not imply tacit acceptance by Georgia or the international community of South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence or Russia’s postwar military presence. Rather, it would be a realistic acknowledgment that a choice exists between standing on principle or tolerating creative ambiguity in the interests of rectifying the negative consequences of the war.

There are a number of issues that could be addressed in a status-neutral fashion. First, all parties have in principle consented to the establishment of a framework agreement on the non-use of force, expanding on the general commitment they made as part of the postwar cease-fire agreement. A major sticking point, however, concerns who should sign such an agreement, and in what capacity. As *de facto* participants in conflict, Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia all should be signatories to a non-use of force agreement. Likely to be concluded under international auspices, the framework agreement cannot be expected to refer to South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, since virtually no member of the international community regards them as such. By the same token, neither does the agreement need to explicitly express support for Georgia’s territorial integrity, a position which for most countries is a matter of public record.

If an agreement on the non-use of force could be concluded, this would ease the way for a number of other measures to be adopted in “status-neutral” fashion. In addition to enabling Russia and Georgia to move forward with negotiations on opening their land border, a range of productive initial measures concerning Abkhazia, which played a relatively minor role in hostilities, could be pur-

sued with relative ease. First, Russia and Abkhazia both could more clearly state their support for the return of the less than 2,000 residents of the Kodori Gorge that fled when Abkhazia attacked the region, allow the community to administer itself, and enable it to draw on both Abkhazian and Georgian budgetary and humanitarian support. Second, Georgian citizens in Abkhazia (mainly ethnic Georgians in the southern Gali region), together with Abkhazian citizens, could be granted an unrestricted right to cross into the neighboring Georgian region of Mingrelia, even if at monitored checkpoints. Finally, Georgian citizens in Abkhazia could be expected to be able to retain their citizenship without this having an adverse effect on their local rights as residents of Abkhazia. None of these measures address Russia’s expanded military presence in Abkhazia, the question of Georgian IDPs from the 1992–1993 war, or Georgia’s resistance to allowing Abkhazia to engage in international commerce. However, the mutual concessions of a Georgian commitment to the non-use of force and the protection of the rights of Georgian citizens in Abkhazia is both an important and viable starting point for further negotiations.

Making progress in South Ossetia is far more difficult, given the direct hostilities between Georgians and Ossetians, the intentional postwar destruction of the homes of up to 20,000 Georgian IDPs from South Ossetia, and the expansion of Russian/South Ossetian control over all formerly Georgian-controlled regions of South Ossetia, including Akhalkalaki, home to some 7,000 Georgians before the war, and a region that was never under Tskhinvali’s control. This community was not driven out during hostilities, but under conditions of occupation more than half of them left. In practice, the return of Georgian IDPs to South Ossetia will be protracted; most are living in new homes constructed by the Georgian government, their former homes (and villages) need to be entirely reconstructed, and many are likely hesitant to return under Russian military occupation and Tskhinvali’s authority. A non-use of force agreement, however, could allow Russian and South Ossetian authorities to at least make an initial acknowledgement of the right of Georgian IDPs to return (retaining their Georgian citizenship). As for Akhalkalaki, Russia can be expected to resist withdrawing in the near-term, given the strategic nature of its new occupation (Akhalkalaki is close to both Tbilisi and Georgia’s main north-south corridor). Still, an interim solution could be devised on the basis of local self-government; the community’s right to seek financial and humanitarian support from Tbilisi; and the maintenance of

free transit by Georgian citizens to and from the region. While difficult to achieve, progress on Georgian IDPs and Akhlagori could set the stage for future negotiations regarding the reestablishment of ties with South Ossetia on a “status neutral” basis.

Conclusion

To serve as the basis for conflict resolution in the South Caucasus, the Report of the EU Fact-Finding Mission has to be regarded as the first word on the Russian-Georgian war, not the last. Bringing Russia and Georgia to a common understanding of the facts will not be

easy, but it is a precondition for substantive progress and avoidance of future conflict. In particular, it could lead to an agreement by all parties on the non-use of force followed by a range of “status neutral” measures related to the welfare of Georgian citizens in, and new IDPs from, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The unfortunate “new reality” of the postwar environment is that a final political settlement to the conflicts is further away than ever before. The stark choice for all parties is between lasting enmity and physical divide or difficult compromises that ease the situation today and possibly the path to reconciliation tomorrow.

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Recommended Reading

- Cory Welt, “The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo–Georgian War” (*Europe–Asia Studies*, forthcoming in January 2010).
- See also: “The EU Investigation Report on the August 2008 War and the Reactions From Georgia and Russia”, Caucasus Analytical Digest, no. 10, 2 November 2009, <http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/cad/>.

Georgia’s Policy towards Russia and the Conflict Regions: Options Now

By Ghia Nodia, Tbilisi

Abstract

After the August 2008 war, the line of confrontation between Tbilisi and Moscow is much more clear-cut, as all former ambiguity regarding Russia’s role in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has been removed by Russia’s occupation and subsequent recognition of these two territorial entities. There are no direct diplomatic relations between the two sides, and Moscow is not ready to talk to the Georgian government as long as Saakashvili remains president. Under these circumstances, Georgia’s maneuvering room vis-à-vis Russia is limited and, at least for the moment, trying to improve relations with Russia is pointless. Georgia should instead seek to develop its internal political institutions in order to make them more stable and effective, and also continue to democratize these institutions. At the same time, Georgia should seek closer relations with Western states and international organizations, as such ties will enhance its security. Finally, Georgia should strive to reestablish links to the peoples of Abkhazia and South Ossetia regardless of the current political situation.

The New Realities

The new reality created after the Georgian–Russian war in August 2008 pushes Georgia to redefine its policies towards Russia and the conflict areas: two issues that can hardly be separated. The main change is that the confrontation has become sharper and less ambiguous. Russia no longer functions as a peacekeeper and mediator: Abkhazia and South Ossetia are now officially

Russian protectorates, or “independent states” recognized only by Russia, Nicaragua and Venezuela; from the Georgian perspective, they are territories occupied by Russia. Additionally, the territories and communities are much more strictly demarcated. After ethnic Georgian enclaves within Abkhazia and South Ossetia were cleansed, these (almost) unrecognized states feel more secure internally, while travel and human con-

tacts between these territories and the rest of Georgia have become much more difficult.

Russia and Georgia are officially enemies: Direct diplomatic relations between the two countries have been cut. The Russian leadership openly says that under no circumstances will it talk to Saakashvili's government, but it loves the Georgian people and is ready to talk to Saakashvili's successor. Georgians see this as a thinly veiled demand to change their political regime, and suspect Russia may still be contemplating some "active measures" to help this happen.

So, what should Georgia's strategy be under these circumstances? No clear and comprehensive vision has been defined so far. This failure is not due to laziness or a lack of understanding about the need to act. The objective dilemmas are so complex that formulating a long-term strategy may involve addressing some politically awkward questions.

Shattered Illusions of Conflict Resolution

Apart from the situation on the ground, attitudes towards the conflicts underwent the deepest change. This development may actually be a positive by-product of the war: Now it may be possible to have a clearer understanding of the issues.

Clear thinking is often impaired by political considerations, whether of political correctness or romantic nationalism. Before Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, international attitudes to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been deeply inconsistent. As a frequent participant in conferences on conflict resolution, I can attest to the discrepancy between what I call plenary presentations and coffee-breaks discussions. During plenary sessions, participants often try to instill a sense of urgency: It is wrong to call these conflicts "frozen," people cannot suffer indefinitely, efforts to resolve conflicts should be accelerated. Over coffee, more *Realpolitik* resignation reigned: "Come on, we all understand these conflicts are unsolvable, right?"

Saakashvili behaved as if he took the politically correct talk of conflict resolution at face value and set the objective of resolving the conflicts within a relatively short period of time. He actually pledged to do this within his term in office. This approach proved to be a mistake. The international community-talk also changed: "No, no, you misunderstood, conflict resolution is supposed to be a lengthy process, it may take many years." Saakashvili's aggressive moves to win the hearts and minds of ethnic Ossetians – partly by supporting an alternative, pro-Georgian Ossetian administration and trying to make it a showcase for other

Ossetians – backfired. It threatened the status quo and alarmed potential losers from the conflict resolution process – the separatist authorities and Russian leadership whose geopolitical schemes did not include the prospect of Abkhazia and South Ossetia returning to Georgia's fold.

The single most important result of the August war is that nobody expects significant progress in resolving the conflict in the foreseeable future. By recognizing the independence of the two territories, the Russian leadership has burnt bridges for itself and its successors: It is hard to imagine a future Russian government that would agree to take back the act of recognition. The idea of building peace over the long term through incremental confidence-building steps, so much loved by conflict-resolution organizations, also looks even more utopian than it did before.

Solve the Conflicts by Giving in?

So, what to do? Living indefinitely in perpetual conflict with a Russia whose military installations are now about 25 kilometers from Tbilisi, in a situation marked by frequent shootouts and kidnappings, is certainly not an attractive prospect.

Of late, Westerners frequently ask Georgian politicians and analysts (though usually not in public): Why not just solve the conflicts by giving in? After the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there is no way back for Russia, and Georgia cannot win a war against it. The West also cannot induce Russia to compromise, and even if it could, it would require making this issue priority number one in international politics – also very unrealistic. Georgians may feel wronged, but who said that life is fair, and Georgians also are not angels, after all. What are your options, under the circumstances? Is it not smarter just to accept the new realities, put the issue behind you and move forward? The question may be accompanied by a hint: You could also sell your consent – for instance, for NATO membership.

