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How Far is Too Far? Public Opinion on Conflict Resolution in Georgia

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Abstract

This article looks at how public opinion regarding the peace processes between Georgia and its two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have changed over the past few decades. Research has shown that Georgian citizens overwhelmingly oppose the idea of these breakaway regions obtaining sovereignty or becoming a part of neighboring Russia, in any form. Still, decades of frozen conflict have also caused many to concede that there is a need for new approaches to how Georgia can co-exist with its breakaway regions into the future. If certain political conditions are met, Georgians seem supportive of a quasi-federal solutions, or are at least open to compromise.

Introduction

Starting in 1989 as sporadic armed clashes (Minorities at Risk Project, 2004a, 2004b) between Georgians and Abkhaz/South Ossetian irregulars, Georgia's ethnic conflicts turned into full scale military conflicts at the beginning of the 1990s. Violence would erupt periodically in the following decades, as happened, for instance, in the case of the Small War of 1998 in the Gali region (Анчабадзе, 2010), in Summer 2004 in South Ossetia, and most notably in August 2008. Since then, all sides have maintained a fragile peace. Yet, peace is often compromised due to ambiguous borders (Toal and Merabishvili, 2019) and occasional violent incidents (OC-Media, 2018).

In search of a way out, over the past three decades dozens of initiatives have been brought to the table (ცინისთავი-ხუციშვილი, 2014). The details of these proposals varied greatly and touched upon the humanitarian, political, and demographic aspects of the conflicts, although none has led to a break in the stalemate. Since the late 2000s, as talks on the future status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have become virtually impossible (De Waal, 2018), the process has been effectively frozen.

As political uncertainty on Georgia's conflict regions is virtually certain, it is important to explore how people perceive the paths out of the deadlock. To date, relatively little is known about Georgians' attitudes towards conflict resolution. This text tries to fill this void by evaluating how public opinion on Georgia's conflicts has changed over the last two decades. I will first analyze the changes in public opinion regarding the models of conflict resolution; I will then delve deeper into the results of the 2019 Caucasus Barometer results and analyze the factors predicting Georgians' readiness for a compromise.

Models of Conflict Resolution

How do Georgians feel about secessionist conflict in their country? Existing research reveals that, for many Georgians, territorial integrity is often inextricably linked with the resolution of conflict. In local public opinion polls, for exam-

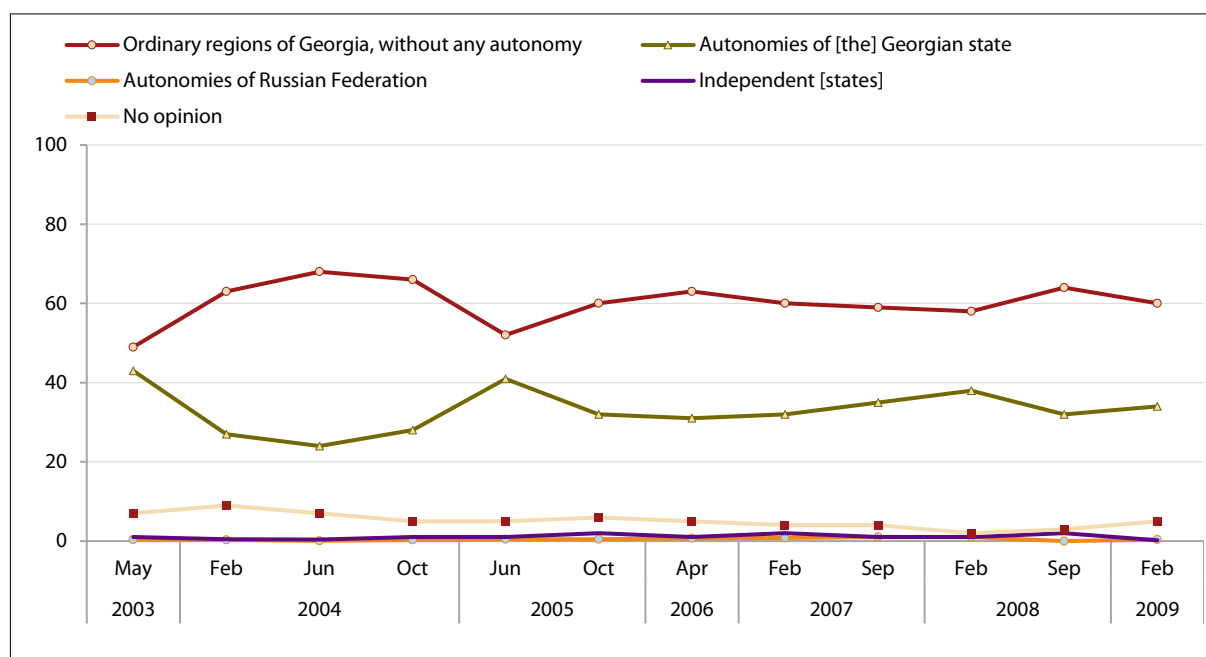
ple, the issue of territorial integrity has been consistently ranked among the most salient problems faced by Georgia (Thornton and Turmanidze, 2019). Along similar lines, it is the only non-economic issue highlighted as a top concern for Georgians in the Caucasus Resource Research Centre / National Democratic Institute's (CRRC/NDI) public opinion research conducted between 2009–2019.

