

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2009

## The South Ossetia Crisis: a War of Ideologies

Many scholars have commented on the influence of the Russia-Georgian war on foreign policy strategies in the Caucasus. In contrast, little attention has been given to its effect on public perception in the countries of the Caucasus.

It is therefore noteworthy that public opinion plays a key role in a recent article by Anar Valiyev, entitled “Victim of a ‘War of Ideologies’ - Azerbaijan after the Russia–Georgia War”. Because of the war, Valiyev argues, Azerbaijanis have become less supportive of Western-style “unmanaged” democracy, preferring instead a more controlled and Moscow-backed “sovereign democracy”.

Interestingly, he asserts that the Russia-Georgia war “significantly changed Azerbaijanis’ perceptions of the democratic West and negatively impacted their perceptions of the United States and the European Union. Georgia’s defeat and the subsequent political turmoil demonstrated the viability and stability of the sovereign democracy and made the Russian model of governance more attractive to the people of Azerbaijan.”

In order to illustrate this premise, Valiyev places a great emphasis on public opinion polls, including CRRC’s Data Initiative. He emphasises the value of these statistics, noting that they are almost the only method enabling to track the political development and the perceptions of the Azerbaijani society before and after the South Ossetia crisis.

For one, surveys held by CRRC show an interesting change in Azerbaijani public support for NATO membership. Whereas about 60 percent of the population supported NATO membership in 2006 and 2007, only 48 percent of the respondents supported the military block in November 2008. At the same time, the share of the population that was neutral on the question rose significantly. To Valiyev, this increasing undecidedness about joining NATO is a direct result of the West’s failure to effectively engage with Russia during the South Ossetia war.

Azerbaijani public support for EU membership was characterised by a somewhat similar development. The year 2008 saw a sharp increase in the percentage of people taking a neutral stance on potential EU membership for Azerbaijan (from 37 to 48 percent), while there was a decline in both the percentage of people supporting and the percentage of people not supporting EU membership. This shift indicates, Valiyev concludes, an increasing confusion among the Azeri public about the role of the EU in the Caucasus.

Other CRRC statistics used by Valiyev demonstrate how public trust in the Azeri armed forces dropped from 81 to 68 percent between 2007 and 2008, and how President Aliyev’s popularity rose to a record 82 percent after the war. Some additional survey material refers to popular support for enhancing economic relations with Western countries and Russia.

There is no conclusive answer as to whether the developments in public perception are a direct result of the Russia-Georgia war. However, Valiyev’s article makes for an engaging read, and highlights the value of survey data to expose the ideological dimension of conflict.

We recommend you to read the article at: <http://heldref-publications.metapress.com/app/home/contribution.asp?referrer=parent&backto=issue,4,4;journal,1,23;linkingpublicationresults,1:119920,1>

Alternatively, it can be found in *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* (Issue: Volume 17, Number 3 - Summer 2009).