Prima facie, this argument sounds perfectly rational, and certainly worthy of discussion. However, there are at least three reasons why the Georgian government cannot and should not take that step, and it also is not in the West's interest if Georgia does this.

First of all, Georgia may be insufficiently democratic in a normative sense, but it is too democratic to take this kind of step even if we assume it is objectively in the interest of Georgia. In a survey commissioned by the International Republican Institute in June 2009, 92 percent of those polled said they would never accept the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia

(two previous polls in September 2008 and February 2009 gave similar results). Suggesting such an outcome is taboo even for supposedly pacifist Georgian NGOs. Some well-wishers of Georgia suggest that despite the public mood, President Saakashvili should “show leadership” in the way President de Gaulle did in resolving the Algeria crisis. But this is not a good comparison: the level of commitment of Georgians to Abkhazia and South Ossetia is qualitatively different from that of French people towards Algeria: the latter territory had never been part of France in the same way in which Georgians consider Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be part of Georgia. It is highly questionable whether de Gaulle would “show leadership” in the same way to forsake French claims to Provence or Alsace. Anyway, regardless of the historical comparisons, even if President Saakashvili believed the recognition of the break-away provinces was in the best interest of Georgia (which I do not think is his opinion), taking such a step would amount to his immediate and painful political suicide – something politicians in their right minds are very unlikely to do.

Secondly, even if “accepting the reality” were politically feasible, there is no guarantee at all that Georgia will get what it is supposed to get from that concession – sustainable peace and stability. In August 2008, Russia did not go to war to consolidate control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, most of which it had controlled anyway. It looked for control over its “near abroad”, and undermining Saakashvili’s pro-western regime was key for achieving that goal. So, if the expectation is that Georgian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will remove the root of the problem, it is wrong: the issue is control over Georgia, not Akhalkalaki.

Thirdly, by taking that step Georgia would not be acting in the interest of international peace and security. From the latter perspective, the best result of the August war was that Russia did not achieve its major political aim: It failed to change the regime in Georgia or even destabilize it in a major way. To be sure Russia did not pay a sufficient price for directly challenging international peace, but neither did it get the kind of results that would encourage it to take similar steps in the future. It did not become more of a hegemon in its “near abroad”. The war did not have as huge a destabilizing effect as it might have.

Any significant concession to Russia – such as recognition of the two states – would amount to legitimizing Russia’s action in August and embolden Russia to take the same course towards its other neighbors. If Georgia took such a step, it would amount to a betrayal of countries like Ukraine or Estonia, who may be

the next targets of Russia’s “passportization for re-occupation” scheme. So, even if it were advantageous for Georgia to give up on its break-away provinces, Georgia should not do it as a responsible member of the international community.

Reducing Harm and Moving Forward

The net result is that Georgia can neither change the reality nor accept it. Neither can it be seen doing nothing about the situation. Not a very pleasant condition to be in.

Not everything is so bad, however. Georgia may be more secure now than it was before the war. The war with Russia was not an unfortunate contingency: in general, it had been predicted and expected. Now, Georgia has put the war with Russia behind it – and, given the respective powers of the participants, it got away relatively unscathed. For a small country, this is a considerable achievement. A new war cannot be fully ruled out – but it would be much more difficult for Russia to invent a remotely credible pretext. The “Kosovo precedent”, extremely questionable as it has been, is now exhausted.

At this point Georgia has two major objectives. One is to develop its internal political institutions in order to make them more stable and effective while at the same time making them more democratic. Combining these objectives while Russia is after Saakashvili is not easy, but neither is it impossible. Keeping the country’s institutions from imploding during and after the war with Russia was a considerable achievement in itself. The way the government handled the political standoff with the opposition this spring and summer is generally encouraging but there is still a long way to go until the consolidation of democratic institutions. A smooth and democratic transition from Saakashvili’s government to its successor in 2012–13 will be a major test, while the municipal elections expected in May next year will be an important landmark along the way.

Garnering international support for reducing the destabilizing effects of the Russian military presence on Georgian territory is another vital necessity. At a minimum, the EU Monitoring Mission should be maintained and pressure should continue on Russia to allow for expanding the international peace mechanisms. Involving the US in them would mark important progress. More broadly, any steps bringing Georgia closer to NATO, the EU and the US will also produce greater security for the country.

Any attempts to improve direct Georgian–Russia relations, even if theoretically desirable, are pointless at

the moment. So are specific steps aimed at resolving the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts. Harm reduction is the only realistic policy objective in that area.

At the same time, Georgia cannot afford to lose ties to the people who live in Abkhazia and South Ossetia now – whatever political attitudes they may have. This is not easy, but Georgians – both in government and in society – should be creative and inventive on this point. Apart from technical impediments for such contacts, the trick is that there can be no short-term political advantages coming from such contacts, and people

usually are not focused on activities that cannot bring anything tangible in the short run.

As to the long run, one should admit that nobody can confidently predict what will be happening in the region in ten–fifteen years time or beyond that. Georgia has too much on its hands right now to be too involved in speculations about it. It is rational to focus on objectives that can be achieved and not allow things that cannot be changed for the time being to get one depressed.

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Georgian Attitudes to Russia: Surprisingly Positive

By Hans Gutbrod and Nana Papiashvili, Tbilisi

Abstract

What do Georgians think about Russia? What relationship would they like to have with their northern neighbor? And what do they think about the August conflict? Data collected by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) allows a nuanced answer to these questions: although Georgians have a very critical view of Russia's role in the August conflict, they continue to desire a good political relationship with their northern neighbor, as long as this is not at the expense of close ties with the West. Georgians remain favorable to Russians as individuals, and to doing business with Russia. Culturally, however, Georgians are orienting themselves towards the West.

Political Attitudes

Following the conflict in August 2008, the geopolitics of the Georgian-Russian relationship have received significant attention. Moreover, the Levada Center in Russia has published a series of analyses of Russian public opinion on the conflict. Yet the view of the Georgian public so far has received little attention.

Between 2007 and August 2009, the CRRC conducted seven different nationwide surveys in Georgia, and also in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Interviewers worked countrywide (with the exception of the contested territories), in face-to-face interviews according to international standards, with more than 1,600 respondents (and up to 3,200). Detailed information on the general survey methodology is available on the CRRC website (www.crrccenters.org).

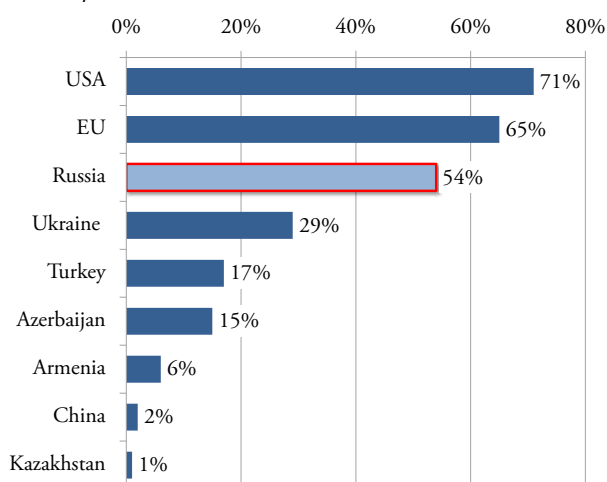
Georgians overwhelmingly desire a good political relationship with Russia. This view was clearly demon-

strated by all the polling that CRRC has undertaken since 2004. In 2007, for example, 57% said that they wanted full political cooperation with Russia. Only 13% suggested that they wanted limited political cooperation. At the same time, a majority of Georgians desired an equally close political cooperation with the United States, while also favoring NATO membership (with 63% in favor, and only 6% explicitly against, the remainder being neutral or *don't knows*).

This positive view of cooperation with Russia has remained stable. In August 2009, 54% of Georgians continued to favor extremely close political cooperation with Russia. (see diagram overleaf)

Even right after the war, in October 2008, 20% of the Georgian population named re-establishing good economic and political relations with Russia to be the fourth most important issue for Georgia. Politically, Georgians carry no grudge.

Q55. Georgia Should Have an Extremely Close Political Cooperation With...



Source: CRRG, EU Survey, August 2009.

Views of the August Conflict

By contrast, Georgians largely blamed Russia for instigating the August conflict. In October 2008, when asked to describe the conflict in their own words, 35% of the respondents stated that Russians had attacked first. Another 15% said that the Russians told the South Ossetian militias to attack first, and 5% believed that the South Ossetian militias themselves attacked. Only 4% of respondents suggested that Georgians had attacked first.

Similarly, in talking about the conflict as a whole, the most mentioned description was that the Russians targeted civilians – mentioned by 44% of respondents – and, after saying that the Russians attacked first, among the most mentioned statements was that the Russians occupied national territory and then refused to leave.

When asked outright to choose between the West and Russia, only 15% said that they would choose Russia – although the question was deliberately leading, inviting the respondent to agree that “Georgia might not be able to simultaneously ally with the West and Russia, and clearly should choose the latter”, i.e. one should choose Russia. When the question was phrased to suggest that one should choose the West (to another group of respondents, since the sample had been split into three parts to undertake embedded experiments), 13 percent said one should side with Russia. The proximity of results suggests that there is not a big undercurrent of pro-Kremlin opinion in the country, although potentially the 4% that refused to answer the question might also

have been harboring pro-Russian views (30% could not make up their mind between the options, and 50% chose the West).

