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Research Article

Foreign Policy Orientation and Electoral Behaviour: Analysing Opinion Polls in Belarus, Georgia, and Kazakhstan[1]

Igor Yu. Okunev, Marianna N. Shestakova

MGIMO University

Abstract. In the post-pandemic years of 2021–2022, the post-Soviet space has entered a stage of decisive transformation, which will test the maturity of the state institutions formed 30 years ago for the region's countries. The study captures a snapshot of public sentiment in these countries on the eve of this wave of transformation – it is based on a series of large-scale opinion polls carried out in Belarus, Georgia and Kazakhstan, conducted immediately after the most recent elections to the lower houses of parliaments of these countries in the pre-crisis era. The main research question of the sociological study was to identify demographic and geographical patterns in determining the attitude of voters toward the prospects for relations with Russia. Countries with traditionally different strategies of relations with Russia were taken: Belarus is a strategic ally, Kazakhstan is friendly but pursues a multi-vector policy, and Georgia is generally hostile at the level of the political class. The analysis showed that in matters of orientation towards positive relations with Russia, the voters of these countries nevertheless had more in common than they had differences. Based on the results of our analysis, several lines of delimitation can be distinguished. Firstly, the "macro-regional, geopolitical" line runs between Belarus and Kazakhstan, on the one hand, and Georgia, on the other. The second split along the "centre-periphery" line takes place within states. Such a demarcation was singled out by many researchers in relation to Russia; however, we found the same demarcations in Belarus ("Minsk and the rest of the country"), and partly in Georgia and Kazakhstan. Finally, the authors acknowledge possible delimitations along the north–south lines in Georgia (Shestakova 2021: 156); to a certain extent along the north–centre–south line in Kazakhstan (Vinogradov 2020: 177), as a result of territorial differentiation, with Russians living in the northern regions of the country and people are more positively disposed to Russia than those living in the more remote southern regions; and somewhat in Belarus – in those regions that border Russia and Ukraine.

Keywords: electoral geography; post-Soviet space; Belarus; Georgia; Kazakhstan; sociological survey; foreign policy orientation

[1] English translation from the Russian text: Okunev I. Yu., Shestakova M. N. 2022. Vneshnepoliticheskaya orientatsiya kak faktor elektoral'nogo povedeniya: rezul'taty sotsiologicheskikh oprosov v Belarusi, Gruzii i Kazakhstane. *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta* [MGIMO Review of International Relations]. 15(6). P. 55–85. https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2022-6-87-55-85

Over the course of three years, a research team studied the electoral behaviour of residents of states that border the Russian Federation.[2] Among other things, the authors were faced with the task of comparing the attitudes of people living in neighbouring countries towards Russia and Russian people, as well as identifying the format of these relationships.

Various research methods were used to address the main questions: Are there intra-territorial differences in the electoral behaviour of residents of countries bordering the Russian Federation? And, are there any differences in the attitudes of people living in these countries towards Russia?

The authors used qualitative and quantitative methods of empirical research: expert surveys, participant observation in the respective territories, and large-scale phone surveys. The latter method allowed the authors to compare the results for three countries, namely Belarus, Georgia and Kazakhstan.

The chosen research design made it possible to broach a number of issues that are important not only for the study of electoral preferences, but also in the broad theoretical context of the social sciences. The main dependent variable – attitudes towards a neighbouring country that is a regional leader – is important for a number of areas in international studies. It should be acknowledged here that, despite the widespread use of the term "relationship" in political discourse in relation to the image of one country in the public consciousness of another, the set of theories that actually conceptualize this phenomenon is limited.

It is generally believed that a mostly friendly or hostile attitude towards a country is closely related to the indicators of its "soft power," and, in this regard, the present paper continues the work to accumulate empirical material on Russian soft-power in the post-Soviet space (Kazantsev, Merkushev 2008; Lebedeva, Kharkevich 2014; Savchuk, Frants, Saidmagomedova 2022).

The image of foreign states is at the heart of research works on popular critical geopolitics, the cognitive theory of foreign policy, and the study of national brands. Popular critical geopolitics deals with geographically cognitive structures (images, stereotypes, mental maps and their relationships) in the mass consciousness (Okunev 2009). It serves to shed light on issues related to the formation of such cognitive structures in individual countries (Sharp 2011) and regions, as well as the events taking place in them (Strüver 2007; Hazbun 2011). Of particular note are the works of V. Kolossov, which focus on separating images according to Russia–West, Russia–East (Kolossov 2003) and West–Non-West (Kolossov 2013) lines.

Existing at the intersection of political psychology and neoclassical realism within the framework of the theory of international relations, the cognitive theory of foreign policy also dwells on the formation of images of other states and how this affects for-

[2] The project received funding from the Russian Science Foundation: Project No. 19-78-10004 "Transformation of Electoral Behavior in the Regions of Foreign Countries Bordering on the Russian Federation: Comparative Spatial Analysis."

eign policy. The concept of the "image of the state" and the "friendliness – hostility" matrix were introduced into scientific circulation as far back as 1959 by one of the founders of the general theory of systems, Kenneth Boulding (Boulding 1959). Contrary to his claims that images in the minds of the elites and those of the general public ultimately influence the political decision-making process, early works were limited to analyses of decision-makers. They mostly studied how various signals shape, for example, the "Soviet image of America's resolve" (Jervis 1970: 247).[3] Gradually, within the framework of the cognitive theory of foreign policy, researchers began to integrate the images that exist in the minds of ordinary citizens into their theoretical analyses (Schweller 2004; O'Reilly 2007) and even focus exclusively on the general population (Kunczik 1996; Alexander, Levin, Henry 2005; Castano, Bonacossa, Gries 2015).

Finally, the literature on "national brands" stands out as a separate area at the intersection of the theory of international relations and public affairs. It pays a great deal of attention to the technologies employed to create the image of a foreign country, emphasizing the activities of different types of actors, including states, transnational corporations, international organizations and NGOs (Dinnie 2014; Sriramesh, Verčič 2003: 399, 522). The questions we ask in this study move away from the traditional method of identifying images of what exists towards identifying images of what is desired, which opens up opportunities to pose new research questions within the framework of the three research areas described above.

Large-scale sociological surveys in the form of standardized, structured interviews are one of the most popular tools used in sociological research. It is a popular tool for obtaining a snapshot of public opinion at a given point in time, and standardized closed-ended questions are suitable for collecting a large array of "similar" data (Belanovsky 2019), which can be classified and interpreted using statistical and mathematical methods.

A weakness of quantitative methods is that they "can be used to answer certain standard questions and study stationary processes" (Belanovsky 2019).

The most glaring shortcomings of this method are the high costs, in the literal sense of the word, as well as the fact that this type of survey does not lend itself easily to adjusting samples by gender, age, profession, education, etc. (or, more precisely, it is possible, but it does not make sense to do so due to the significant time, human and material costs it would involve).

The advantages of sociological surveys are that answers to the same questions can be compared, which is a key element of the scientific method in sociology (Ventaktesh 2017). And it is this idea that formed the basis of our study: to conduct an almost identical survey of residents of states neighbouring Russia in order to be able to operationalize and compare the answers of respondents as much as possible. In addition, if

[3] In later works, the term "perception" is used in the same sense.

the sample is geographically dispersed, as it is in this case, this method is more suitable than others (Bryman, Bell 2012). The most significant limitations of phone surveys are the time constraints and the limited number of questions that can be asked as a result.

