

A blurred photograph of a large crowd of people walking on a city street, with modern buildings in the background. The image is used as a background for the top section of the page.

## MAJOR FINDINGS BASED ON A COMPARISON OF THE SURVEYS CONDUCTED IN GEORGIA AND RUSSIA

The Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation) in cooperation and with the support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) South Caucasus Office has commissioned a CRRC empirical study on the knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of Georgian citizens towards Russia with a special focus on the North Caucasus. The research was carried out in February 2021.

A parallel study, consequently with the same goals, was also carried out in Russia in order to reveal the attitudes and the perceptions of citizens of the Russian Federation towards Georgia. The FES Russia identified the Institute for Comparative Social Research (CESSI) as a local partner which carried out the aforementioned study in February-March 2021.

Identical questionnaires were developed and streamlined through the joint consultation process of the

Georgian and Russian sides with the close engagement of the FES South Caucasus and Moscow offices. Both empirical studies used the identical methodology that included a quantitative survey using computer assisted telephone interviewing as well as qualitative focus group discussions.

The goal of both studies was to better understand public knowledge, attitudes and perceptions vis-à-vis the research topics as they exist in each country and between different age groups. The study covered the topics such as people and the state, the domestic policies of each state, sources of information, Russia-Georgia relations, the occupied regions and the Russian republics in the North Caucasus.

The goal of the paper is to present major findings based on a comparison of both surveys conducted in Georgia and Russia.



## Attitudes Towards State and People

*While in Russia attitudes towards the Georgian state and citizens are almost similar, there is a wide divergence in the perception of the Russian state and Russian citizens in Georgia. Slightly more than half of the population of Georgia reports a positive attitude towards the Russian people while on the contrary, almost half has a negative attitude towards the Russian state. The negative attitude towards the Russian state derives from historical experience and the threat perception from Russian policy. This, in fact, enhances the amount of negative information that the Georgian public receives about the Russian Federation which in turn affects its attitude towards the Russian state.*

### Relevant Survey Data

- About half of the respondents - 52% in Russia have neutral feelings towards the Georgian state and slightly less - 49% feel similarly about the Georgian people. In addition, 30% have a positive attitude towards the Georgian state and even more - 38% have similar feelings towards the Georgian people.
- While neutral attitudes towards the Russian state and the Russian people are almost similar in Georgia amounting to 34% and 39%, respectively, there is a huge distinction between positive and negative attitudes towards the Russian people and the Russian state. About half of the respondents - 52% in Georgia report positive attitude towards the Russian people; however, only 18% feel similarly towards the Russian state. In contrast, only 7% of Georgians have a negative attitude towards the Russian people while roughly half - 45% report negatively about the Russian state.
- During the focus group discussions conducted in Georgia, most attitudes towards the Russian people were neutral or positive and only a few reported negatively. In contrast, most viewed the Russian state in an overwhelmingly negative light. This is mostly derived from the historical experience of Russia's expansionist and imperialist politics, including the occupation of Georgian territories. However, it was also argued that because of the Russian threat, people in Georgia neither feel secure at present nor they will in the future.
- The majority in Georgia - 59% report that they receive mainly negative information about the Russian Federation while the majority in Russia - 57% say that their information about Georgia is neutral.
- Personal visits of Russians to Georgia correlate with a favorable opinion about the country. Among those who have been to Georgia in recent years, 52% have a positive attitude towards it as compared with 29% who have not visited the country.