One reason why there does not seem to be a big pro-Russian faction is that Georgians see little advantage in cooperating with the Kremlin. They do not believe that there is a deal to be had with Russia. In October 2009, only 13% agreed with the idea that “if Georgians would just give up on the idea of joining the West and let Russia have its way, Russia would stop supporting the secessionists”, and of those only 5% agreed strongly. The suggestion that such a deal was on offer was rejected by 59% of respondents. If Russia ever was willing to engage in a *quid pro quo* arrangement, as the former Georgian ambassador to Russia, Erosi Kitsmarishvili, has suggested, this certainly was not regarded as a realistic possibility by the Georgians themselves.

More broadly, the Georgian case highlights a serious limitation of Russian power: while the Kremlin may be an attractive partner for corrupt elites, it is hard to see what Russia offers to a people it wants to win over to its side. Data from November 2008 illustrates this: even in Armenia, the showcase example of a Russian ally that fundamentally relies on its patronage, 31% said they would favor membership in NATO, and only 29% rejected that idea (with the remainder neutral, or saying they had no opinion on this issue). Russia offers no compelling vision of a revived Russian sphere of influence, even for its own allies. This makes for a limited ability to project power and sustain influence, and much would need to change before a Russian protégé could gain any traction in Georgia.

Approached from a different angle, and asked which country they saw as either friendly or unfriendly to Georgia, 90% of Georgians rated Russia as unfriendly, with only 2% rating Russia as friendly (and the rest scattered among neutral, don’t know and refuse to answer). In the same survey in late November 2008, 71% of Georgians thought that the August war was in the interest of the Russian government. (see [Diagram 1 on p. 19](#))

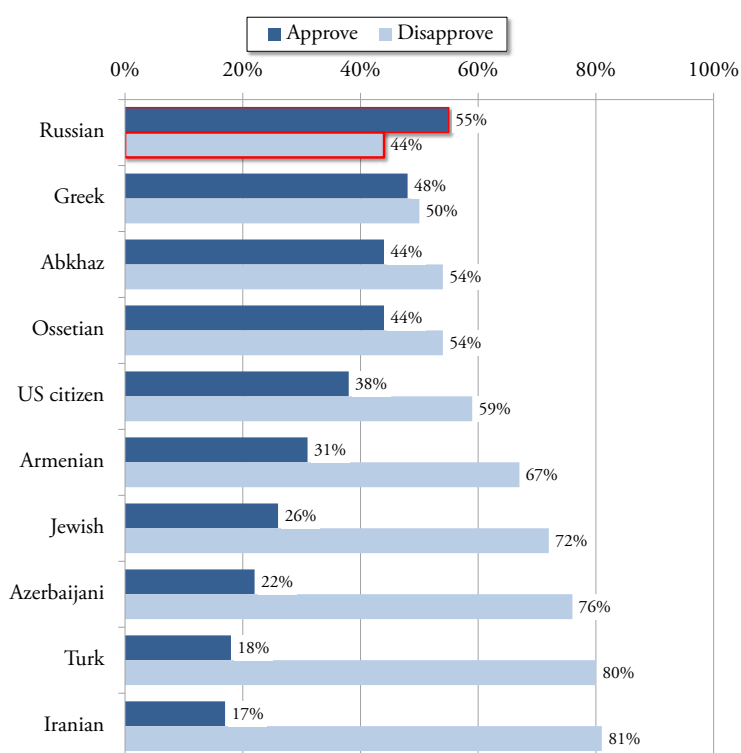
No Enemies

Yet on a personal level, Georgians generally have favorable views of Russians, and these views stayed remarkably stable throughout the conflict. 94% of Georgians approve of being friends with Russians. This made Russians closer than some of Georgia’s overseas friends, as 87% of respondents approve of being friends with the US citizens. The number of people that approve of doing business with Russians has dropped slight-

ly, from 91% in 2007 to 84% in 2009, but has stayed on a high level.

In 2007, when asked whether respondents would approve of marriage to various nationalities, 55% said they would approve of marriage to Russians, making them the most popular nationality to marry, ahead of Greeks, Ossetians, US citizens and other ethnicities and nationalities.

Q15. Would You Approve or Disapprove Marrying the Following Nationality:



Source: CRRC, DI, 2007. Note: Don't knows are eliminated in this diagram.

When these questions were repeated in the spring of 2008, amidst rising political tensions, Russians still were the most popular, followed at a considerable distance by Greeks (other EU countries had not been listed in that survey). For this new survey we specified the question further, asking whether respondents would approve of Georgian women marrying another nationality, since marrying out of one's own national group would capture a more specific scenario.

So how did approval rates for marriage with Russians change, after the war? Remarkably, the numbers remained relatively stable. In August 2009, 44% approved

of Georgian women marrying Russians. Russians again are among the most popular nationalities to marry, on the same level with the English, and slightly ahead of the French, Americans, Italians, and 5% ahead of Poles. Russians no longer are the most popular nationality, but they still are in the top group.

The results from August 2009 also highlighted that the views of Georgians toward the Abkhaz and the Ossetians remain relatively positive. In August 2009, 37% of Georgians approved of a Georgian woman marrying an Abkhaz man, and 36% of marrying an Ossetian – while only 31% approved of marrying an Armenian, and 22% of marrying Turks. While the friendly view that Georgians have of the Ossetians and Abkhaz is often taken for granted, it stands in sharp contrast to attitudes that Armenians and Azerbaijanis have to each other – or the differences that marked many ethnic conflicts in the Balkans. Georgians may have fought with Russians, Abkhaz and Ossetians, but they do not see them as enemies.

Endorsing Russian Business with and in Georgia

Views of doing business with Russia are also comparatively positive. Three months after the war, only 27% thought that limiting trade with Russia was a good idea, with only 14% thinking it was a very good idea. By contrast, 48% percent specifically described limiting trade with Russia as a bad idea. Respondents under 40 years of age were a little more likely to be against trading with Russia, but they were also more in favor of trading. A larger percentage of older age groups said they just didn't know.

Effectively, Georgian views almost corresponded with those in Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, 24% thought that restricting trade with Russia was a good idea. Armenia's strategic partnership with Russia was reflected in the data: 11% favored limiting trade, while 66% described it as a very bad idea, and another 17% as a bad idea. Although trade obviously serves both sides, and Russia could be a sizeable market for Georgian exports of wine, vegetables and mineral water, the general openness of Georgia such a short time after the war arguably is remarkable.

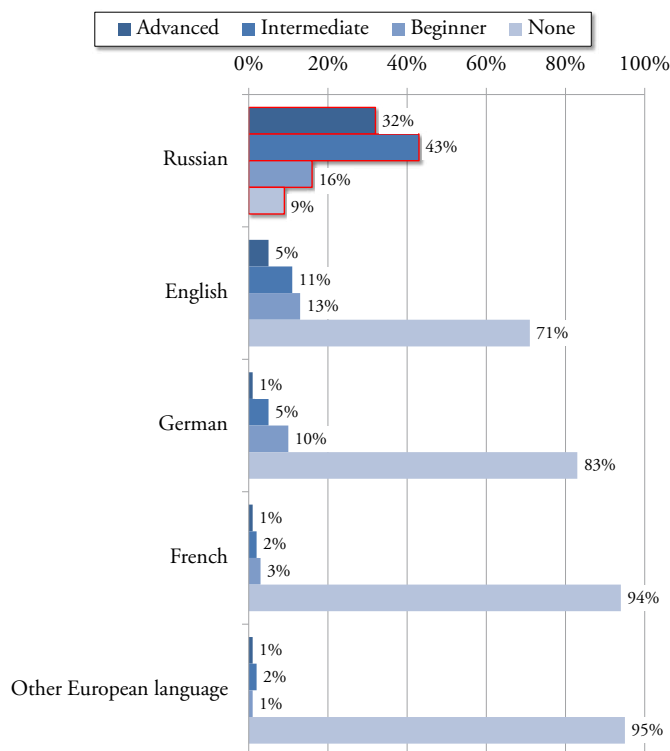
Even more remarkable were Georgian views of Russian businesses operating in Georgia. Just two months after the conflict, 32% of Georgians were in favor of allowing Russian companies to purchase businesses in Georgia, with 36% against – and 30% saying they did not know. This contrasted with Azerbaijan, where only 23% thought that Russian companies should

be allowed to purchase businesses in Azerbaijan, and 45% wanted that to be prohibited. Georgians, in spite of the conflict, were 9% more positive regarding Russian-owned businesses than Azerbaijanis.

Culturally, Georgia Orients itself Westward

If Georgia thus remains fairly open to Russian business, culturally it is orienting itself to the West. In August 2009, 54% of Georgians agreed with the statement (by the late Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania) that “I am Georgian and therefore I am European”, with 33% disagreeing.

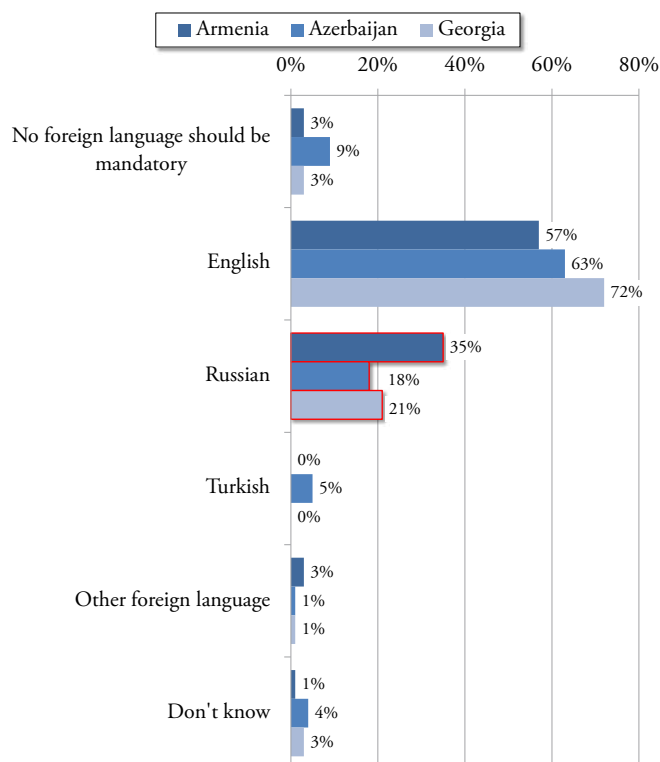
In terms of languages, the orientation towards the West is also stark. In an EU-focused survey (i.e. a survey in which Russia was not seen as part of Europe), 75% of Georgians agreed that if Georgian students want to receive a quality education, they need to know one of the European languages. Skills in European languages are gaining ground. English is in the lead, followed by German and then French.



