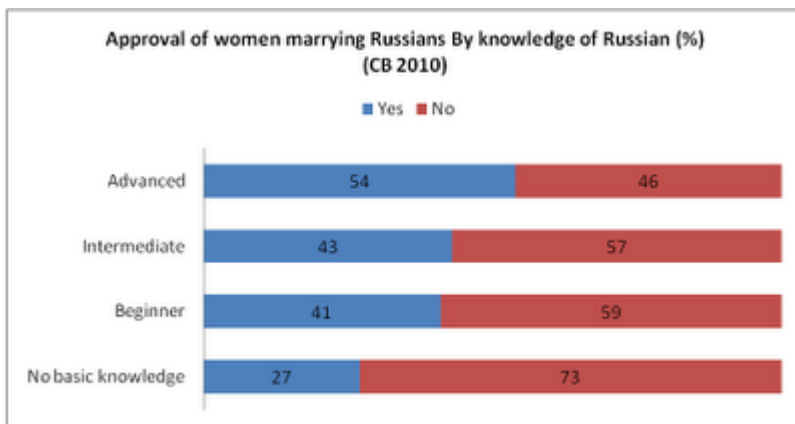


Georgia and Russia: Can positive relations between the populations overcome the political turmoil?

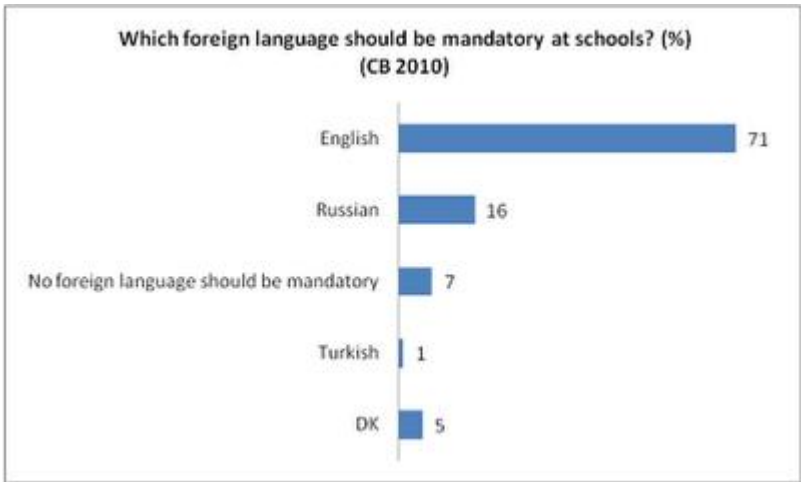
On the third anniversary of the 2008 August war the Russian Foreign Minister said that Russia will not renew ties with Georgia as long as the Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili is in power. Relations between the Georgian and Russian governments have been at a standstill since the conflict in 2008. Nevertheless, the attitudes of Georgians towards Russians remain positive.

While relations between the Georgian and Russian governments can be described as troublesome, Georgians remain positive towards the Russian people. According to the Caucasus Barometer 2010, 73% of Georgians approve of doing business with Russians, compared with 79% who approve of doing business with Ukrainians (the highest rated result for this question). Moreover, 42% of Georgians approve of Georgian women marrying Russians which was the second highest rated result for this question after Ukrainians (45%). In addition, data from the Caucasus Barometer suggests that people who have a better knowledge of Russian are more likely to approve of Georgian women marrying Russians. The data also shows that 90% of Georgians think they have at least a beginner's level knowledge of Russian, while 32% think they have at least a beginner's level knowledge of English.



Socio-cultural characteristics such as a sizeable Georgian diaspora in Russia and Orthodox religion may also play a role in the positive perception of Russians by Georgians. The Georgian Ministry of the Diaspora estimates that the number of Georgians residing in Russia varies between 800,000-900,000 people. Also, the strong role of religion in Georgian society might help to explain positive attitudes towards Russians. Relations between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) are good. For example, the ROC recognizes the canonical authority of the GOC over the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as was confirmed by both patriarchs during their August 2011 meeting in Kiev to commemorate St. Vladimir Equal-to-the-Apostles the Baptizer of Russia.

Nevertheless, positive attitudes towards the Russian people do not influence Georgia's predominant pro-Western orientation. According to the 2010 Caucasus Barometer, 70% of Georgians support membership in NATO and 71% think that English should be a mandatory language in schools, while only 16% think that Russian should be a mandatory language in Georgian schools. Georgian-Russian political relations are also at odds with the different approaches towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Tbilisi claims both territories as an integral part of Georgia, while Moscow has recognized their independence.



Georgians have positive attitudes towards the Russian people despite political turmoil between the Georgian and Russian governments. We do not have data on Russian attitudes towards Georgian people. However, do you think that positive attitudes between people could pave the way to a Georgian-Russian rapprochement?