



ORIGINAL PAPER

Public opinion on Russia in Ukraine and Georgia. Comparative Analysis

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to analyze the public opinion of citizens in Georgia and Ukraine towards the Russian Federation, on the grounds that the two states have in common several elements. Among them, we mention the fact that both are states aggressed by Russia, both have a past in the sphere of the Soviet Union and therefore in both Russia has never ceased to exert its influence.

In our opinion, from the perspective of a psychosocial dimension of the conflict, the repercussions are felt at the level of identity, of collective traumas (social memory theory), victimization, opinions about the enemy ("demonization"), stereotypes, existential fears. Conflict trauma can be passed on from generation to generation (social memory theory), forming a new collective identity, one marked by existential fear.

Thus, after the institutionalisation of conflict (creating, in practice, a culture of conflict), violence becomes a way of relating to the other identity. Living in a culture of conflict, of violence, international mediation almost becomes an utopian idea. Therefore, despite multiple attempts of mediation by international institutions, the conflicts in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and Ukraine persist, albeit not in the form of open conflict, but in the form of frozen conflict, as the case may be.

In our opinion, it is important to note what was the opinion of Ukrainians on the development of their country in relation to Russia both before 2022 (the year of invasion) and after, in order to compare these results with the opinion of Georgians in the same time units on similar issues.

Keywords: *conflict, cooperation, warfare, psychosocial dimension, public opinion, social trauma.*

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Polls prior to February 2022

In a poll the results of which were published on August 12, 2009, entitled "Georgians' Attitudes Toward Russia Less Friendly Since War", by the news editors Neli Esipova and Julie Ray, at Washington, D.C., the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia prompted that, in May 2009, 47 percent of respondents to a questionnaire on the relations their country should have with the Russian Federation were of the opinion that those ties should be positive (Esipova *et al*, 2009). By comparison, when asked the same question in June 2008 (just before the start of the war), the percentage who thought that good relations with Russia should be maintained was around 64 percent (Esipova *et al*, 2009). As a result, the war has led to a 17 percent drop in respondents favouring rapprochement with Russia over an 11-month period.

The above-mentioned study took place in Tbilisi in 3 stages: in May 2007, in June 2008 and in May 2009, on a sample of 1,000 persons aged 15 years and over, with a maximum margin of sampling error is ± 3.5 percentage points (Esipova *et al*, 2009).

In comparison with the above mentioned results, according to a 14 nations survey conducted from August 27 to September 24, 2009 by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project among 14,760 adults (margin of sampling error was not specified), at that time, regardless that a country situated not far away of Ukraine had been the victim of a war started by Russia, 46% of the Ukrainian respondents stated that Russia had a good influence on Ukraine overall, while only 25% answered that the specified influence was a negative one over their country, 20% answered "neither bad, nor good" and 9% refused to answer (Pew Research Center, 2009). As we will see below, this public perception of Ukrainians over Russia will change within time, mostly due to the aggression that has started in 2014 against Donbass region and especially after the 2022 invasion of the entire country.

Furthermore, we will analyze the results of a public opinion survey of residents of Ukraine held on behalf of the Center for Insights and Survey Research (CISR) of the International Republican Institute, between March 13 and March 2021 throughout the entire Ukraine, except for Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk occupied territories (Center for Insights in Survey Research, March 2021).

The survey consisted of face-to-face discussions with 2400 respondents aged 18 and over, with a response rate of 54% and a margin of error of 2% (Center for Insights in Survey Research, March 2021). Thus, to the question "If Ukraine was able to enter only one international economic union, which one of the following should it be?", 54% of the respondents indicated "European Union" as an answer, 20% "Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan", 13% answered "something else" and 14% refused to answer (Center for Insights in Survey Research, March 2021).

To the above-mentioned question, grouped by age category, 63% of respondents aged 18-35 answered "European Union", 16% "Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan", 11% "something else" and 10% refused to answer (Center for Insights in Survey Research, March 2021). On the same question, respondents aged 36-50 answered as follows: 48% indicated "European Union", 20% indicated "Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan", 15% answered "other" and 17% refused to answer (Center for Insights in Survey Research, March 2021). And respondents aged 51 and over answered: 50% European Union, 22% "Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan", 12% "something else" and the remaining 15% gave no answer (Center for Insights in Survey Research, March 2021).

