

Archil Gegeshidze

## A Road to Reconciliation: Are We Ready to Rebuild Relations with South Ossetians and Abkhazians?

Two conflicts existing on the territory of Georgia — the Georgian–Abkhaz and the Georgian–Ossetian — have remained one of the country’s principal challenges to security and development for already three decades. Following the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region and the deployment of military bases in latter territory by Russia aftermath the 2008 Russia–Georgia war, the prospects for a political resolution of the conflicts became significantly more complicated. The reintegration agenda was replaced by the **task of managing the conflict(s) under conditions of a tense status quo**, while direct negotiations with the de facto regimes were practically suspended.

Over time, these circumstances have further deepened the **mutual alienation between Georgians and Abkhaz/Ossetians**, which, in its turn, hinders the emergence of opportunities for reconciliation. Russia effectively exploits this circumstance to strengthen its influence through both military and socio-economic mechanisms. However, within Abkhaz society there is a gradual growth of awareness that Russia’s “patronage” is not altruistic and that Moscow’s goal is the complete political and economic subordination of Abkhazia. Nevertheless, the fear of the return of ethnically Georgian displaced persons is strong to the extent that Abkhaz society is still unable to resist this process and compelled to remain within Russia’s geopolitical orbit, following the course of the scenario developed by Russia.

The situation in South Ossetia/the Tskhinvali region is somewhat different — no less than half of the population would agree to Russia’s annexation of this territory, as a result of which South Ossetia would be incorporated into North Ossetia, which is part of the Russian Federation.<sup>1</sup>

Against this background, it becomes necessary to initiate a positive process of some sort that would reduce alienation between Georgians and the Abkhaz on the one hand, and between Georgians and Ossetians on the other, thereby creating a basis for the restoration of trust. In other words, **the objective of conflict transformation comes onto the agenda**, which involves not so much the search for pathways to political settlement as the normalization of relations between the opposing societies, the rebuilding of trust, and the weakening the image of an enemy. Transformation implies multi-level interaction among individuals, communities, and institutions — particularly in less politicized spheres such as trade, education, healthcare, and cultural and humanitarian cooperation.

Elements of such relations between the parties to the conflict are present, to varying degrees, in the cases of Moldova and Transnistria, as well as Northern and Southern Cyprus, where conflicts remain politically unresolved, yet the nature of relations between the sides is more civilized. At first glance, this concept of conflict transformation should be unconditionally acceptable to the parties involved in the conflict(s) in Georgia. **However, it remains unclear to what extent Georgian and Abkhaz/South Ossetian societies are ready for such relations.** It is likely that distrust, fear, and aggression toward the other side still remain among certain groups within Georgian society. From this perspective, no readiness is evident on the part of either official Tbilisi or the Abkhaz and South Ossetian de facto administrations. The situation is further complicated by the uncertainty surrounding the final outcomes of the Russia–Ukraine war, which makes Russia’s future position regarding the conflicts in Georgia difficult to predict. Despite these circumstances, interest has emerged within Georgian analytical circles in first of all examining the

---

<sup>1</sup> Informed segment of the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region’s society, similar to the Abkhaz elite, is aware of Russia’s actual motive. However, extremely strong irredentism suppresses any form of resistance

readiness of Georgian society, specifically the perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of various groups regarding the conflict(s). The following question demanded an answer: **are we ready to view the conflict not only as a political problem, but also as a human tragedy that, through collective effort, should be transformed into an opportunity for development?**

For this purpose, a **public opinion survey**<sup>2</sup> was conducted in the summer of 2024, during which 1,995 respondents were interviewed in Tbilisi and the regions. The sample was designed according to a stratified multi-stage cluster principle, and interviews were conducted face-to-face using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) between 29 May and 2 July 2024. During the same period, five online meetings (focus groups) were held with representatives of the internally displaced communities. The aim of the study was to determine how Georgian society perceives the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, how well informed it is about ongoing processes, what attitudes exist toward the restoration and transformation of relations, and to what extent society is ready to take steps toward reconciliation.

The present paper aims, on the basis of the results of the aforementioned survey, to assess the potential for conflict transformation of the conflict(s) existing in Georgia, primarily from the perspective of the readiness of Georgian society. It is hoped that in the future it will be possible to conduct a similar study to examine the readiness of the authorities as well. As for the attitudes of Abkhaz and South Ossetian societies and the de facto authorities toward the transformation of the conflict(s), the prospect of conducting such research remains uncertain due to a number of factors, although its relevance is beyond doubt.

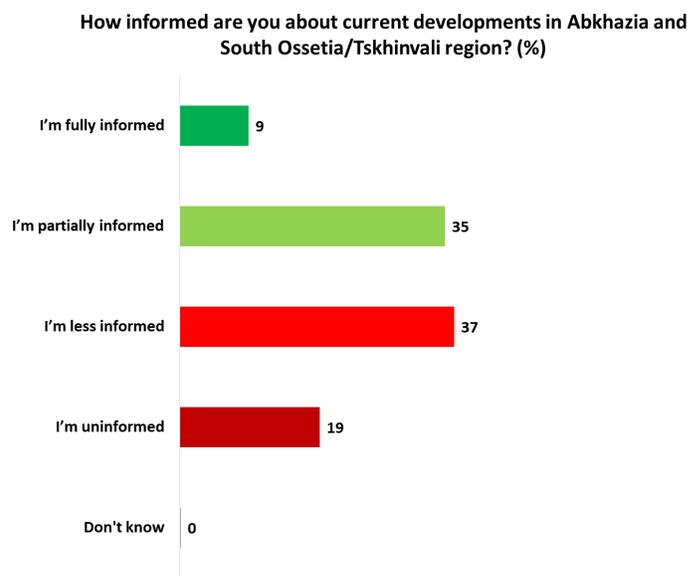
## **Public Readiness for Conflict Transformation: Key Trends**

### 1. Low Level of Awareness

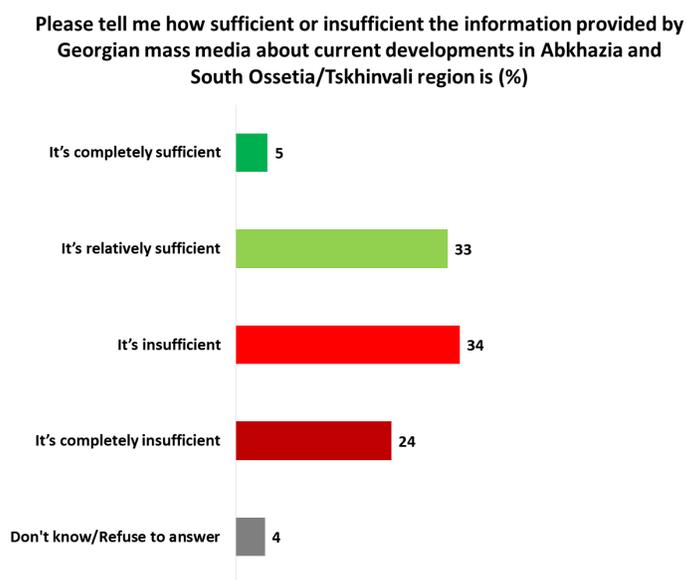
The findings of the survey show that the majority of the population **is not adequately informed** about developments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region: only 9% stated that they are fully informed about these issues, while more than half (56%) are either not informed at all or are poorly informed.