The turn away from Russia is particularly pronounced with regards to teaching preferences in secondary schools. When asked which should be the first mandatory foreign language, an overwhelming majority of Georgians choose English. In Georgia this preference is more pro-

nounced than in neighboring countries, although it is again striking how even in Armenia, English is broadly preferred to Russian.

Q11. Respondent's Foreign Language Teaching Preference in Secondary Schools



Source: CRRC, DI, 2007

Curiously, while other values remained broadly stable, the number of Georgians that identified as having advanced Russian knowledge declined by 8% between 2007 and 2008, potentially signaling an undercurrent of turning away from cultural self-identification with Russia.

Conclusion

The political implications of these findings are nuanced. While Georgians desire a better relationship with Russia, they don't believe that the Kremlin brings any goodwill to the relationship. Consequently, it is not an issue that offers itself as a political platform in Georgia itself. Politicians that are in power can work to improve the relationship, but *rapprochement with Russia* is not likely to generate electoral support, as several Georgian politicians recently found out.

Given the general resilience of Georgian public opinion in spite of seismic events, we can expect it to remain stable for the foreseeable future: friendly towards Russians, skeptical of the Kremlin, but consistently oriented towards the West. A fundamental change would only be likely if either the West comprehensively disappoints (although the cultural orientation towards the West would still retain traction), or if Russia understands that for it to exercise real power it will need to hold an attractive vision, and not just the means of coercion. It follows that the Kremlin would probably increase its reach if it facilitated trade with Georgia and lifted the ban on Georgian mineral water, wine and vegetables. Arguably, the Kremlin inadvertently strengthened the Georgian leadership it was seeking to displace by holding all of Georgia hostage to its enmity.

On a side note, the relatively positive views that Georgians have of the Abkhaz and the Ossetians raise an

old theme: potentially one feature which smaller neighboring ethnic groups find irritating about Georgians is that they have a fuzzy positive and even embracing attitude, which can be taken to imply that they do not recognize small groups as substantially different – when what small groups often clamor for is recognition as being distinct. This remark, however, is speculative and would require research in Abkhazia and Ossetia to substantiate.

Public opinion data illustrates how Georgian policy has deep roots in underlying opinions. It also offers a fascinating study of how sizable events impact on what a people think. This article only highlighted some of the main features. A deeper and more comprehensive analysis of these issues is still waiting to be done, and should offer rich opportunities to any researcher who wants to engage with a topic at the cross-section of cultural, historic, geostrategic and political interests.

About the Authors:

Hans Gutbrod is Regional Director and Nana Papiashvili is Research Associate at the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC).

Recommended Reading:

www.crrccenters.org. (Not all surveys are online at the moment, but much of the data can be made available on demand. Please contact the authors if you have further questions.)

Opinion Poll

Russian Popular Opinion on the Conflict with Georgia 2004–2009

Opinion Polls by the Levada Center

Diagram 1: Abkhazia should ...

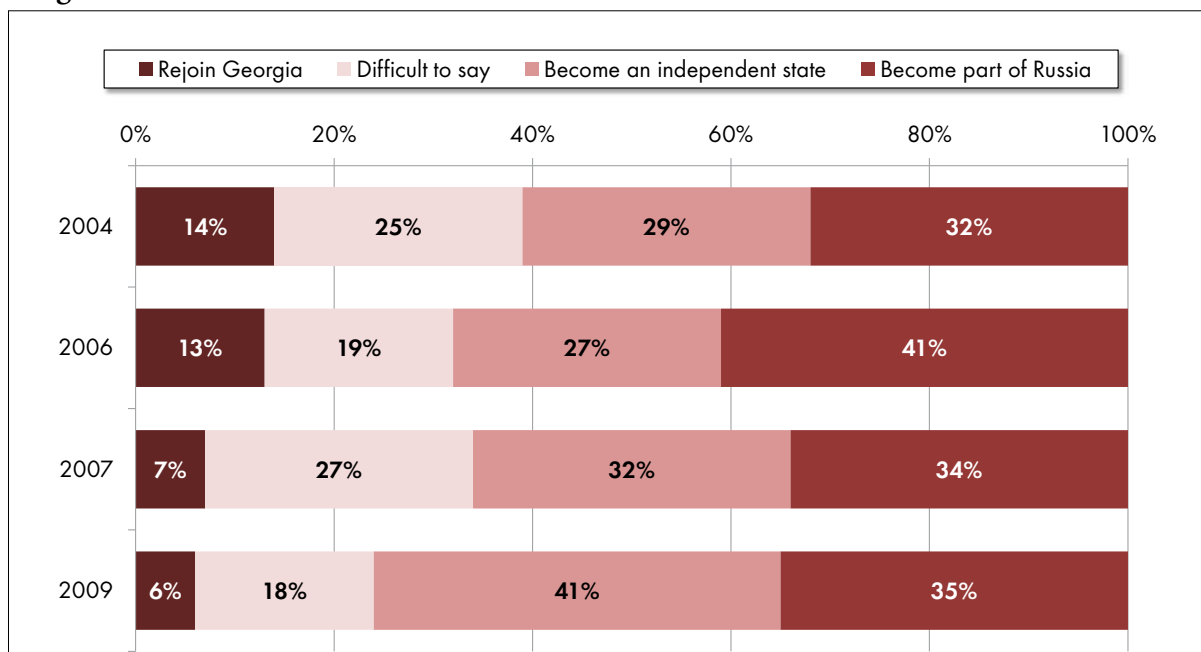
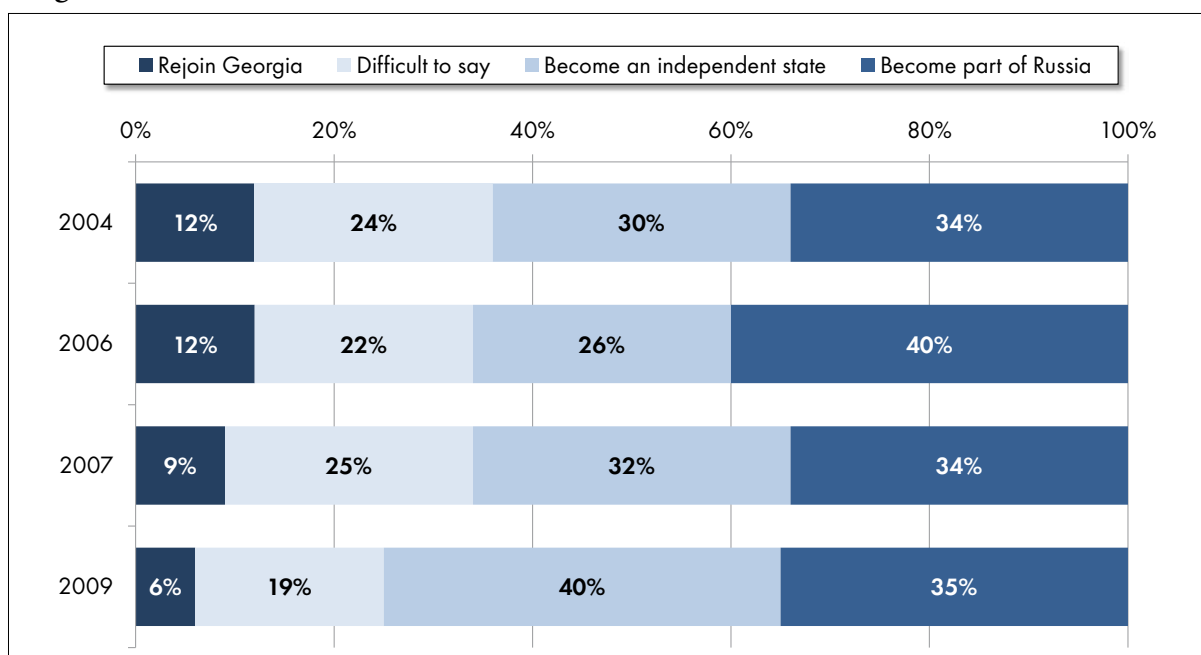


Diagram 2: South Ossetia should ...



Source: opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center 17–20 July 2009 <http://www.levada.ru./press/2009080401.html>

Diagram 3: Do you Think the Recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian Independence by Russia Was (in 2008: “Will Be”) Advantageous or Harmful for Russia?

