



PERCEPTION OF FOREIGN THREATS IN GEORGIA

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DISCLAIMER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The foreign threat of Russia has been a key political topic since Georgia's independence. The topic gained more importance when Russia's invasion of Ukraine began. To study public opinion in Georgia regarding the war in Ukraine, the Russian military threats in Georgia, and the country's foreign policy prospects, CRRC-Georgia, with financial support by the National Endowment for Democracy, carried out a nationally representative survey of adult Georgian residents in August-September of 2022.

The survey shows that Georgians strongly support integration within the European Union and NATO, regardless of a potential threat from Russia. However, they have no overwhelming expectation that NATO membership will bring back the country's territorial integrity. At the same time, Georgian society is not uniform and some groups support Western aspirations more than others: younger people, urban populations, individuals with a higher education, and opposition supporters express higher commitment to Georgia's Western aspirations, than other groups. At the same time, Georgians expect more aggressive actions from Russia.

There is no consensus on whether the country should seek compromises with Russia to guarantee its security. While, in general, potential compromises are not completely rejected by Georgian society, clear lines are drawn where such compromises cannot be made. The study shows that Georgians are not ready to sacrifice Western aspirations, territories, and independence to avoid military aggression from their Northern neighbor. Georgian Dream supporters are more ready to compromise Western orientation for avoiding the war than opposition supporters and non-partisans. On the other hand, younger people, urban populations, and respondents with higher levels of education are less eager to trade the country's pursuit to the West for hypothetical peace with Russia. Giving up part of its territories or independence is even more strongly rejected.

Most Georgians assess the role of Ukraine's President Volodymir Zelenskiy positively, followed by the role of former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US President Joe Biden. On the other hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belorussian president Alexander Lukashenko are assessed negatively. Overall, opposition supporters are more radical in their assessments and describe the role of Ukraine's President and Western leaders more positively, and the role of Russian and Belorussian Presidents more negatively than GD supporters and unaffiliated citizens do. At the same time, opinions split on Georgia's leadership's actions related to the war from positive to negative, across different party supporters.

The survey used a randomized experiment, in which one group received a message describing Ukraine's military success, a second group was given a message regarding Ukraine's military losses, and a third group received no message whatsoever before questions regarding compromises. The results of the experiment show that the groups which express the strongest pro-Western commitment and are the least supportive of any compromise with Russia were the most affected by messages about Ukraine's military losses. Specifically, opposition supporters who heard about Ukraine's military losses more often agreed that Ukraine could avoid the war if it made certain compromises towards Russia, compared to those opposition supporters, who heard no message at all. The message about Ukraine's military losses also increased agreement with the statement that Georgia should have compromised its Western orientation for avoiding a war with Russia, among opposition supporters. In contrast, Georgian Dream supporters and non-partisans were overall less affected by the type of information given to them. Nevertheless, most Georgians think that Russia will not be able to occupy all of Ukraine, however, opinions split on whether Ukraine will liberate its territories completely or partially.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted in Georgian, Armenian, Azeri, and Russian languages. Overall, 1,523 interviews with adult (18+) citizens of Georgia were conducted from Aug 29 to Sep 5, 2022, by phone. To compensate for the differences between the sample and the census data, the results discussed further in this report are weighted.

The survey team conducted a randomized experiment. Before asking the survey questions, the sample was randomly divided into three groups. Respondents in two groups were read different statements and the third group did not receive any information:

- Group 1: As you know, Ukraine was able to repulse Russian military aggression, in particular, they preserved their statehood, defended the capital Kyiv and inflicted great damage on the Russian army.
- Group 2: As you know, Ukraine suffered great losses as a result of Russian military aggression, in particular tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians were killed, they lost territories and the economy suffered great damage.
- Group 3: No statement.

Respondents' answers to the follow-up questions enabled the project team to analyze the impact of different information on perception of the war and foreign threats.

FINDINGS

The first part of this section covers Georgians' attitudes toward foreign entities, where we discuss that even in a highly turbulent international situation, Georgians maintain strong commitments toward their country's Western aspirations. Opposition supporters, younger people, urban residents, and better-educated individuals express higher support for Georgia's pro-Western orientation compared to other groups.

Next, we elaborate on what Georgians think about mitigating threats related to Russian aggression by compromises, where the focus is not only on existing Russian aggression in Ukraine but also on potentially similar threats for Georgia. First, we discuss that the majority of Georgians doubt that compromise can stop Russia from war at all and then we focus on more specific examples, such as giving up Western orientation, territorial integrity, and even independence. The majority of Georgians do not accept these key interests, even if it guarantees peace with Russia. The same groups, who maintain the strongest pro-Western sentiments, are the least prone to compromises with Russia.

The next part discusses the effect of information, utilizing the survey experiment results. The data shows that after hearing about Ukraine's success or losses in the ongoing war, some groups tend to change their opinions more than others. Interestingly, people with the strongest pro-Western commitments and the least willing to compromise on Russia are most vulnerable to information regarding Ukraine's losses and demonstrate a higher potential to soften their positions regarding compromises with Russia, than other groups.

The final part of the findings summarizes Georgians' overall positive expectations regarding the outcome of the war. It also shows that Georgians describe the role of Ukraine's President and Western leaders who support Ukraine mostly positively, while actions of the Russian leader and his Belorussian ally are perceived negatively. At the same time, opinions regarding Georgian leaders' role concerning the ongoing war are more mixed and vary across groups.

GEORGIANS MAINTAIN A STRONG PRO-WESTERN ORIENTATION

The survey shows that the majority of Georgians want to see their country as a member of the European Union and NATO, even if it increases Russian aggression toward Georgia. Overall, younger people, an urban population, individuals with higher education, and opposition supporters support basis Georgia’s pro-Western aspirations to more extent, than other groups do.

The overwhelming majority of Georgians think that membership of Western structures will bring economic development to their country and they do not believe the narratives about losing their national identity. At the same time, a relatively smaller share of Georgians expects that integration with the EU and NATO can restore the country’s territorial integrity and bring back the Russian-backed secessionist regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region.

Traditionally, Georgians e strong commitments towards NATO membership: although the level of support towards NATO membership has been fluctuating over the years, at least 60% have steadily preferred to see their country in NATO¹ (NDI surveys on public attitudes). Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, this support declined from 77 to 69 percent.

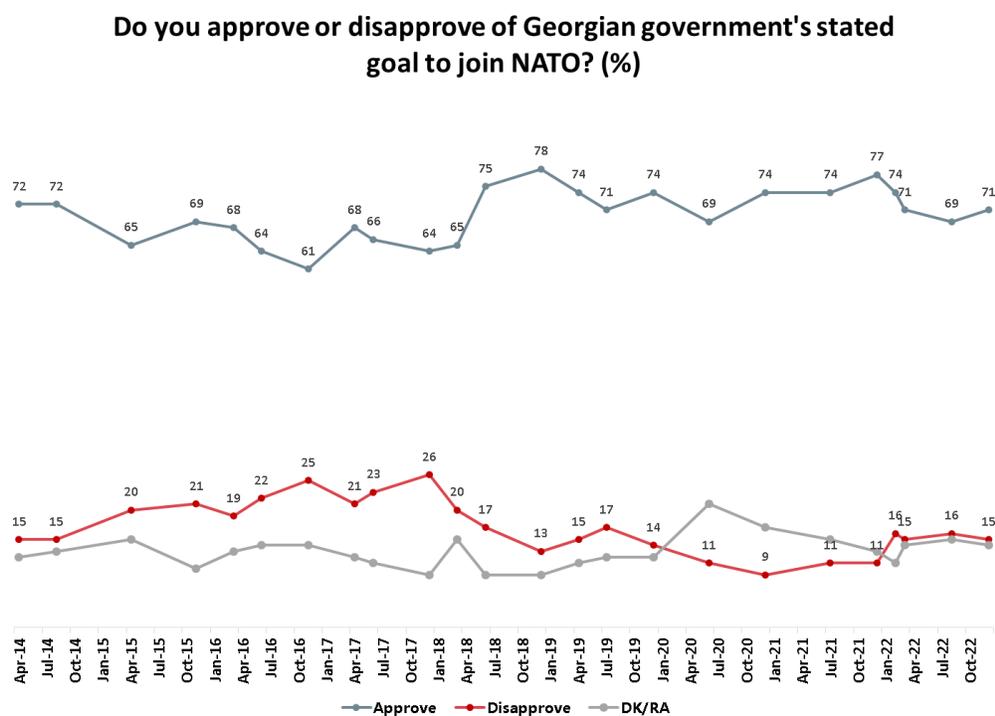


Figure 1: Support for NATO membership - NDI and CRRC survey time series

Source: NDI surveys on public attitudes, time-series dataset on caucasusbarometer.org

¹ NDI/CRRC Surveys on Public Attitudes

To detect opinions of foreign orientation, the survey asked respondents to choose which statements they agree with the most: “Georgia will benefit more by joining EU and NATO” or “Georgia will benefit more from abandoning EU and NATO” Overall, 54% of Georgian residents agree with the former statement. Opposition supporters, younger people (18-34 years old), residents of the capital and urban settlements, and people with higher education express higher support towards NATO and the EU than other groups of the population.