As a comparison with the situation in Ukraine, the above data from this country will be compared with the results of a study carried out on a similar economic issue in approximately the same period - February 2, 2021 - February 26, 2021, in Georgia, by CISR, under the aegis of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Center for Insights in Survey Research, February 2021). The sample on which this survey was conducted consisted of 1500 persons, aged 18 years and over, residing in Georgia, excluding Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with a margin of error not exceeding 2.5% and a response rate of 75%, the sample being representative in terms of age, gender and region (Center for Insights in Survey Research, February 2021). Noteworthy, however, is the fact that respondents were allowed to provide multiple answers, which makes it difficult for us to clearly interpret the study.

Thus, to the question "Which of these countries do you consider to be the most important economic partners for Georgia?", the answers were "USA", "European Union", "Turkey", "Ukraine", "Azerbaijan", "Russia", "China", "Armenia", "Iran", "None" and "No answer" (Center for Insights in Survey Research, February 2021).

Therefore, 55% of respondents answered "USA", "European Union" - 39%, "Turkey" - 29%, "Ukraine" - 21%, tied with "Azerbaijan" - 21%, "Russia" was tied with "China" - both options were chosen by 11% of respondents, "Iran" - 5%, "None" - 1% and "No answer" - 3% (Center for Insights in Survey Research, February 2021).

If we were to categorize the answer "European Union" as the Western direction in the Ukrainian survey, we note that only 54% of Ukrainians preferred the "Western way" at the time of 2021, and the 13 percent who answered "other" or the 14 percent who refused to answer cannot be included in any category, thus confusing us with a deficit in the survey, because some of these 27 percent may opt for both the "Western way" and economic alliances with the East (Center for Insights in Survey Research, March 2021). However, in the absence of concrete data on the clear choice of these respondents who totaled 27%, we will choose not to consider the 27 percent as belonging to either the pro-West or the pro-East category and will limit our interpretation of the results to the 54 percent pro-EU.

In the case of the survey in Georgia, we will interpret the answers "USA" and "European Union" together as the "Western way" and the rest of the answers as the "Eastern way". Therefore, we observe that the "Western way" accounts for 55% ("USA") + 39% ("European Union"), while the "Eastern way" options account for 29% ("Turkey") + 21% ("Azerbaijan") + 11% ("Russia") + 11% ("China") + 9% ("Armenia") + 5% ("Iran") (Center for Insights in Survey Research, February 2021). It is not possible to calculate a percentage total in favor of one direction or the other, as the same respondent had the possibility to give multiple answers, thus tipping the balance both one way or the other, but at a first glance, we can see that there was a parity of the options "the Western way" vs. "the Eastern way", with the respondents' preferences being roughly the same in both countries.

In terms of strategic decision making, the two aforementioned CISR surveys, both in Ukraine and in Georgia, also asked respondents a similar question: "If a referendum was held today on Ukraine joining NATO, how would you vote?" in Ukraine and "Do you support or oppose Georgia joining NATO?". (Center for Insights in Survey Research, February and March 2021).

Thus, in the case of Ukraine, 48% of respondents said they "would vote for Ukraine to join NATO", 28% "would vote against Ukraine joining NATO", 11% "would not vote" and 13% gave no answer. (Center for Insights in Survey Research, March 2021).

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While in Georgia, 59% of respondents "fully support Georgia joining NATO", 19% "somewhat support", 6% "somewhat oppose", 8% "strongly oppose" and 8% did not answer. (Center for Insights in Survey Research, February 2021). We can interpret these results, if we look strictly at the two surveys, given that they were conducted over roughly the same period of time and by the same public opinion polling institute, as meaning that in Ukraine only 28% of respondents would have opted for an alliance with NATO, while in Georgia, 59% of respondents were in favor of such an alliance, if we only count the very decided ones.

In the followings, however, we will note that especially in the case of Ukraine, unlike Georgians, the former's negative view of Russia has sharpened considerably in the wake of the February 2022 invasion, while Georgians' negative public perception of Russia has increased at a lower pace, as the 2022 war did not directly target them. However, the past social traumas caused by the 2008 war with Russia have triggered existential fears in Georgians' collective memory once they realized that another country was facing not only similar problems to theirs, but even more serious ones, namely a large-scale invasion in the case of Ukraine.

