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Kingdom of the Netherlands

## **POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES IN THE POPULATION OF KVEMO KARTLI**

2021

The document is based on a study carried out by the Liberal Academy Tbilisi (LAT) and the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) as part of a project supported by the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Liberal Academy Tbilisi is responsible for the information and views expressed in the document, and it may not reflect the position of the donor.

In the fall of 2020, shortly before the start of the Second Karabakh War, the Liberal Academy Tbilisi (LAT) commenced to study the identity, conservative values, and political views of the ethnic Georgian and ethnic Azerbaijani populations of Kvemo Kartli through a comprehensive study, which includes both quantitative and qualitative components. The former component was implemented in partnership with the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC Georgia).

Kvemo Kartli was chosen to study these issues because it is one of the most diverse regions in terms of ethnic composition. According to the 2014 census, there are 423,986 people living in Kvemo Kartli.<sup>1</sup> 51.3% of them are Georgians and 41.8% are Azerbaijanis.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the share of Orthodox Christians is 51.3%, while that of Muslims is 43.0%.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, the region provides an opportunity to explore the importance of ethnic and religious affiliation in terms of attitudes, political views, and foreign orientation between ethnic groups.

In the framework of the research, we studied the attitudes of the population of Kvemo Kartli towards conservative values, democracy and foreign orientation, as well as the age, social, gender or other factors that influence these attitudes. The report pays special attention to comparing the views and attitudes of the Georgian and Azerbaijani communities and discussing the socio-political dynamics in the region in both quantitative and qualitative terms. This report discusses the political views and foreign priorities of the people of the region.

## Methodology

Research data were collected and analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methodology. A face-to-face survey was conducted in Georgian and Azerbaijani languages with 972 people in Kvemo Kartli on October 8-28, 2020. 542 of them were ethnically Azerbaijani and 430 were Georgian. The data are representative of Kvemo Kartli in general, as well as the region's adult Azerbaijani and Georgian populations.

Statistical and analytical data processing was performed based on the obtained results. In parallel with the quantitative data analysis, focus group sessions and in-depth interviews were conducted with local activists and other influential people in the community. A total of 14 focus group sessions were held with the population of Kvemo Kartli, including eight

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<sup>1</sup> Geostat, Results of the 2014 Census (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Here and below in "Azerbaijani" and "Georgian", unless otherwise indicated, we mean a citizen of Georgia, an ethnic Azerbaijani and an ethnic Georgian, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> State Agency for Religious Affairs, Distribution of Population by Regions and Religious Belief, 2021. See. Here: <https://religion.gov.ge/statmaps/#>.

sessions with ethnic Azerbaijanis and six sessions with Georgians. Sessions were held in Marneuli, Gardabani, Bolnisi and Dmanisi. Eight to ten individuals participated in each of them. In addition, 17 interviews were conducted with local civil society representatives and journalists.

### *Attitudes towards democracy and political processes*

About half of the respondents (49%) agree with the opinion that democracy is better than all other political formations. Opinions of Georgians and Azerbaijanis are similar, with only a minority saying that in some cases an undemocratic government is better than a democratic one (15%) or that it does not matter what kind of government it will be (17%). However, it should be noted that Azerbaijanis more often than Georgians say they do not know about this issue (24% and 8%, respectively). It is also interesting to note that again only in the case of Azerbaijanis do we encounter gender differences, in particular, women more often (22%) say that it does not matter to them what kind of government it will be than men (7%).

Although half of the population explicitly supports the democratic establishment, views on the role of government, an autocratic leader, and religious institutions' role in politics show that the political attitudes of the Kvemo Kartli population are not always consistent. First of all, it should be noted that the Georgian population is divided almost in the middle and one part (51%) thinks that people are like children and the government should take care of them as a parent takes care of his/her child, while the other part (43%) agrees that the government is hired and people should act like superiors and should control the government. Strange, but paternalistic attitudes are less common among older Georgians (41%) than among young people (62%).

Paternalistic sentiment is clearly prevalent among Azerbaijanis. 79% agree with the opinion that the government is like a parent and only 16% think that the government is hired by the people. Here, too, the highest paternalism is found in young people aged 18 to 34 (87%).