While the issue of territorial integrity remains a top concern for Georgian citizens, the research also shows that over the years the salience of the issue has been declining. In 2009, for example, when CRRC and NDI first started measuring the Georgian public opinion, about 49% picked territorial integrity as the top national issue, next to employment. A decade after, in 2019, only 29% picked territorial integrity as an important problem, the issue having been overtaken in importance by rising prices, inflation, and poverty.

Despite this decline, territorial integrity continues to have salience for Georgians. More therefore needs to be known about exactly how Georgians perceive things like conflict, the country's relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the potential ways out of conflict—existing data for which remains relatively scant and fragmented.

One useful source for evaluating how Georgian attitudes towards conflict resolution have changed over time are nationwide polls conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI). Since this poll's launch in May 2003, at least twelve annual waves of IRI surveys have asked Georgians what they perceive to be a solution to the conflict— independence, incorporation, or autonomy (International Republican Institute, 2009). The result has been a valuable source of data on the topic.

Figure 1: Proportion of Georgians Preferring Various Models of Conflict Resolution, 2003–2009
Abkhazia and South Ossetia Should Be... (%)



	2003	2004				2005		2006	2007			2008		2009
	May	Feb.	Jun.	Oct.	Jun.	Oct.	Apr.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.		
Ordinary regions of Georgia, without any autonomy	49	63	68	66	52	60	63	60	59	58	64	60		
Autonomies of [the] Georgian state	43	27	24	28	41	32	31	32	35	38	32	34		
Autonomies of Russian Federation	0.4	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.8	1	1	0	0.4		
Independent [states]	1	0.5	0.4	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	0.2		
No opinion	7	9	7	5	5	6	5	4	4	2	3	5		

Source: IRI/Baltic Surveys, 2003–2009

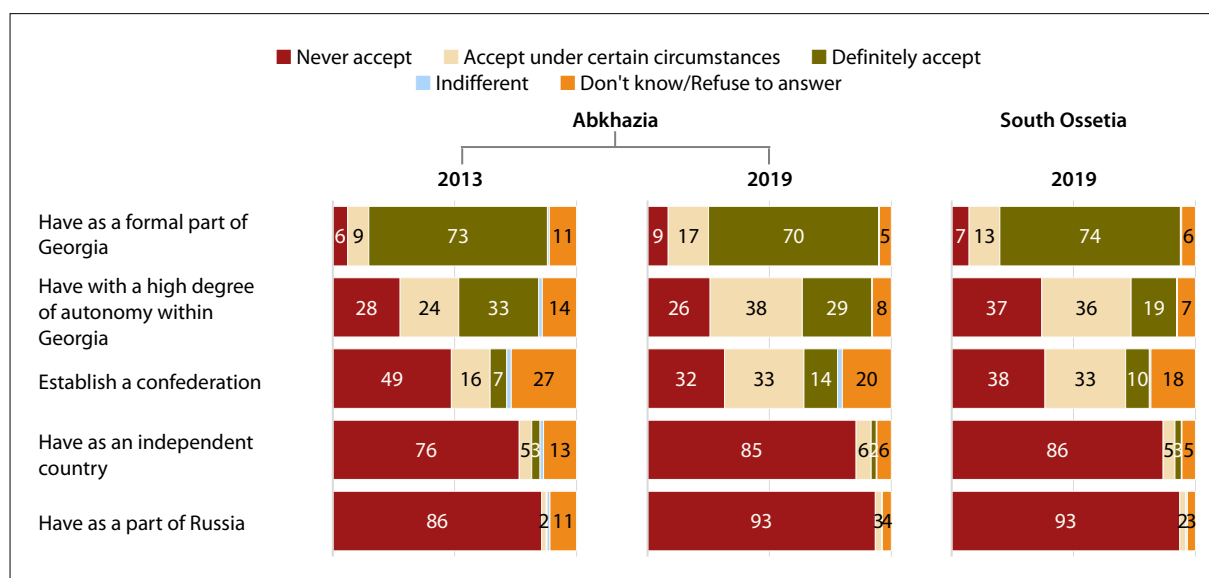
Specifically, between 2003 and 2009, IRI surveys probed Georgian attitudes towards the unresolved political status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Respondents had the option to choose between whether Abkhazia and South Ossetia should remain: non-autonomous regions of Georgia, autonomous entities inside Georgia, autonomies of the Russian Federation, or to become their own independent states.