---

<sup>2</sup> The survey, for which fieldwork and data analysis were conducted by **CRRC**, was commissioned jointly by **the Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts, Caucasian House, and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation**. The research report and database can be accessed here: <https://crrc.ge/en/report-conflicts-in-georgia-perceptions-attitudes-and-expectations/>



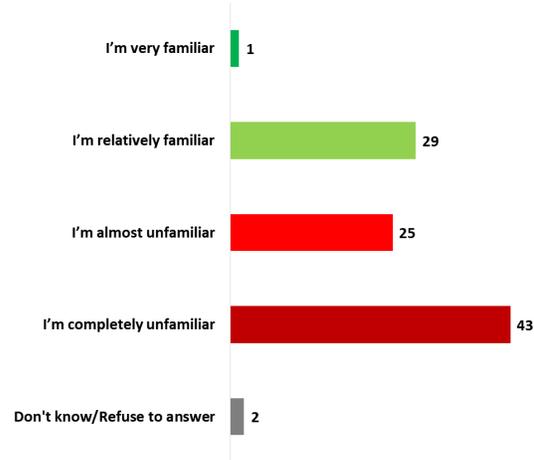
In addition, 58% believe that **Georgian media do not provide the public with sufficient information** about the situation in the occupied regions. This points to an underdeveloped and often politicized environment in which the topic of the conflict(s) rarely becomes the subject of public discussion.



**The information deficit is particularly striking with regard to peacebuilding initiatives of the Government of Georgia and the non-governmental sector:** 43% are not familiar with these programs at all, while 25% are only superficially familiar with them. In such circumstances, it is difficult for the population to comprehend the significance of transformational processes, which directly limits public engagement.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> To save space, only one chart is presented below, which reflects the awareness about government activities. The picture of awareness regarding the activities of non-governmental organizations and expert circles is almost identical.

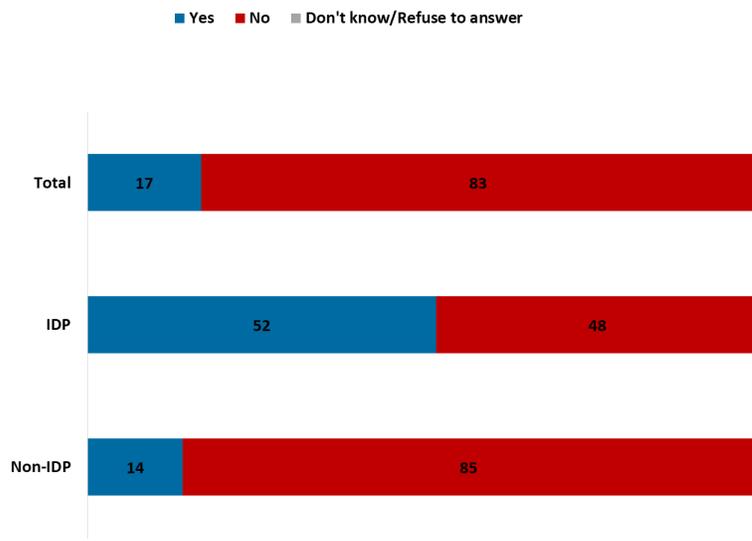
How familiar are you with the socioeconomic programs and/or peace initiatives created by the Georgian government for the well-being of the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region? (%)

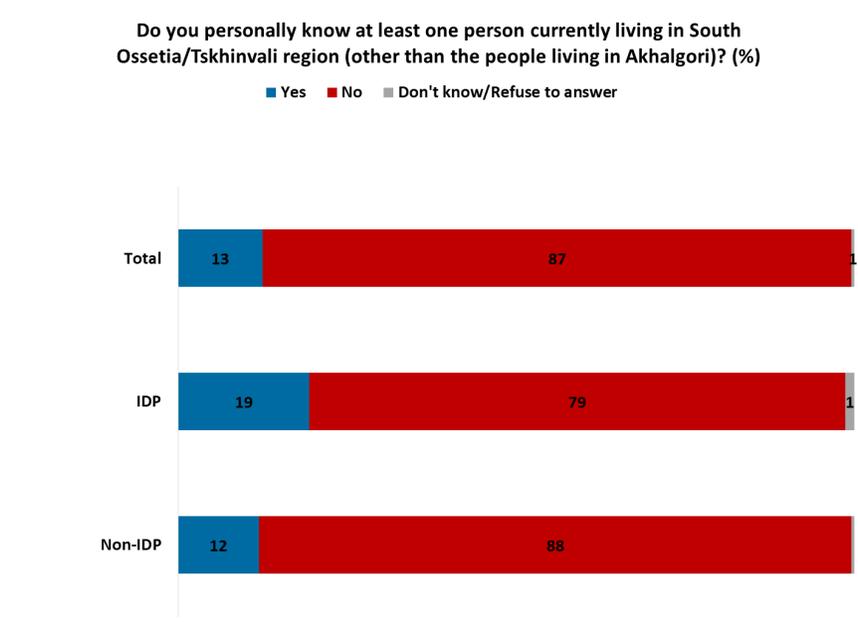


## 2. Scarcity of Human Contacts, Yet a Positive Attitude Toward Relations

In terms of personal contacts, only 17% of respondents say that they know someone living in Abkhazia, while 13% know someone living in South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region. This data confirms that **physical, social, and communication barriers make the building of relationships virtually impossible**, particularly among younger generations who lack the experience of pre-war shared life. Notably, among displaced persons from Abkhazia this indicator is significantly higher than among those displaced from South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region (52% and 19%, respectively).

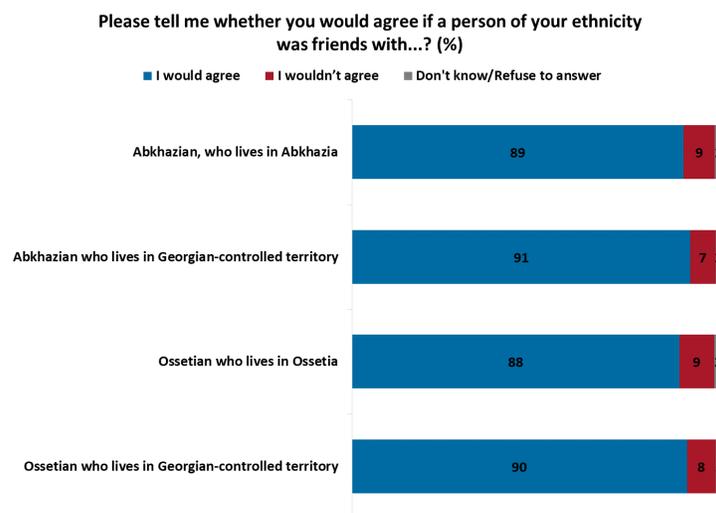
Do you personally know at least one person who is currently living in Abkhazia (other than the people living in the Gali municipality)? (%)