The same issues apply to the question of consulting with the people in the decision-making process and a strong, yet independent decision-making leader. Most Georgians as well as Azerbaijanis agree that it would be better for the country if the ruling political force makes all the decisions through public consultation (59% and 60%, respectively). 35% of Georgians agree with the second opinion that it would be better for the country if a strong political leader unilaterally, without consultations with people, makes the necessary decisions for the society, while only 21% of Azerbaijanis share the same opinion. Azerbaijanis, for their part, are more likely to say "don't know".

As we have seen, half of Georgians and more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of Azerbaijanis perceive the government as a parent and therefore assume a more passive role. It is also interesting to note that, in the case of both Georgians and Azerbaijanis, men are less likely than women to say that the decision should be made in consultation with the public. However, in terms of age, in the case of Georgians, older people are less likely to support the idea of public consultation (46%) than young people (69%) and middle-aged people (64%). On the contrary, older Azerbaijanis are more likely to support the idea of public consultation (67%) than young (56%) and middle-aged Azerbaijanis (56%).

We also find interesting differences in the views of Georgians and Azerbaijanis when it comes to the participation of religious institutions in political processes. First of all, it should be noted that about 30% of Azerbaijanis do not have an established opinion on this issue. However, 43% agree that the Georgian Orthodox Church should never interfere in political decision-making, and 40% think that neither the Administration of All Muslims of Georgia (AMG) has the right to do so. About a quarter of the Azerbaijani population, in the case of both the Church and the AMG, think that politicians should take their opinion into account when making political decisions.

50% of Georgians say that the Church should never interfere in political decision-making, while 39% say that politicians should take into account the opinion of the church. In the case of the AMG, Georgians are more likely to say that they should never interfere in political decisions, and more rarely that the position of the AMG should be taken into account (see Figure 3.1). Interestingly, in relation to AMG alone, Georgian youth are more likely (73%) to say that they should never interfere in political decisions than middle-aged people (58%) and the elderly (52%).