Opinion regarding NATO and EU (%)

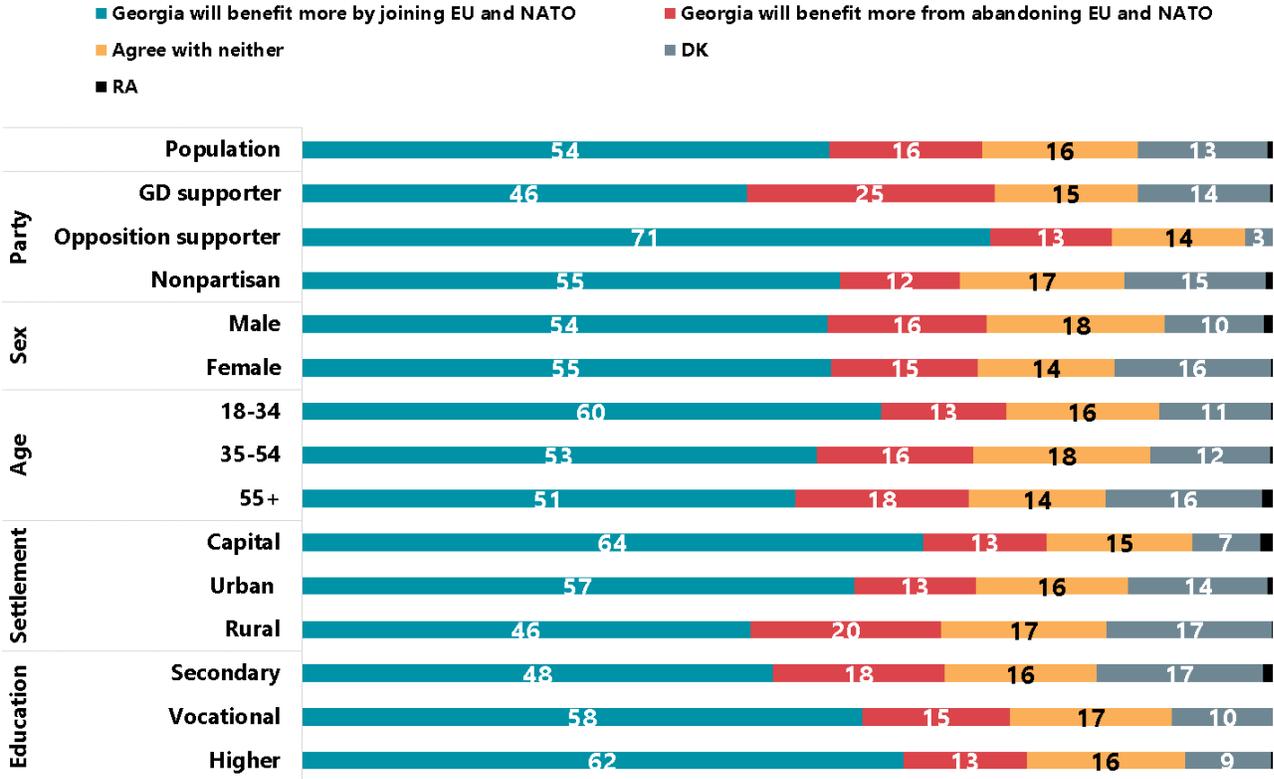


Figure 2: Opinion regarding NATO and the EU

The majority of respondents (73%) agree that becoming an EU member will help develop the Georgian economy. Opposition supporters, younger people, capital and urban residents, and people with higher than basic education support this idea more than others.

If Georgia becomes a member of the EU, this will develop its economy (%)

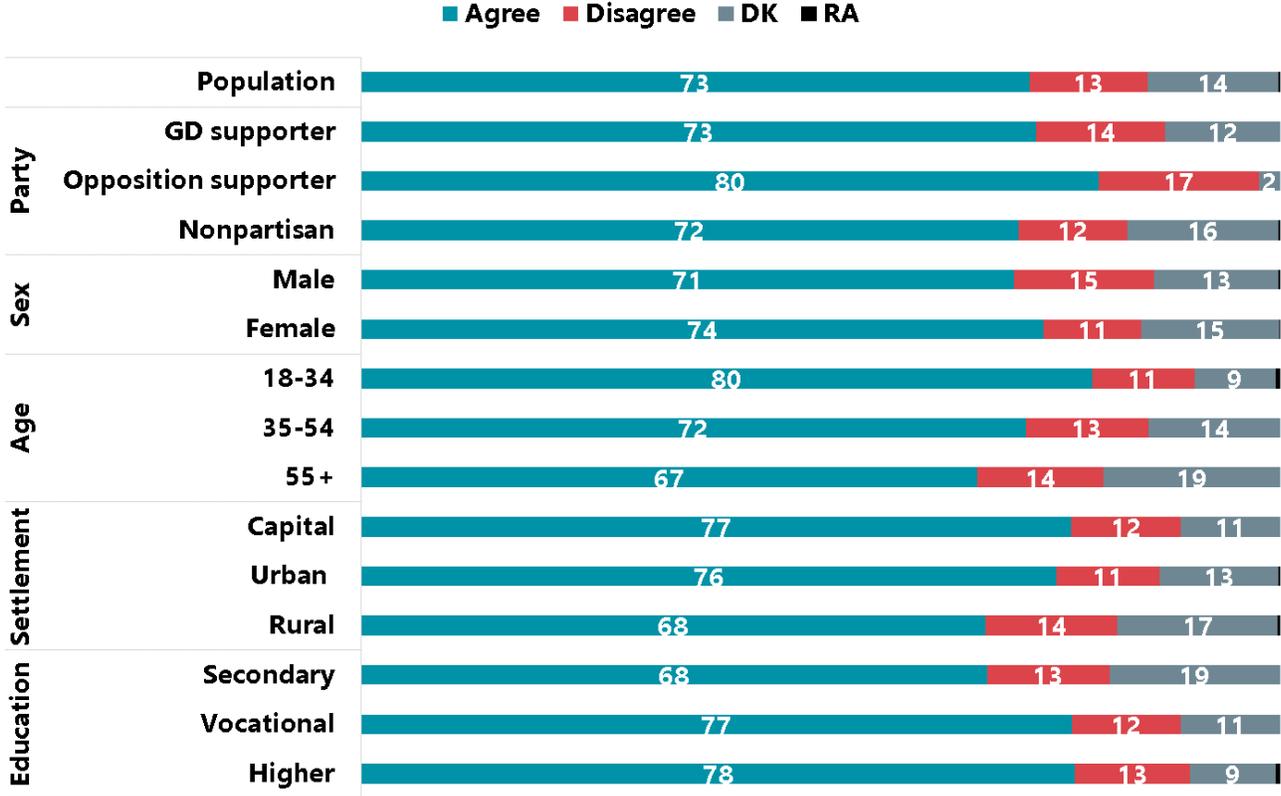


Figure 3: Georgia's accession to the European Union and economic development

The same population groups (except for young people), plus women, express higher support for the idea that becoming a NATO member will help Georgia restore its territorial integrity, however, the overall level of support for this statement is lower: 48% in contrast to 73% support to the statement regarding economic development brought by the EU membership.

If Georgia becomes a member of NATO, it will help restore territorial integrity (%)

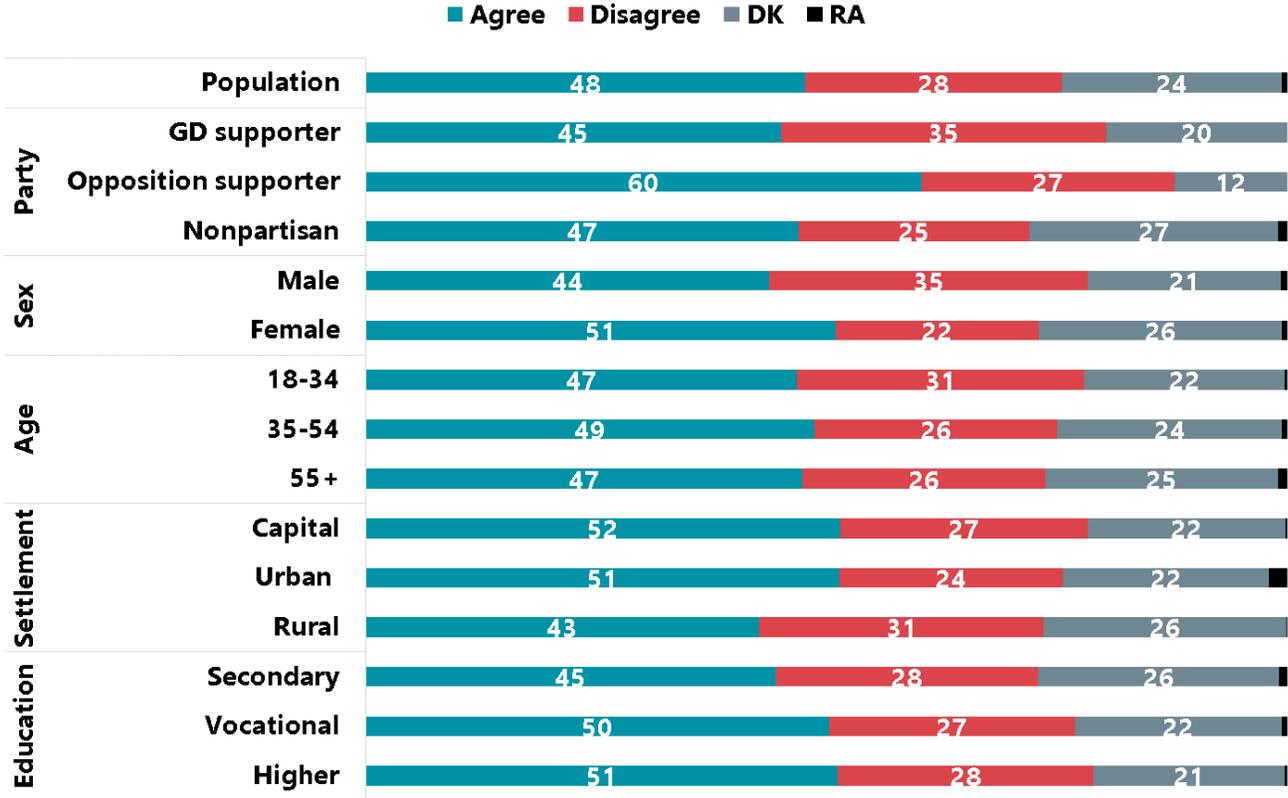


Figure 4: Georgia's accession to NATO and restoration of territorial integrity

The survey also asked about the positive and negative consequences in the case of Georgia joining the EU and NATO. Only 22% of Georgian citizens agree that Georgia will lose its national identity if it becomes a member of the EU. GD supporters are the single largest subgroup that agrees with this statement the most, compared to opposition and nonpartisans, while people with a higher education agree with the statement less frequently than ones with secondary and vocational education do.