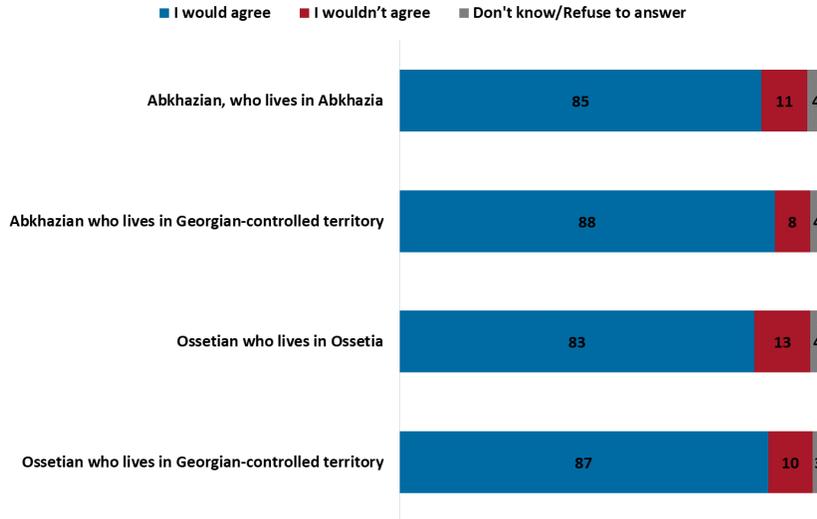


However, despite these limited contacts, **the public's attitude toward friendship and cooperation is extremely positive:**

- 85% are ready for professional or business relations with Abkhazians;
- 83% — with Ossetians;
- 89% and 88%, respectively, agree to friendship.

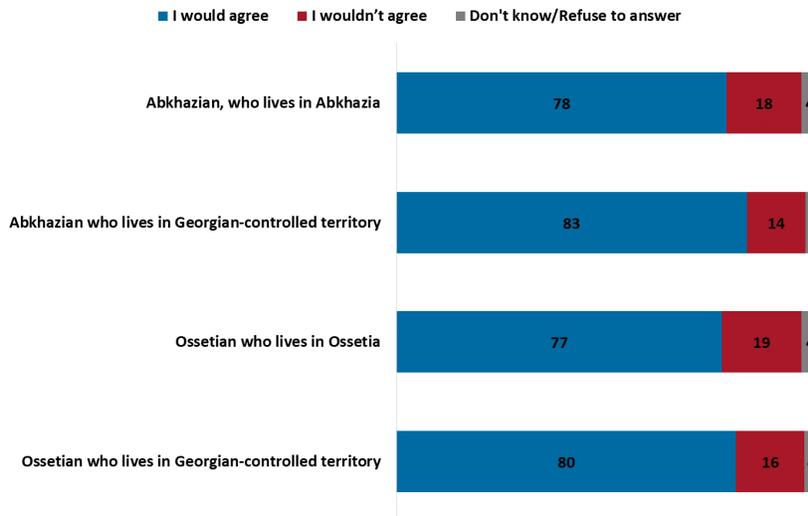


Please tell me whether you would agree if a person of your ethnicity had a business relationship with...?



This data confirms that **Georgian society no longer embraces ethnic hatred narratives emotionally** and that its attitudes are largely pragmatic. Interestingly, 75% of respondents perceive Abkhazians as Georgians just like the population of other regions, while 66% hold the same opinion regarding Ossetians. It is noteworthy that the vast majority of those surveyed consider even starting a family with an Abkhazian or an Ossetian to be acceptable (78% and 77%, respectively).

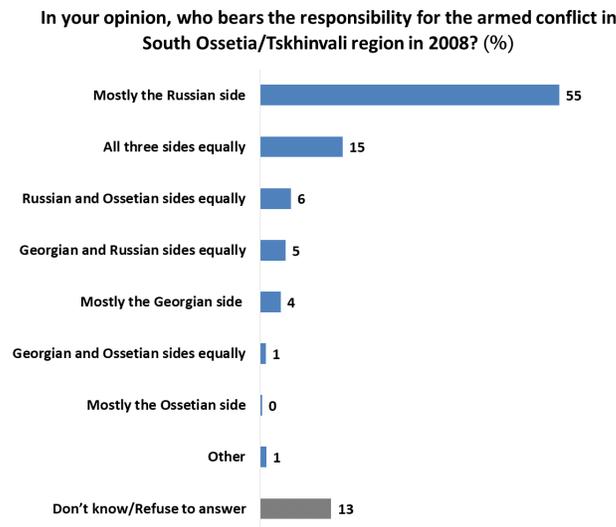
Please tell me whether you would agree if a person of your ethnicity was married to...? (%)



### 3. Perception of responsibility and readiness to reflect on the past

More than half of the society (55% of those surveyed) **primarily holds the Russian side responsible for the 2008 war**.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, 15% believe that responsibility lies equally with all three parties, which indicates a less emotional and more reflected attitude towards the past.

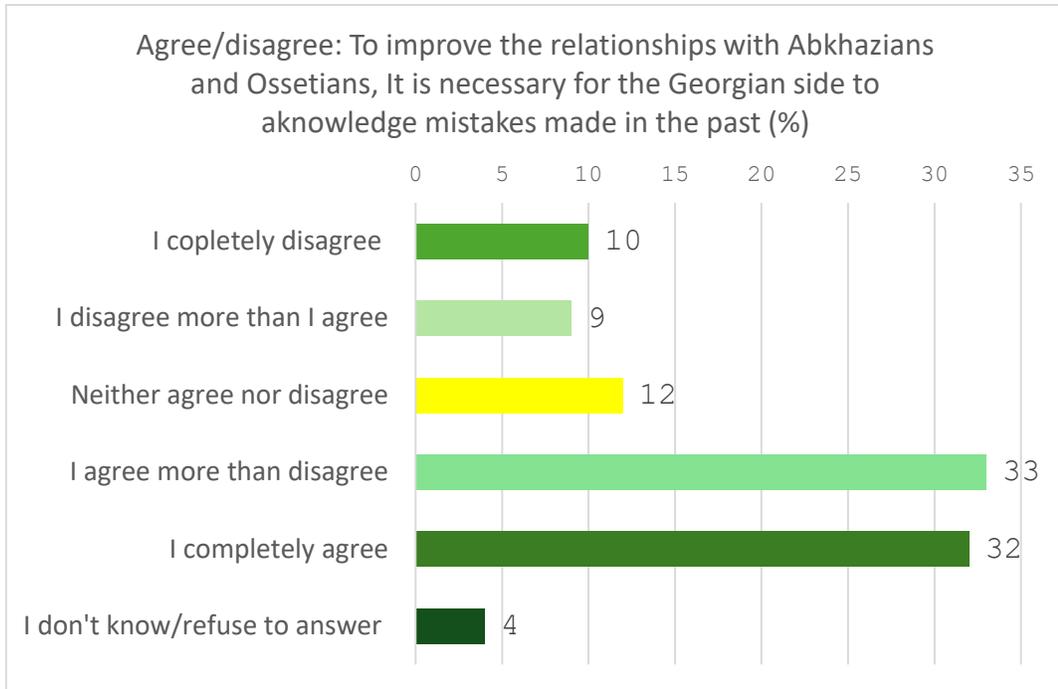
Footnote 4.