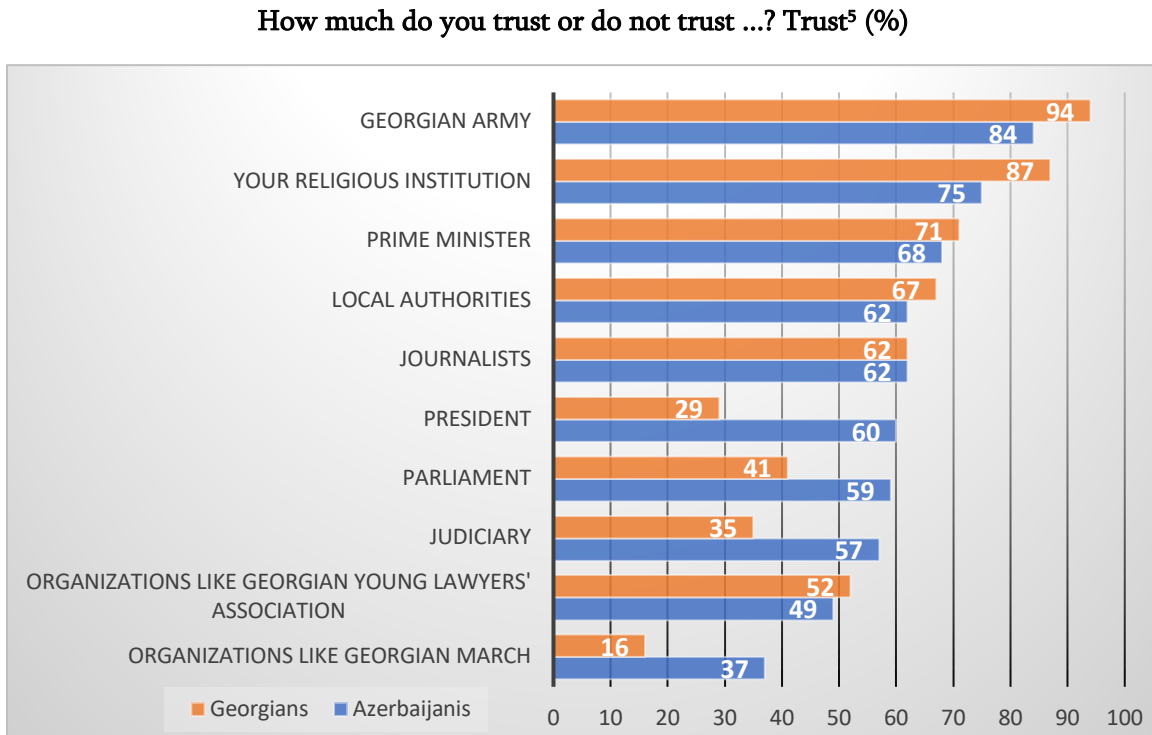
### ***Trust in institutions***

The Georgian and Azerbaijani populations trust different institutions in almost the same order. Traditionally, they have the most trust in the Georgian army and religious institutions, and the least in the president, parliament and judiciary, as well as organizations such as the Georgian March, about which half the population has not actually heard (see Figure 1).

Despite the above, we still encounter some interesting differences. In particular, Georgians are more likely to say that they trust the Georgian army and religious institutions than Azerbaijanis. In addition, in the case of Azerbaijanis, the president is trusted by the population as much as other state institutions, while in the case of Georgians, the president has one of the lowest levels of trust. It should also be noted that in the case of all other

institutions/groups except the army, the religious institute and the Prime Minister, at least 10% of the Azerbaijani population expresses more confidence than the Georgians. In focus groups, this was mainly explained by the desire of minorities to express or approve of loyalty to the government and, consequently, to the state. They often equate government with the state.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1.



This pattern even applies to organizations such as the Georgian March, which may indicate that the Azerbaijani population's higher trust in various institutions was only declarative response without emotional basis. Otherwise, 37% of the Azerbaijani population of Kvemo Kartli would not say that they fully or mainly trust an organization that often expresses nationalist views and targets ethnic and religious minorities, including Azerbaijanis.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Focus groups. Ethnically Azerbaijani men (24.06.2021 and 01.08.2021) and women (25.06.2021, 12.07.2021 and 13.07.2021).

<sup>5</sup> Percentage points indicate the sum of “fully trust” and “partially trust” responses.

<sup>6</sup> Radiotavisupleba.ge, *The ultranationalist "Georgian March" threatens Azerbaijan and issues an ultimatum*, (2020).

Kartli would not say that they fully or mainly trust an organization that often expresses nationalist views and targets ethnic and religious minorities, including Azerbaijanis.<sup>7</sup>

To measure anti-establishment sentiment, which, along with nativism and the demand for an authoritarian leader, is a major determinant of populism, we offered respondents two alternatives. The first was formulated as follows: "Do you agree with the opinion that the government is mainly run by a few large private groups that only care about their own interests?" 54% of Georgians and only 24% of Azerbaijanis *agree* with this statement. 53% of Georgians and 41% of Azerbaijanis *disagree* with the second statement, "Do government officials use their power to improve the lives of the population?" which clearly indicates that anti-establishment sentiments are much higher among Georgians.

### ***Foreign policy priorities***

Examining views on foreign orientations allows us to see what the respondents' views are on Georgia's geopolitical situation and what the relationship is between ethnic identity, conservative values, and foreign policy priorities. To explore these issues, we asked questions about Euro-Atlantic integration, relations with Russia, and Georgia's key enemy and main friend countries.

The majority of Georgians surveyed (53%) agree that Georgia will benefit more from European and Euro-Atlantic integration (EU and NATO membership), and only 22% think that the benefits would be greater if they refused to integrate with the West in exchange for better relations with Russia. Opinions of Azerbaijanis surveyed are almost equally divided - 37% see more benefits in Euro-Atlantic integration, 34% prefer better relations with Russia, and 24% say they do not know. However, in both groups, young and middle-aged people are more inclined to the Euro-Atlantic vector than the elderly. In addition, only in the case of Azerbaijanis do we experience gender differences. Women are more inclined towards Euro-Atlantic integration, while men prefer a better relationship with Russia.

