

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.

*About the Author:*

Professor Ghia Nodia is the Director of the School of Caucasus Studies at Ilia Chavchavadze State University in Tbilisi, Georgia and chairman of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, a Georgian think-tank.

## 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](http://www.crrccenters.org)).

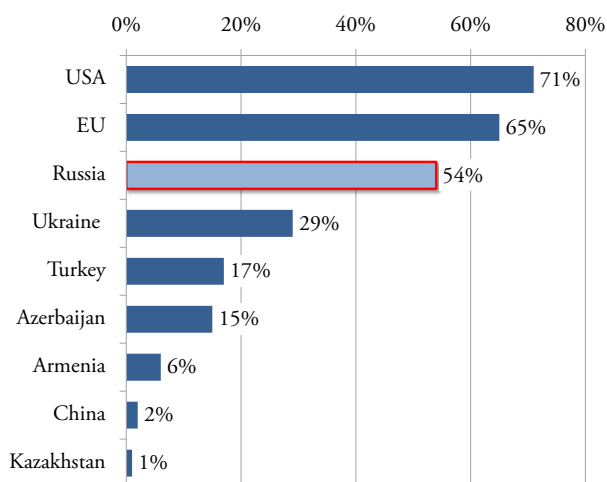
Georgians overwhelmingly desire a good political relationship with Russia. This view was clearly demon-

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](#))

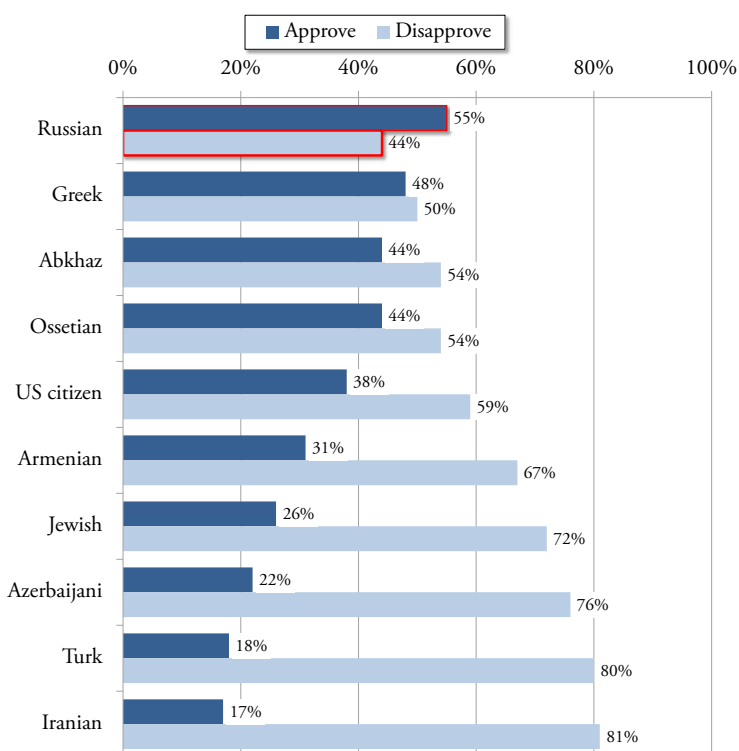
### No Enemies

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.

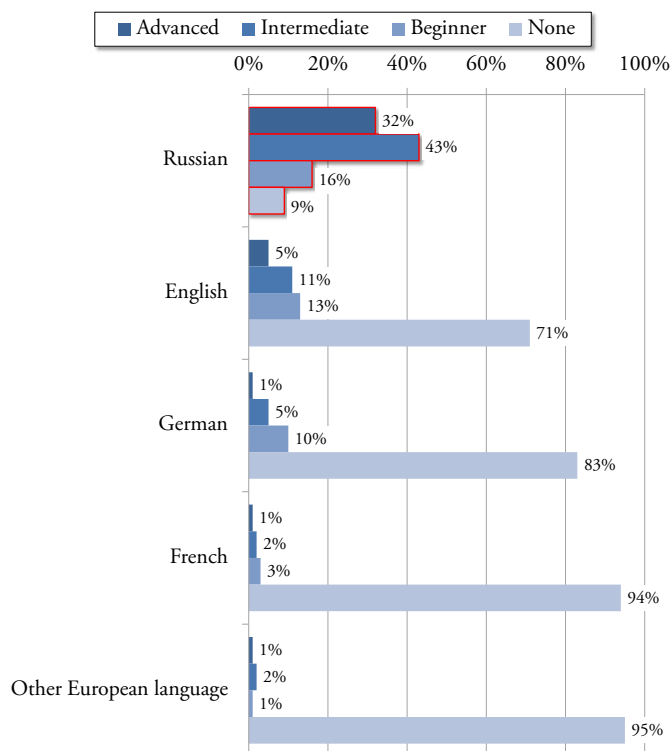
Even more remarkable were Georgian views of Russian businesses operating in Georgia. Just two months after the conflict, 32% of Georgians were in favor of allowing Russian companies to purchase businesses in Georgia, with 36% against – and 30% saying they did not know. This contrasted with Azerbaijan,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

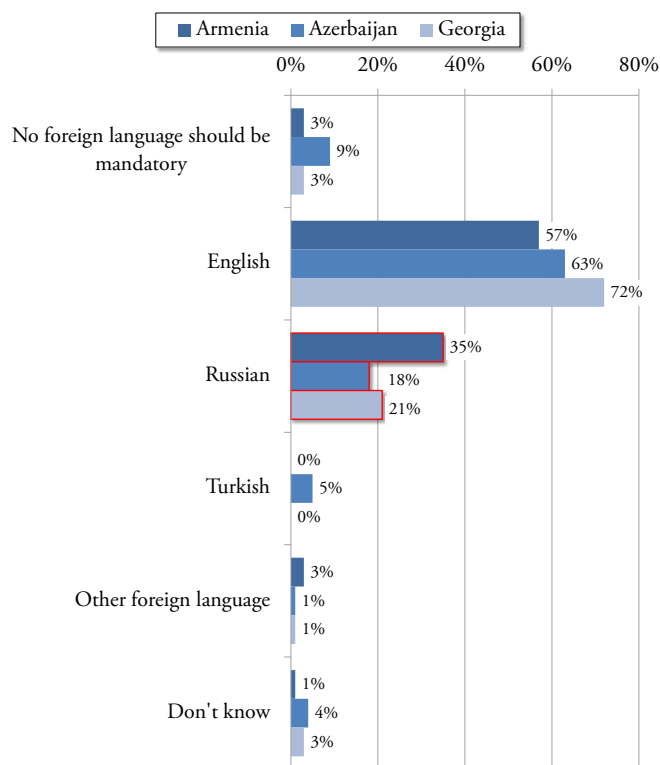
In terms of languages, the orientation towards the West is also stark. In an EU-focused survey (i.e. a survey in which Russia was not seen as part of Europe), 75% of Georgians agreed that if Georgian students want to receive a quality education, they need to know one of the European languages. Skills 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](http://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.)