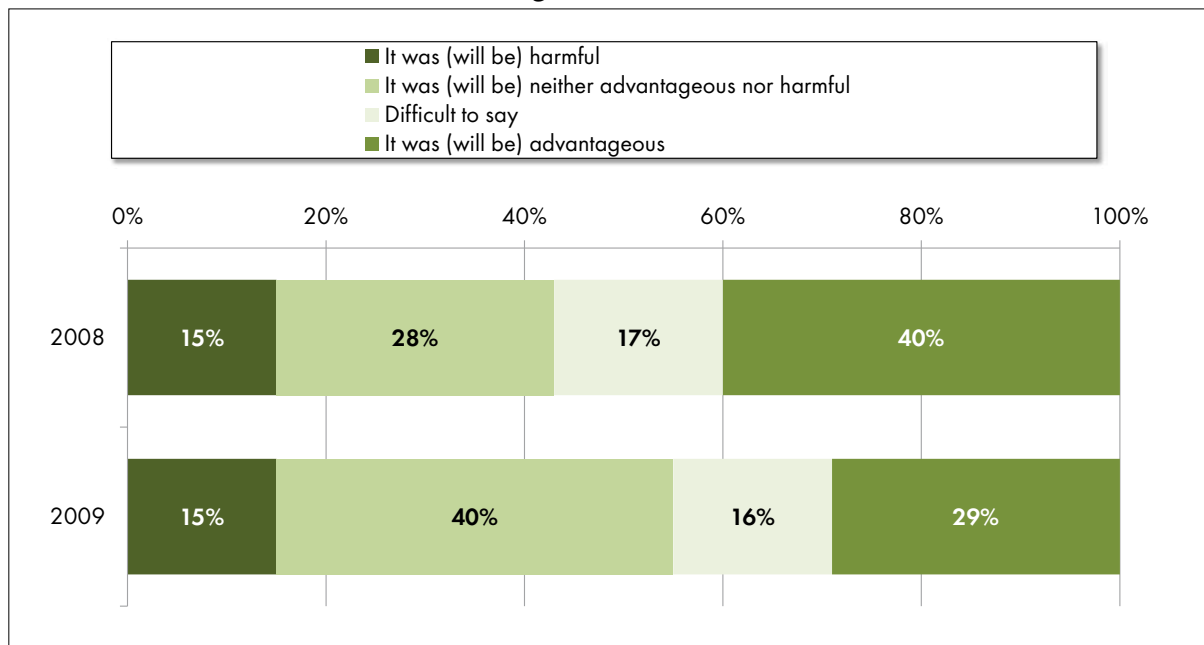
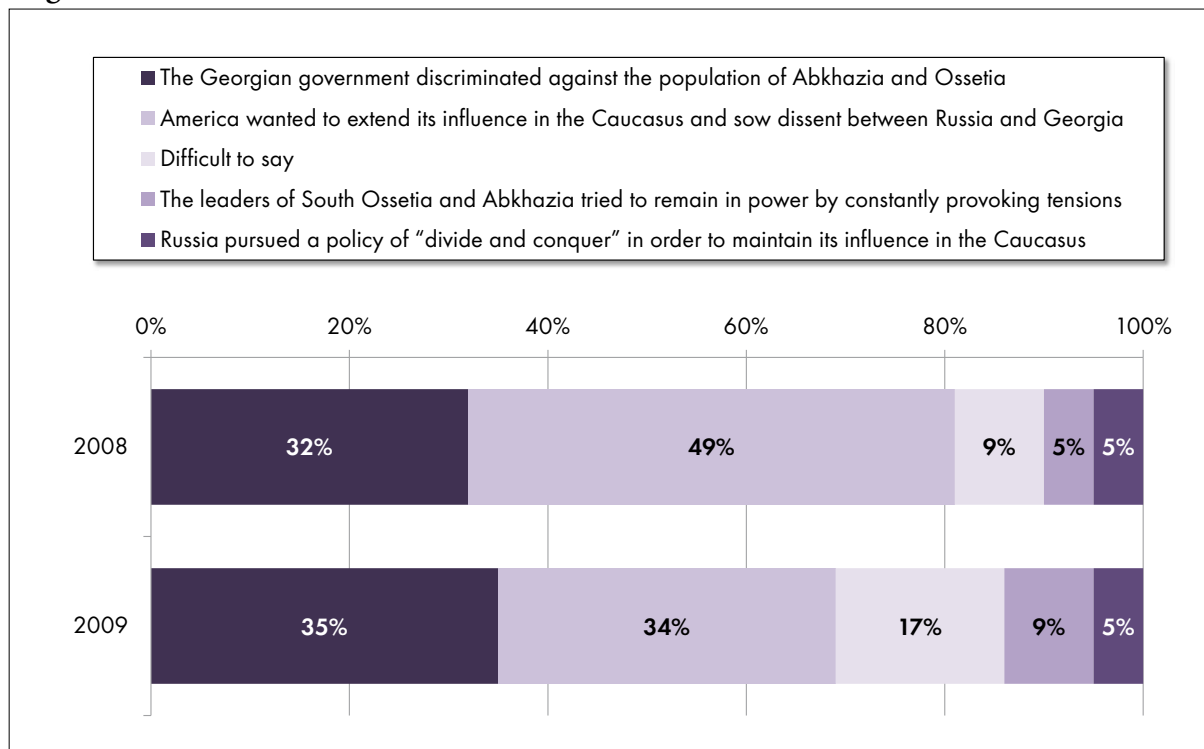


Diagram 4: In Your Opinion, What Was the Main Trigger for the Conflict in South Ossetia in August 2008?



Source: opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center 17–20 July 2009 <http://www.levada.ru./press/2009080401.html>

Diagram 5: What is Your Opinion on the Russian Military Intervention in the South Ossetian Conflict in August 2008?

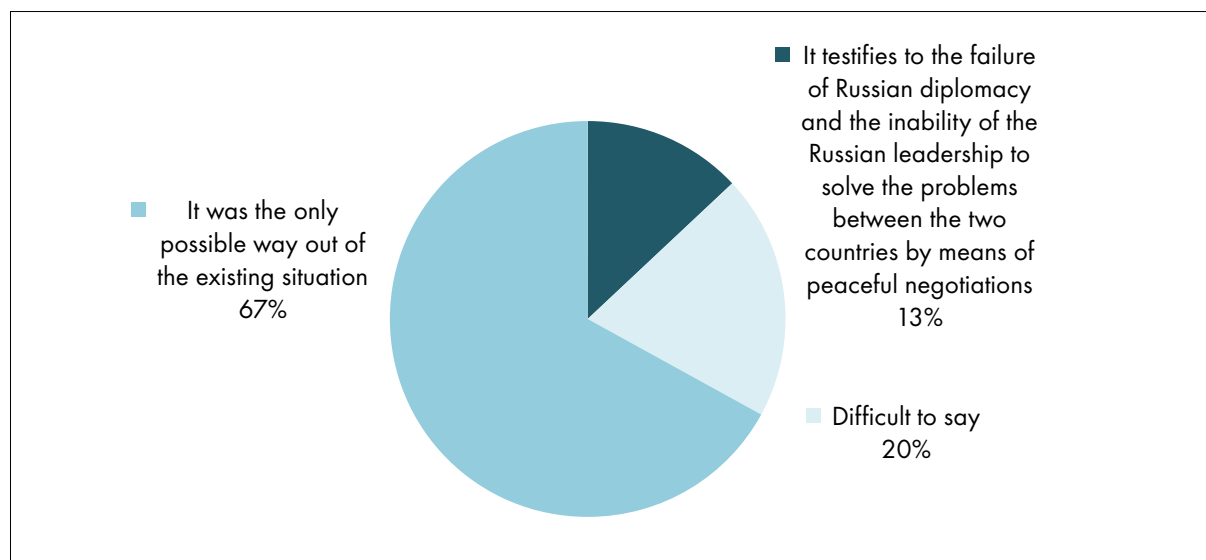
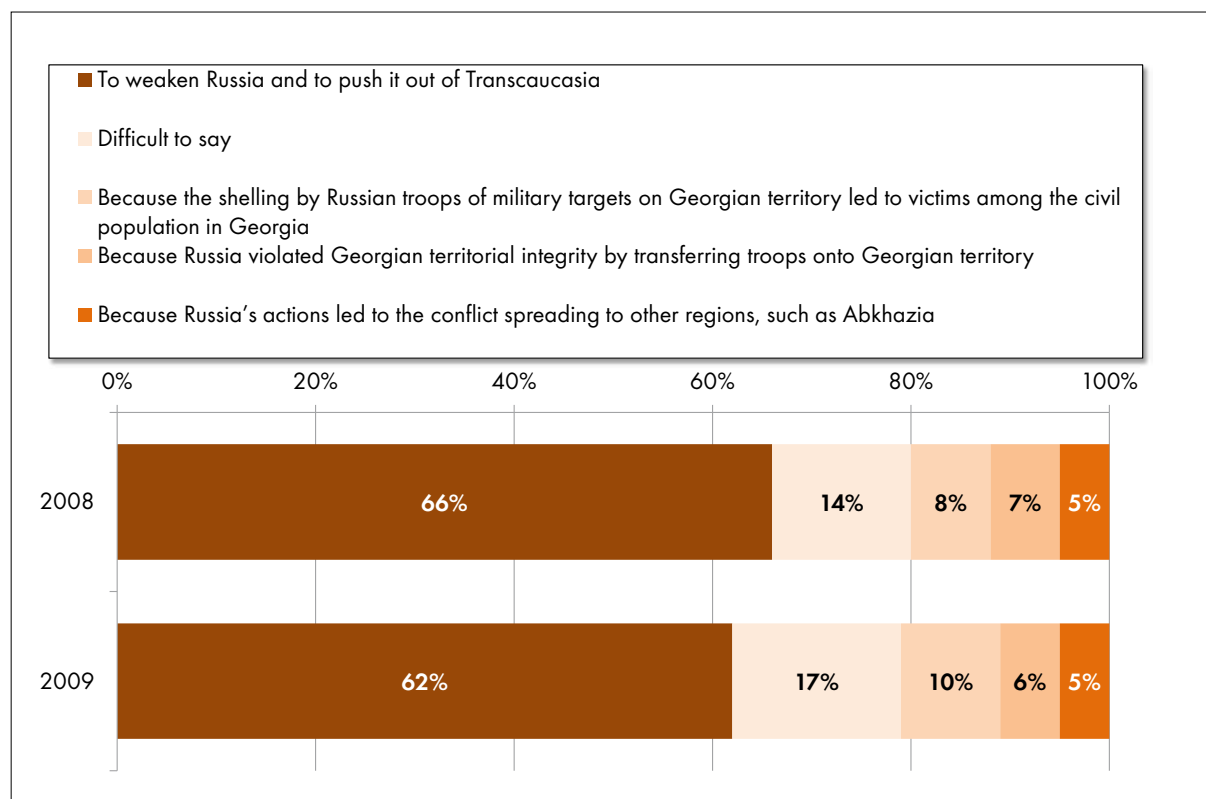
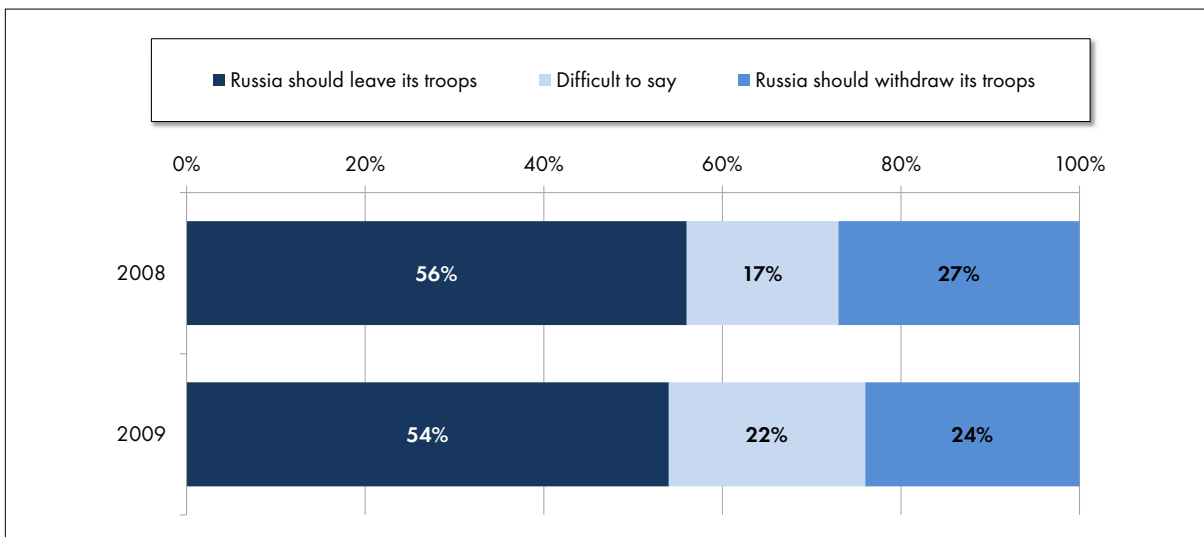