One of the most important criteria for selecting the countries for this study was the dynamics of relations with Russia during the post-Soviet period: one country that has pursued an exclusively friendly policy towards Russia and whose residents feel entirely at ease communicating with Russians (Belarus); once country that can be described as relatively "neutral" towards Russia (Kazakhstan); and one country with which has had a rocky relationship since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Georgia).

Another important condition for the comparability of opinion polls in different countries was that they could be timed to coincide with the parliamentary elections in each of them. All the polls were conducted immediately after general elections – in November 2019 in Belarus, November 2020 in Georgia, and January 2021 in Kazakhstan. Phone surveys in Kazakhstan and Belarus were further supplemented with expert interviews.

As we can see, the surveys were conducted before the significant geopolitical changes that characterize the current situation took place. The "pulse of public opinion" was taken to coincide with the electoral cycles in each of the countries, and this allows us to compare results, despite the fact that they were conducted at different times.

The main requirement for researchers conducting the phone surveys was to ensure a controlled, uniform (as far as possible) sample in all regions of the countries. This is important for establishing whether or not intra-regional differentiation is observed. The interviewers recorded the gender, age and nationality of the respondents (according to the answers they themselves gave). The social and economic situations of the respondents (level of education, profession, income, etc.) were outside the scope of the survey. All the questions were closed-ended, and random sampling was used to select participants.

An objective limitation of the opinion polls was that phone interviews were conducted over landline only, which in some cases reduced the potential base of respondents to sparsely populated or hard-to-reach regions (for example, a number of mountainous regions in Georgia), as well as the fact that the surveys were carried out in Russia. While the latter fact was not an issue in Belarus, and presented little trouble in Kazakhstan, it greatly affected the makeup of the participants – and thus their responses – in Georgia. Interestingly, a study carried out by A. Manakov revealed that the use of Russian had actually increased in a number of post-Soviet countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union, although it is obvious that "the status of the Russian language […] is also associated with the share of the Russian-speaking population, but it also depends strongly on the political situation" (Manakov 2021: 345). And this so happens to be the case in the countries where we conducted our opinion polls.

The questionnaire we devised contained standardized (as far as possible) questions related, first and foremost, to social and cultural practices related to the interaction of residents of these neighbouring countries with Russia, as well as an assessment of the electoral behaviour of people living there.

Crucial to our analysis was the search for territorial differentiation in the answers inside the countries we looked at – what interested us was whether or not the responses given by residents of regions bordering the Russian Federation differed from those given in other parts of the country.

This was, in fact, the initial goal of the project – "to study the electoral features of border regions as a result of their special position" (Shestakova 2019: 444), especially since there is a dearth of such studies in the Russian academic literature. The only works that come to mind are those by A. Zinoviev (Zinoviev 2015), A. Manakov (Manakov 2016), and I. Tarasov and E. Fidrya (Tarasov, Fidrya 2016).

The length of the borders of the countries in question with the Russian Federation varies from 561km for Georgia (*de facto*),[4] to 1239km for Belarus, to 7598.6km (the longest of the three) with Kazakhstan. The number of regions in these countries that border the Russian Federation also varies: three regions in Belarus; four in Georgia, the most challenging in terms of physical accessibility (the North Caucasus acts as a barrier); and seven in Kazakhstan.

As our research progressed, our main hypothesis (that residents of regions bordering Russia demonstrate specific electoral behaviours) was augmented by another – that there is a territorial differentiation in electoral behaviour between the "centre" and the "periphery" in relation to their large neighbour.

These hypotheses were verified by empirical studies carried out in the form of sociological surveys. Almost 20,000 phone calls were made in total, with 1577 questionnaires being completed in full.

In 2020, we published the results of a similar study for Belarus (Okunev, Shestakova, Bibina 2020). At the time, we saw the value of testing several working hypotheses simultaneously. For this reason, when comparing the results of the surveys for the three countries in question, we decided to test and present the results in the same manner.

Several hypotheses were tested during our analysis of the responses. We will consider them in order.

The first hypothesis was that the older generation is more friendly towards Russia and supports the idea of allied/partner relations between the two countries to a greater extent than the younger generation.

We proceeded from the assumption that the older generation remembers life in the Soviet Union, perhaps even idealizing it, and, accordingly, the nostalgia effect – the longing for one's best years – may play a significant role. As a result, they will

[4] The *de facto* and *de jure* length of the Russia–Georgia border are not the same.

give different answers than those provided by representatives of other age groups. The phenomenon of nostalgia for the Soviet Union in the former Soviet countries has been widely studied in the relevant foreign and émigré literature (White 2010; Lee 2011; Mazur 2015; Kalinina, Menke 2016). And it has been proven to exist, especially in the older generation.[5]

While the official age of retirement has been raised in all the countries we are looking at in this study,[6] we have used the more traditional definition of the "older generation" to mean people aged 55 and upwards. The remaining two age groups are: "youth" (people under the age of 35), and the "sandwich generation" (people aged 35 to 55).

Kazakhstan had the largest proportion of respondents representing the youth (41.8%), while the share in the other two countries did not exceed one quarter of the respondents (24% for Belarus, and 19.6% for Georgia). Approximately half of all respondents in the three countries were representatives of the sandwich generation. The older generation had the lowest share of respondents in Kazakhstan (13.2%). It is likely that the differences in the share of respondents by age group produced different answers among interviewees. That said, we tried to compare, within the framework of our hypothesis, the answers of age groups within the countries themselves, and only then their shares between the states themselves.

Those who took part in the phone survey were asked which format of relations with Russia they preferred as a neighbouring country. Four options were given: allied relations; partner relations; neutral relations; and hostile relations. Unsurprisingly, most (over half) of the respondents living in Belarus and Kazakhstan chose allied relations (57.6% and 58.9%, respectively). The results for these countries are even more impressive when partner relations are also taken into account, with 89.4% of respondents in Belarus and 86.3% of respondents in Kazakhstan stating they preferred either allied or partner relations with Russia. It is a different story for Georgia, which is quite natural given the strained relations it has had with Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even so, over 40% of those who took part in the survey were in favour of allied relations between the two countries. Combined with those who chose partner relations, we see that almost three quarters of respondents in Georgia would prefer allied or partner relations with Russia, which is fairly high. The percentage of people who would opt for neutral relations with Russia varies to a much greater degree, from 10% in Belarus to 20% in Georgia. Very few people would like to see hostile relations between their country and Russia: 0.2% of respondents in Belarus, 0.3% of those in Kazakhstan, and 3.2% in Georgia chose this option. Figures 1 and 2 show a comparison of respondents' answers in all countries where interviewees stated that they would prefer their country to be in allied or neutral relations with Russia.

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[5] "Why Young People Yearn for the USSR". *Vedomosti*. 26 December 2017. URL: https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2017/12/26/746513-rossiya-skuchaet-po-sssr (accessed: December 25, 2022).

[6] As of 2022, the retirement age in Georgia was 65 for men and 60 for women; 63 for men and 58 for women in Belarus; and 63 and 60, respectively, in Kazakhstan.