It is particularly significant that 65% of those surveyed agree with the opinion that — "to restore peaceful relations, the Georgian side must reflect on mistakes made in the past". The percentage is rather high and indicative of **the readiness of the society for self-reflection and dialogue**, which is a necessary prerequisite for the formation of a culture of reconciliation.

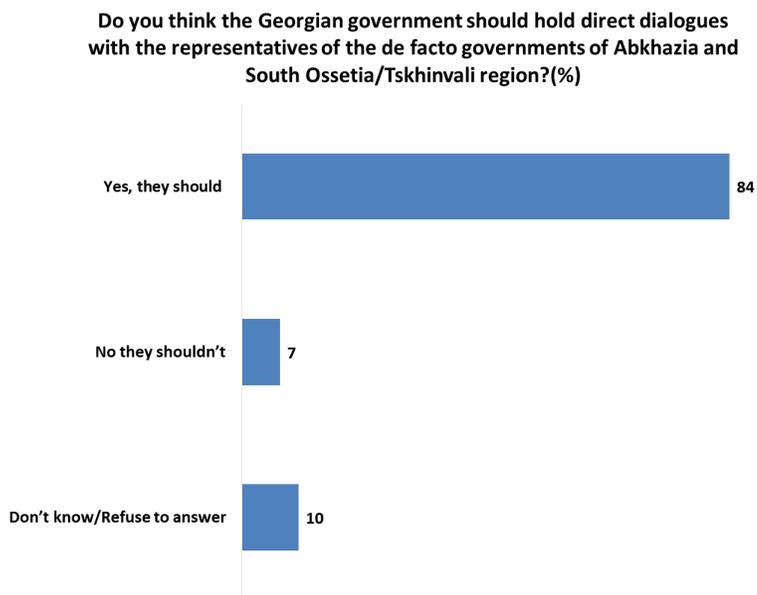
---

<sup>4</sup> The public also primarily holds the Russian side responsible for the military confrontations that took place in Abkhazia (46%) and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region (48%) in the 1990s.

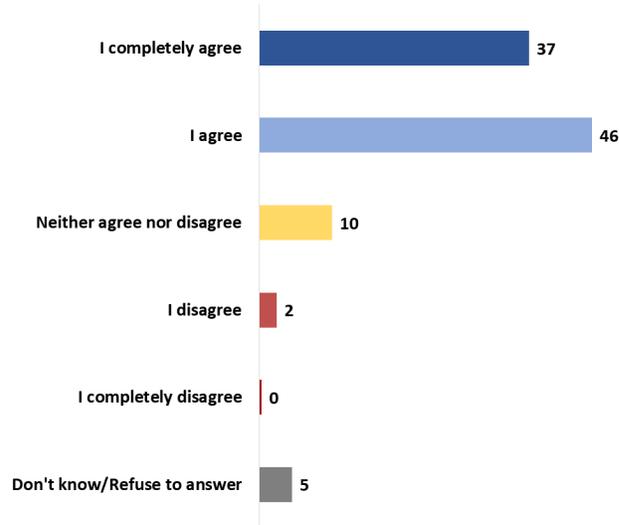


4. Support for dialogue and humanitarian cooperation

84% of the respondents believe that the Government of Georgia should conduct **direct dialogue** with representatives of the de facto authorities. It is important that, in their opinion, such a **dialogue should begin immediately**. This data substantially changes political stereotypes established over the years, where such dialogue was often perceived as a "compromise".

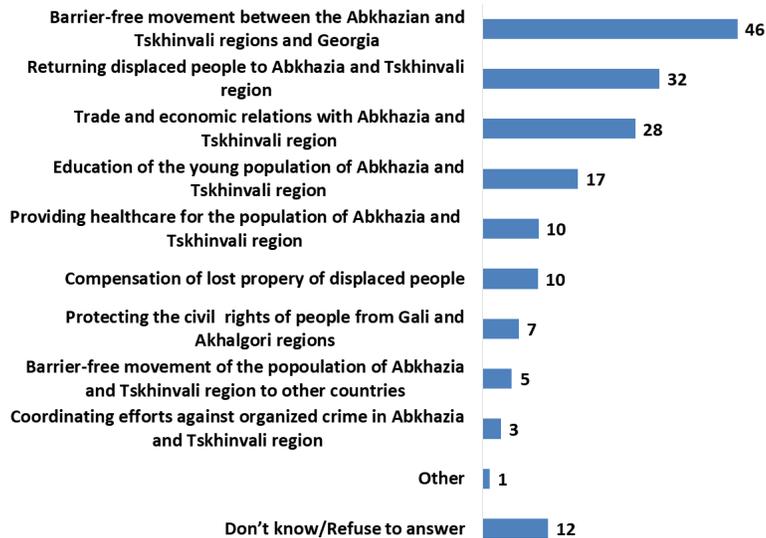


How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "An official dialogue between Georgian and Abkhazian sides is necessary and must start soon"? (%)

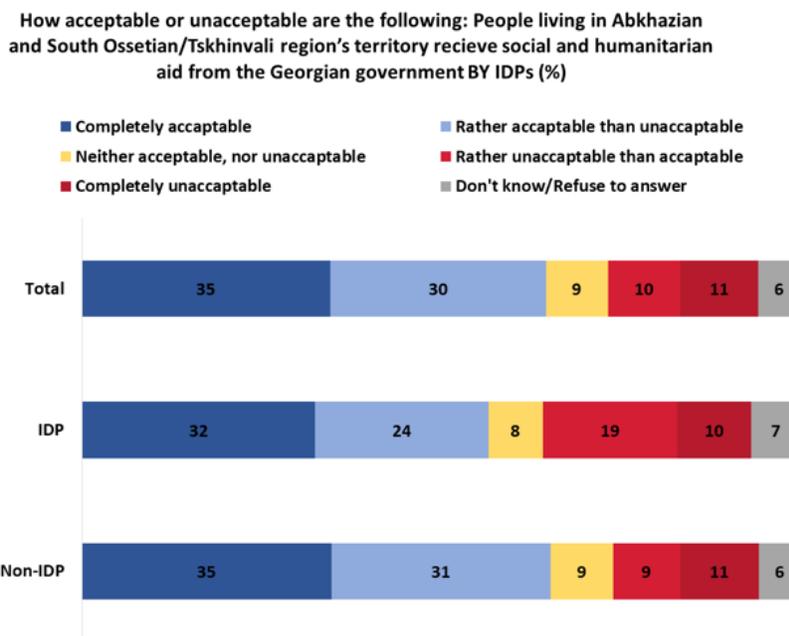


It is noteworthy that a significant part of those surveyed (46%) supports raising the issue of free movement of the population across the dividing lines as a first priority on the agenda of such a dialogue. However, among the priority issues is also the return of IDPs (32%) and the development of trade and economic relations between the parties to the conflict(s). It is clear that **physical contact with South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region, and especially with Abkhazia**, is an important issue for Georgian society and, it appears, is one of the determining factors for the demand for the aforementioned direct dialogue between the central government and the de facto administrations from the side of Georgian society.