If Georgia becomes a member of the EU, it will lose its national identity (%)

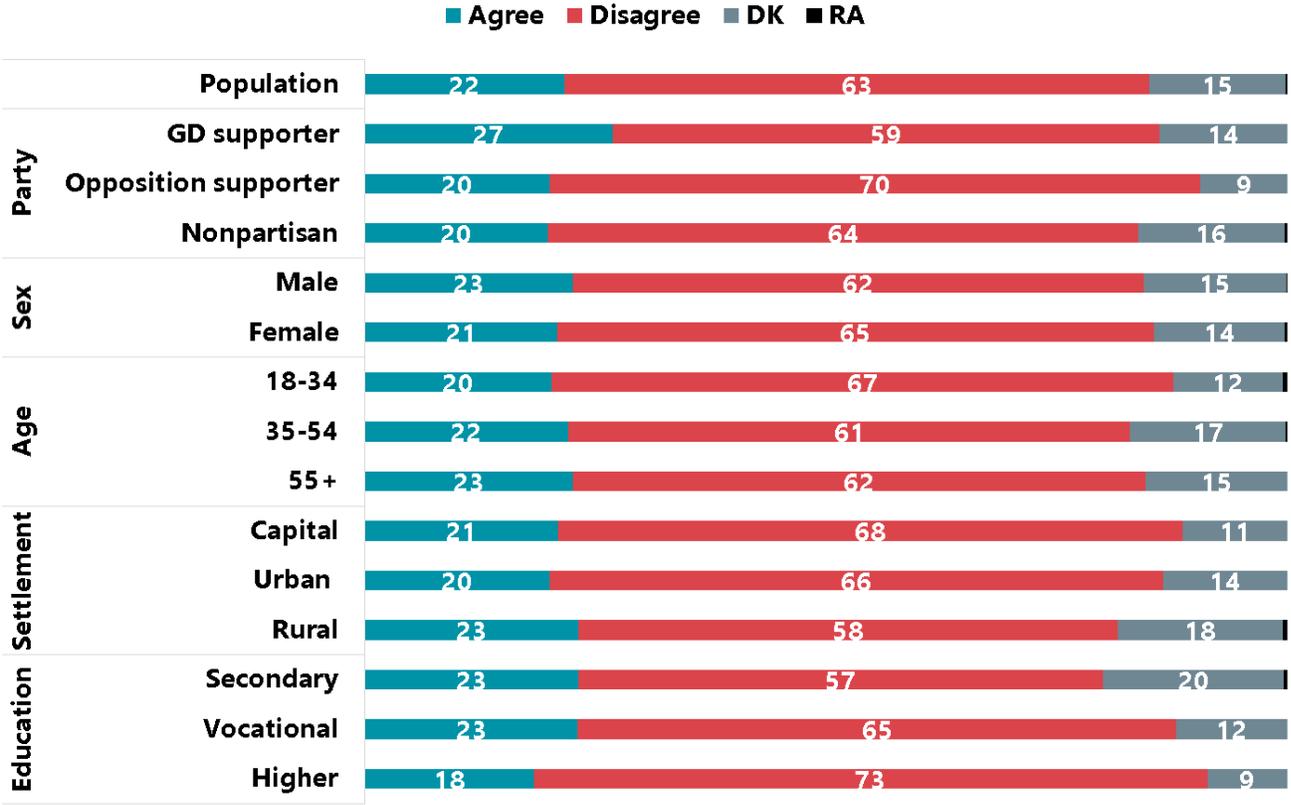


Figure 5: Georgia's accession to the European Union and national identity

Another statement regarding the hypothetical negative consequence of joining the Western structures described a risk of Russian aggression in case Georgia becomes a NATO member. Most of the respondents (71%) agree that such risk is present and only 13% disagree with such risk.

If Georgia becomes a member of NATO, it will increase Russian aggression (%)

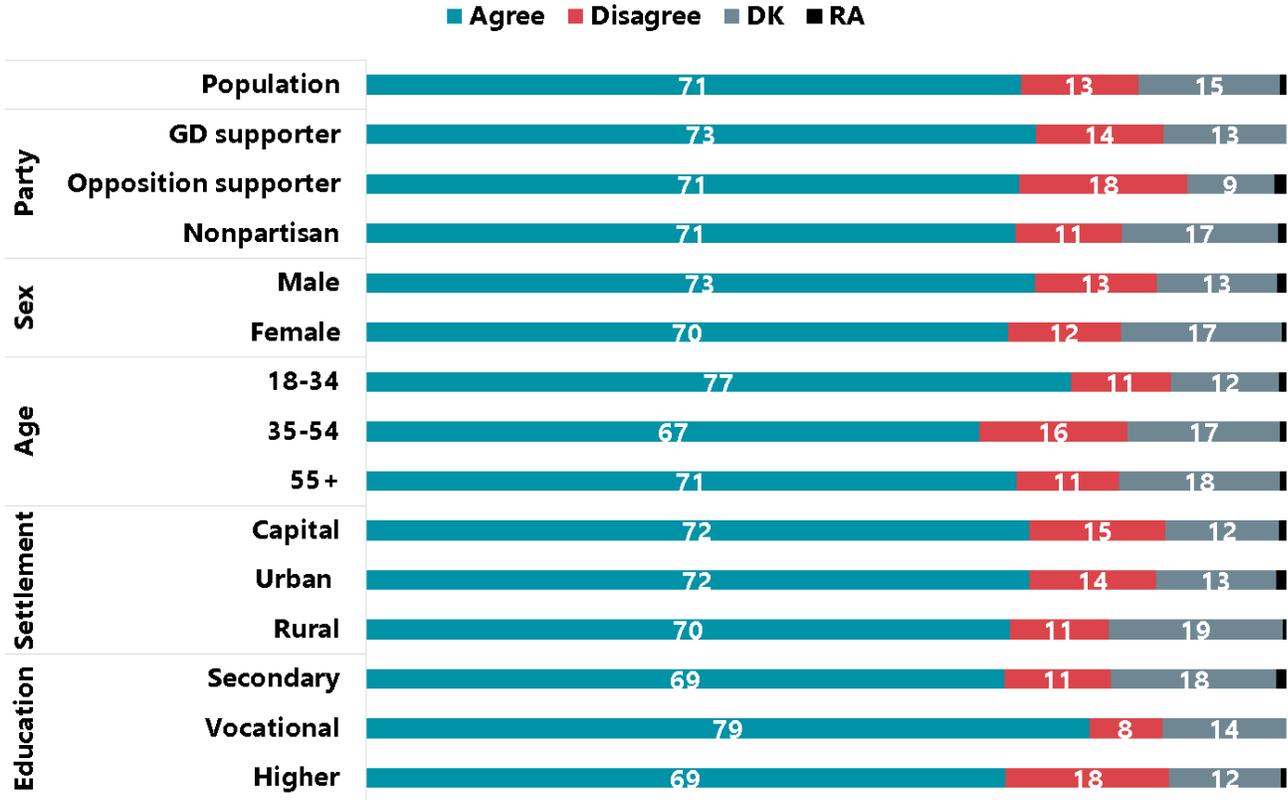


Figure 6: Georgia accession to NATO and Russia's aggression towards Georgia

The survey asked respondents which countries/unions Georgia should have the closest political cooperation with. We aggregated the responses into broader categories: the category “Western countries and organization” includes the USA, UK, European Union, and NATO, and the category “Other countries” includes Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, China, and some other countries. Almost half of the respondents (47%) think that Georgia should have close political cooperation with Western countries/organizations, 12% think that Georgia should have closest cooperation with Russia and one-fifth of the respondents don’t know which country Georgia should have close political cooperation with. The rest of the respondents prioritize other countries. Opposition supporters express the highest support towards the closest political cooperation with the West: 66%, at least 20% points higher than observed among GD supporters and nonpartisans, respectively. Albeit less pronounced, the

differences are observed in other groups as well: younger people, residents of the capital and urban areas, and people with higher education more frequently choose cooperation with the West than older people, residents of rural areas, and people with lower educational backgrounds.

With which countries/unions should Georgia have closest political cooperation? (%)

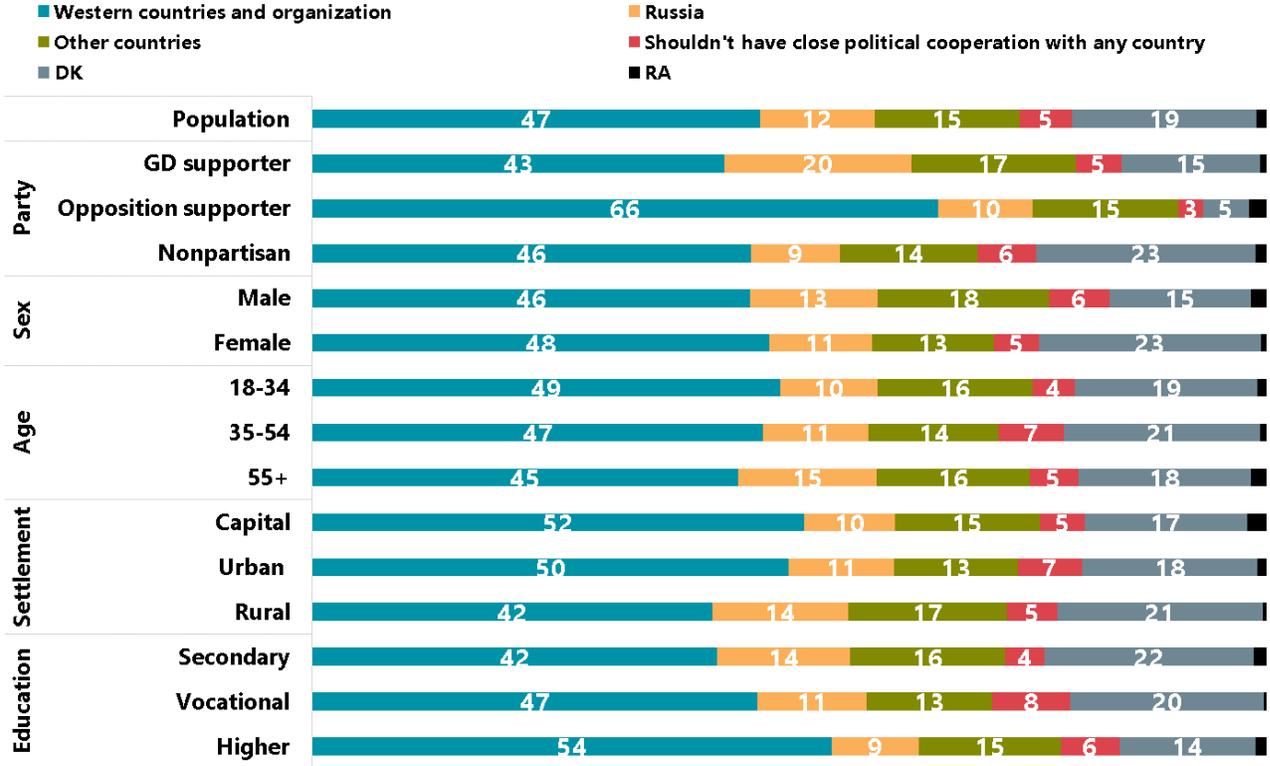


Figure 7: Which countries or unions should Georgia have the closest political cooperation with?

Overall, Georgians maintain their long-held orientation towards the West and want to see their country as a member of the Western economic and security system, even though they have no overwhelming expectations that it will bring back the country’s territorial integrity. Citizens of Georgia also consider that closer cooperation with the West may provoke more aggressive actions from Russia. However, Georgian society is not uniform and some groups support Western aspirations more than others.