Diagram 6: In Your Opinion, Why Did the Leaders of the Western Countries Support Georgia in the South Ossetian Conflict?



Source: opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center 17–20 July 2009 <http://www.levada.ru./press/2009080401.html>

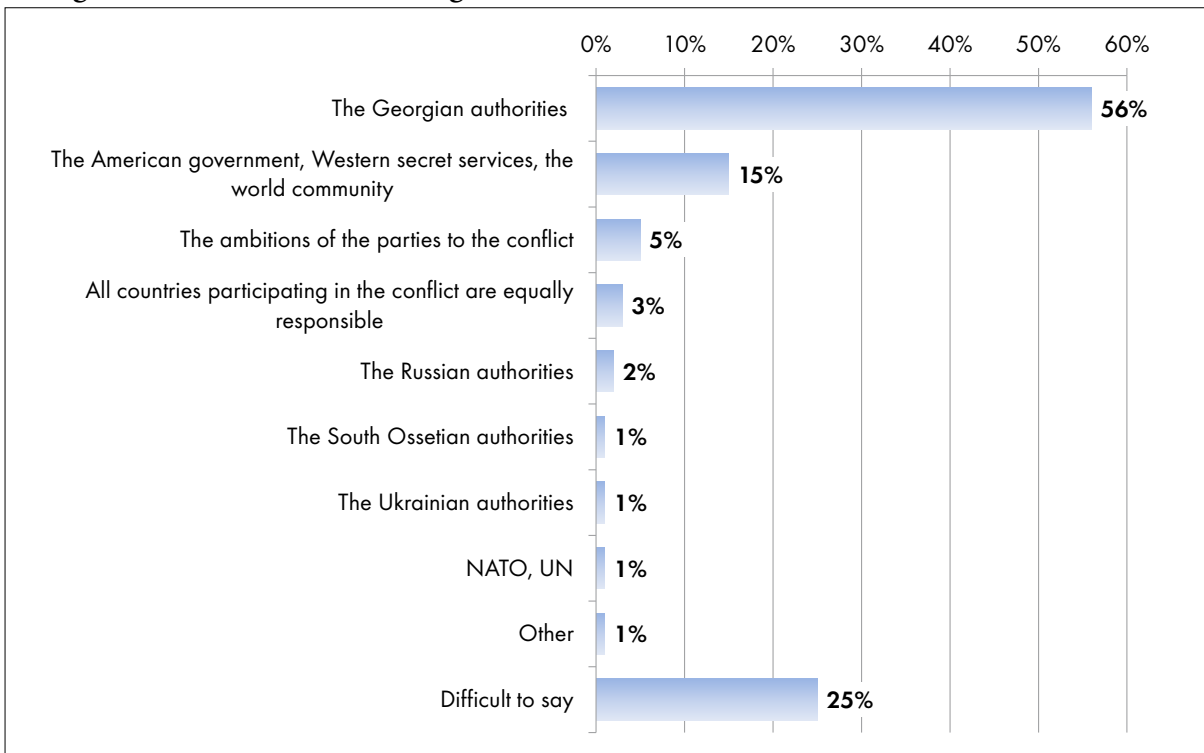
Diagram 7: Should Russia Leave Its Troops in South Ossetia or Withdraw Them?



Source: opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center 17–20 July 2009 <http://www.levada.ru./press/2009080401.html>

“South Ossetia, Abkhazia ... Who Is Next?” Opinion Polls by VTsIOM

Diagram 1: Who Is Primarily Responsible for the Protracted Hostile Relations Between Georgia and South Ossetia Turning into an Armed Conflict?



Source: opinion polls conducted by VTsIOM on 25–26 July 2009 <http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/12235.html>

Diagram 2: Did Russia Act Correctly by Supporting South Ossetia During the Georgia–Ossetia Conflict, Or Not?

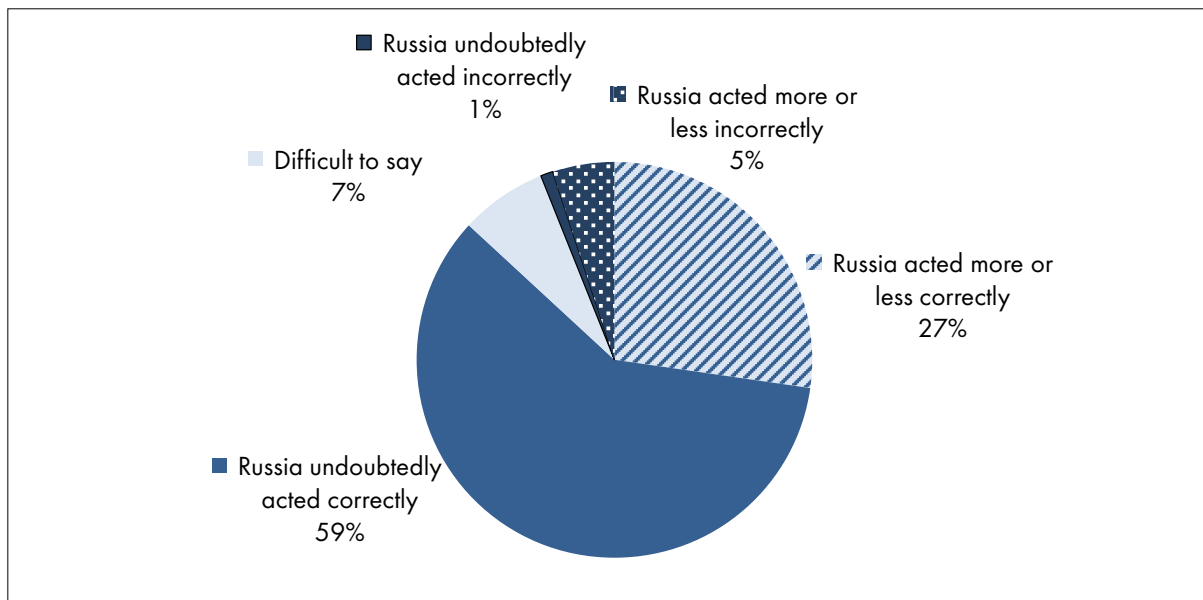
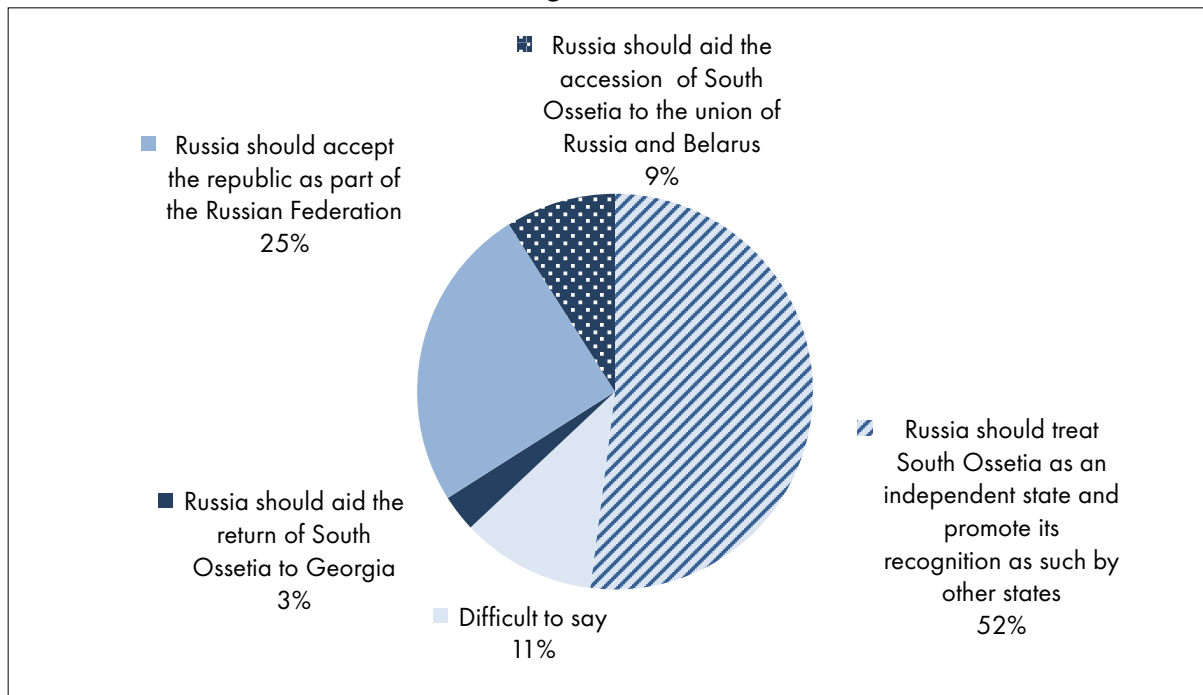