Which topics should take priority during the dialogue with the representatives of the defacto governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region? (%)



It is also an important result that 65% of those surveyed consider it acceptable for the **Government of Georgia to provide humanitarian assistance** to people living in Abkhazia and the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region. This attitude indicates a readiness to identify common interests and to deepen relations at the human level.



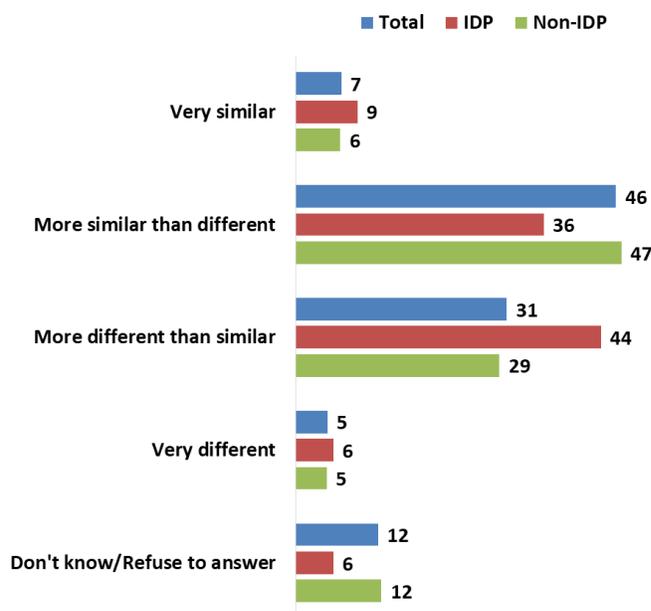
## 5. Socio-cultural and political factors of reconciliation

According to the survey, 73% of the population is convinced that the involvement of women in peace processes will have a positive impact on Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian relations, while 80% share the same opinion regarding the involvement of IDPs. These results underscore the **need for the inclusive nature of the reconciliation process**, where various social groups (especially IDPs, youth, women) will be equally represented.

It is noteworthy that more than half of those surveyed (53%) believe that Georgians and Abkhazians are connected by a similar or more similar than different culture and traditions.<sup>5</sup> This indicator is slightly lower in relation to Ossetians (49%). It is interesting that in the case of both conflicts, IDPs support this view relatively less (45% and 28%, respectively). Despite this, these indicators point to a **potentially significant resource for reconciliation**. These indicators of ethno-cultural similarity are quite high and, presumably, exceed the indicators of spiritual closeness with national minorities living in Georgia or, even more so, with other nations.

<sup>5</sup> To save space, the diagram presented below reflects the ethno-cultural perception of Abkhazians by those surveyed. The indicators are almost identical in relation to Ossetians.

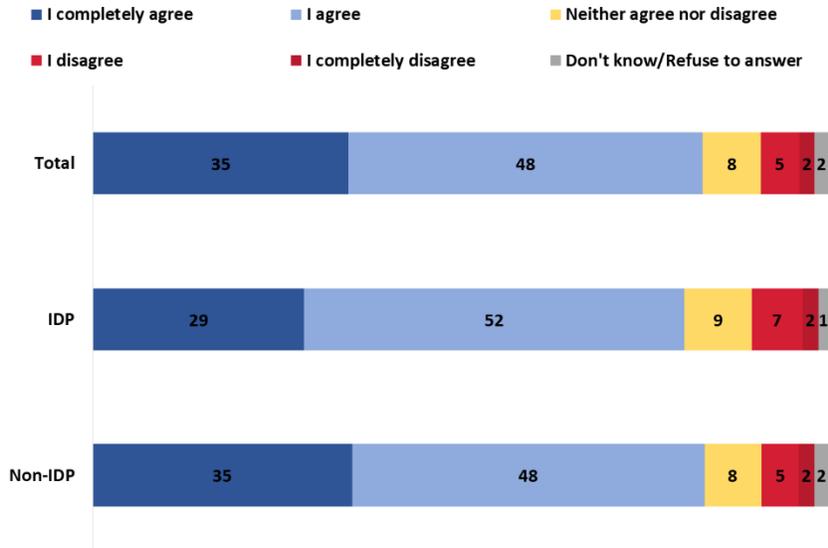
**Do you think the culture and traditions of Georgians and Abkhazians are very different, more different than similar, more similar than different, or very similar? (%)**



A noteworthy result was recorded regarding **the readiness of Georgian society for peaceful cohabitation with Abkhazians and Ossetians in a single state**. 83% of those surveyed (in the case of both conflicts) agree with such a perspective.<sup>6</sup> Although this indicator concerns the resolution of the conflict(s), it significantly points to the potential for reconciliation.

<sup>6</sup> To save space, the diagram presented below reflects the perception of those surveyed regarding the cohabitation in a single state only with Abkhazians. The indicators are almost identical in relation to Ossetians

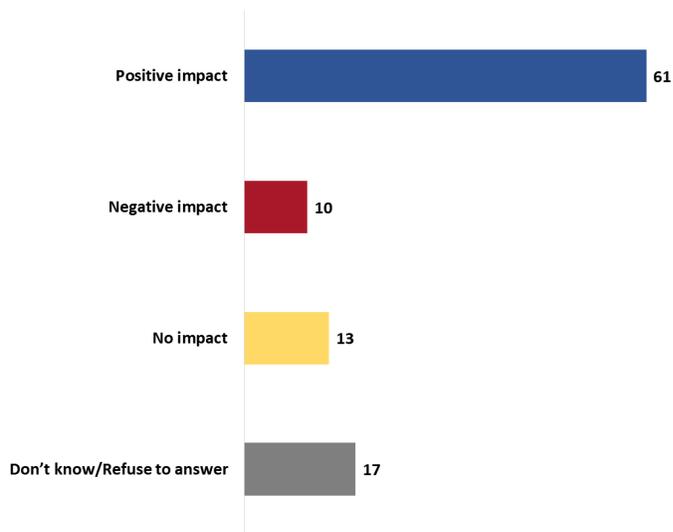
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:  
 "Georgians and Abkhazians can peacefully coexist in one (shared) country"?  
 BY IDPs (%)



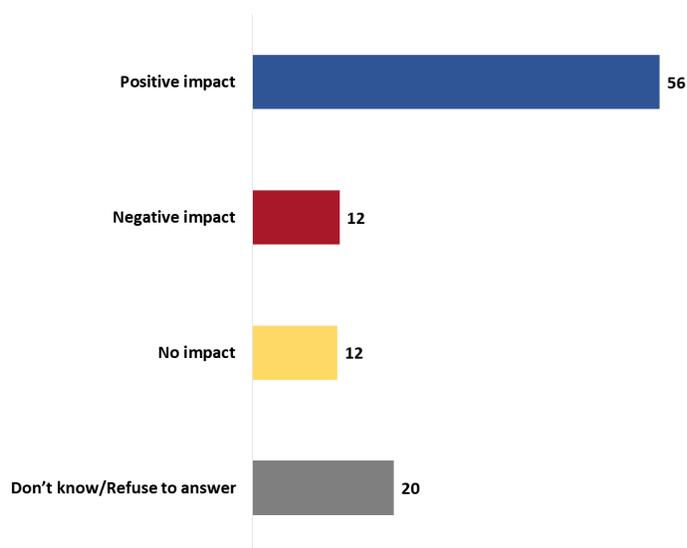
6. European and Euro-Atlantic integration as a foreign policy factor of reconciliation

61% of the population believes that **Georgia's integration into the European Union will contribute to the improvement of Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian relations**, while 56% share a similar position regarding integration into the NATO. This finding shows that **European values — democracy, human rights, cultural diversity — are already associated with reconciliation and peace opportunities**, which reflects an evolution of public awareness.