THE MAJORITY OF GEORGIANS DO NOT BELIEVE COMPROMISES CAN STOP RUSSIA FROM WAR

In light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, security issues for the region once again arise, even if these concerns have faded to some extent, since the 2008 Russo-Georgia war. The survey asked respondents whether Ukraine could avoid the invasion by making compromises with Russia, as well as if it is an option for Georgia and which compromises are worth for peace.

Over one-third of Georgians think that compromises, in general, could/can avoid war, both in Ukraine and Georgia. While almost half of the respondents (46%) think that compromises with Russia would not help Ukraine to avoid the war, only 22% think similarly about Georgia. The rest of the respondents (about a quarter) think there is no threat of such war at all.

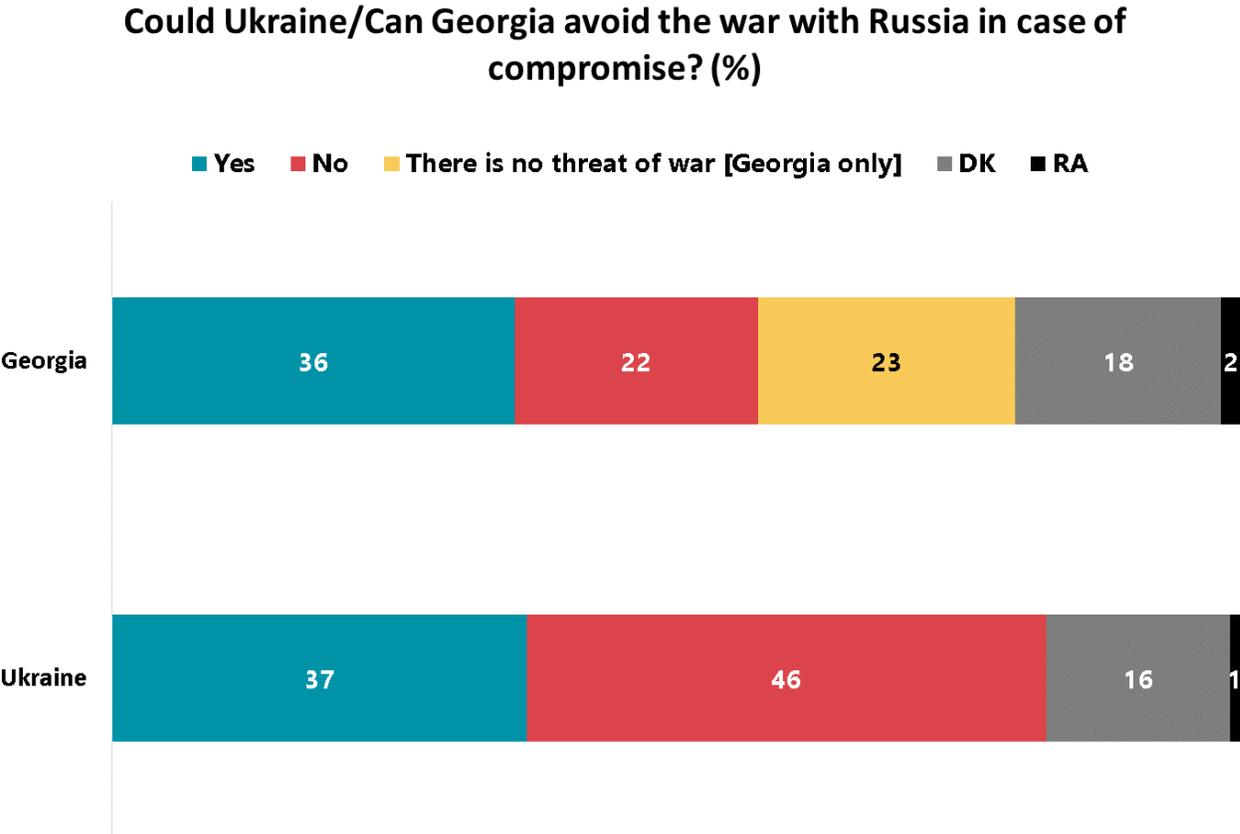


Figure 8: Could Ukraine / Can Georgia avoid war with Russia if it made / makes certain compromises?

While the similarity in the distribution of responses might lead one to think that it is the same people who think that compromise would help Ukraine to avoid the existing conflict and those who think that compromise can help Georgia to avoid the conflict in the future, it is not exactly so. Only 21% of the population think that both Georgia and Ukraine can/could avoid the war and 16% say that neither Ukraine could, nor Georgia can avoid the war by compromising towards Russia. The rest of the population thinks that Ukraine and Georgia have non-similar chances of avoiding the war with Russia by compromises.

Could Ukraine/Can Georgia avoid the war with Russia in case of compromise? (%)

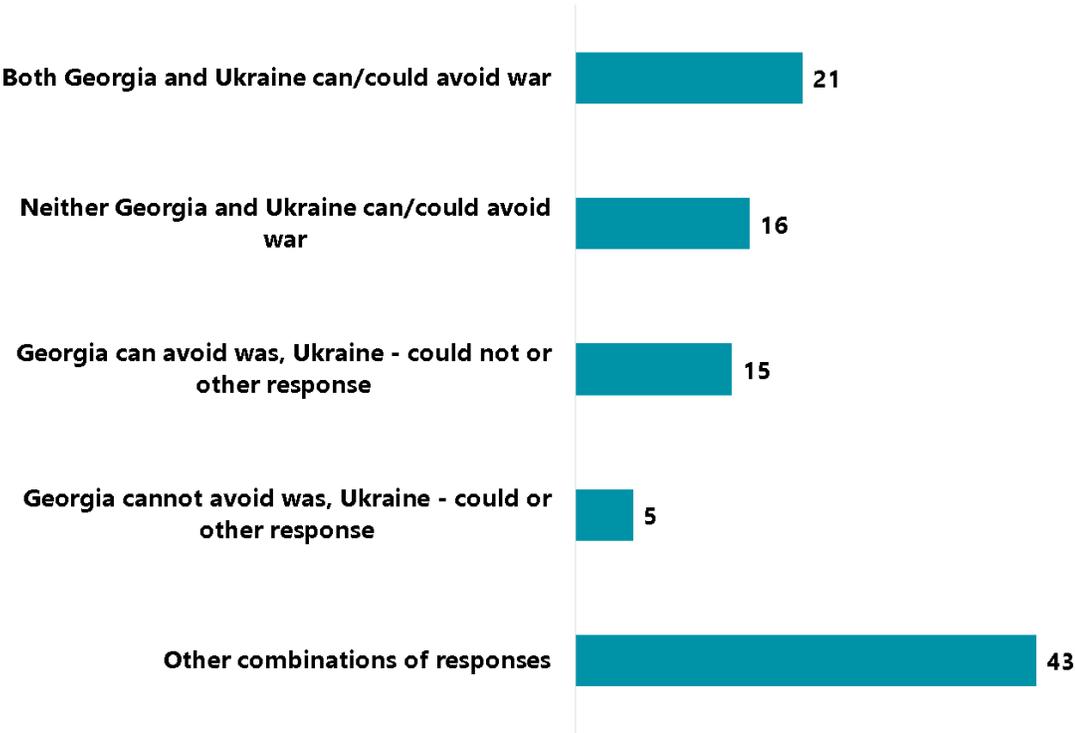


Figure 9: Could Ukraine / Can Georgia avoid war with Russia if it made / makes certain compromises? - grouped

GD supporters are more likely to believe that compromise could avoid the war both in Georgia and Ukraine, while opposition supporters, non-partisans, urban and better-educated individuals more often tend to say that no compromises can help to avoid a potential conflict with Russia, either for Georgia or Ukraine. At the same time, approximately the same share of GD and opposition supporters think that war in Georgia is not likely at all.

Interestingly, age-based differences are prominent only with regards to Georgia, while sex-based differences are present for Ukraine only: younger people more often tend to say that no compromises can help to avoid a potential conflict between Georgia and Russia and men more often say that Ukraine could avoid the war by compromise.

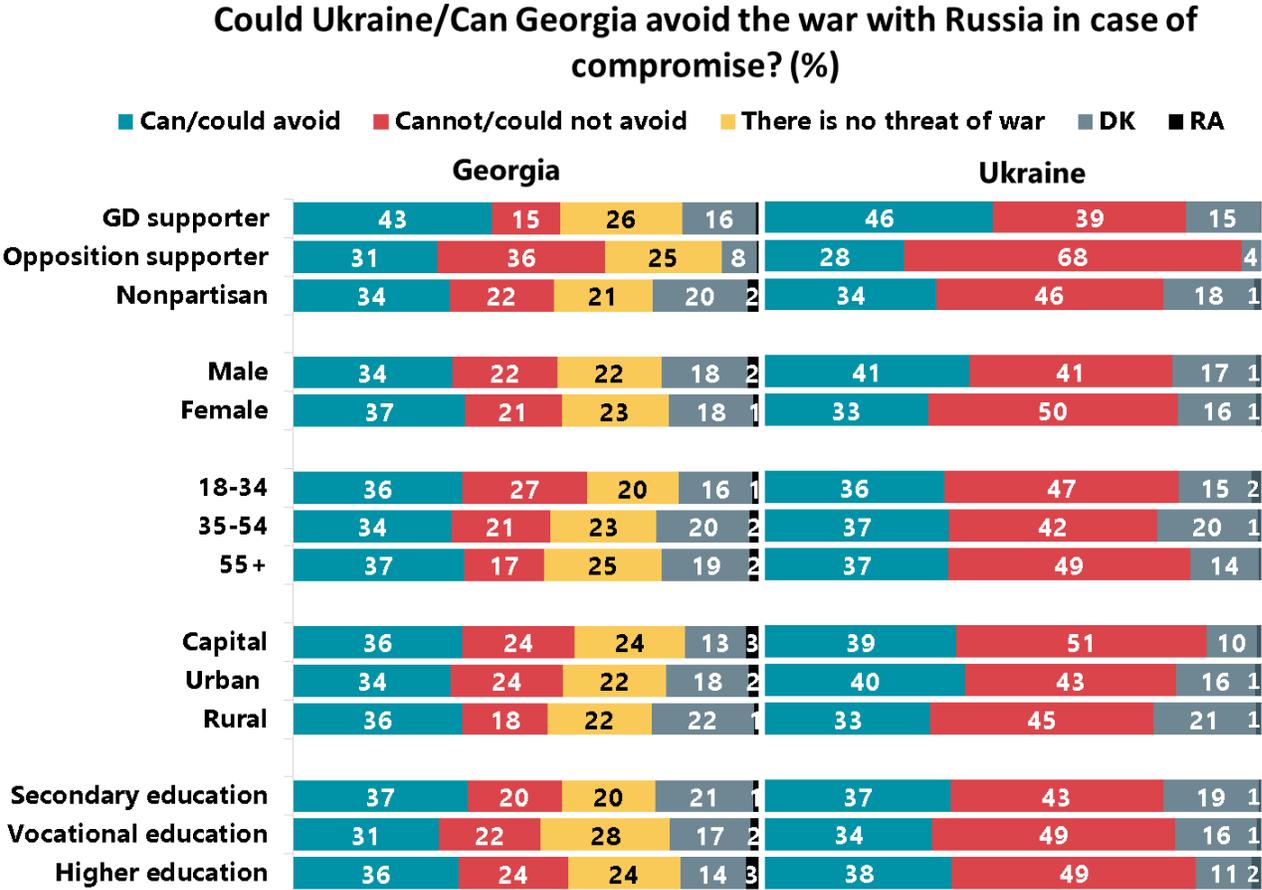


Figure 10: Could Ukraine / Can Georgia avoid war with Russia if it made / makes certain compromises? - by different groups

Slightly over one-third of Georgians believe that conflict with Russia can be avoided by compromise. Even fewer Georgians are ready to relinquish what they see as the country’s key interests, such as Western orientation, territorial integrity, and independence.