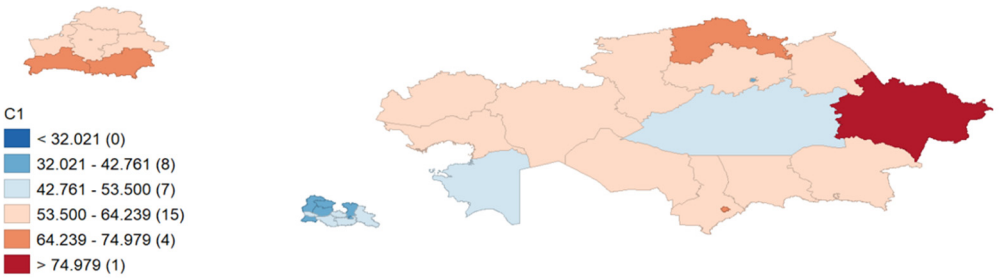

Figure 1. Cartogram of standard deviations for the choice of allied relations between states and Russia[7]

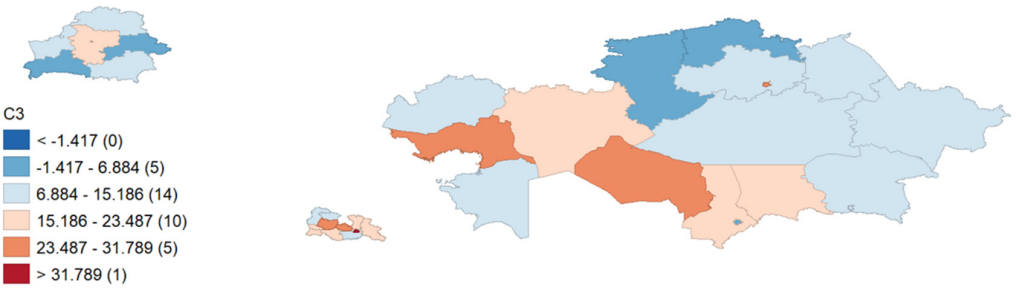

Figure 2. Cartogram of standard deviations for the choice of neutral relations between states and Russia

As the data shows, in Belarus and Kazakhstan, all groups are most in favour of allied relations with Russia, regardless of age. Moreover, there is practically no differentiation between groups – not only in Belarus and Kazakhstan (up to 1.1 times), but also in Georgia, where the difference between "generations" is hardly significant (1.5 times), although the actual percentage here is lower (see Table 1), and is slightly higher for the older age group. It is noteworthy that even though the number of people who are in favour of hostile relations is low in absolute terms, this response was more common among representatives of the older generation.

[7] The standard deviation cartogram divides the observations into six groups: the three shades of blue represent data below the mean, while the three shades of red represent data above the mean. A more saturate colour indicates the degree of deviation from the mean (by one and two standard deviations, respectively, which means that it is possible to judge deviations in the distribution of a phenomenon from the norm – according to the Gauss-Laplace law).

Table 1. Proportion of age categories in the countries under consideration that advocate different formats of relations (in % of the entire age group)

	Allied relations	Partner relations	Neutral relations	Hostile relations
Belarus				
Youth	53.3	31.7	15	-
Sandwich generation	58.3	33.2	7.7	0.4
Older generation	59.1	29.1	11.8	-
Georgia				
Youth	29.6	33.7	34.7	2
Sandwich generation	45.6	30.9	20.8	2.7
Older generation	46	31.7	18	4.3
Kazakhstan				
Youth	59.3	26.1	14.1	0.5
Sandwich generation	58.3	26.6	15.1	-
Older generation	59.2	34.2	5.3	1.3

It should be noted here that a similar ratio is observed in the total proportion of those who favour allied and partner relations. This is shown more clearly in Figure 3.

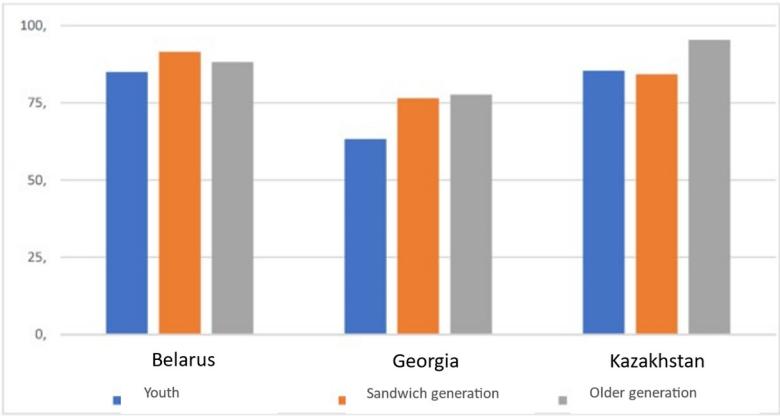

Figure 3. Proportion of age groups that advocate allied and partner relations with Russia

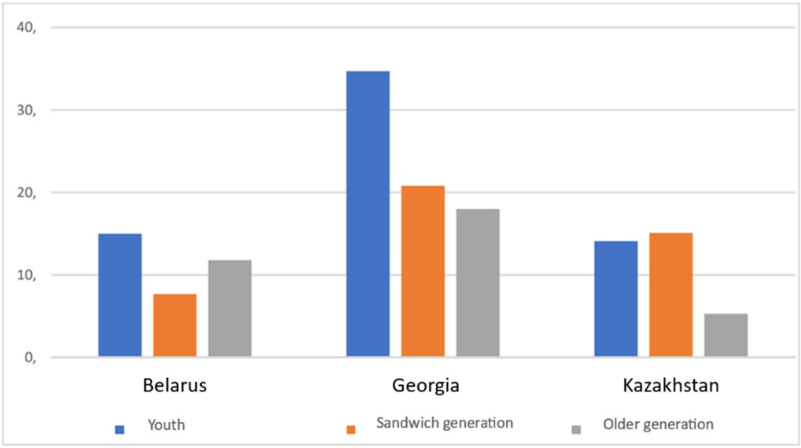

Figure 4. Proportion of age groups that advocate neutral relations with Russia

Comparing the answers given by different generations, we can see that the older generation does not differ greatly from the youth in terms of how they answered this question. The indicators for Georgia do stand out somewhat, but if we take allied relations (1.5 times) together with partner relations, then this differentiation is levelled. A bigger generational gap becomes evident if we analyse the answers of respondents who call for neutral relations between countries. Here we see that the older generation is less inclined to select this option. The difference ranges from 1.3 times in Belarus (the lowest differentiation) to 2.7 times in Kazakhstan (which is unexpected, since people of different ages living in the country are mostly in agreement when it comes to the other formats of relations). Georgia is in the middle (1.9 times). This can be seen more clearly in Figure 4.

Slightly different figures are observed when comparing the choices for each age group: for example, in Belarus, younger people say they would prefer allied relations 3.5 times more often than neutral relations, compared to 5 times for the older generation, and more than 7.5 times for the sandwich generation. A similar situation is seen in Kazakhstan, although the smallest gap in the choice between allied and neutral relations is observed in the sandwich generation (3.8 times), while the biggest gap is evident among the older generation (11.2 times). In Georgia, the gaps are the smallest: 2.5 times for the older generation (the biggest gap observed in this country), and 1.2 times for the younger generation. However, there is an important difference in the latter case: the younger generation is the only age group that expresses a greater interest in neutral relations than in allied relations, although this is levelled if we take allied and partner relations together (see Table 1). This hypothesis is thus partially confirmed. Our second assumption was that the population of the titular nation in the countries where the research was conducted is less "pro-Russian" than the ethnic Russians living in these countries (that is, they are less inclined to choose allied and partner relations).

Looking at the reverse side of this hypothesis, we can test the theory that Russians

living abroad have a special attitude towards the development of ties between their country of residence and Russia. While Russians living in former Soviet countries are not typically considered diasporas, there is nothing preventing us from testing the basic thesis that representatives of a given nationality have a special attitude towards their titular state (Loshkarev 2015), using former Soviet states as an example.