An interesting results were yielded by the statistical analysis of the data on the response to this question in the context of the Shiite-Sunni confessional difference. As it turned out, the view that there are more benefits in integration with the West is more shared by Sunnis (48%) than Shiites (32%). At the same time, more Shiites (34%) expect more benefits from Russia than Sunnis (29%). That is, the majority of Shiites expect more benefits from Russia

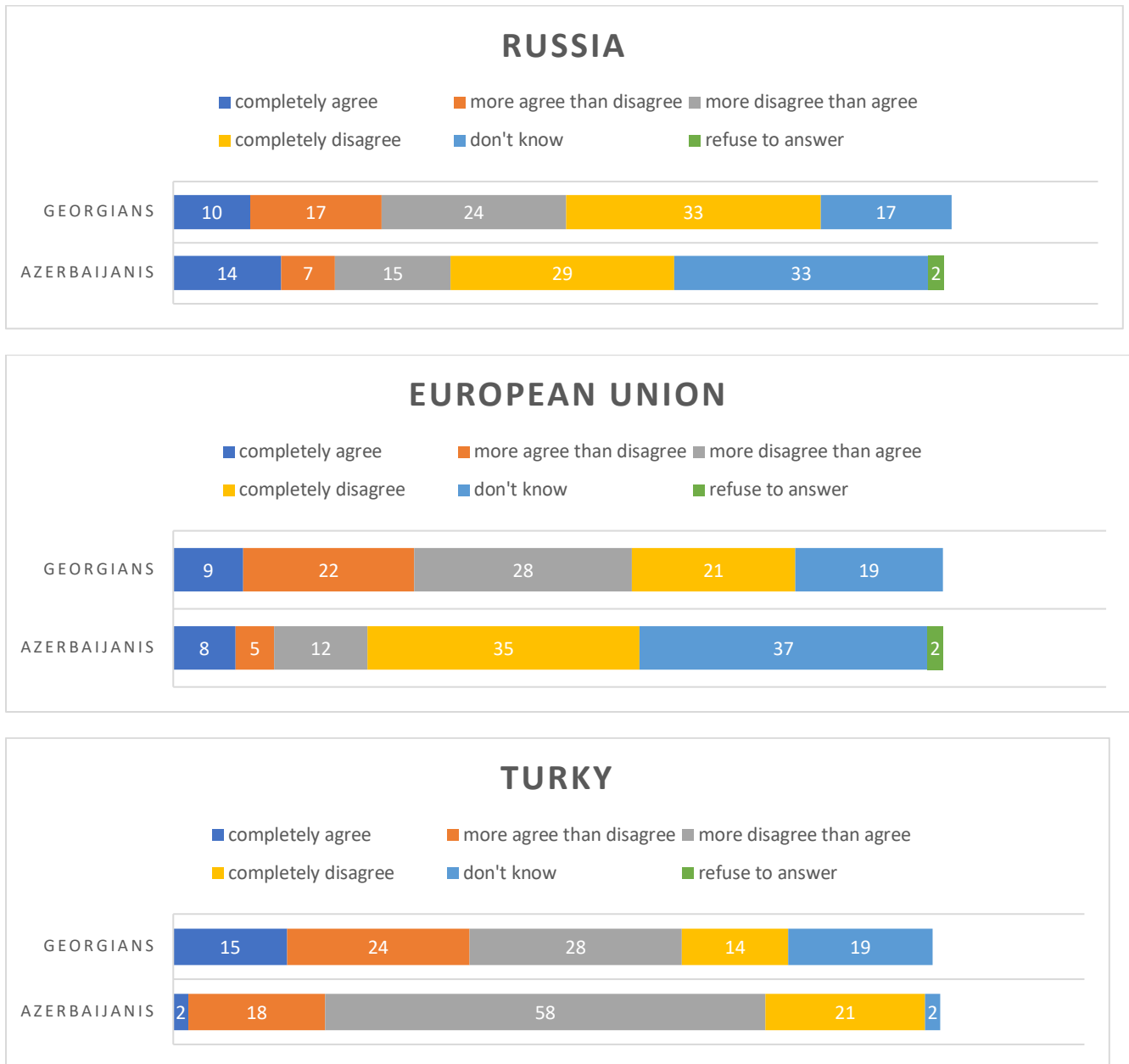
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<sup>7</sup> Radiotavisupleba.ge, *The ultranationalist "Georgian March" threatens Azerbaijan and issues an ultimatum*, (2020).

by a small margin, while Sunnis, on the contrary, expect more benefits from Russia. However, positive expectations towards Russia are quite high in the latter group as well.