Beyond the aforementioned aspects, there have also been studies regarding the Georgian population's opinion of Russia, according to which it was a more positive one prior to 2022, before the time of the invasion of Ukraine. According to a study conducted by the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies 2021, published by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, in February 2021, about 52% of the population had a positive attitude towards Russia, while 39% had a neutral attitude and only 7% a negative perception (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2021). The study was a mixed method one, including a quantitative survey using computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) as well as qualitative online focus group discussions, on a sample of 1851 telephone interviews with adults, with the exception of the occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2021). Moreover, the study also included 24 focus groups held in 12 locations (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2021). According to the survey, positive attitudes towards Russians at that time were based on old professional ties in the past, neutral attitudes were based on respondents' acceptance that people simply differ from region to region, while the negative attitudes were based on the association between the decisions of the political leadership and the actual citizens of Russia (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2021, Center for Insights in Survey Research, February 2021).

Polls after February 2022

In May 2022, after multiple international events have taken place, in which the Russian Federation has been the protagonist of international aggression in the Black Sea region, according to a survey conducted by the Institute of Polling and Marketing of the U.S. NGO International Republic Institute – Center for Insights in Survey Research, on a sample of 1486 respondents in Georgia, over 18 years of age, with a margin of error of approximately 2.5 percent, 54% of respondents indicated that the European Union represents the most important political partner for Georgia, followed by the United States of America with 53% (Institute of Polling and Marketing, International Republic Institute – Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2022). At the other end of the scale, only 4% of respondents said that the Russian Federation is the most important political partner for Georgia, with only Iran ranking lower in this respect with 1% (Institute of Polling and

Marketing, International Republic Institute – Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2022). Moreover, according to the same survey, 90 percent of the respondents believed that the Russian Federation is the biggest political threat to Georgia (Institute of Polling and Marketing, International Republic Institute – Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2022).

Regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this event has increased Georgians' concerns about the image of Moscow as an aggressor, according to a two-stage survey conducted in Tbilisi, Batumi, Telavi, Zugdidi, Akhalkalaki, and Marneuli in February and March 2022, by Caucasus Research Resource Centers Georgia for NDI (Caucasus Research Resource Centers Georgia for NDI, 2022). The sample used was of 2036 respondents in February, with an average margin of error of 1.8%, and of 2024 in March, with an average margin of error of 1.6% (Caucasus Research Resource Centers Georgia for NDI, 2022). Specifically, the two stages of the survey were conducted at two key moments: just before Russia's invasion of the entire Ukraine and right after it began (Caucasus Research Resource Centers Georgia for NDI, 2022).

According to the results obtained, to the question "Which countries and unions should Georgia have the closest political/economic cooperation with?", in February 2022, 29% of respondents answered "with the European Union", and in March 2022, this percentage increased to 42%; on the other hand, regarding the percentage of respondents who answered "Russia" to the above question, in February 2022, their percentage was 24%, and in March 2022, the percentage decreased to 13% (Caucasus Research Resource Centers Georgia for NDI, 2022). All these changes in the Georgian population's opinion about Russia as the aggressor – in less than a month's time – show that past traumas from the 2008 war have been exacerbated and "revived" with the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as fear of the Russian Federation as a threat to its neighbours persists in Georgians' *social memory*.

As for surveys of the Ukrainian population on their attitude towards Russia, according to Eurobarometer results of June 15, 2023 (these surveys were conducted between April 28 and May 3, 2023), 34.6% of Ukrainians believe that the Russian population is responsible for the war actions of the political class in Moscow by collectively supporting the decisions of the Russian leadership (Eurobarometer, 2023). Therefore, 84% of Ukrainians hold a negative attitude toward Russian citizens, according to the aforementioned study (Eurobarometer, 2023).

As for the public perception of the Georgian population regarding the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, according to a Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia survey conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers, a research institute financed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, from April 16, 2024 to May 13, 2024 on a sample of 1509 respondents, adults only (over 18 years old) in Georgia, excluding populations living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, (survey mode: Computer-assisted personal interview – CAPI), the respondents mainly indicated that the Russian Federation is the most responsible entity on the current war in Ukraine – 35% of them (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2024). Moreover, 25% of the respondents indicated Vladimir Putin personally as the main responsible of the war, 1% indicated the Russian people, while on the other hand, 8% indicated Volodymyr Zelenskiy personally, other 7% indicated the United States of America, 5% considered the Government of Republic of Ukraine, 1% blamed the Ukrainian people, 1% indicated the EU, another 1% indicated NATO (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2024). The rest of the 2% of the

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respondents to this question indicated other entities, while 17% did not know and 1% refused to answer (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2024).