It was mainly the titular population that took part in our surveys. The data obtained in the course of our research differs somewhat from official statistics. This is due, among other things, to the specifics of phone surveys as a form of carrying out an opinion poll, as well as (partly) to the fact that the survey was conducted in Russian. We should point out a general trend in all three countries here: since the collapse of the USSR, so-called "ethnization" processes have been unfolding in the former Soviet countries, expressed in the gradual increase in the share of the titular nationality and the gradual decrease in the share of other ethnic groups, particularly Russians. This process proceeded at different speeds in different countries, but the trend towards increased mono-ethnicity in the former Soviet countries is clear to see. At the same time, the quality of life of the Russian-speaking population in these countries differs: for example, in Belarus and Kazakhstan,[8] Russian and Russian-speaking citizens live reasonably comfortably, and Russian continues to be the language of interethnic communication.

In Belarus, 77.6% of respondents identified themselves as indigenous Belarusians. This is less than the official figure (83.7%).[9] Meanwhile, 14.4% introduced themselves as Russian (compared to 8.26% recorded in the census), and 8% said they belonged to different nationalities. Other nationalities living in Belarus primarily include Poles (2.8%, compared to 3.1% recorded in the official statistics), living in a small part of Grodno Region, and Ukrainians (2.4% vs. 1.7%).[10]

The vast majority of respondents in Georgia belong to the titular nation, and their share has increased consistently in the post-Soviet period: 86% of interviewees said they were ethnic Georgians; 4.5% stated they were Armenian; 3.7% identified as Russian; and less than 6% stated their ethnicity as "other." In terms of the number of Georgian and Armenian people living in Georgia, these figures largely coincide with the official statistics for 2014.[11] The numbers for the share of Russians, however, differ. Georgia is also home to a number of small areas where representatives of other nationalities live: for example, Kvemo Kartli has traditionally been home to high numbers of people of Azerbaijani origin, while Samtskhe–Javakheti has a sizable Arme-

[8] Art. 7 par. 2 of the Constitution of Kazakhstan states: "Russian language shall be officially used along with the Kazakh language …". The Constitution. URL: https://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/constitution (accessed: 25.12.2022).

[9] National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus. URL: https://census.belstat.gov.by/saiku/?guest=true&lang=ru&default_view_state=edit#query/open//public/F501N_ru.saiku (accessed: 25.12.2022).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Mosaki. N. Preliminary Results of the Population Census in Georgia: Georgia Has a Population of Just 3.7 Million People. Demoskop Weekly. 2–15.11.2015. URL: http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2015/0661/analit05.php (accessed: 25.12.2022).

nian population. However, the share of people from these regions who took part in our survey was lower than is recorded in the census. "In Kvemo Kartli, Azerbaijanis make up 41.8% of the population, and Armenians 5.1%. Armenians make up 50.5% of the population in Samtskhe–Javakheti" (Mosaki 2018: 110). In our survey, 14% of the respondents in Kvemo Kartli were of Azerbaijani origin, and 4% were of Armenian origin, while 24% of the respondents in Samtskhe–Javakheti were Armenian, and 2% were Azerbaijani." The once cosmopolitan Tbilisi has become a mono-ethnic city over the past three decades, a fact that is reflected in our survey (97% of the respondents were Georgian).

As for Kazakhstan, there is a significant discrepancy in terms of the ratio of nationalities listed in the official statistics and the ratio of nationalities represented by the respondents who took part in our survey. Thus, according to the 2009 census, ethnic Kazakhs made up 63.1% of the population, and Russians 23.7%;[12] in our survey, 53.1% of respondents were Kazakhs and 33.1% were Russians. The figures for other nationalities were more or less equal – 13.2% according to the official statistics, and 13.9% for our survey. As far as our survey is concerned, this group primarily included Uzbeks (3.3%) and Ukrainians (2.4%), which is close to the official data (2.8% and 2.1%, respectively). It should be noted here that throughout the entire post-Soviet period, the state policy of Kazakhstan has been aimed at the so-called *Kazakhization* of the country, meaning that, even after the 2009 census, some sources give different information on the country's ethnic composition, with Kazakhs making up as much as 70% of the population, Russians 20%, and Uzbeks 3%.[13]

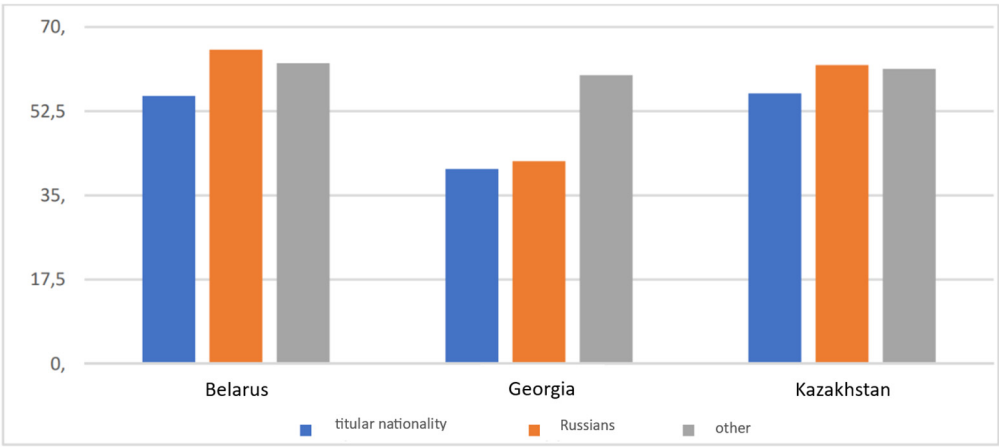

Figure 5. Proportion of citizens of different nationalities who advocate allied relations with Russia.

[12] Bureau of National Statistics. Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. URL: https://stat.gov.kz/ (accessed: 25.12.2022).
[13] Statistics and Information. URL: https://rosinfostat.ru/naselenie-kazahstana-i-statisticheskaya-informatsiya/#i-6 (accessed: 25.12.2022).

According to the data on the three countries we are looking at, the Russian population advocates allied relations more than the titular nationalities, although the difference is small (1.2 times greater in Belarus), or there is no difference at all, as in the case of Kazakhstan and Georgia (see Fig. 5). The same trend is observed if we add up the total number of answers in favour of allied and partner relations. The responses of representatives of the titular nationality diverge to a greater extent from those of Russians in the choice of neutral relations. The differences here are significant, particularly in Belarus and Kazakhstan (see Fig. 6). The few respondents who stated they would prefer hostile relations with Russia (none of the respondents in Kazakhstan gave this answer) belonged to the titular nationality (Belarus, Georgia) (see Table 2). Respondents from the "other nationalities" group gave varying answers. In all states, the proportion of respondents who would prefer allied relations turned out to be comparable to the size of the titular and Russian populations.

A comparison of the responses given by the "national" groups we have noted reveals that 3.4 times more people in Kazakhstan and 4.9 times more people in Belarus chose allied relations over neutral relations, while the figures for those who identify as Russian were 7.4 times and 11.9 times, respectively. The numbers for other nationalities were also higher than for the titular population (4.9 times greater in Kazakhstan and 8.7 times greater in Belarus). There was less differentiation in the responses of national groups in Georgia: 1.7 times greater for ethnic Georgians, two times greater for Russians, and 3.3 times greater for other nationalities (see Table 2).

The "national" hypothesis is thus only partially confirmed.