Diagram 3: South Ossetia is a Small, Vulnerable and Economically Underdeveloped State. This is the Context in Which Its Future Is Being Discussed. Which Position Should Russia Take?



Source: opinion polls conducted by VTsIOM on 25–26 July 2009 <http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/12235.html>

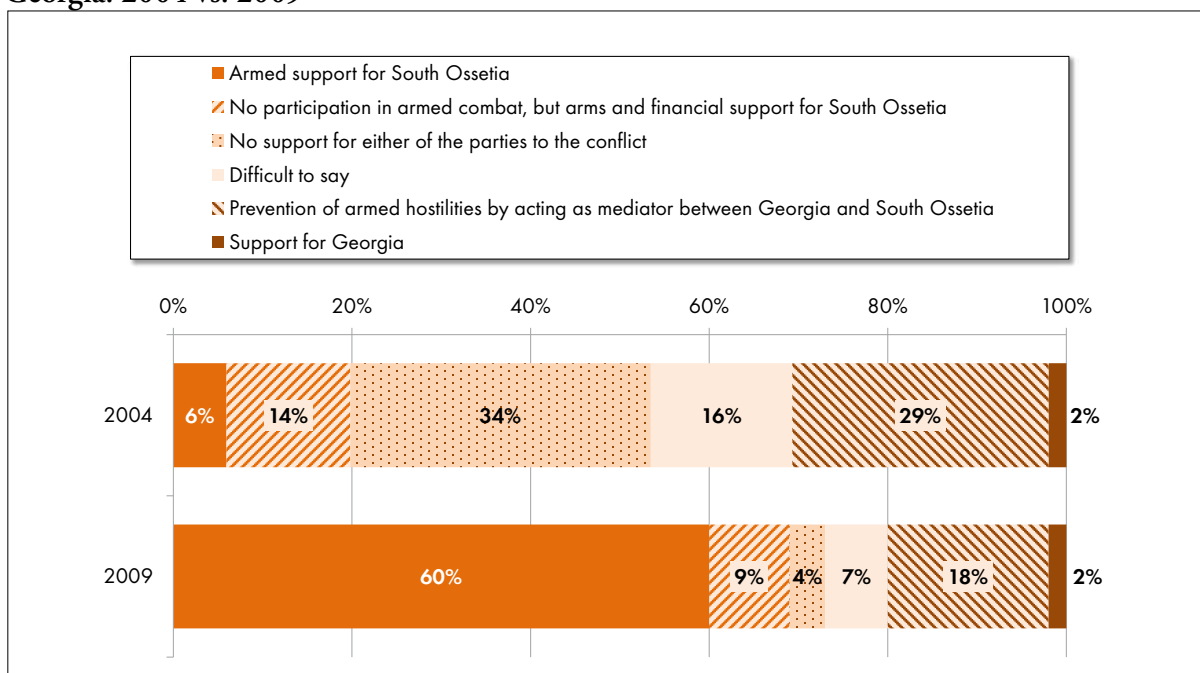
Table 1a: 2004: In Case Hostile Relations Between South Ossetia and Georgia Turn Into an Armed Conflict, How Should Russia Act?

Russia should give armed support to South Ossetia	6%
Russia should not engage in armed combat, but should support South Ossetia with arms and money	14%
Russia should not support either of the parties to the conflict	34%
Russia should support Georgia	2%
Russia should prevent armed hostilities by acting as a mediator in negotiations between Georgia and South Ossetia	29%
Difficult to say	16%

Table 1b: 2009: A Year Ago, Hostile Relations Between South Ossetia and Georgia Turned Into an Armed Conflict. How Should Russia Have Acted in this Situation?

Russia should have given armed support to South Ossetia	6%
Russia should not have engaged in armed combat, but should have supported South Ossetia with arms and money	14%
Russia should not have supported either of the parties to the conflict	34%
Russia should have supported Georgia	2%
Russia should have prevented armed hostilities by acting as a mediator in negotiations between Georgia and South Ossetia	29%
Difficult to say	16%

Diagram 4: Perceived Options for Russian Action in the Conflict Between South Ossetia and Georgia: 2004 vs. 2009



Source: opinion polls conducted by VTsIOM on 25–26 July 2009 <http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/12235.html>

Opinion Poll

Cui Bono?

Opinions of the Population of the South Caucasus States on the August War

Diagram 1: Was the August War in the Interest of the Russian Government? (%)

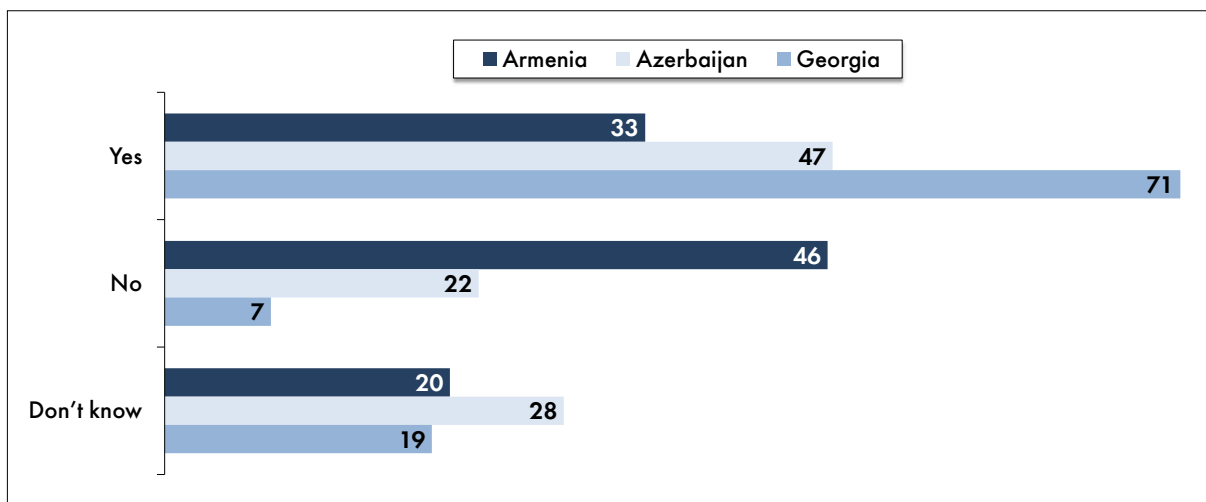
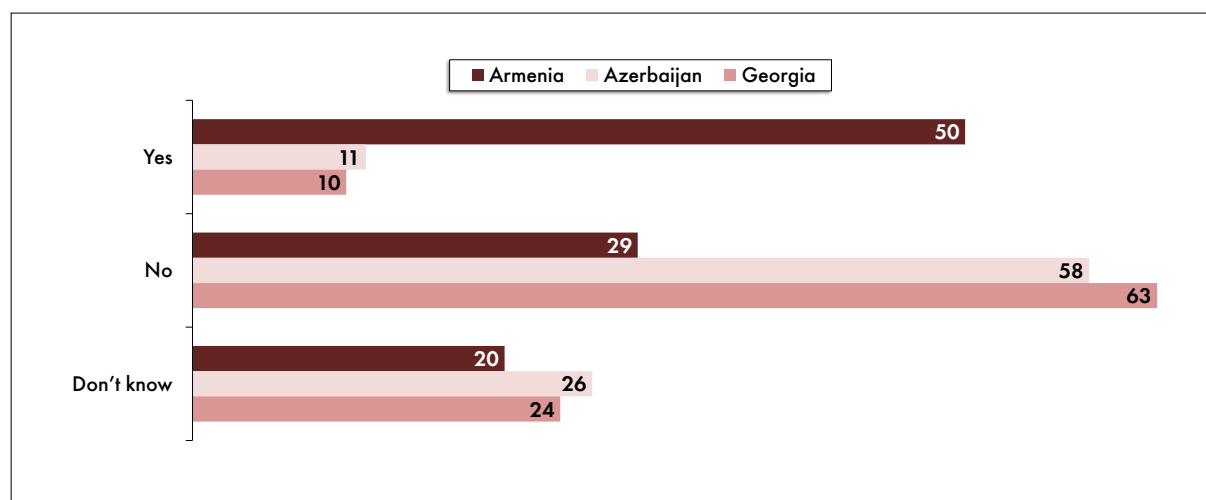


Diagram 2: Was the August War in the Interest of the Georgian Government? (%)



Source: opinion survey conducted by Caucasus Resource and Research Centers (CRRC, www.crrccenters.org) in November 2008.