MOST GEORGIANS DON'T ACCEPT COMPROMISING KEY INTERESTS FOR AVOIDING CONFLICT WITH RUSSIA

Besides compromise in general, the survey also asked about three specific compromises both in the case of Ukraine and Georgia: a) giving up Western orientation, b) giving up part of its territories and c) officially joining Russia. Overall, respondents expressed low support towards each of these specific compromises (especially in the case of Georgia). Only a fifth of the respondents agreed that Georgia (and slightly more in the case of Ukraine) should have compromised Western orientation. Almost the same share could not answer, while over half of the respondents did not agree with this possible compromise. The rest of the suggested compromises (part of territories and independence) had even lower support, in the cases of both Georgia and Ukraine.

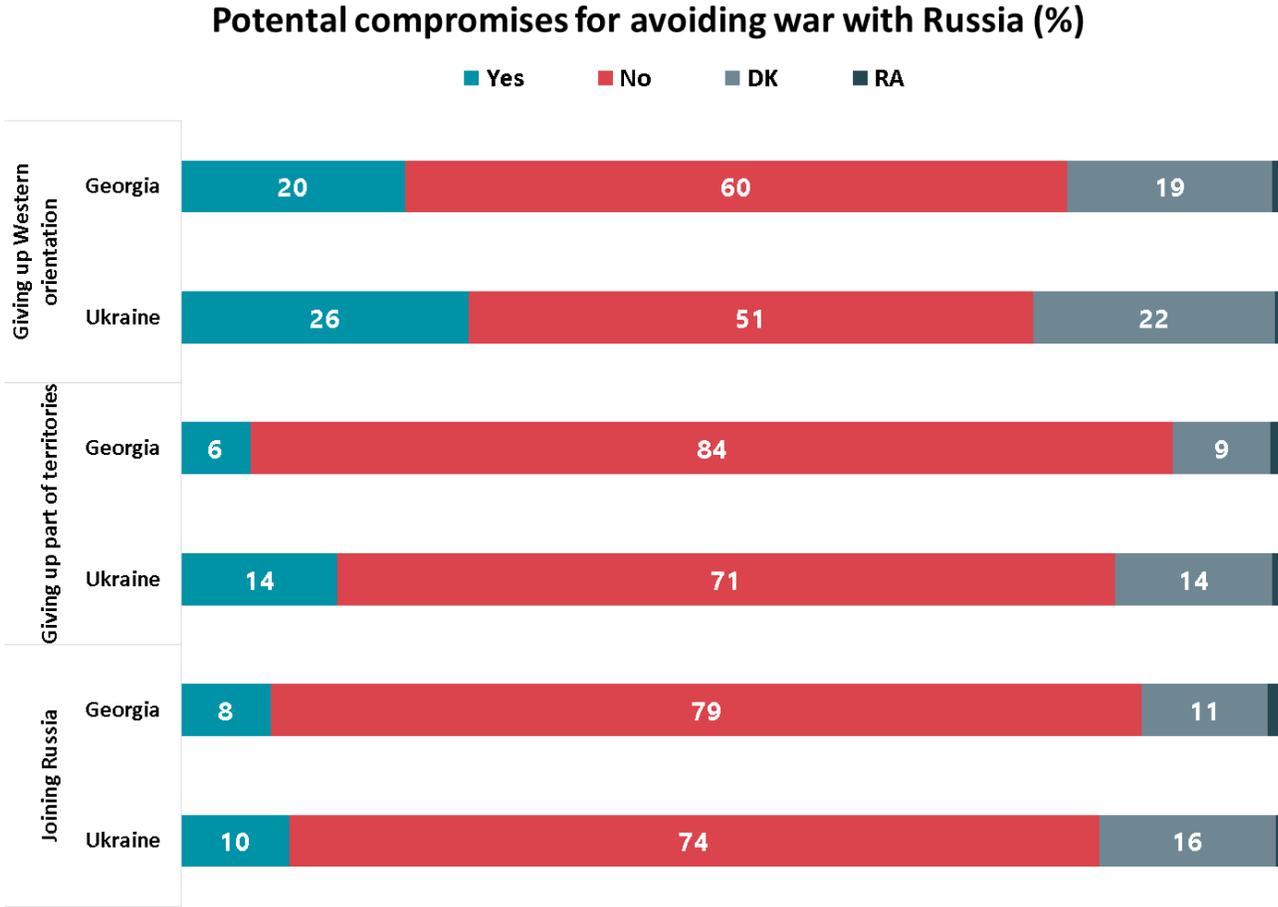


Figure 11: Support for possible compromises to avoid war with Russia

GD supporters are more ready to compromise Western orientation for avoiding the war than opposition supporters and non-partisans, both in the case of Georgia and Ukraine: the share of those against the compromise is lowest among GD supporters and the share of those who accept the compromise is highest among them. In terms of gender, men are more likely to agree that Ukraine should give up its Western orientation if it avoided the war, however, no significant differences were identified concerning Georgia. At the same time, younger people, urban population, and respondents with higher levels of education are less eager to trade the country's pursuit to the West for avoiding a hypothetical war with Russia.

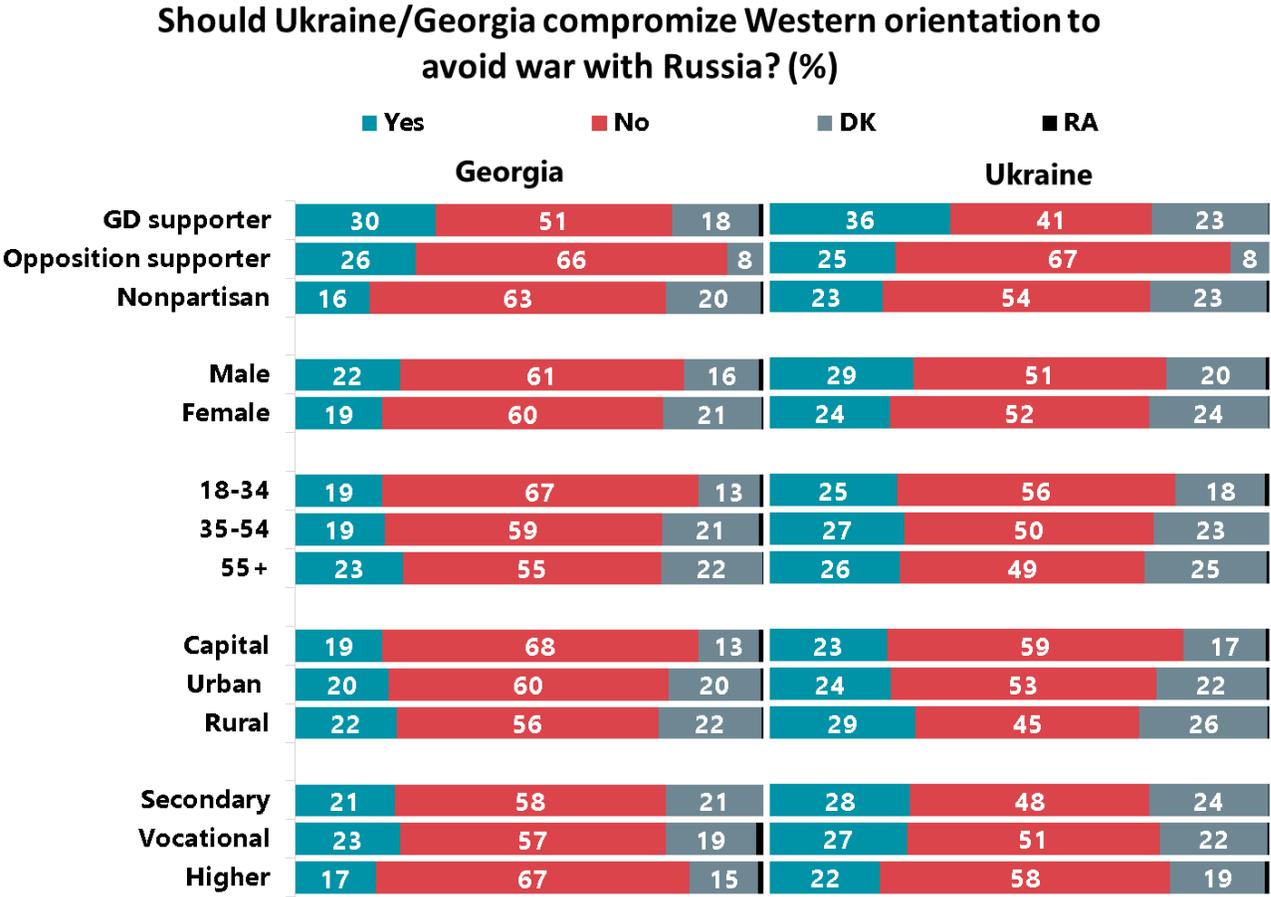


Figure 12: Giving up western orientation to avoid war with Russia - by different groups

Giving up territories as a possible compromise got even less support than giving up Western orientation in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia. Moreover, there is lower variability across different population subgroups on the issue. Only GD supporters are more prominently reporting that either Georgia or Ukraine should give up part of its territories for avoiding war with Russia. Respondents with a basic level of education are slightly more accepting of Ukraine giving up territories for peace, however, no similar pattern is determined for Georgia.