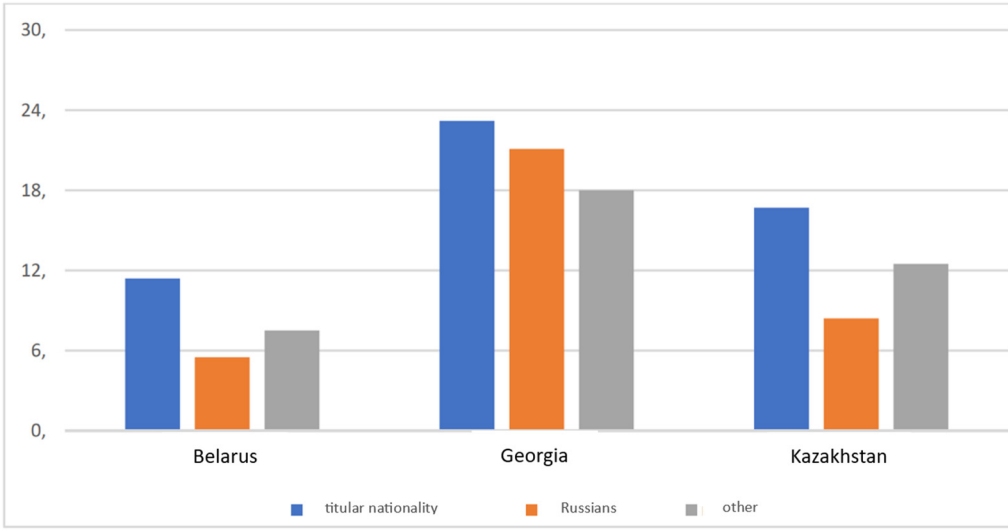

Figure 6. Proportion of citizens of different nationalities who advocate neutral relations with Russia.

Table 2. Proportion of nationalities in the countries under consideration that advocate different formats of relations (in % of nationality).

	Allied relations	Partner relations	Neutral relations	Hostile relations
Belarus				
Titular nationality	55.7	32.5	11.4	0.4
Russians	65.3	29.2	5.5	-
Other	62.5	30	7.5	-
Georgia				
Titular nationality	40.5	32.6	23.2	3.7
Russians	42.1	36.8	21.1	
Other	60	22	18	
Kazakhstan				
Titular nationality	56.2	26.5	16.7	0.6
Russians	62.1	29.5	8.4	
Other	61.25	26.25	12.5	

The third hypothesis suggested that respondents who visit Russia more often are more in favour of allied and partner relations with the country than those who have never been there.

The assumption that advanced communications promote integration is considered to be a basic axiom of the theory of transactionalism (Deutsch et al. 1957: 36–37). As such, we can test the validity of the thesis on data from former Soviet countries, with due account of Russia's status as the leader of a regional integration group.

We divided the respondents into three groups depending on how they answered this question:

- "travel frequently" – those who travel to Russia several times per year;
- "travel occasionally" – those who travel to Russia once per year or less frequently; and
- "never been to Russia."

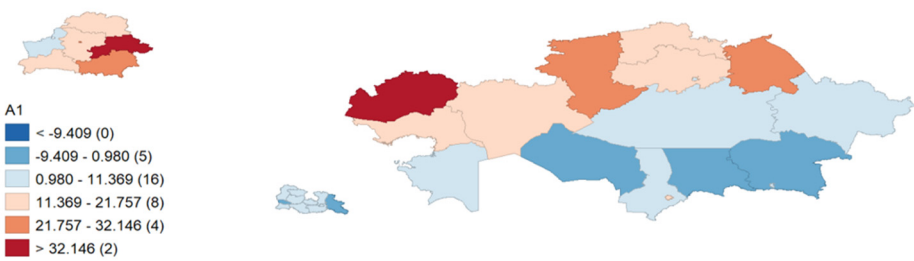

Figure 7. Cartogram of standard deviations in the frequency of trips to Russia (respondents who travel frequently).

The differentiation of responses by country is, of course, quite significant. Obviously, Belarusian citizens travel to Russia more frequently (one in five respondents). And Belarus the lowest rate of respondents who have never been to the country (23%). Next is Kazakhstan, where 13% of those interviewed travel to Russia on a regular basis, and 34% have never been there. The percentage of participants in our study from Georgia who regularly travel to Russia was extremely small (3%), while almost one third had never been to Russia at all. These results speak to the fact that these countries continue to move further away from one another. The cartograms in Figs. 7 and 8 show the frequency of trips to Russia among respondents from the three neighbouring countries we are looking at.

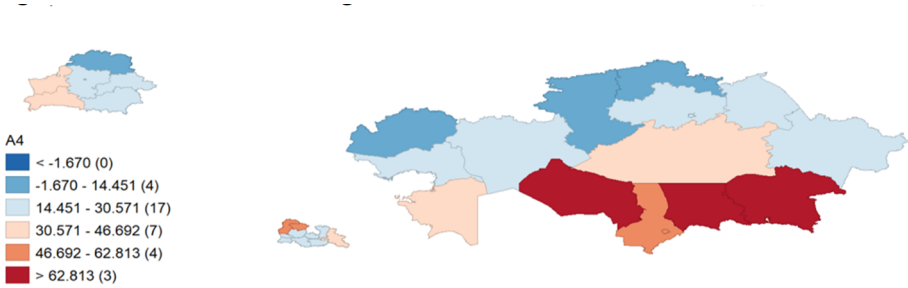

Figure 8. Cartogram of standard deviations by frequency of trips to Russia (respondents who have never been to Russia).

Significant intra-regional differences can be observed in the countries, especially in Belarus and Kazakhstan, where people living in the border regions travel to Russia most often, while those in regions more remote from Russia travel there the least. In Belarus, the most active regions in terms of travel to Russia are Gomel Region and Mogilev Region (where one fifth and one third of respondents, respectively, travel regularly to the Russian Federation), as well as Minsk (one quarter of respondents). The regions with the highest proportion of respondents who had never been to Russia were the remote Grodno and Brest oblasts (36.6% and 30.6%, respectively).

A similar situation is observed in Kazakhstan: the most frequent travellers to Russia among those who took part in the survey live in the regions bordering Russia, namely, West Kazakhstan Region, Kostanay Region, and Pavlodar Region (34.3%, 28.6 % and 25.7%, respectively), as well as other small areas with a high concentration of Russians living there. Conversely, the majority of respondents who have never visited Russia live in the country's southern regions: Kyzylorda Region, Jambyl Region, and Almaty Region (70.4%, 69.8% and 63.9%, respectively). Respondents living in the Kazakhstani capitals (the current capital of Astana and the former capital of Almaty) do not have strong connections with Russia – fewer than 10% visit the country on a regular basis.

A very small proportion of respondents from Georgia visit Russia regularly, and this explains why there is little differentiation in this indicator between administrative units. Nor is there a clearly defined territorial differentiation among respondents who have never been to Russia. The regions in question are Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, which neighbours Abkhazia (almost half of the respondents), and the remote (from Russia) Kakheti region (32.5%) and Tbilisi (42.4%).

We can note a number of multidirectional trends here. First, the gap between those who travel frequently to Russia and those who have never been there and at the same time call for allied or partner relations with the country is levelled in Belarus and Kazakhstan. Georgia is the only country where a significant is observed: those who visit Russia several times a year are twice as likely to support allied relations than those who have never been to the country, and even if we add up the answers for allied and partner relations, there is still a gap. This is clearly a consequence of the complicated relations between the two states. Those who often visit Russia typically have strong social, family and domestic ties to the country, which would explain why they are more positively disposed to their neighbour. We can also spot a difference between the groups we have looked at with regard to those who would prefer neutral relations between their country and Russia. And the difference is significant in all three countries: greater than two times in Kazakhstan and Georgia, and 3.5 times in Belarus. At the same time, the proportion of respondents who have never been to Russia and would prefer neutral relations is significantly higher than among those who visit Russia on a regular basis (or even occasionally) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Proportion of citizens who advocate various formats of relations with Russia, depending on the frequency of trips.