What impact do you think Georgia's integration in the EU would have on Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian relations? (%)



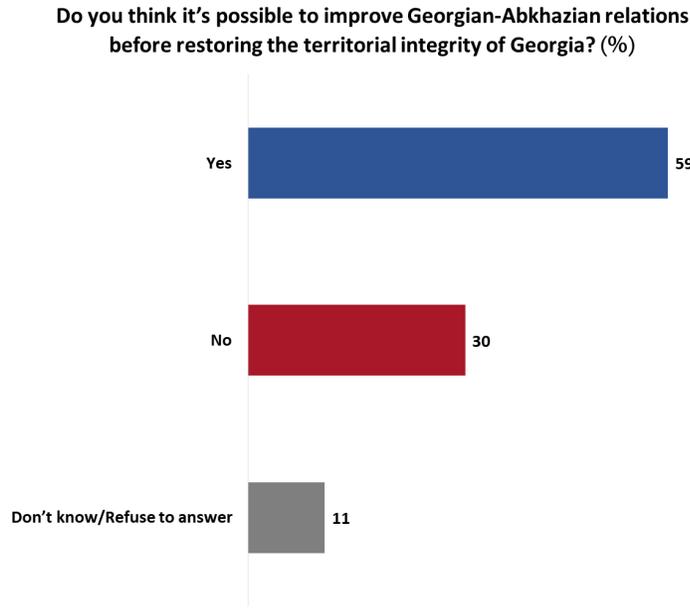
What impact do you think Georgia's integration in NATO would have on Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian relations? (%)



#### 7. Other supporting factors for the improvement of relations

When respondents were asked what, in their opinion, could the main factor for improving relations be, the majority (30%) named **non-interference by Russia**. This clearly reflects the society's realistic view of regional dynamics. This is followed by **economic prosperity** (29%), which indicates awareness of the social dimension of peace. **Development of new policies and approaches** (28%) comes third, which points to the population's readiness for change and the adoption of innovative approaches.

Importantly, the majority of those surveyed (approximately 60%) believe—**the improvement of relations is possible before the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity**, which is a serious trend. This means that the society sees the **reconciliation process as an independent goal, and not only as a result achieved following a political settlement**.



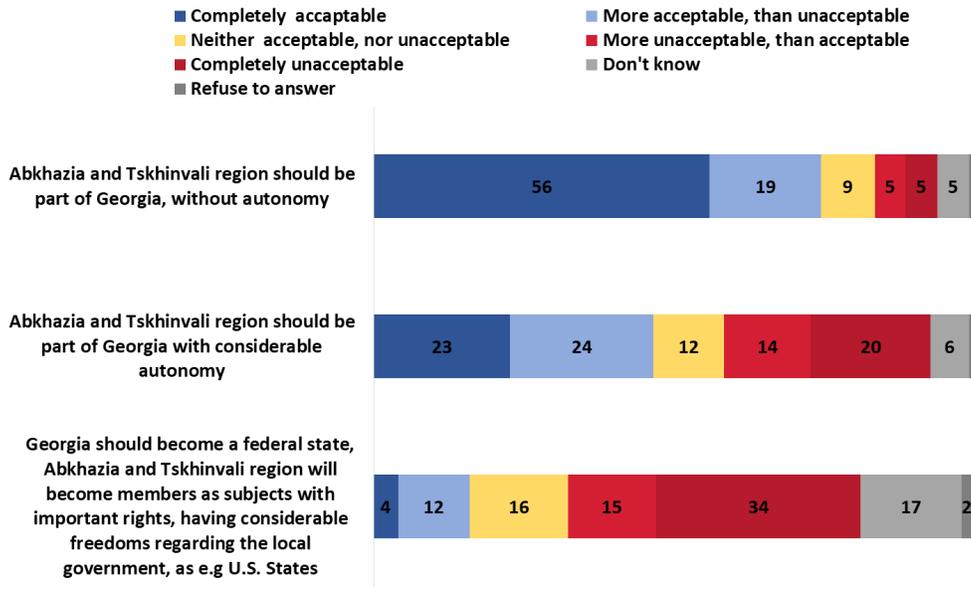
#### 8. Obstacles to the improvement of relations

The results of the survey show that Georgian society sees **the resolution of the conflict(s) only within the framework of a single unified Georgian state**. Furthermore, for the vast majority of those surveyed (75%), the most acceptable model is a Georgian state with a **unitary structure**. 47% would support the pre-war model,<sup>7</sup> where Abkhazia and the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region had the status of autonomy, while only 16% would favor a federal arrangement of a unified state. Even less support exists for a confederation (union of states), which is acceptable to only roughly 12%.

---

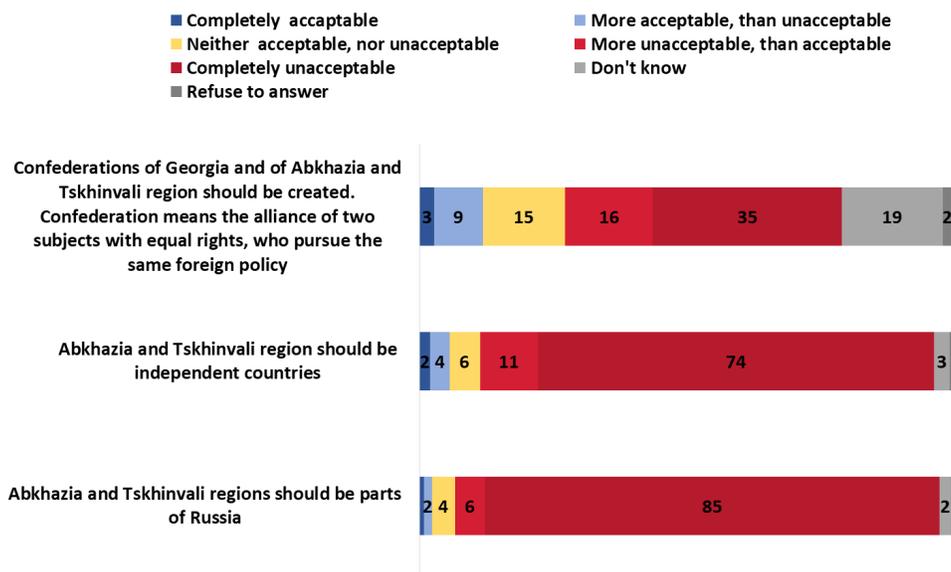
<sup>7</sup> This refers to the status before the military clashes of early 1990s in Abkhazia and the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region

