

Majority of Georgians see prospects for change to improve relations with Abkhaz

OCTOBER 03, 2020



Conciliation Resources commissioned questions as part of a survey conducted by the [Caucasus Research Resource Centers in April 2020](#) among the adult population of Georgia. A total of 1,351 people (roughly 46% women and 54% men, and a range of age groups) were asked about actions their government could take, and about their attitudes to dealing with the past.

Steps to improve Georgian-Abkhaz relations

When presented with a range of potential steps that could be taken, the majority (69.7%) of respondents opted for **direct dialogue with the de facto authorities in Abkhazia**. This is a highly significant finding in light of the prevalent narrative, at different levels in Georgian society, that the conflict is a problem of Russian occupation, with the Abkhaz authorities having limited or no agency due to their dependency on Moscow.

In the event that officials in Tbilisi were to start direct talks with counterparts on the Abkhaz side of the conflict, almost three quarters of the Georgian public would see this as positive, if we extrapolate from these survey results to the whole population.

The second most popular step (48.4%) was to **identify common interests and ways to resolve them together, followed by support for development of a range of areas within Abkhazia**: healthcare (45.1%), education (40.3%) and the economy and trade (32.7%).

In an environment where progress has been slow and many Georgian government officials are cautious, this degree of public support would seem to indicate more room for manoeuvre. In spite of fears that enabling development or systemic reform in Abkhazia may amount to ‘creeping recognition’, these survey findings suggest that Georgians are willing to explore the possibility for bolder engagement across the conflict divide.

One in five Georgians, according to this survey, were even supportive of the idea of **developing state institutions in Abkhazia** as a means to improving the Georgian-Abkhaz relationship. This was the least popular option of those listed (21.7%), coming just below the **fostering greater contact between Abkhaz society and the international community and its institutions** (23.9%).

However, in the context of the troubled Georgian-Abkhaz relationship, the fact that options such as these were considered by this many of those interviewed is telling – showing scope for public discussion of a range of options, and encouragement for greater initiative by the Georgian government to improve relations.

Regional and gender variations

There were a number of differences based on gender, location and education. Women, people with higher education, residents of regional towns and internally displaced people were most inclined towards change.

A slightly higher percentage of women (71.4%) than men (70.5%) responded positively to the question of whether the Georgian government could take more steps to improve relations. Only 8.8% of women (as opposed to 14.4% of men) were of the opinion that the government could not take steps in that direction. Roughly the same percentage of age groups responded positively, with a correlation between higher levels of education and positive opinion that more can be done.

Interestingly, there was a degree of regional variation, with Tbilisi, the capital, proving more sceptical – 69.6% responded positively in Tbilisi, and 13.1% negatively, whereas in regional towns, 75.7% gave positive responses and only 8.6% felt more steps could not be taken. Respondents living in rural areas were more in line with Tbilisi residents, with 68.5% in favour, and 12.1% against.

Significantly, respondents from the internally displaced community – people who have been the most personally impacted by the conflict and who have been living in exile for almost three decades – were the most positive about the potential to take steps to improve relations. 78.2% of this group were in favour of the Georgian government taking action, with only 9.2% against.

Public support for dealing with the past?

The survey also tested how ready the Georgian public is to reflect on the recent violent past. This is an issue that often elicits strong reactions in discussions, with quite a degree of scepticism on the one hand, and strong arguments in favour on the other.

The findings seem to support this, with no clear majority. However, almost a third (31.1%) of those questioned responded positively to the question **Is it important for Georgian society to re-assess, or evaluate the Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict of the 1990s?** Very slightly more (32.3%) responded negatively, with the largest number (36.1%) undecided.

Women, urban residents and younger generation Georgians stood out for being more in favour of dealing with the past, with internally displaced

Georgians more supportive than any other group (38.0%).

Given the complexity of the issue, and the painful emotions associated with it, the fact that almost a third were in favour of re-assessing the early 1990s gives scope to engage more in public discussion. The large number of undecided might indicate confusion as to what is meant by reassessing or evaluating the armed conflict, or what implications this may have.

Of a range of possible initiatives to deal with the past, the most popular was **enabling discussions about the Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict among different social groups of Georgian society (47.2%)**, followed closely by **direct dialogue about the conflict in the 1990s with current residents of Abkhazia (45.3%)**. Over one third of respondents were in favour of **having an independent international expert assessment of the conflict**, and of **making eye-witness accounts by people involved in the armed conflict widely accessible to the public**. Just over one quarter agreed with **providing access to educational materials that reflect the existing differences in perspectives** on either side of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

These questions have helped to take the temperature of Georgian society. They have tested some of the assumptions we were starting to form from a variety of discussions with people, including consultations on either side of the conflict divide, in bilateral Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue, and through dealing with the past initiatives such as the *Corridors of Conflict exhibition*, held in Tbilisi in 2019.

While there are limits to what we can reliably conclude from such a survey, the results give grounds for optimism. Almost a third of respondents agree it

is important to reassess the armed conflict of the 1990s, and a clear majority supports dialogue, and taking steps to improve Georgian-Abkhaz relations. This provides hope that with continued persistence, a peaceful transformation of this conflict is possible.

Survey methodology

The COVID-19 pandemic meant the survey was conducted over the telephone, from 2-7 April 2020. 1,351 people took part: 46.2% women, 53.8% men. Respondents in different age ranges were roughly equivalent: 18-34 year olds (31.4%); 34-54 year olds (35.9%); over 55 year olds (32.7%).

Questions were in the Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani languages, and the survey excluded people living in Abkhazia or South Ossetia. 90.7% of respondents were ethnic Georgians, 3.5% Armenians and 4.1% Azerbaijanis. The mean statistical error was no more than 2.67%, and results were analysed according to the following categories: residents in the capital (Tbilisi), regional towns and villages.

Demographic and socio-economic indicators were also taken into account: sex, age, level of education, ethnic background, occupation, personal experience of the conflict and income.

Thank you to Marina Elbakidze, Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, for analysing the dataset provided by Caucasus Research Resource Centers.

The findings in this article reflect the survey questions put to and perspectives of respondents from diverse groups in Georgian society concerning Abkhazia. As such, the term 'de facto' as it relates to institutions and authorities in Abkhazia is used throughout. By reflecting the survey language in this piece, Conciliation Resources in no way implies a position on status.

<https://outline.com/MGC6SW>

COPY

 Annotations · [Report a problem](#)

Outline is a free service for reading and annotating news articles. We remove the clutter so you can analyze and comment on the content. In today's climate of widespread misinformation, Outline empowers readers to verify the facts.

[HOME](#) · [TERMS](#) · [PRIVACY](#) · [DMCA](#) · [CONTACT](#)