	Allied relations	Partner relations	Neutral relations	Hostile relations
Belarus				
Travel frequently	54.2	41.1	3.7	0.4
Travel occasionally	58.1	30	11.5	0
Never been to Russia	59.5	27.6	12.9	
Georgia				
Travel frequently	61.5	23.1	15.4	0
Travel occasionally	46.2	33.7	16.9	3.2
Never been to Russia	32.7	28	36	3.3
Kazakhstan				
Travel frequently	61.33	28	9.33	1.33
Travel occasionally	61.6	27.9	10.2	0.3
Never been to Russia	53.6	26.5	19.9	0

If we only consider answers regarding allied and partner relations, then the frequency of travel has almost no bearing at all (with the exception of Georgia). However, if we include answers that favoured neutral relations, then we see that most people who gave this response have never been to Russia (see Fig. 9).

Looking at the distribution of answers within groups depending on the frequency of trips, we can see that the lowest level of differentiation between the options "allied relations" and "neutral relations" is observed among respondents who have never been to Russia, ranging from 2.7 times in Kazakhstan to 4.6 times in Belarus. As for Georgia, this group of respondents leans slightly more towards neutral relations (1.1 times higher), which is not found in other groups. The number of people in the group of regular travellers to Russia who chose allied relations over neutral relations was significant: four times higher in Georgia, 6.6 times higher in Kazakhstan, and 14.6 times higher in Belarus (see Table 3). Our hypothesis is thus partially confirmed.

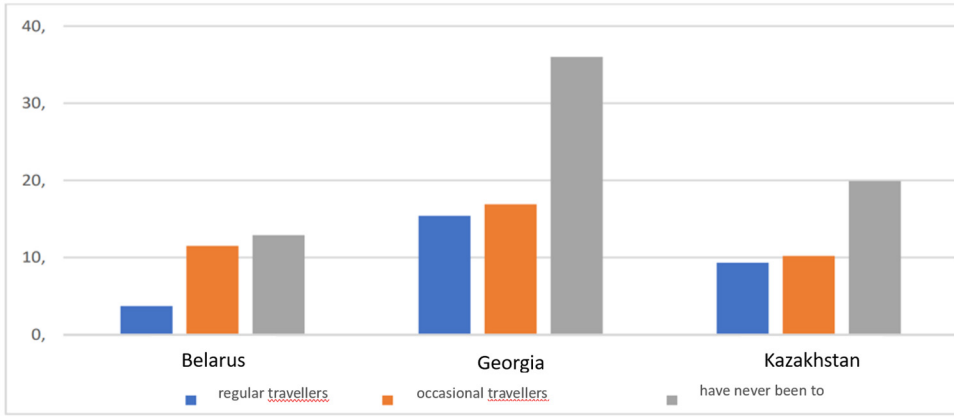

Figure 9. Proportion of citizens who advocate a neutral format of relations with Russia, depending on the frequency of trips.

Our fourth assumption was that respondents who get information about Russia from the Russian media are more inclined to call for allied relations.

A number of works have appeared recently that conceptualize foreign broadcasts and media in general as a powerful tool of international influence. Researchers in the West focus on the influence of the Russian media (Fisher 2020), while Russian researchers note the power of Western media to influence their audiences (Zarubina 2018). One of the basic assumptions of these works is the notion that the media can influence the foreign policy preferences of voters. Let us test this hypothesis.

In general, we can note that, in all cases, most people prefer new sources of information to traditional media: the proportion of respondents who get their news from the internet varies slightly, from 49.5% in Georgia to 56.8% in Kazakhstan.

The share of people who are interested in news about Russia and get their information from the Russian media ranges from 20.8% in Kazakhstan to 31.7% in Georgia. One in ten respondents in Belarus and Georgia have no interest in news about Russia; the number for Kazakhstan is slightly higher, at 15.1%. Territorial disproportions are observed with respect to this question, with the possible exception of Belarus. In Georgia, for example, people living in the capital and Kakheti are least interested in news about Russia; in Kazakhstan, this is true for the residents of Almaty and Shymkent.

We proceeded from the assumption that people who receive information about Russia from the Russian media are more pro-Russian and would generally prefer allied relations. This hypothesis was confirmed to varying degrees, as, in all three countries, the proportion of those who watch Russian media and advocate allied relations exceeds the proportion of those who are not interested in news from Russia and advocate allied relations, by 1.3–1.6 times (see Fig. 10). A comparison of the share respondents who get their information about Russia from the Russian media and selected allied relations and those who follow the Russian media but call for neutral relations yields more significant differences: 3.5 times higher in Georgia, 8.7 times higher in Belarus, and 12.4 times higher in Kazakhstan (see Table 4).

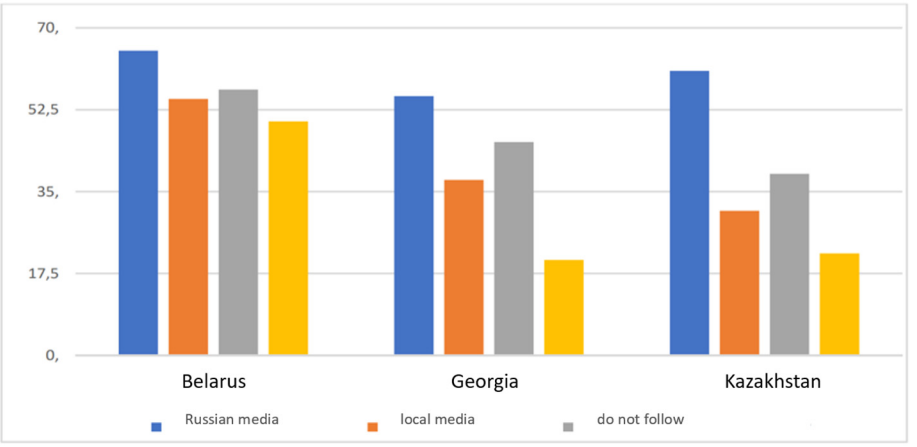

Figure 10. Proportion of citizens who choose different sources of information about Russia and prefer allied relations

Let us note a fairly obvious fact here: the proportion of respondents who are not interested in news from Russia and advocate neutral relations exceeds the proportion of those who would also prefer neutral relations but consume news about Russia from Russian sources. The difference between these groups ranges from 2.2 times in Belarus to 5 times in Kazakhstan (see Table 4).

Table 4. Proportion of citizens who receive information about Russia from different sources and choose a different format of relationships

	Allied relations	Partner relations	Neutral relations	Hostile relations
Belarus				
Get information from Russian media	65.1	27.4	7.5	0
Get information from local media	54.8	35.5	9.7	
Internet	56.8	32.4	10.1	0.7
Not interested in news about Russia	50	33.3	16.7	
Georgia				
Get information from Russian media	50.9	34	14.5	0.6
Get information from local media	37.5	37.5	17.5	7.5
Internet	39.9	30.7	25.4	4
Not interested in news about Russia	33.3	26	37	3.7
Kazakhstan				
Get information from Russian media	71.7	22.5	5.8	0
Get information from local media	52.4	30.9	14.3	2.4
Internet	58.4	29.7	11.9	0
Not interested in news about Russia	46	24.1	28.7	1.2

Our fifth hypothesis posited that respondents who call for allied relations consider relations with Russia to be an important item on the political agenda.