## Threats Perception

*The Georgian and the Russian public have quite similar views regarding the threats that Russia and Georgia are facing. External issues/conflicts, the economy and healthcare are the most important topics for the societies of both countries. Despite these similarities, the difference seems substantially more dramatic. For the Georgian public, the distinct perception of the source of external issues/conflicts is Russia while this same source for the Russian public is the West. This finding serves as another clear example of how differently the Georgian and the Russian people assess their external security environment.*

## Relevant Survey Data

- According to the Georgian public, the most important threats that Georgia faces are as follows: 1) economic and social Issues - 57%, 2) the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia - 41%, 3) the violation of territorial integrity - 32% and 4) healthcare (including COVID issues) - 26%.
- The most important threats faced by Georgia that have been identified by the Russian public are almost similar: 1) economic and social problems - 30%, 2) Abkhazia and South Ossetia related problems - 25%, 3) public health, medical care, COVID - 19% and 4) other threats to Georgia's territorial integrity - 10%.
- According to the Russian public, the most important threats that Russia faces are as follows: 1) economic and social problems – 44%, 2) public health and medical care, including COVID – 31 % and 3) foreign policy threats, international conflicts, sanctions - 31%.
- The Georgian public has a relatively different vision of the threats faced by Russia; however, similarities could be also identified: 1) External issues and international conflicts/sanctions - 43%, 2) human rights and democracy – 25%, economic and social issues – 14% and crime 13%.
- For 22% in Russia, Georgia's policy of integration into the EU and NATO is the main obstacle for Russia-Georgian relations. Also, 44% respondents in Russia are against Georgia's EU integration and even more – 68% oppose Georgia's integration into NATO.
- On the contrary, 80% of Georgian citizens have a positive attitude towards Georgia's EU integration and 74% towards Georgia's NATO integration.
- During the focus group discussions conducted in Russia, the lack of friendly relations between Russia and Georgia was generally attributed to Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy. In contrast, the outcome from the focus groups conducted in Georgia confirm that the Georgian public strongly supports the EU and NATO and considers that these organizations could bring a solution for Georgia's problems.

## Prospects of the Relations Between Georgia and Russia

*The Russian and the Georgian societies have opposite views regarding the current state of relations as well as they assess the existing problems completely differently. Economic relations, trade and tourism is perceived positively in terms of their contribution to the improvement of the relations between Russia and Georgia. However, the political disagreement is considered as a crucial problem which produces a predominantly skeptical approach towards the prospects of the improvement of bilateral relations.*

### Relevant Survey Data

- About half of the population – 49% of the Russian Federation believe that Russia and Georgia have friendly relations. This number is even higher among the young generation and residents of small towns and rural areas as it reaches 57% and 54%, respectively.
- The overwhelming majority of Georgians have the opposite vision as 74% considers that Russian-Georgian relations are hostile. No significant differences were observed among age groups or settlement types.
- Only 5% of Russians assume that Russian support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia is a main obstacle for Russian-Georgian relations while the majority of Georgians - 60% consider this as a major problem.
- Respondents in Russia and Georgia agree in that economic relations, trade and tourism can contribute to the improvement of the relations between the two states. In Russia, 81% of respondents are in favor of economic relations and trade while slightly more - 86% support the development of tourism. In Georgia, the numbers are 75% and 84% accordingly. However, according to the qualitative study, any dramatic shift in the relations of the two states seems less likely.
- During the focus groups conducted in Russia, respondents characterized Russian-Georgian relations as “cool” and “problematic.” However, many of them were not able to name the reasons for that situation. Among those who could name the obstacles vis-à-vis Russia-Georgia relations, the majority referred to Georgia’s aspirations to join the EU and NATO and other Georgian political decisions. Only a few linked the problem with the conflicts and the situation around Abkhazia and South Ossetia.
- On the contrary, the qualitative findings in Georgia resemble the quantitative. Respondents state that the relationships between Russia and Georgia are tense in large part due to Russia’s imperialist politics. The occupation of Georgian territories and creeping occupation were mentioned most frequently as a reason for tense relations.
- In addition, respondents of the focus groups conducted in both countries seem to be quite skeptical about the prospect for the improvement of relations between the two states.

