

TUESDAY, AUGUST 11, 2009

Russian Public Opinion on the August 2008 Conflict -- A Year Later

On August 4, the Levada Center, an independent Moscow-based public opinion polling organization, released the [results of its survey](#) of Russians' attitudes toward last year's conflict with Georgia. There are few surprises: the beliefs of most Russians continue to align with Moscow's official version. The great majority of respondents see either Georgian or Western (especially US) provocation as the cause for the war, and Russia's role as essentially reactive, aimed at keeping peace and stability in its near abroad.

However, compared with the results from the Levada Center's September 2008 survey (you can read that, and our analysis, [here](#)), there has been some shift in attitudes. Last year, 40% of Russians thought that their country's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent would benefit Russia. Now, a year later, with Russia and Nicaragua still alone in their recognition of the breakaway regions, 29% of Russians think this has benefited Russia (but still only 15% think this action was actually harmful for the country).

Respondents also now appear to be slightly more uncertain about both the US's role in the Caucasus and Russia's involvement in the conflict. Last fall, 49% of respondents said that the main reason for the war was that US leadership was trying to strengthen its influence in the Caucasus. Now only 34% agree with that, and 17% found the question difficult to answer. And in 2008, 70% of respondents gave the Russian leadership their full support, saying that their leaders did everything possible to avoid an escalation of the conflict and bloodshed; that figure dropped to 57% in 2009. At the same time, the percentage of respondents outrightly critical of Russia's actions remains in the single digits across the board.

Finally, respondents continue to be split about what should become of the breakaway republics. Thirty-five percent think Abkhazia and South Ossetia should join the Russian Federation, while 41% and 40%, respectively, believe they should be independent states. (Interestingly, respondents seem to think of the two republics monolithically, despite their quite different histories and circumstances.) Only 17% of respondents think the two territories should join the RF immediately -- many Russians seem less than eager for Russia to officially expand into an already unstable region.

The full results (in Russian) can be found [here](#); we've also translated them into English below for those who want to take a closer look.

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04.08.2009 On the anniversary of the military conflict in the Caucasus

Between July 17 and 20, the Yuri Levada Analytical Center (Levada Center) carried out a representative survey of 1600 Russian citizens in 128 locations across 46 regions of the country. The distribution of answers to the questions of this study is given as the percent of the total number of respondents, along with data from prior surveys. The statistical error is less than or equal to 3.4%

Are you interested in what is happening now in South Ossetia?

Yes, considerably	11
Yes, somewhat	39
Not really	28
Not at all	16
Difficult to answer	6

In your opinion, should Abkhazia be part of Georgia, part of Russia, or be an independent state?

	2004	2006	2007	2009
Part of Georgia	14	13	7	6
Part of Russia	32	41	34	35
An independent state	29	27	32	41
Difficult to answer	25	19	27	18

In your opinion, should South Ossetia be part of Georgia, be part of Russia, or be an independent state?

	2004	2006	2007	2009
Part of Georgia	12	12	9	6
Part of Russia	34	40	34	35
An independent state	30	26	32	40
Difficult to answer	24	22	25	19

In your opinion, did (in 2008: “will”) Russia’s recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia benefit Russia, harm Russia, or neither benefit nor harm Russia?

	2008	2009
Benefit	40	29
Harm	15	15
Neither benefit nor harm	28	40
Difficult to answer	17	16

In your opinion, what was the main reason for the conflict in South Ossetia in August of last year? (answers are ordered)

	2008	2009
The Georgian leadership had discriminatory policies toward the Ossetian and Abkhaz populations	32	35
The leadership of the US was trying to strengthen its influence in the Caucasus and create tension between Georgia and Russia.	49	34
The leadership of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were trying to keep in power, constantly provoking a tense situation	5	9
The Russian leadership tried to use a policy of “divide and rule” to preserve its influence in the Caucasus	5	5
Difficult to answer	9	17

Which of the following opinions about the reason for the actions of the Russian leadership with regards to the conflict do you most agree with? (answers are ordered)

	2008	2009
The Russian leadership did everything possible to not allow an escalation of the conflict or bloodshed	70	57
The Russian leadership gave into the provocation from Georgia and let itself be drawn into this conflict, which will have negative consequences for Russia internationally	16	21
The Russian leadership gradually incited the Georgian-Ossetian conflict for the sake of attaining its own geopolitical interests	4	5
Difficult to answer	10	17

What is your opinion of the Russian military intervention in the South Ossetian conflict in August 2008?

It is proof of the failure of Russian diplomacy and the inability of the Russian leadership to solve problems between countries by means of peaceful negotiations	13
It was the only possible way out of the situation that had taken shape	67
Difficult to answer	20

In your opinion, why did the countries of the West support Georgia in the South Ossetian conflict? (answers are ordered)

	2008	2009
Because the West's leadership is trying to weaken Russia and "force it out" of the Caucasus	66	62
Since the shelling of the military installations by the Russian forces on Georgian territory caused deaths among the civilian population	8	10
Because, in bringing its forces into Georgian territory, it violated the sovereignty of that country	7	6
Because the actions of Russia resulted in the conflict spreading to other territories, particularly Abkhazia	5	5
Difficult to answer	14	17

In your opinion, is the situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia now becoming more strained, does it remain tense, or is tension decreasing and life becoming more peaceful?

	2008	2009
The situation is becoming more strained	6	5
The situation remains tense	57	48
The tension is decreasing and life is becoming more peaceful	30	31
Difficult to answer	7	16

In your opinion, should Russia continue to keep its forces in South Ossetia or will it remove its forces from there?

	2008	2009
Keep its forces in South Ossetia	56	54
Remove its forces from South Ossetia	27	24
Difficult to answer	17	22

What do you think regarding the inclusion of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the Russian Federation?

	2008	2009
This should be done as soon as possible	20	17
This should most probably be done, but later, once emotions have cooled	26	24
Whether this should be done or not should be thought over	25	28
It is not worth doing this	12	17
Difficult to answer	17	14