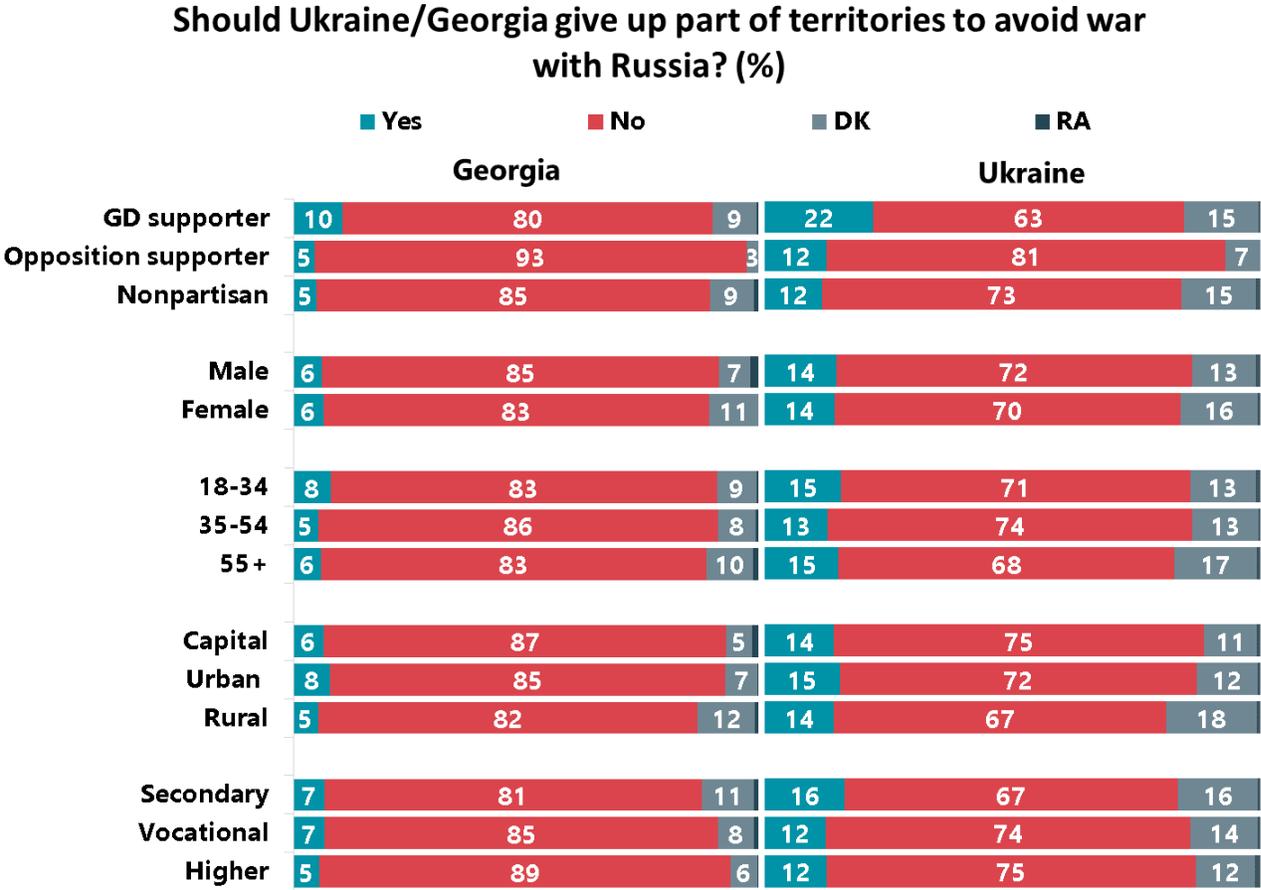


Figure 13: Giving up part of territories to avoid war with Russia - by different groups

The third and the most radical option the survey offered to respondents was Ukraine and Georgia giving up their independence and officially joining Russia. As with the case of giving up part of territories, this option got a high rejection rate: 74% of the respondents in the case of Georgia and 66% of respondents in the case of Ukraine see such sacrifice unacceptable, even if it brings peace with Russia. Among the population groups, giving up its independence to avoid the war is the most unacceptable for opposition supporters, younger people, Tbilisi residents, and people with higher education.

**Should Ukraine/Georgia join Russia to avoid war with Russia?
(%)**

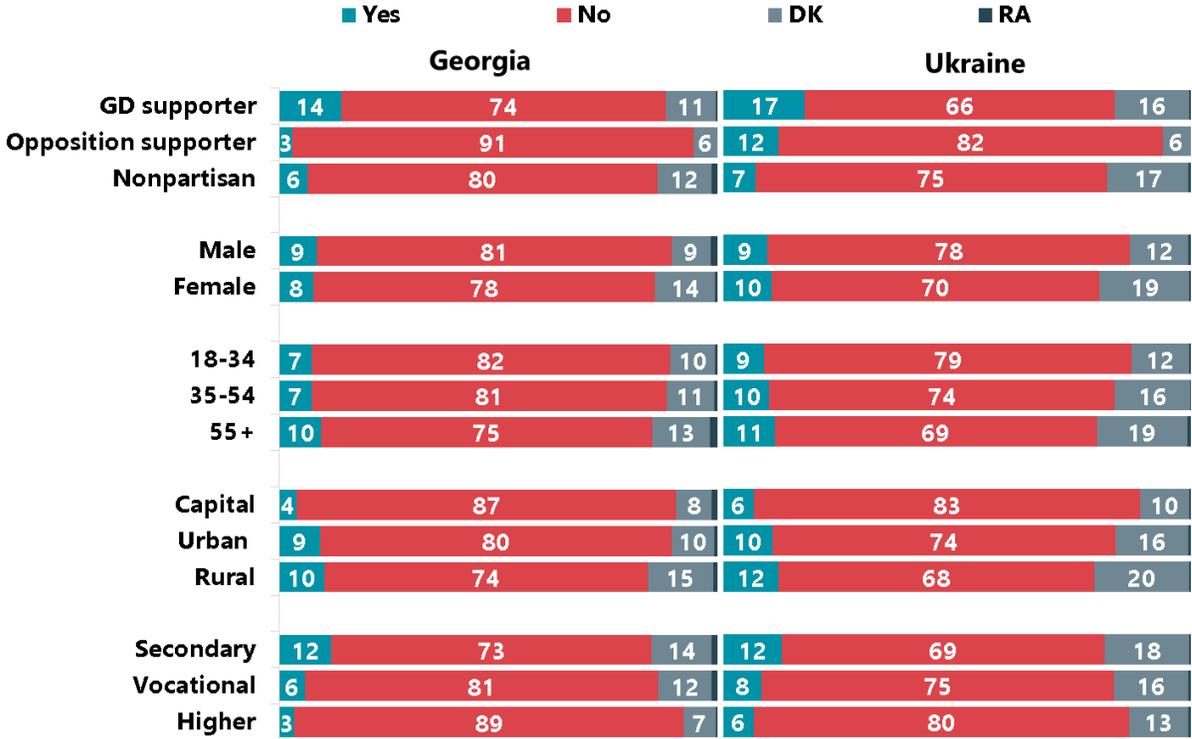


Figure 14: Giving up independence to avoid war with Russia - by different groups

As the survey shows, even under ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, Georgians are not ready to sacrifice their key interests and reject Western aspirations, territories, and independence to smooth their neighbor’s political ambitions. While, in general, potential compromises are not completely rejected by Georgian society, clear lines are drawn where such compromises cannot be made.

EFFECTS OF INFORMATION FRAMING REGARDING COMPROMISES

The survey utilized a randomized experiment to determine the effect of information framing on attitudes regarding acceptance of compromises for avoiding war. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three groups. One group received a message describing Ukraine’s military success, the second group was given a message regarding Ukraine’s military losses, and the third group received no message. Respondents received the messages before questions regarding compromises, which allowed us to detect the effect of each message (experimental condition) on subsequent responses. The results indicate that although opposition supporters are less prone to accepting compromises with Russia, they are also more vulnerable to how the information is framed regarding the progress of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

At the overall population level, the experimental condition (type of statement) had no significant effect on responses regarding either Ukraine or Georgia. At the same time, information framing specifically affects opposition supporters: respondents who heard the statement describing Ukraine’s military failures chose the response that “Ukraine could avoid the war if it made certain compromises towards Russia” 25 percentage points more frequently than those opposition supporters who heard no statement at all. As for the case of Georgia, the experimental condition had only a marginal effect: opposition supporters who heard statements regarding Ukraine’s success were less frequently responding that Georgia can avoid war if it makes a compromise with Russia, however, this effect was at the edge of statistical significance.

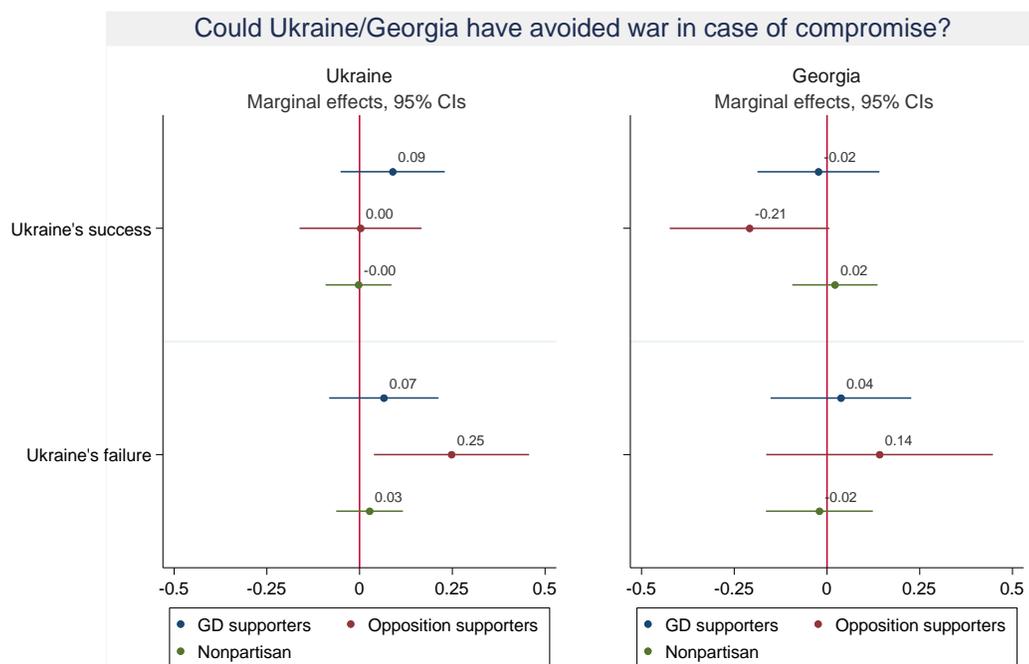


Figure 15: Avoiding war with compromises - the effect of information.