## Perception of the Development of Russia in Georgia and Vice Versa

*More people in Georgia think that Russia is developing mainly in the wrong direction as compared to the number of Russian citizens with the same view towards Georgia. In both countries, a huge number of people cannot identify the direction of the development of the respective country. This at least partially is derived from the low level of awareness in both societies regarding each other's domestic affairs. However, the younger generation in Russia seems to be a little bit more positive about Georgia's way of development, rather than the older generation.*

### Relevant Survey Data

- 30% of Georgia's population are not able to assess whether Russia is developing in the right or the wrong direction. Slightly more than half of the population of Georgia - 56% think that Russia is developing mainly in the wrong direction and only 10% see Russia's way of development as right.
- Even more people in Russia - 51% could not answer a general question regarding Georgia's direction of development. The amount of respondents who consider Georgia's development as mainly wrong reaches 27%. This slightly prevails over the number of people with the opposite view which amounts to 21%.
- In Russia, 33% of the age group of 18-34 years of age favor Georgia's way of development and only 13% disregard it. In other age groups (35-54 years of age and 55 years of age and older) 20% and 14% percent, respectively, are only in favor and 26% and 37%, respectively, are opposed.
- Focus groups conducted in Russia show that the most well-known fact about Georgia's domestic affairs was the fight against corruption. Some participants of the focus groups also mentioned that Georgia has made significant progress in the development of democracy, has built effective and accountable state institutions, civil liberties and has a more developed civil culture than in Russia.
- In contrast, the focus groups conducted in Georgia show that there are criticisms of Russia's state of democracy as well as its internal and foreign policy even among those citizens who acknowledge that there are certain developments in Russia and regard it as a powerful state. Also, 25% of respondents in Georgia consider that human rights and democracy are main issues for Russia while 13% think that that is greatest problem is crime.
- Most people in Georgia as well as in Russia say that they are not informed or have only little information regarding respective developments in the two countries. Hence, people who consider themselves as fully informed are in a minority in both countries and their numbers only amount to 14% in Russia and 19% in Georgia. In contrast, the number of respondents considering themselves as not informed or little informed in the case of Russia is 27% and 56%, respectively, and in case of Georgia 37% and 41%, respectively.
- The most popular source of information in both countries is television. However, the younger generations in both countries tend to prefer the internet for this purpose but even they have a low level of awareness as compared to the older generation of their respective countries.

## Attitudes Towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia

*Abkhazia and South Ossetia are the most contradicting topics for the Russian and the Georgian public. The majority of Georgians oppose Russian policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia while the majority of Russians support it. The perception of the Russians about the current status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is vague but they tend to believe that these territories will become a part of the Russian Federation in the future. The Georgians tend to believe that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are part of Georgia. This perception prevails even for a ten-year future prospective although it can be said that the level of uncertainty in this regard is also rising among the Georgia public.*

### Relevant Survey Data

- Only 4% of respondents in Russia see Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a part of Georgia. About one-third considers that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are quasi-independent states (35% and 34%, respectively). This is followed by the belief that they are part of Russia (20% in both cases) and the assumption that they are independent states (15% and 9%, respectively). Also, there is quite a large number of people who are not able to identify either Abkhazia's or South Ossetia's current status (26% and 33%, respectively).
- The majority of Georgians say that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are part of Georgia (75% and 71%, respectively) while 13% and 16%, respectively, consider them as part of Russia and 5% and 4%, respectively, think that they are quasi-independent states. It is noticeable that the younger generation in Georgia is less certain that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are part of Georgia or if they will be after ten years from now in comparison to the attitudes of the older age groups.
- Furthermore, in the case of Russia the rise in the number of the people who think that Abkhazia and South Ossetia will become a part of Russia after ten years is most noticeable (from 20% to 29% in the case of Abkhazia and from 20% to 30% in the case of South Ossetia). In the case of Georgia, however, the only rise is in the number of people who are uncertain about the status of Abkhazia or South Ossetia after ten years (from 5% to 29% in the case of Abkhazia and from 7% to 27% in the case of South Ossetia).
- Many respondents of the focus groups conducted in Russia understand that these territories are only nominally independent states but, in fact, they depend on Russian support to a large extent. The Russian respondents were somewhat better informed about the conflict in Abkhazia than about the conflict in South Ossetia. Some focus group participants did not distinguish North Ossetia from South Ossetia but some were of the opinion that South and North Ossetia are artificially divided but historically are a united ethnic community. Moreover, some of them consider the "reunification" of South and North Ossetia to be a natural and fair outcome.
- There is a plurality in Russia vis-à-vis Abkhazia and South Ossetia developing mainly in the right direction. However, the number of respondents who are uncertain about this remains very high (41% in the case of Abkhazia and 43% in the case of South Ossetia). The majority of Russians are in favor of Russian policy providing funding for Abkhazia and South Ossetia (64% and 61%, respectively).