There are different opinions regarding the way the Abkhazian and South Ossetian/Tskhinvali region conflicts should be resolved. How acceptable or unacceptable these statements? (%) Part 1

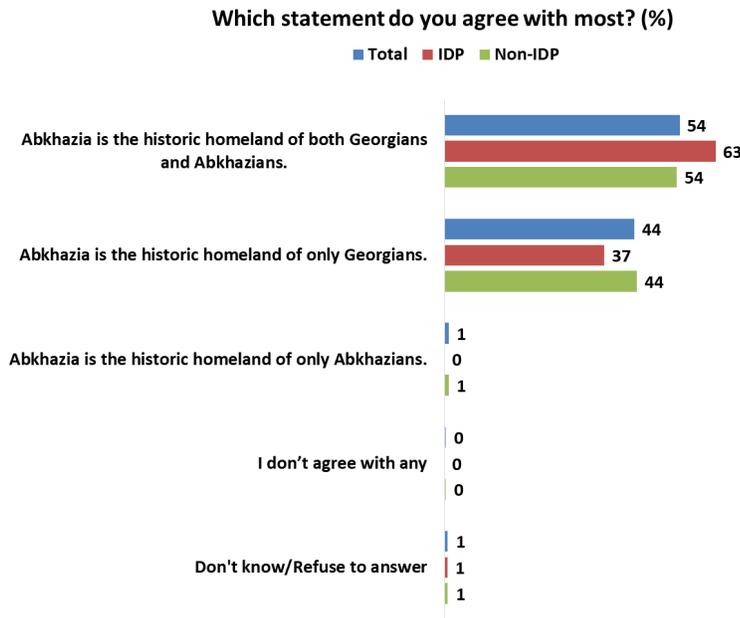


Regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region being outside Georgian jurisdiction (independence; being a subject of the Russian Federation), this is **unacceptable to 91% of those surveyed**. This is a given, something that people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region cannot reconcile with.

There are different opinions regarding the way the Abkhazian and South Ossetian/Tskhinvali region conflicts should be resolved. How acceptable or unacceptable these statements? (%) Part 2



The findings of the survey revealed yet another trend, which presumably does not create a favorable background for the improvement of relations between the parties: **approximately half of Georgian society believe that Abkhazia and the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region, as a homeland, are to be shared.** In the case of Abkhazia, 54% of those surveyed, and in the case of the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region, 47% believe that these territories are also the homeland of Georgians. It is significant that a substantial part of the society perceives Abkhazia and the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region as only the homeland of Georgians (44% and 50%, respectively).



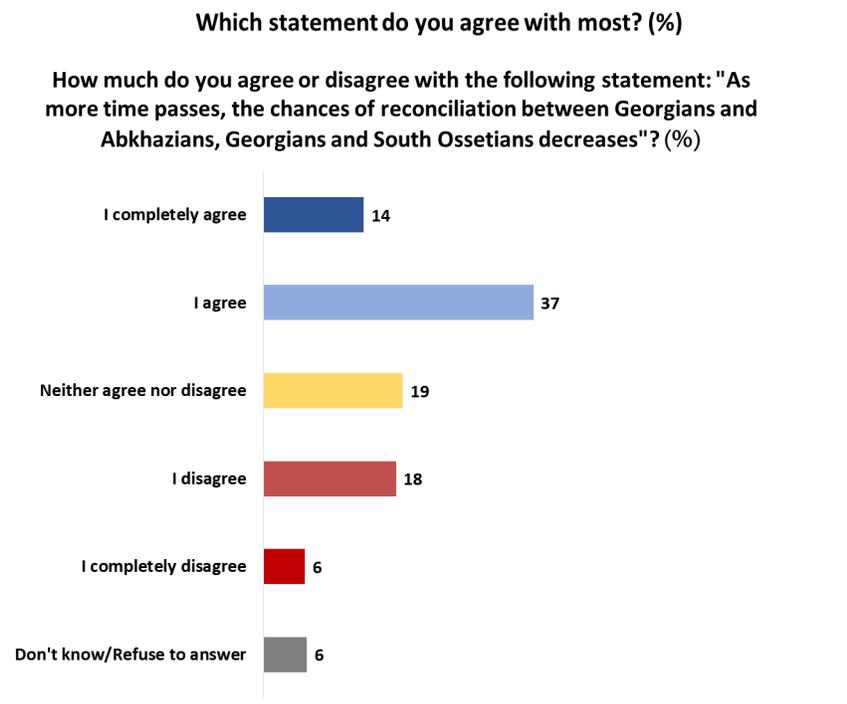
Naturally, the position expressed so firmly by Georgian society regarding the possible ways to resolve the conflict(s) does not contribute to the restoration of trust and complicates the start of cooperation between the conflicting parties on even politically insensitive issues. However, fortunately, the survey also reveals many other counterbalancing, supportive factors, which we have already discussed above.

### Conflict(s) transformation: Fertile, but untilled soil

The findings of the survey unequivocally indicate that there is a **high potential in Georgian society for conflict(s) transformation** — at both the emotional and value levels. As we have seen, several results of the survey directly point to the elements of this potential. Below are several additional circumstances that are not directly read from the survey results but can be drawn from logical analysis.

## Perception of the Time Factor

The survey showed that the society is aware of the time factor. More than half of those surveyed (51%) believe that **time is not working in favor of reconciliation**. Despite the fact that it has already been 18 years since there has been a military confrontation in the country, this has not brought a positive result in terms of resolving the conflict(s): trust between the conflicting societies has been reduced to a minimum, physical contacts have been terminated, and alienation is deepening. The aforementioned conditions



determine the awareness in Georgian society of the necessity to improve relations with the Abkhazian and South Ossetian societies.

## *Dwindling Expectations for Resolving the Conflict(s)*

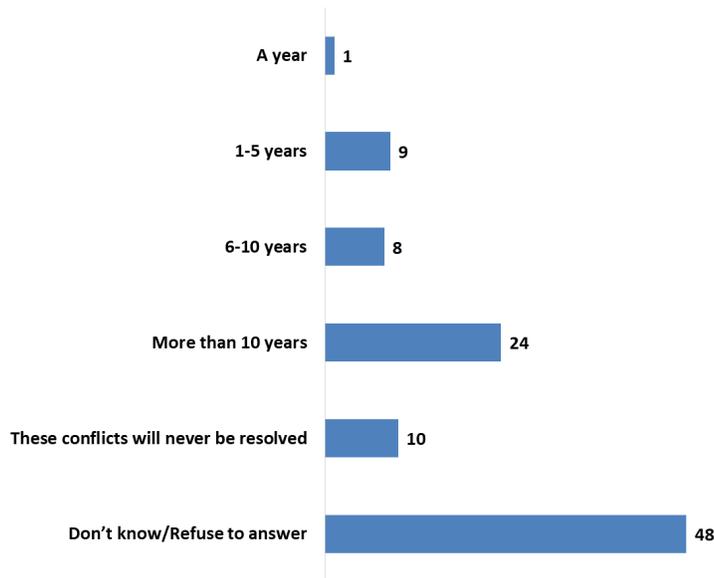
The survey yielded a noteworthy result regarding one important aspect of public sentiment toward the conflict(s) — the perspective on resolving the conflict(s). 48% of those surveyed do not know or refuse to name a timeframe for when the conflict(s) existing in Georgia might be resolved. Such an answer likely indicates that the respondents do not expect the conflicts to be resolved in the near future and view it as an indefinitely distant prospect. Respondents in this category constitute the largest segment. The second largest segment consists of those who believe that resolving the conflict(s) will require at least 10 years (24%) followed by those (10%) who do not expect the conflict(s) to be resolved at all. The respondents included in these three segments (totalling 82%) are most characterized by getting used to conflict(s), which is referred to in specialized literature as the "protracted conflict syndrome". At the same time, **reconciling with the existence of the conflict(s) should not be confused with its current form**, which may not be acceptable at all. This is evidenced by the trends revealed by the survey, which point to the society's readiness for conflict(s) transformation. Accordingly, the society's hopelessness regarding the

resolution of the conflict(s) **should, for its part, be viewed as an additional stimulus for supporting conflict(s) transformation.**