Statement regarding Ukraine’s military failure also increases the probability of agreeing that Georgia should have compromised its Western orientation in case it is needed for avoiding war with Russian, compared to those who are not given any statements, among opposition supporters, women, and younger people. We observe a similar effect with the Ukraine-related question, however, its statistical significance was marginal.

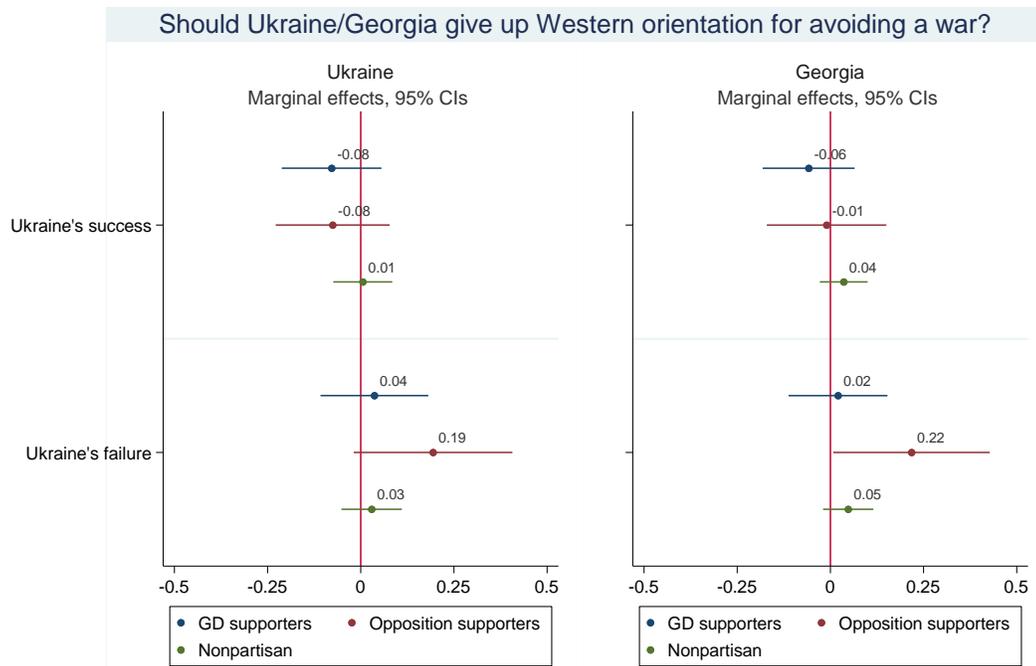


Figure 16: Giving up western orientation to avoid war - the effect of information

In the case of Ukraine giving part of its territories or giving up its independence for avoiding war, the only two groups where the statements affect responses are opposition supporters and younger people: in both of these groups, the statement regarding Ukraine’s failure increases the probability of agreeing that it was worth for Ukraine to join Russia for the sake of peace. We did not detect any statistically significant effect of the statement regarding Ukraine’s success or failure over responses regarding Georgia in none of the political/demographic groups.

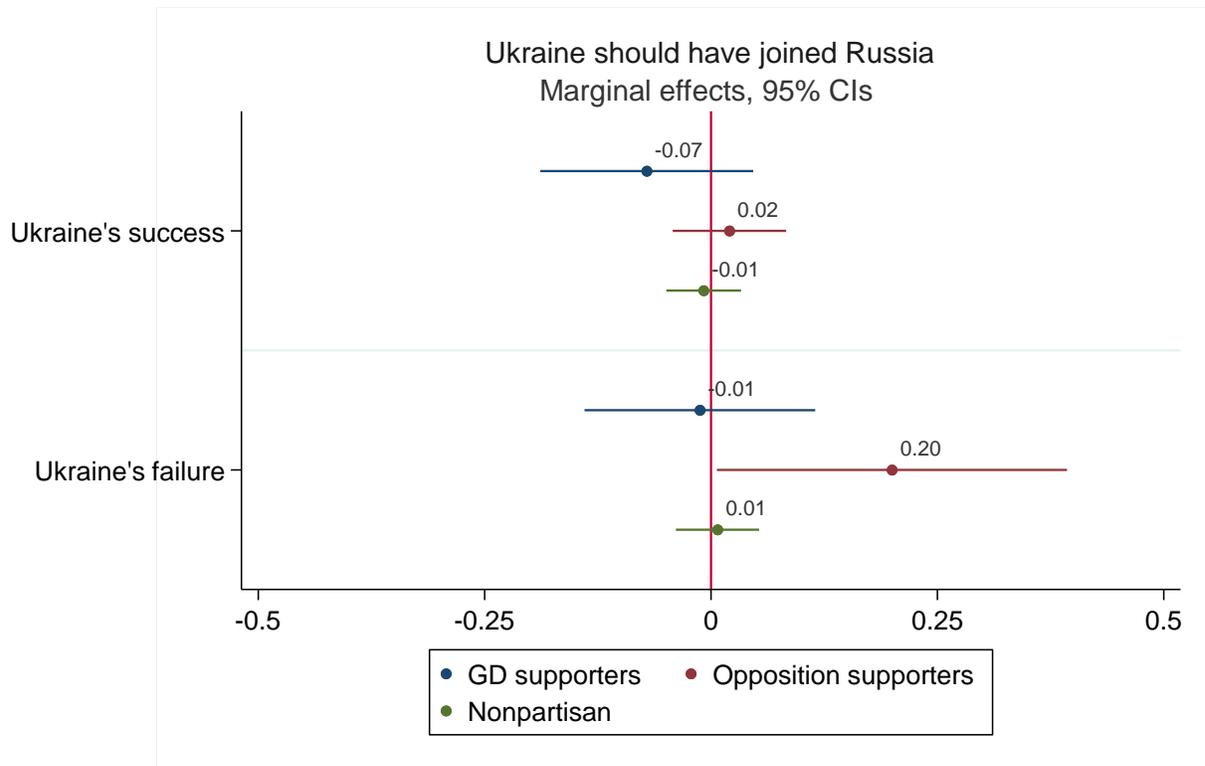


Figure 17: Giving up independence to avoid war - the effect of information

The survey experiment demonstrates that information is a powerful tool for mobilizing public attitudes toward one position or the others, although its effect might vary across different population groups. Interestingly, the groups which demonstrate the strongest pro-Western support and are the least supportive towards any compromise with Russia (opposition supporters and young people), are the most affected by hearing about Ukraine's military losses and tend to change their opinion toward more compromising positions regarding Russia. In contrast, groups with initially more moderate positions towards Russia (nonpartisans and ruling party supporters) turned out to be more robust against the information effect.

A PLURALITY BELIEVES THAT UKRAINE WILL LIBERATE ALL OF ITS TERRITORIES

Most Georgian think that Russia will not be able to occupy Ukraine, however, opinions are split on whether Ukraine will be able to completely liberate its territories, or whether the success will be partial. Overall opposition supporters express a higher level of optimism toward Ukraine’s success, than GD supporters and nonpartisans. They also describe the role of Ukraine’s president and Western leaders (Biden and then PM Johnson) more positively, and the role of Belorussian and Russian presidents and Georgian leaders (Gharibashvili and Zurabishvili) more negatively, than GD supporters and nonpartisans do.

Only 5% of Georgians think that the war will end with the complete occupation of Ukraine’s territory. The rest of the respondents split roughly equally between those who think that the war will end with partial occupation of Ukraine, those who think that the war will end with Ukraine liberating its territories, and those who find it hard to answer this question. The differences between the groups are not highly prominent and only opposition supporters stand out with the highest expectation of Ukraine liberating its territories (52% vs max 39% in other groups).

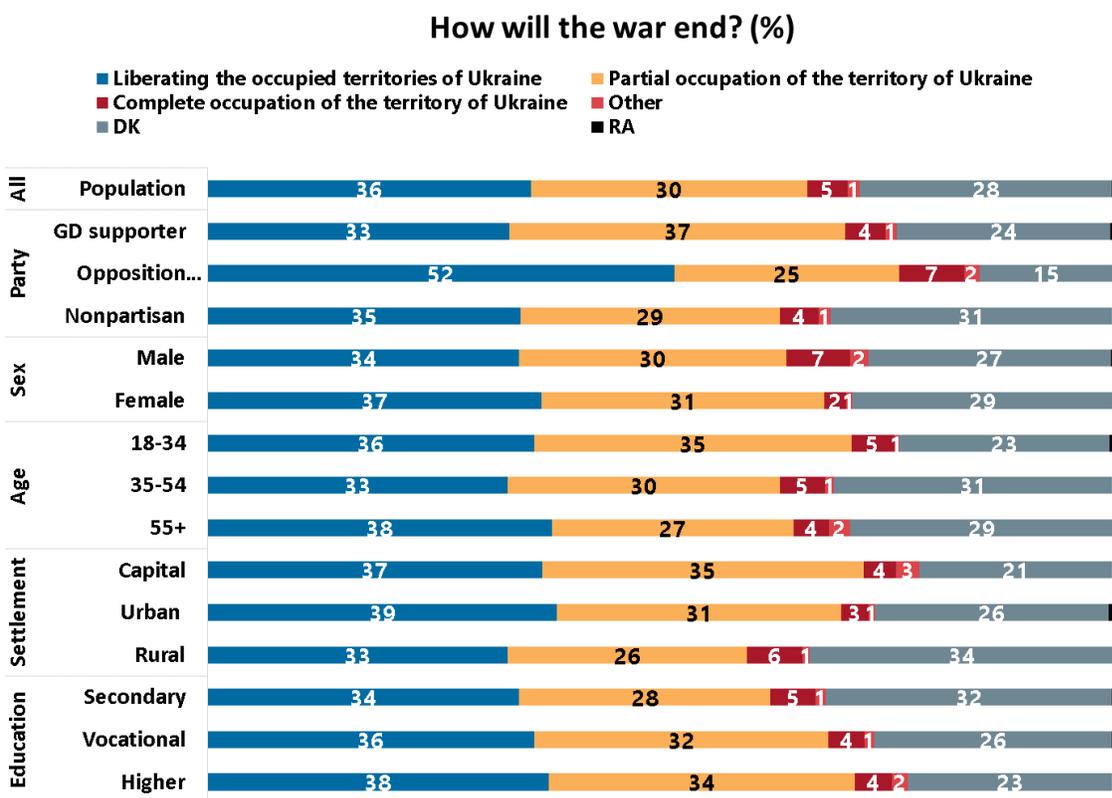


Figure 18:
How will the war in Ukraine end? - by different groups

The survey also asked about the roles of various leaders related to the war in Ukraine. Among foreign leaders, the roles of Volodymyr Zelenskiy, Boris Johnson, and Joe Biden were assessed positively, and the roles of Alexander Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin – negatively. Opposition supporters assess the roles of Zelenskiy and the Western leaders more positively, and the role of Putin and Lukashenko more negatively than GD supporters and non-partisans do.