At the beginning of the survey period in May 2003, about 49% of Georgians preferred there being no special status for the breakaway regions. By February 2009, however, the portion of those preferring no special status had increased to 60%, showing an increase in Georgian desires to see the country reunified. Over this six-year polling period, the share of respondents desiring direct incorporation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgia without any autonomy grew by ten percentage points. During this same period, support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia becoming autonomous entities inside Georgia declined by nine percentage points. In the first wave of the IRI survey from 2003, 43% of respondents supported autonomous status for the breakaway regions, while only 34% demonstrated this support in 2009.

Interestingly, support for autonomous status decreased right after the 2003 Rose Revolution. Starting from 2004, support for the unitary solution to Georgia's conflicts increased rapidly and peaked at 68% in June 2004. The share of those who supported the idea of granting autonomy to Abkhazia and South Ossetia declined to 24%.

As of 2009, IRI ceased to survey Georgian citizens regarding secessionist conflict and the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The CRRC's Caucasus Barometer surveys from 2013 to the present thus remain the only publicly available source of information on Georgian public opinion regarding the issue. While the results of the Caucasus Barometer are not directly comparable to those of IRI, they still give a glimpse into the evolution of conflict-related public opinion in Georgia.

Figure 2: Proportion of Georgians Preferring Various Models of Conflict Resolution in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, 2013–2019



Source: CRRC Caucasus Barometer, 2013–2019

The 2013 and 2019 Caucasus Barometer surveys asked respondents the extent to which they supported particular options for conflict resolution in Georgia. In a series of questions, respondents were probed whether they: definitely favored, would accept under certain circumstances, or would never accept conflict regions either: being a part of a unitary state with no special rights; having a high degree of autonomy; being part of a confederate state; having them as independent countries; or as a part of Russian Federation. In the 2013 installment of Caucasus Barometer, only questions about Abkhazia were included in the survey, while in the 2019 wave respondents were asked about both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Overall, the Barometer results show that Georgians are more inclined to support solutions which preserve the country's territorial integrity, in a framework similar to Georgia's current de-facto situation. In the 2019 Barometer results, 86% of Georgians would either definitely accept or accept under certain circumstances Abkhazia being a part of Georgia, with the region being granted no special status. A similar share of the Georgian population supported the same status for South Ossetia.

Fewer people supported an option for a confederate union between Georgia and its breakaway regions. In 2019, about 47% of respondents would either definitely favor or would accept in certain circumstances Abkhazia and Geor-

gia entering into a confederation. This is about fourteen percentage points more than the share of those who oppose the confederate option. By contrast, 43% of Georgians would support their country being a part of a confederation with South Ossetia to a certain extent, while 38% would oppose such an arrangement.

What this research reveals is that while Georgians appear to be open to the idea of an union state of some sort, they overwhelmingly oppose the country's breakaway regions becoming fully independent or being incorporated into the Russian Federation. Only 8% of respondents would accept the independence of these regions either unchallenged or under certain circumstances. A union between the breakaway regions and Russia was acceptable to only 3% of respondents.