### Awareness of the Cost of Protracted Conflict(s) in the Society

Beyond the fact that a comprehensive resolution of the conflict(s) existing in Georgia appears to be an impossible task in the near future, the violent nature of the conflict(s) itself comes at a high price for all interested parties. The survey shows that the cost of protracted conflicts is multi-faceted and can be economic, foreign-policy related, and socio-cultural. For the immediate parties to the conflict(s), the highest cost is precisely this last aspect, which is linked to the ongoing mutual alienation between the

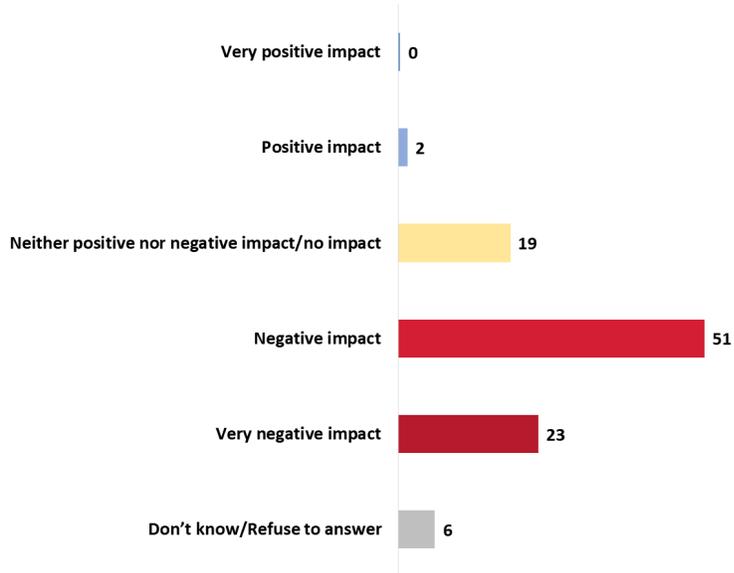
In your opinion, how long will it take to resolve the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts? (%)



Georgian society on the one hand, and the Abkhazian and South Ossetian societies on the other. If not stopped, this process will destroy any prospect of reconciliation in the future (for illustration, see Trend 2 mentioned above).

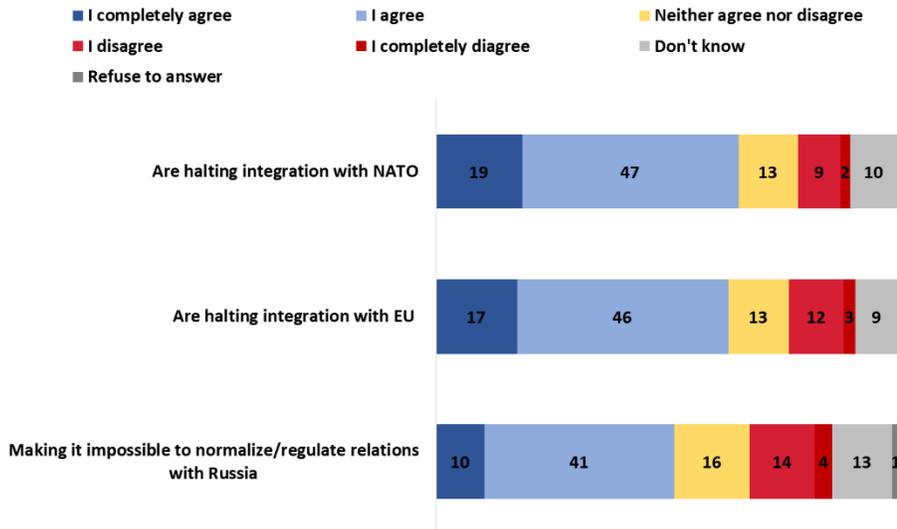
74% of respondents believe that the existence of conflicts in their current form damages the country's economy. Indeed, besides the fact that the country's transit potential is hurt due to the existing conflicts (the dysfunctional Transkam Highway; the railway and highway passing through Abkhazia), there is a high general level of political risk, which damages the investment environment.

**What impact do you believe the unsettled Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts have on the Georgian economy? (%)**



Despite the fact that a large portion of those surveyed considers European integration to be an important factor for reconciliation (see Trend 6), an equal number of respondents believes that maintaining the conflicts in their current form hinders European integration itself. Additionally, the existence of the conflicts is seen as the primary barrier to the normalization of bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
The current unsettled Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts... (%)**



All of the above suggests that the soil for conflict(s) transformation in Georgia is fertile, but it requires **prudent cultivation** — systematic communication, education, promotion of relations, and new formats of dialogue.

## Conclusion

The topic of reconciliation in Georgia has existed for decades against a backdrop of pain, fear, and disappointment. But within this pain, something new is being born—a desire to one day regain not only the land, but mutual understanding, trust, and peace. This is a long road that requires patience, trust, and responsibility, but it is a road for which there is no other alternative.

Today our country stands at a crossroads where the past is not erased, but the future is yet to be written. Currently, **the perspective for a political resolution of the conflicts is not in sight**. Against the background of the occupation, forced displacement, and the breakdown of trust, both the state and society face **a challenge as how to transform the conflict so that real reconciliation becomes possible**.

Over time, Georgian society has matured and come to perceive events realistically. It is increasingly noticeable that a significant part of the population, especially the youth and educated groups, is becoming more open toward reconciliation. This tendency indicates the **potential for the society's internal transformation**; however, parallel to this, the political will and institutional framework remain fragile for transforming this readiness into political action. Russia's position remains a significant factor, which will largely depend on the results of the military confrontation with Ukraine.

The 2024 survey makes it clear that **Georgian society is tired of uncertainty and confrontation**, and is gradually ready to adopt a culture of peace and reconciliation. Despite informational and political barriers, human attitudes already create the foundation for beginning the transformation of the conflicts.

Therefore, the main task today is the **mobilization and institutionalization** of this resource—the transformation of public readiness into a strategic policy. If the Georgian government, the civil sector, and international partners can undertake joint, coordinated action, the transformation of Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian relations can set in motion a real process that will increase the possibilities for reconciliation in the future.