Assessing foreign leaders's action regarding to the war (%)

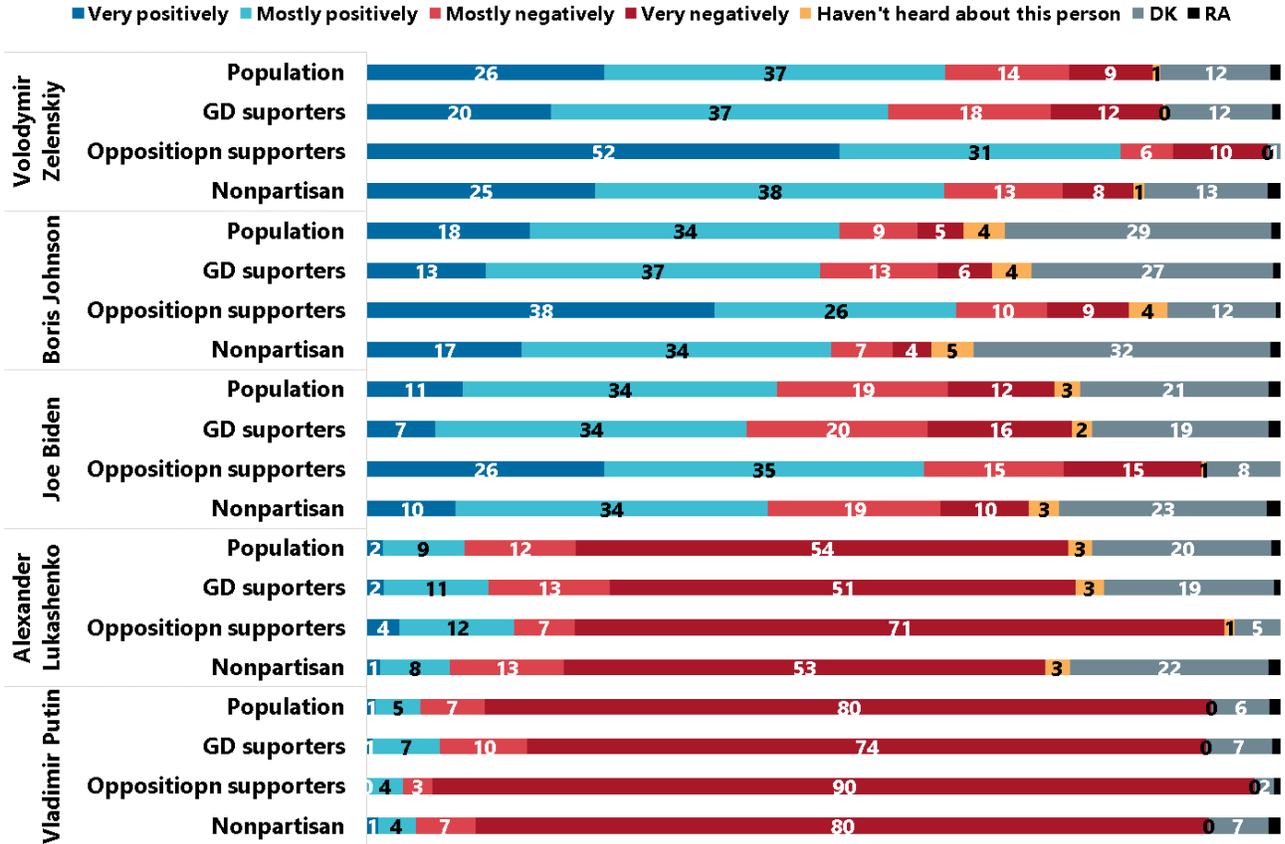


Figure 19: Assessment of foreign leaders' actions regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine

As for Georgia’s political leadership – PM Gharibashvili and president Zurabishvili, GD supporters assess their roles more positively than opposition supporters and not-partisans.

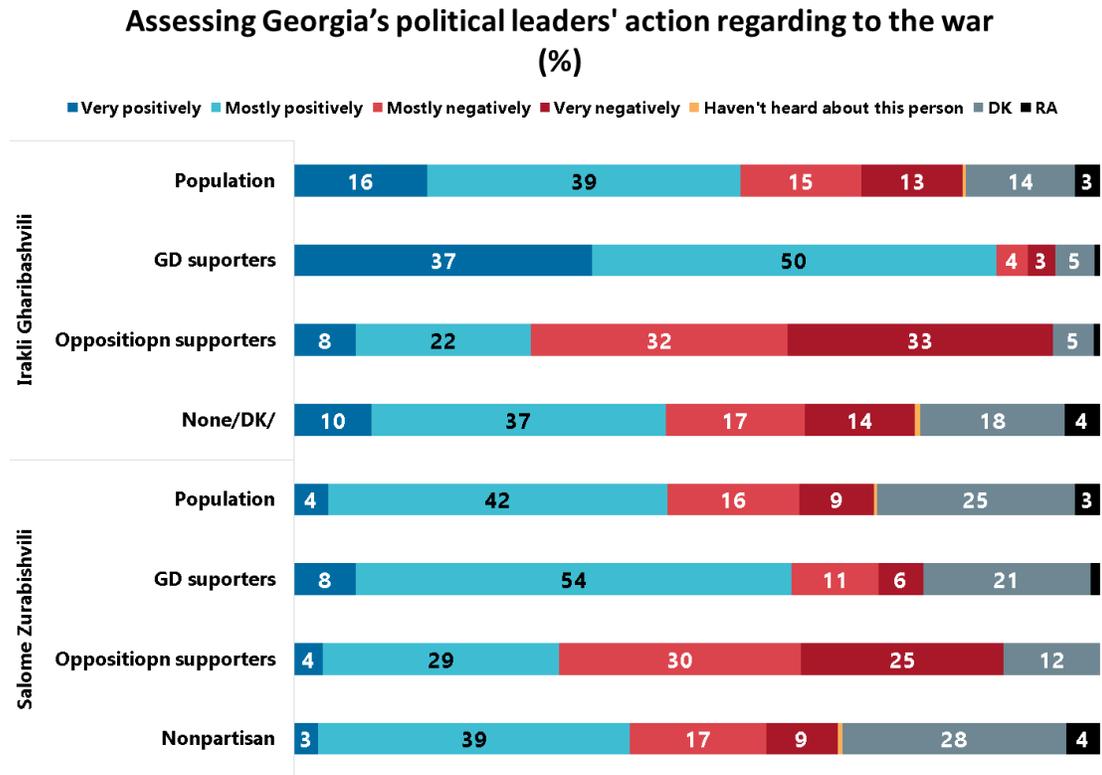


Figure 20: Assessment of Georgian leaders' actions regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine

Overall, Georgians expect Ukraine to maintain independence, even if it’s not able to restore control of all of its territories. Ukraine’s leadership, as well as Western leaders, who supported Ukraine, are positively perceived by the Georgian public, while opinions split on Georgia’s leadership’s action from positive to negative, across different party supporters.

SUMMARY

Georgians maintain a strong pro-Western orientation: the majority of Georgians want to see their country as a member of the European Union and NATO, regardless of their expectation that it may increase Russian aggression toward Georgia. They believe that membership of Western structures will bring economic development to their country and the threat of losing national identity is exaggerated: Only 22% of Georgian citizens agree that Georgia will lose its national identity if it becomes a member of the EU, while 73% of respondents agree that becoming an EU member will help to develop Georgian economy. However, Georgian society is not uniform and some groups support Western aspirations more than others: younger people, the urban population, individuals with higher education, and opposition supporters express higher level of support for Georgia's Western aspirations, than other groups do.

The majority of Georgians do not believe compromises can stop Russia from war. Only slightly over one-third of Georgians think that compromises, in general, could avoid a war in Ukraine or can avoid it in Georgia. At the same time, almost half of the respondents (46%) think that compromises with Russia would not help Ukraine avoid the war. GD supporters more often respond that compromise could avoid the war both in Ukraine and Georgia, than nonpartisans and opposition supporters.

Most Georgians don't accept compromising key national interests for avoiding conflict with Russia. While, in general, potential compromises are not completely rejected by Georgian society, clear lines are drawn where such compromises cannot be made. Even under ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, Georgians are not ready to sacrifice the country's national interests - Western aspirations, territories, and independence to smooth their neighbor's political ambitions. Only a fifth of the respondents agreed that Georgia (and slightly more in the case of Ukraine) should have compromised Western orientation, while over half of the respondents did not agree with this possible compromise.

GD supporters are more ready to compromise Western orientation for avoiding the war than opposition supporters and non-partisans. On the other hand, younger people, the urban population, and respondents with higher levels of education are less eager to trade the country's pursuit to the West for hypothetical peace with Russia. Other potential compromises, such as giving up part of its territories or independence for the sake of peace, were rejected even more strongly, than giving up Western orientation.

Information framing affects attitudes regarding compromises. A randomized experiment shows that different groups react differently to framing the information as Ukraine's military success or Ukraine's military losses: the groups which demonstrated strongest pro-Western support and were the least supportive towards any compromise with Russia (opposition supporters and, to some extent, young people) were the most affected by hearing about Ukraine's military losses and tended to change their opinion towards more compromising positions regarding Russia.

Most Georgians assess the role of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy positively, followed by the role of former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US President Joe Biden. On the other hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belorussian president Alexander Lukashenko are assessed negatively. Overall, opposition supporters are more radical in their assessments and describe the role of Ukraine's President and Western leaders more positively, and the role of Russian and Belorussian Presidents more negatively than GD supporters and not-partisans do. At the same time, opinions split on Georgia's leadership's actions related to the war from positive to negative, across different party supporters.

A plurality believes that Ukraine will liberate all of its territories. Most Georgian think that Russia will not be able to occupy Ukraine, however, opinions are split on whether Ukraine will be able to completely liberate its territories, or whether the success will be partial.