Figure 2.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that Russia / EU / Turkey is threatening your traditions? (%)



We got a no less interesting results when we asked the respondents about the perception of the threat to their traditions emanating from Russia, the EU and Turkey (Figure 2). About a third of Georgians (31%) and only a small proportion of Azerbaijanis (13%) see such a threat in the EU. 21% of Azerbaijanis and 27% of Georgians expect such a threat coming from Russia. It should be emphasized that the interviewed Georgians see a greater threat to their traditions in the EU than in Russia, while the opposite is true of the Azerbaijanis. As expected, the latter group does not expect a threat to their traditions emanating from Turkey; while among Georgians this perception is most acute - 39% consider this threat to be real (see Figure 3.3). It is noteworthy that only in the case of Azerbaijanis, compared to men; women are more likely to agree that Russia threatens traditions. It should also be noted that the percentage of "don't know" response among the Azerbaijani population is quite high, especially in the context of Russia and the European Union.

In addition, it is noteworthy that the statistical processing of the data gave us a significant difference in the context of the Sunni-Shiite dichotomy. As it turned out, share of people who expect threat to their tradition from the EU is twice as many among Sunnis (18%) than among Shiites (9%). However, in the latter group many more respond that they do not know (42%) than in Sunnis (29%). Both groups equally do not expect such a threat coming from Turkey (74% from both). However, when asked whether Russia threatens their tradition, 32% of Sunnis say yes, while only 12% of Shiites say the same.

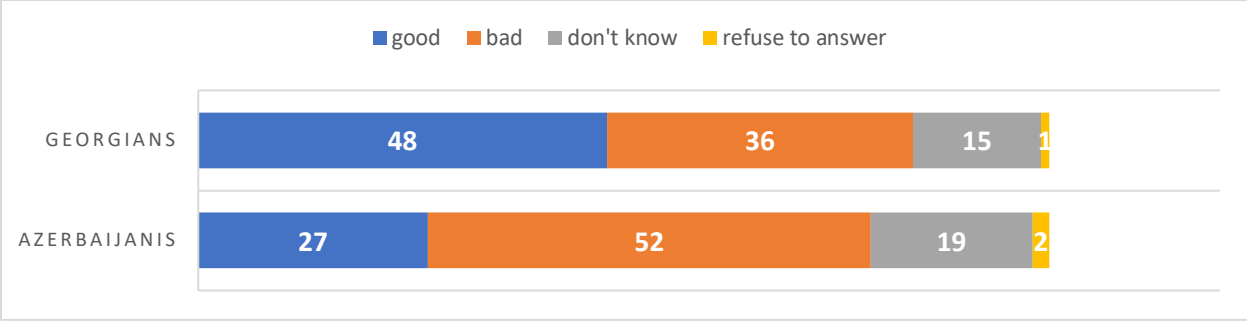
Very high number of Azerbaijanis (64%) say they do not know how much the interests of ethnic minorities will be protected if Georgia joins NATO, while only 22% of Georgians find it difficult to answer the same question. 72% of Georgians think that in case of joining NATO the interests of ethnic minorities will be partially or fully protected, while only 26% of the Azerbaijani population say the same.

Statistical analysis here also gave us a significant difference in confessional terms. In particular, 44% of Sunnis and only 18% of Shiites agree that the interests of ethnic minorities will be protected if Georgia attains NATO membership. At the same time, 69% of Shiites and 51% of Sunnis say they do not know.

Figure 3.

**In general, was the collapse of the Soviet Union a good event for Georgia or a bad one? (%)**





The question "Was the collapse of the Soviet Union a good event or a bad event for Georgia?" gave us interesting results as well (Figure 3). The responses of the two target groups here are drastically opposed. A larger proportion of Georgians (48%) think it was a good event, while about a third (36%) considers it a bad event. On the contrary, more than half (52%) of surveyed Azerbaijanis consider it a bad event only about a quarter (27%) thinks it was a good one (see Figure 3.4). As further analysis of the data has shown, the age factor has a decisive influence on the responses to this question. For example, 71% of young Georgians (18-34 years old) evaluate the collapse of the USSR positively, while 62% of older Georgians (55+ years old) evaluate it negatively. A similar, though less pronounced, trend is observed among Azerbaijanis: for only 30% of young people, the collapse of the Soviet Union is a positive event, for 31% it is a negative event, and 36% are unaware.

