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New survey finds Russians down on Georgia, increasingly ambivalent toward United States

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Russian opinion of neighboring Georgia has fallen significantly over the past year, according to the results of a December 2006 nationwide survey of Russians released today by InterMedia, a Washington, D.C.-based media and public opinion research organization. The survey of 4,641 randomly selected respondents shows that 28 percent have a “somewhat unfavorable” view of Georgia, compared to 21 percent in 2005, while more than a third don’t know what to make of the United States.

Russia and Georgia have jostled over several issues since the breakup of the Soviet Union, including Georgia’s cozying ties with the West and Russia’s support of breakaway republics within Georgia.

Now, the souring mood among Russians comes on the heels of the Georgian government’s arrest in early fall 2006 of four Russian military officers it accused of spying, adding tinder to the long-smoldering relationship between the two countries. In retaliation, Russia authorities cracked down on Georgians working in Russia and Georgian-owned businesses there. “The strained relations between the governments of Russia and Georgia, along with an anti-Georgian tone of coverage in the Russian media are likely the key reasons for the Russians’ increasingly unfavorable views of Georgians,” explains Sarah Glacel, InterMedia project manager for Russia.

Meanwhile, Russians’ view of the United States—a champion of the Western-leaning Georgia and its NATO aspirations—has also become less favorable. Just 5 percent of respondents had a “very favorable” view of the United States in 2006, compared to 13 percent in 2005, according to the InterMedia survey. And the number of respondents who now view the United States in “neither favorable nor unfavorable” terms spiked from 2005 to 2006, from 28 percent to 37 percent, indicating Russians’ opinions of the United States are becoming more ambivalent.

“Many Russians are conflicted about the United States,” explained Glacel. “Even though the deteriorating view of the United States is probably in-step with current global sentiment, mixed messages from the Russian government and media about the country’s relationship with the United States likely account for the dramatic rise in ‘undecided’ views of the U.S. Although a number of Russians may have personally warm feelings toward the United States, they also may

be wary of its motivations, which are often cast in a negative light in the Russia media and government circles.”

In contrast to the Russian take on their country, Georgians have been steadily pro-Russian according to InterMedia surveys fielded in the three years between 2004 and 2006, but prior to the current spate of mutual enmity stoked by the events noted above. Those expressing “somewhat favorable” views of Russia even rose slightly between 2005 and 2006, from 34 percent to 37 percent. How current events are affecting this rosy view will be clearer when the results of an ongoing InterMedia survey in Georgia are released in April.

Survey note: Russia survey results based on interviews with 4,641 randomly selected adults (+15) held 7-26 December 2006. Maximum margin of error, with a 95% confidence interval, is ±1.44%. Georgia survey results based on interviews with 2,000 randomly selected adults (+15) held between 24 March and 10 April 2006. The maximum margin of error, with a 95% confidence interval, is ±2.19 percent.

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For further details, or to arrange an interview with Sarah Glacel, contact Alex Wooley, InterMedia’s director of communications and development, at 202-434-9332, or at wooleya@intermedia.org.