Still, notable shifts are emerging with regard to the acceptance of quasi-federated solutions to the conflict in Abkhazia. Georgians are increasingly accepting of Abkhazia enjoying a high degree of autonomy inside Georgia. While in 2013 57% of respondents would have accepted Abkhazia being an autonomy or a part of a confederate state, support for such an arrangement had increased by ten percentage points by 2019.

When compared to the earlier IRI data, large and surprising changes occurred in opinions regarding the establishment of a confederacy between Georgia and Abkhazia. In IRI's 2013 data, only 23 percent of respondents favored the idea of Georgia and Abkhazia entering into a confederacy agreement. Six years later, however, the Caucasus Barometer data shows double this figure; almost half (46%) of the respondents were open to considering this solution.

Given the duration of frozen conflict, Georgian public opinion on models for internal conflict resolution have shifted in ways that one might have perhaps expected. While the idea of the breakaway regions becoming independent is still unpopular, support for quasi-federal models is on the rise. In the next section, I explore specific factors which predict the support of a particular option or model of conflict resolution.

Who Is Ready for a Compromise?

How do the representatives of different groups of Georgian society perceive various models of conflict resolution? In the following section I present two sets of analysis. First, I explore how various socio-demographic and geographic characteristics predict support for specific political arrangements between Georgia and its breakaway regions. The second analysis explores cumulative indicators measuring degrees of openness to conflict resolution.

The first set of models assess whether respondents would accept Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, part of a confederate state with Georgia, as territories enjoying a higher degree of autonomy within Georgia, or as directly incorporated into Georgia with no specific rights. Binary dependent variables are coded into ones if respondents perceive each of the given statements as "acceptable" or "acceptable under certain circumstances". Answer options "Unacceptable," "Indifferent," "Don't know," and refusals are coded into zeros. Regression models include standard demographic variables such as respondents' gender, age, index for material wealth, education, ethnic identity, and settlement type as predictors. In order to control for the effects of proximity of the conflict regions to the respondent, regression equations also include variables measuring distances of sampling points from Abkhazian and South Ossetian Administrative Boundary Lines.

Overall, Tbilisians are more likely to be open to any of the models of conflict resolution than people residing in other urban and rural settlements. Tbilisi residents have about a 10% chance of accepting Abkhazia's independence, while probabilities for urban and rural respondents are close to zero. Tbilisians have about a 50% chance of supporting confederation between Georgia and Abkhazia in comparison with other urban (30%) and rural (26%) residents. The idea of a confederacy between Georgia and South Ossetia is more acceptable to Tbilisians (37% chance) than to respondents coming from other urban (20% chance) and rural (15% chance) areas of Georgia. Similar patterns emerge when modeling support of autonomy and direct incorporation of breakaway regions into Georgia.

Ethnic minorities of Georgia are more likely to accept any model of conflict resolution than ethnic Georgians. They have about 10% probability of accepting the independence of Abkhazia. Minorities are more likely to accept Abkhazia and South Ossetia (65% chance each) as parts of a confederate state with Georgia.

Length of education, that is, years spent at school is positively associated with the acceptance of a confederation model. Georgians with ten years of schooling have about 10% less chance of supporting a confederation between Georgia and Abkhazia or South Ossetia than those with twenty years of schooling.

Political partisanship does not divide Georgians much when it comes to the acceptance of various models of conflict resolution. Those who say that they do not know which party they feel most affiliated to or refuse to answer are less likely to accept any model of conflict resolution. Supporters of the United National Movement have about a 60% chance of accepting confederacy between Abkhazia and Georgia; supporters of conservative opposition parties are more likely than others (78%) to accept the autonomy of Abkhazia. Supporters of other parties have the highest probability (62%) of accepting the autonomy of South Ossetia.

The distance of a community from Administrative Boundary Lines has a perhaps rather unexpected effect compared to what one might expect in an area heavily affected by the conflict. Respondents residing in close vicinity to Abkhazia are more likely to support its independence than the residents of communities deeper in the Georgian heartland. Distance from the Administrative Boundary Line with South Ossetia is not a significant predictor of support of any presented conflict resolution models.

The second strand of analysis explores which groups are the most open to various degrees of concessions in order to resolve the problems. Dependent variables in this analysis represent scales constructed in the following manner: respondents who accept the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are given scores of four, those who would accept confederacy three, those who would only agree to regional autonomy two, and those who would only accept breakaway regions being directly incorporated into Georgia are given a score of one.