The majority of Azerbaijanis indicate that the rights of ethnic and religious minorities are protected in Georgia, and only a third think that their rights were more protected in the Soviet Union than they are now. This result, at first glance, contradicts the outcome of the previous question and requires interpretation. When pointing to this contradiction to Azerbaijani participants in focus group sessions, they explained the fact through “pragmatic logic”, saying that a kind of homage towards the USSR among many Azerbaijanis was driven more by economic factors than fundamental human rights issues. Apart from age, no other factors are important, including gender, type of settlement, education, knowledge of Georgian and Russian languages, religion, economic status and conservative values.

Despite differences in views on the collapse of the Soviet Union, 49% of Georgians and 40% of Azerbaijanis believe that Georgia's main enemy is Russia, although the views of these two groups differ significantly when it comes to a key friend. According to 70% of Azerbaijanis, Azerbaijan is Georgia's main friend, while only 5% of Georgians share this opinion. 34% of Georgians think that the main friend of Georgia is the U.S. and only 9% of Azerbaijanis say the same. In addition, it should be noted that, compared to Azerbaijanis, Georgians are more

likely to say that all countries are enemies of Georgia, or that Georgia has no friends. The perception of Georgia's main enemy and friend once again indicates that the views of the Azerbaijani population on foreign policy are more related to their ethnicity.

### *Willingness to combat in another country's war*

The question of whether citizens should have the right to engage in hostilities outside of Georgia independently of the state gives us some idea of the degree of identification of Azerbaijanis with the state. War, like any kind of confrontation, is important in terms of self-identification, and a person's attitude on this issue indicates of his or her identity.<sup>8</sup>

There is a significant difference between ethnic groups here. While 6% of Georgians answer positively to this question, this figure rises to 25% among Azerbaijanis. It should be noted that in the latter case, this right is recognized more often by women than by men.

The response to the question about the August 2008 Russo-Georgia war also indicates less identification with Georgian state by Azerbaijanis. The respondents were asked whether the war was a confrontation between Georgia and Russia, Georgians and Ossetians, or between Russia and the United States. Three-quarters (74%) of Georgians say the 2008 war was a confrontation between Georgia and Russia. 52% of Azerbaijanis agree with the same, while one third say they do not know (36%). It is noteworthy that only in Georgians do we find the age difference in answering this question. Young people more often say that it was a war between Russia and Georgia, while older people more often say that they do not know.

## **Conclusion**

The research of the Kvemo Kartli population's foreign policy priorities has showed that in some cases, the Azerbaijani and Georgian communities are significantly different from each other. Although Azerbaijanis, like Georgians, see Russia as Georgia's top enemy, most think the break-up of the Soviet Union was a bad thing, and a third say Georgia will benefit more if it rejects Euro-Atlantic integration in exchange for better relations with Russia.

Georgians are more likely to say they trust the Georgian army and religious institutions than Azerbaijanis. In addition, in the case of Azerbaijanis, they trust the President, as an institution, as much as other state institutions, while in the case of Georgians, the President has one of the lowest levels of trust. It should also be noted that, at least 10% more of the

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<sup>8</sup> Northrup, Terrell. *"The Dynamic of Identity in Personal and Social Conflict."* Essay in Intractable Conflicts and Their Transformation, 55–82. Syracuse, NY, New York: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1989.

Azerbaijani population expresses confidence in institutions/groups, except the army, religious institutions and the Prime Minister, than the Georgians.

At the same time, compared to other questions, there is a larger share of Azerbaijanis who respond “don’t know” to the questions about their foreign policy priorities and political processes. It cannot be attributed to the ignorance of state language or lack of information because these questions are general and, as a rule, don’t require knowledge of specific facts. However, this may indicate a lack of interest in political socialization or political dynamics in general among the Azerbaijani population.