- The majority of Georgians think that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are developing mainly in the wrong direction (68% and 69%, respectively). Also, there is a plurality vis-à-vis non-support of Russia's policy of providing funding for Abkhazia and South Ossetia (44% and 45%, respectively).
- The qualitative findings from the focus groups conducted in Georgia confirm the quantitative data with most of the participants claiming that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are part of Georgia and that both are in a very bad state. Also, most of the participants agreed that Russia provoked and managed the conflicts between Georgia and these regions.

## The North Caucasus and Georgia

*People in the North Caucasus are generally more positive towards Georgia but overall their attitude is very similar to the findings reflected in the national sample of Russia. The level of awareness of Georgians and North Caucasians about each other is quite low despite the geographical proximity and the historical ties between the Georgians and the people living in the North Caucasus. Personal communication and contacts are vital in terms of the enhancement of mutual awareness and the promotion of positive attitudes.*

## Relevant Survey Data

- In the republics of the North Caucasus, the attitude towards Georgia and the people of Georgia is much better than the average in Russia. Chechnya and Ingushetia are leading as 63% of the respondents in Chechnya and 61% in Ingushetia report a positive attitude towards the Georgian people and 61% and 56%, respectively, towards the Georgian state. North Ossetia-Alania is the last in this list; however, the results are quite impressive as 47% of Ossetians report positively about the Georgian people and 38% about the Georgian state.
- Also, respondents in the North Caucasian republics assessed the state of Russian-Georgian relations more positively than respondents in other regions of Russia. However, otherwise only minor differences were found between the North Caucasian and the Russian national samples regarding attitudes towards Georgian development, the main threats that Georgia is facing and Georgia's EU and NATO aspirations.
- The subjective assessment of the awareness about the situation of Georgia is rather low and only slightly higher than the average Russian margin. Traditional media remains the main source of information in the North Caucasus as it also is in Russia overall. However, unlike other regions of Russia, personal communication plays an important role in informing citizens about Georgia in the North Caucasian republics.
- Almost half of the Georgian population - 46% could not name any the North Caucasian republic which they consider to be the friendliest towards Georgia. A total of 20% think that none of them is friendly. Only 11% reported Ingushetia as the friendliest, followed by Dagestan -5%, Chechnya - 4%, and North Ossetia-Alania -4%. Other republics were named even more rarely.
- Findings from the qualitative data reflect these results as many have practically no information about most of the Russian republics in the North Caucasus. Those with some information name people from Ingushetia as the friendliest. However, the respondents were the most informed about Chechnya but attitudes towards it were split.

- Assessing which of the republics of the North Caucasus are the closest to Georgia, residents of Ingushetia named their own republic most often (51%). In other republics, less than 30% of the respondents mentioned such special relations with Georgia. Kabardino-Balkaria was the last in the list at 20%.
- The opinion of people living in Georgia is almost equally divided when asked about the similarities and the differences between the different peoples in the North Caucasus and Georgia. A total of 42% think they are similar (39% more similar than different and 3% very similar) while 39% think that they are different (28% more different than similar and 11% very different).
- The opinion of the North Caucasians on their similarities or differences with Georgians is also controversial. Although 43% tend to believe that the Georgians and the North Caucasians are more similar than different, 44% disagree with this opinion. Most similarities were mentioned by residents of North Ossetia: more than half of them believes that there are more similarities than differences between their nations. Most differences were mentioned by the residents of Chechnya: 44% stand for differences and 31% for similarities with the Georgians. In the other three republics, the share of those who see more differences or more similarities is roughly equal.

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