Overall, results are rather similar to previous analyses. Tbilisi residents are more open to compromise than people outside the capital city both with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Distance from the conflict regions have opposite effects. Respondents living close to Abkhazia are more likely to be open for concessions in case of both conflicts than those living in the proximity of South Ossetia. Younger Georgians are also more likely to be open to the compromise, although effects are significant in the case of a conflict in South Ossetia.

To summarize, many Georgians have become more open to the models of quasi-federalism or granting a certain level of sovereignty to the country's breakaway regions. Tbilisi residents are more open to conflict resolution and to higher concessions to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While we cannot directly infer how Georgia's internally-displaced population feels about the models, proxy measures such as distance from the conflict regions show certain context-dependency. Proximity to Abkhazia predicts more readiness to compromise, while closeness to South Ossetia has the opposite effect.

So What: Key Takeaways

In short, Georgian public opinion towards the country's conflict regions has shifted. While territorial integrity has lost some of its salience as an important national issue, Georgians increasingly consider alternative methods of conflict resolution. Indeed, there are red lines: the idea of the breakaway regions becoming independent is very unpopular. However, as the analysis shows, there is a steady increase for a model which grants certain sovereignty to the breakaway regions.

Another emergent pattern is a significant divergence in opinions between Tbilisi residents and others. The former are more open to different models of conflict resolution and are generally more in favor of compromise. Residents in the close vicinity of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have conflicting opinions. While those closer to the Abkhazian Administrative Boundary Line are more likely to support compromise, respondents residing in communities in the proximity of South Ossetia feel the opposite, likely an outcome of fresh memories of violence and ongoing borderization.

The Georgian public is seemingly ready for change, but this alone does not ensure that the peace process will necessarily kick-start as desired. Analysts suggest that the current emergency of the global COVID-19 pandemic (De Waal, 2020) has created opportunities for cooperation and confidence building. However, as until recently the public opinion across Administrative Boundary Lines did not lean towards compromise (O'Loughlin et al., 2014), the chances of a breakthrough still seem rather negligible.

Methodological Note

The first part of this analysis is based on binary logistic regression models predicting support for different models of conflict resolution. Models assessing readiness for a compromise are based on ordered logistic regressions. Predicted probabilities are reported. Regression tables as well as the complete replication script are available via [Github](#).

About the Author

Dr. David Sichinava is a research director at CRRC-Georgia and works as an assistant professor of human geography at Tbilisi State University.

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The Gap Between Support for Democracy and Liberal Values in Georgia

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Abstract

While democracy has been viewed by Georgians as the most preferable form of government for the last decade, support is on the decline, and a majority no longer reports a preference for democratic governance. CRRC’s Caucasus Barometer survey also shows that more and more Georgians view the country’s democracy as having major problems. This article addresses support for democracy at the individual level, specifically whether support for democracy is associated with liberal values. Using data from the Caucasus Barometer, it examines whether liberal values predict democratic support after demographic factors are taken into account. This research finds that in the Georgian context, support for democracy is not necessarily associated with traditional liberal democratic values, such as respect for minorities or progressive attitudes towards gender equality.

Introduction

This article aims to identify what factors are related with support for democracy in Georgia. Specifically, the paper uses survey data from CRRC’s Caucasus Barometer to examine whether support for democracy is associated with support for gender equality and tolerance towards minorities that are regarded by many as the core values of liberal democracy (Lægaard, 2007).

Public opinion polls suggest support for democracy as preferred form of government is in decline in Georgia. An increasing number of Georgians view their country as “a democracy with major problems”, with CRRC’s Caucasus Barometer survey showing the percentage reporting this belief to have increased from 27% in 2011 to 48% in 2019.¹ Parallel to this growing skepticism towards the country’s democratic situation, surveys also report a decline in the proportion of the population believing that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government, falling from 65% in 2011 to 49% in 2019.²

Existing scholarly literature on declining support for democracy in Georgia has sought to identify underlying causes. Some authors have linked this trend with the failure of political and civil society elites to “to overcome the resilience of clientelistic practices within state structures “ (Broers, 2005 p. 347; Chikhladze & Aliyev, 2019). Others tie disillusionment with the existing system to dissatisfaction with neo-liberal economic policies (Jones, 2013). Both domes-

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