Diagram 3: Was the August War in the Interest of the Governments of West European Countries? (%)

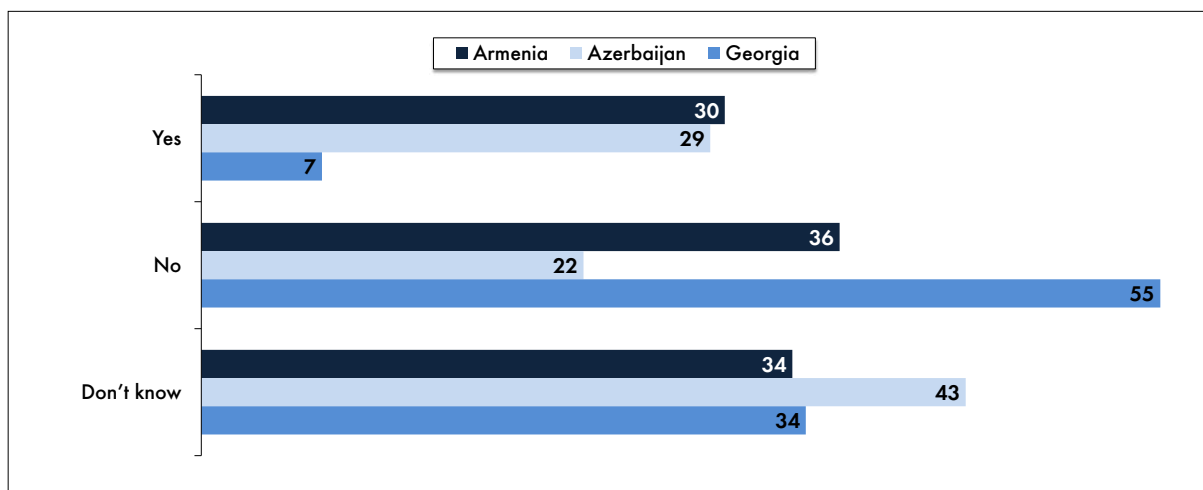
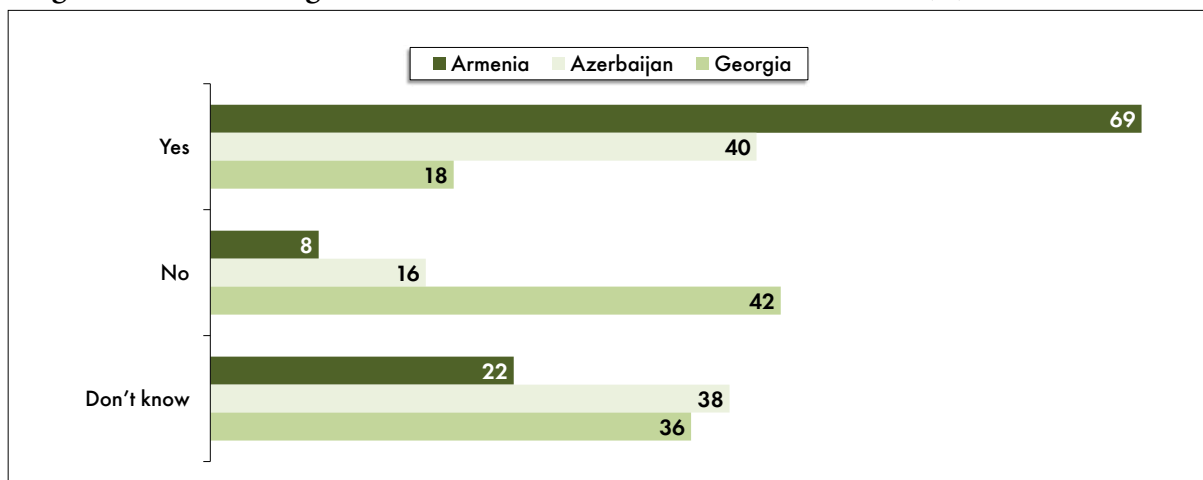


Diagram 4: Was the August War in the Interest of the US Government? (%)



Reading Tip

Identities and Politics During the Putin Presidency The Foundations of Russia's Stability

Casula, Philipp und Perovic, Jeronim (eds)

With a foreword by Heiko Haumann

in collaboration with Ivo Mijnsen

Volume 92 in the series "Soviet and Post-
Soviet Politics and Society" (SPSS)

How could an undemocratic regime manage to stabilise Russia? What is Putin's success formula? What are the symbolic and discursive underpinnings of Russia's new stability? Many outside observers of Russia regarded the authoritarian tendencies during the Putin presidency as a retreat from, or even the end of, democratisation. Rather than attempting to explain why Russia did not follow the trajectory of democratic transformation, this book aims to attain an understanding of the stabilisation process during Putin's tenure as president. Proceeding from the assumption that the stability created under Putin is multi-layered, the authors attempt to uncover the underpinnings

of the new equilibrium, inquiring especially about the changes and fixations that occurred in the discourses on political and national identity. In doing so, the authors analyse the trajectories of the past years from the traditional perspective of transitology as well as through the lens of post-structuralist discourse theory. The two approaches are seen as complementary, with the latter focusing less on the end point of transition than on the nature of the mechanisms that stabilise the current regime. The book therefore focuses on how nationalism became an increasingly important tool in political discourse and how it affected political identity. "Sovereign democracy" is seen by many contributors as the most explicit manifestation of a newfound post-Soviet identity drawing on nationalist ideas, while simultaneously appeasing most sectors of the Russian political spectrum.

404 pages. Paperback. 2009

ibidem-Verlag, Stuttgart

ISBN 978-3-8382-0015-6

ISSN 1614-3515

SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET POLITICS AND SOCIETY
Edited by Dr. Andreas Umland

Philipp Casula and Jeronim Perovic (eds)

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The Foundations of Russia's Stability

With a foreword by Heiko Haumann



ibidem

About the Russian Analytical Digest

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de) and the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich). It is supported by the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russlandanalysen (www.laender-analysen.de/russland), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.res.ethz.ch), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

Founded in 1982, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to socialist and post-socialist cultural and societal developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Research Centre possesses a unique collection of alternative culture and independent writings from the former socialist countries in its archive. In addition to extensive individual research on dissidence and society in socialist countries, since January 2007 a group of international research institutes is participating in a collaborative project on the theme "The other Eastern Europe – the 1960s to the 1980s, dissidence in politics and society, alternatives in culture. Contributions to comparative contemporary history", which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

In the area of post-socialist societies, extensive research projects have been conducted in recent years with emphasis on political decision-making processes, economic culture and the integration of post-socialist countries into EU governance. One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular email services with nearly 20,000 subscribers in politics, economics and the media.

With a collection of publications on Eastern Europe unique in Germany, the Research Centre is also a contact point for researchers as well as the interested public. The Research Centre has approximately 300 periodicals from Russia alone, which are available in the institute's library. News reports as well as academic literature is systematically processed and analyzed in data bases.

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich is a Swiss academic center of competence that specializes in research, teaching, and information services in the fields of international and Swiss security studies. The CSS also acts as a consultant to various political bodies and the general public. The CSS is engaged in research projects with a number of Swiss and international partners. The Center's research focus is on new risks, European and transatlantic security, strategy and doctrine, area studies, state failure and state building, and Swiss foreign and security policy.

In its teaching capacity, the CSS contributes to the ETH Zurich-based Bachelor of Arts (BA) in public policy degree course for prospective professional military officers in the Swiss army and the ETH and University of Zurich-based MA program in Comparative and International Studies (MACIS); offers and develops specialized courses and study programs to all ETH Zurich and University of Zurich students; and has the lead in the Executive Masters degree program in Security Policy and Crisis Management (MAS ETH SPCM), which is offered by ETH Zurich. The program is tailored to the needs of experienced senior executives and managers from the private and public sectors, the policy community, and the armed forces.

The CSS runs the International Relations and Security Network (ISN), and in cooperation with partner institutes manages the Crisis and Risk Network (CRN), the Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security (PHP), the Swiss Foreign and Security Policy Network (SSN), and the Russian and Eurasian Security (RES) Network.

Any opinions expressed in Russian Analytical Digest are exclusively those of the authors.

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Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder

Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann

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