According to the aforementioned study, at the question "Which country is the main enemy of Georgia?", 69% of the respondents answered „Russia”, while only 4% answered „USA”, 2% answered „Turkey”, 1% „Armenia”, 3% said „Other”, 16% did not know and 2% refused to answer (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2024).

To compare the results of the aforementioned question with the the ones obtained in a barometer (survey mode: Computer-assisted personal interview) conducted by the same institute from October 9, 2019 to November 4, 2019 (prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine), on a sample of 2317 respondents, adults only (over 18 years old) in Georgia, excluding populations living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2024), at that time only 49% of the respondents indicated „Russia” as the main enemy of the country (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2019). 4% of the respondents of the aforementioned study indicated „Turkey”, 2% indicated USA, 2% answered „Armenia”, 1% answered „Everybody”, 2% said „Other”, 8% answered „No one”, 26% did not know and 5% refused to answer (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2019).

The difference from the 2019 result to the one obtained in 2024 at the same question – from 49% to 69% represents an indicator of the fact that the social perception of the Georgian population towards Russia was negatively influenced by its actions in this period of time. Most probably, these actions are a result of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, this producing the fear that such scenario could apply to any other country located within Moscow’s sphere of geographical and geopolitical interest. Besides this, among Georgian people, there is also the collective social trauma from the 2008 war, added on the fear based on the fact that Russia is still capable, in 2024, of invading its neighbors using most of its armed forces.

Conclusions

As intended, the present report brought together results of public opinion polls conducted in Georgia, Ukraine, and also internationally, for the purpose of outlining the way attitudes towards Russia have changed over the years, in relation to the conflicts that emerged in 2008, 2014 and 2022. The reason of this choice consisted on the fact that Both Georgia and Ukraine are two vulnerable states that have suffered attacks from a common aggressor, namely the Russian Federation (Puddington, 2017).

Moreover, one of them falls into the pattern of "frozen" conflicts (Georgia), with the possibility that the second one could turn that way after ceasing fire (one indicator in this sense is the current status of the Crimean peninsula, which is quite uncertain) (Grant, 2017, p. 390). Additionally, in both cases there has been involvement of Western institutions, which advocate for peace, that (in our opinion) leads to an appetite of the population of the aggressed states for increased cooperation with the West. Therefore, both conflicts contain psychosocial relations, such as negative representations of the enemy, living in a violent social context, marked by hostile and traumatising attitudes, leading to a high degree of victimisation, collective emotions and stereotypes rooted in the social memory.

In our point of view, it is important to note what was the opinion of Ukrainians on the development of their country in relation to Russia both before 2022 (the year of invasion) and after, in order to compare these results with the opinion of Georgians in the same time units on similar issues.

According to the results of this research paper, the former's negative view of Russia has sharpened considerably in the wake of the February 2022 invasion, while Georgians' negative public perception of Russia has increased at a lower pace, as the 2022 war did not directly target them. However, the analysed studies have shown that the social perception of the Georgian population towards Russia was, in some measure, negatively influenced by Moscow's actions in this period of time. Most probably, these actions are a result of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, this producing the fear that such scenario could apply to any other country located within Moscow's sphere of geographical and geopolitical interest. Besides this, among Georgian people, there is also the collective social trauma from the 2008 war, added on the fear based on the fact that Russia is still capable, in 2024, of invading its neighbours using most of its armed forces.

All these changes in the Georgian population's opinion about Russia as the aggressor – in less than a month's time – show that past traumas from the 2008 war have been exacerbated and "revived" with the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as fear of the Russian Federation as a threat to its neighbours persists in Georgians' *social memory*.

Additionally, in terms of Ukrainians' perception of the evolution of the war with Russia, the data reveal that in the spring of 2024, Ukrainians' outlook on the evolution of this military conflict remained optimistic

Moreover, Russia's leadership, led by President Vladimir Putin, suffers from an increasingly negative social perception at international level, being in contrast to the perception of the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who benefits of a much more favourable one. However, an important matter is how the global security paradigm will change following the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. Such aspect remains to be seen in the near future.

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