We assumed that people who leant towards allied relations with Russia would see relations with Russia as a key issue in election campaigns. The assertion proved to be true. In all three countries, the proportion of respondents who selected allied relations and commented that relations with Russia should be an important part of election campaigns is significantly higher than the proportion of those who do not believe the issue to be important, exceeding 50% in all cases (with the exception of Kazakhstan, at 45.1%). In Belarus, the difference in the share of these respondents is 4.7 times, compared to 4 times in Georgia and 3.5 times in Kazakhstan (see Table 5). The opposite situation is observed among those who would prefer neutral relations and consider relations with Russia important. Their share is significantly lower than those who do not believe this agenda item to be important. The gap in this case is also rather high in

Belarus, but in the opposite direction (3.2 times), and negligible in Georgia and Kazakhstan. As before, our attention is drawn to the fairly high percentage of those who had trouble answering the question – and this was true of all groups of respondents. The share of respondents in Belarus and Georgia who prefer allied and partner relations and had trouble answering is slightly less than one third, compared to over 40% for the same group of respondents in Kazakhstan. The share is even higher among those who prefer neutral relations (59.7% of respondents in Kazakhstan and 39.8% of respondents in Georgia), which may indicate a certain indifference to this issue. The only country where respondents who stated they would prefer neutral relation with Russia but mostly see this issue as unimportant is Belarus (at 62.7%), with the proportion of those who consider the topic to be important or had trouble answering being more or less the same (19.6% and 17.7%, respectively) (see Table 5).

Table 5. Proportion of respondents who prefer different formats of relations and consider relations with Russia an important/unimportant topic on the agenda of election campaigns

	Important topic	Unimportant topic	Difficult to answer
Belarus			
Allied relations	58.3	12.5	29.2
Partner relations	45.3	24.5	30.2
Neutral relations	19.6	62.7	17.7
Hostile relations			
Georgia			
Allied relations	56.8	14.1	29.1
Partner relations	39	31.4	29.6
Neutral relations	34.5	25.7	39.8
Hostile relations	31.2	43.8	25
Kazakhstan			
Allied relations	45.1	13	41.9
Partner relations	39.2	20.3	40.5
Neutral relations	22.1	18.2	59.7
Hostile relations	0	0	100

Our sixth hypothesis was that people who feel an affinity for pro-Russian candidates in their home country are more likely to support allied relations.

Respondents were asked about pro-Russian parliamentary candidates in their countries. Interviewers were interested in how the electorate would view candidates who put an emphasis on relations with Russia during their election campaigns – whether respondents would notice this, and if they would, whether this would affect their attitude (positively or negatively) towards that candidate. We should note here that, on the whole, the proportion of respondents who felt an affinity for such candi-

dates is not particularly high, ranging from 25.5% in Kazakhstan to 38.5% in Georgia, with the figure standing at slightly above 30% in Belarus (see Fig. 11). At the same time, the percentage of respondents who do not care whether or not a parliamentary candidate is positively disposed towards Russia is rather high: the least "apolitical" in this sense were respondents from Georgia (53.7%), while the most "indifferent" were those from Kazakhstan (74%), with Belarus in the middle (65.2%).

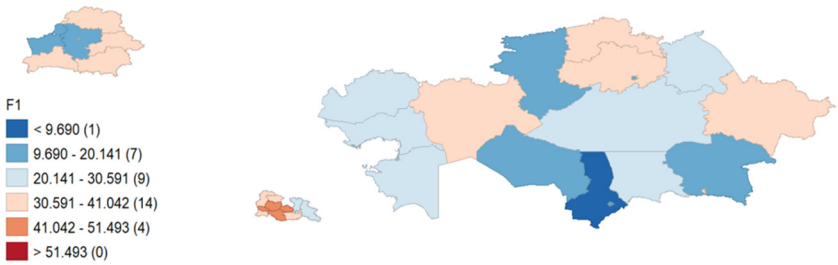

Figure 11. Cartogram of standard deviations for all countries on the issue of affinity for parliamentary candidates who emphasize relations with Russia during their election campaigns

Significant territorial differentiation is observed within states on this issue. For example, in Belarus, some 40.8% of respondents from Vitebsk Region responded positively to this question (the highest figure), compared to slightly higher than 18% among those from Grodno and Minsk regions. At the same time, the majority of respondents in these regions were not swayed in any way by the candidates' views on relations with Russia (81.7% and 73.6%, respectively).

A similar situation is observed in other countries: as a rule, regions where the share of respondents who feel an affinity for pro-Russian candidates is lowest also have highest proportion of people who are not influenced by the position of candidates on this issue in any way. These regions include Mtskheta-Mtianeti (29.6% and 65.9%) and Kakheti (30% and 62.5%) in Georgia; and Astana (15.4% and 84.6%) and Turkistan Region (8.1% and 91.9%) in Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan, the proportion of people whose opinions of candidates did not go down due to their focus on relations with Russia is negligible. The same situation is observed in Belarus.

According to our hypothesis, respondents who feel a growing affinity for candidates due to their pro-Russian stance are more likely to opt for allied relations with Russia. Conversely, respondents who select "decreased affinity for the candidate" are more likely to advocate neutral, or even hostile relations. This hypothesis was fully confirmed. The difference between those who selected "increased affinity" and allied relations and those who answered "increased affinity" and neutral relations was over 4 times in Georgia, compared to 20.8 times in Kazakhstan and 35.9 times in Belarus (see Table 6). The difference between those who answered "lowered affinity" and

neutral relations and those who selected "lowered affinity" and allied relations is less pronounced, but still clear to see: 2 times in Kazakhstan, 2.7 times in Georgia, and 4 times in Belarus.

Table 6. Proportion of respondents who have different attitudes to election campaign c andidates and choose a different format of relations with Russia

Relations	Allied relations	Partner relations	Neutral relations	Hostile relations
Belarus				
Increased affinity	71.7	26.3	2	0
Lowered affinity	14.3	23.8	57.1	4.8
No effect	54	35	11	0
Georgia				
Increased affinity	55.4	30.1	14.5	0
Lowered affinity	15.4	20.5	41	23.1
No effect	37.2	34.6	25.6	2.6
Kazakhstan				
Increased affinity	70.7	25.9	3.4	0
Lowered affinity	33.3	0	66.7	0
No effect	54.9	28.2	16.4	0.5

Our seventh hypothesis was that respondents who believe the issue of relations with Russia received a great deal of coverage during the most recent election campaign mostly live on regions bordering the Russian Federation.

We proceeded from the assumption that residents of regions that border Russia would be more likely to pay attention to whether or not the issue of Russia is included in the agenda of election campaigns, as relations with Russia are more relevant for them than for citizens living in other regions. Survey participants were asked the following question: "Were relations with Russia discussed during the last election campaign?" The options given were "Yes, a lot," "Yes, a little," and "No." The reader is reminded that in all three countries the survey was conducted immediately after the end of election campaigns, meaning that the question should not have been particularly difficult to answer. The distribution of responses by country is shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Proportion of respondents' answers about relations with the Russian Federation during the most recent election campaigns

Country	Yes, a lot	Yes, a little	No
Belarus	10.8	21	68.2
Georgia	13.6	26.7	59.7
Kazakhstan	6.9	13.2	79.9

As we can see, the proportion of respondents in all three countries who believe that relations with Russia were discussed a lot during the previous campaign is very small. The lowest figure is observed for respondents from Kazakhstan (less than 7%), while the highest is observed for Georgia, although it is still not particularly significant. Even if we add up the results for the two affirmative answers ("Yes, a lot" and "Yes, a little"), we see that only one fifth of respondents from Kazakhstan paid attention to the issue of relations with Russia, compared to less than one third of respondents from Belarus, and slightly over 40% of respondents from Georgia. This could suggest that the people who took part in our surveys were not politically active, or that the issue of relations with Russia was not particularly important for parliamentary election campaigns. This is entirely possible for Belarus and Kazakhstan (at the time of the elections and, accordingly, when the surveys were conducted), but it seems unlikely in the case of Georgia.

The hypothesis regarding intra-regional differentiation is not fully confirmed for all countries. While it holds true for Belarus, a somewhat similar but more heterogenous situation is observed in Kazakhstan, where a large number of affirmative answers were given both by people living in regions bordering Russia and by those living in the central regions. A similar situation is observed for the group that gave the least common answer, both in regions close to the border with Russia and in those farther away. As for Georgia, the picture is the exact opposite to the one presented in our hypothesis: respondents in border regions selected the affirmative answer less than any of the other options, unlike those living in areas more remote from Russia, including Tbilisi, whose residents paid more attention than any other region to whether or not relations with Russia were discussed during the election campaign – the only capital city of the three countries we are looking at to do so. This could indicate that the most politically active citizens in Georgia live in the capital, and that the issue of relations with Russia is of more concern to them.

To sum up, we can conclude that the citizens of the three countries are positively disposed towards Russia and would like to build good relations with Moscow.

That said, the majority of respondents are apolitical, meaning they are not overly interested in relations with Russia being the most important agenda item during election campaigns. A total of 40.3% of respondents in Kazakhstan felt this way, compared

to half of respondents in Belarus, the country with the highest levels of apoliticism (Fig. 12). This happened to be one of the questions that respondents had difficulty answering.

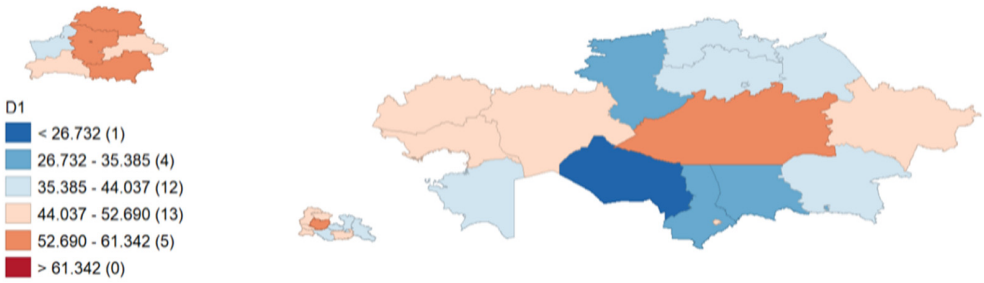

Figure 12. Cartogram of standard deviations on the importance of the topic of relations with the Russian Federation during election campaigns in all countries

At the same time, the respondents noted that it was important for relations between countries to develop in the format of a friendly dialogue. This could explain why such a high proportion of those who said that they would prefer allied relations with Russia (over half of respondents in Belarus and Kazakhstan and 42.5% of respondents in Georgia). Almost exactly the same percentage of people stated they would like to pursue partner relations: upwards of 31.7% in Georgia, 31.8% in Belarus, and 27.4% in Kazakhstan. It is possible that those who took part in the survey were not fully aware of what "allied relations" actually means. We might guess that the only respondents who truly understood what this form of relations entails were those from Belarus, the authorities of which have been institutionalizing the new Union State with Russia for some time now). The respondents from other countries were likely not envisioning the construction of an allied state when answering this question, but were instead experiencing a certain sense of "nostalgia" for Soviet times, during which many of them lived very comfortably.[14]

Note also the general indifference across the board to the issue of relations with Russia during the discussion of the election campaigns in Kazakhstan (6.9%), Belarus (10.8%), and Georgia (13.6%) (Fig. 13).

[14] Curiously, none of the respondents asked for clarification of what "allied relations" might mean.

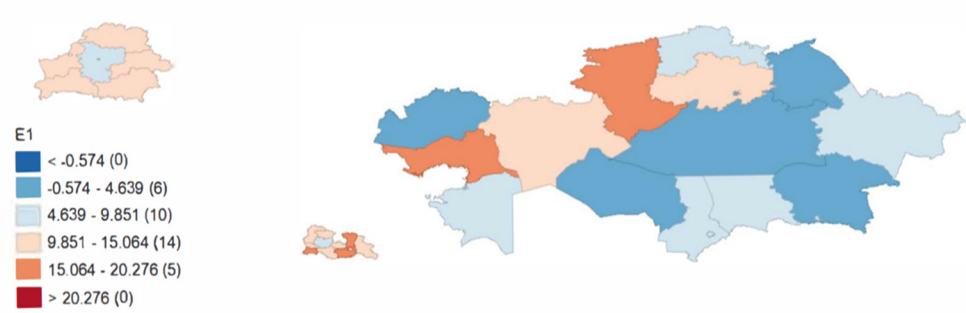

Figure 13. Cartogram of standard deviations for all countries in the responses of respondents who believe that the topic of relations with Russia was discussed a lot during the most recent election campaign

The results of our study allow us to divide the neighbouring countries in which sociological surveys were conducted into two groups: Belarus and Kazakhstan on the one hand, and Georgia on the other.

These groups differ from each other in a number of parameters, specifically in terms of the format of relations, the political agenda, the attitude towards Russia, and social practices that have developed in the course of relations with the country. This is quite understandable, given that the countries we chose to look at opted for opposing tracks in terms of their policies towards their neighbours following the collapse of the Soviet Union: Belarus and Kazakhstan pursued good-neighbourly relations with Russia aimed at various forms of integration, while Georgia opted for a centrifugal policy, often adopting a highly conflicting stance. However, our research up until 2022 has documented the potential for rebuilding relationships that can be driven by ordinary citizens who wish to develop constructive and friendly ties.

Several lines of delimitation can be distinguished. Firstly, the "macro-regional, geopolitical" line that runs between Belarus and Kazakhstan, on the one hand, and Georgia, on the other.

The second split along the "centre-periphery" line takes place within states . This phenomenon has been noted by a number of researchers, in particular A. Akhremenko (Akhremenko 2003) and R. Turovsky (Turovsky 2006), in relation to Russia. However, we found the same divisions in Belarus ("Minsk and the rest of the country")[15] and partly in Georgia and Kazakhstan.

[15] Okunev I., Shestakova M., Bibina E.S. 2020. "Minsk and the Rest of the Country: Territorial Differentiation of Electoral Behaviour in the People of Belarus". *Russia in Global Affairs.* URL: https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/differenczia czya-belorussii/ (accessed: 25.12.2022).

We acknowledge possible delimitations along the north–south lines in Georgia (Shestakova 2021: 156); to a certain extent along the north–centre–south line in Kazakhstan (Vinogradov 2020: 177), as a result of territorial differentiation, with Russians living in the northern regions of the country and people are more positively disposed to Russia than those living in the more remote southern regions; and somewhat in Belarus – in those regions that border Russia and Ukraine (Okunev, Shestakova, Bibina 2020).

Any analysis of the electoral behaviour of the population would benefit from supplementing large-scale sociological surveys with other tools, particularly qualitative methods.

About the Authors:

Igor Yu. Okunev – Candidate of Political Sciences, Associate Professor, Director, Center for Spatial Analysis in International Relations, Institute for International Studies, MGIMO University, 76, Prospect Vernadskogo Moscow, Russia 119454. E-mail: iokunev@mgimo.ru

Marianna N. Shestakova – Candidate of Geographical Sciences, Leading Expert of the Department of Master's Training, Senior Lecturer, Department of Comparative Political Science, MGIMO University, 76, Prospect Vernadskogo Moscow, Russia 119454. E-mail: marianna@rapn.ru

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