



CZECH PERSPECTIVES ON GEORGIA: THREE DISCOURSES

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Georgia's cultural history goes back millennia, so its people have had ample time to develop strong and coherent forms of national identity. However, being a small country, it's less well-known outside the immediate region. How others view Georgia and its people is nearly as important as how Georgians view themselves, especially in light of the country's attempts to further integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures.

Outside perceptions of Georgia are complex and multi-faceted. More than simply a geographic space, the country is an area around which its people form identity. Constructivist scholar [Franke Wilmer](#) reminds us that "national identities, including ethnic identities, are narrative practices." There are several narratives at play: First, who are the people, what is their role in human history and their future? Second, every nation also has conceptions of the others, those who excluded and left beyond the borders of the nation's collective self. And third: Every nation has a notion of how other nations think of it.

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Georgian identity is important as the country strives for closer association with both the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Since its self-conceptions have [real implications](#) for foreign policy, efforts to bring the third kind of perception – how other nations think of it – closer to reality are important. Moreover, in democracies, public opinion matters and one should be aware of his or her image abroad. So, how do the others think about Georgia?

This article outlines perspectives from the Czech Republic. Although it's only one state and from a global perspective not a particularly important one, the Czech Republic is still a member of both the EU and NATO and thus its perspective can provide valuable insights about how Georgia looks from foreign eyes.

To be blunt, Georgia isn't a hotly discussed topic in the Czech Republic – something which is probably mutual. However, in studying Czech newspapers, policy papers, strategic documents, and the statements of politicians, one can still find several contrasting images of Georgia. Three of those images, both political and societal, are discussed here.

“Georgia is not a member of the Alliance, but acts as a member of the Alliance”

Georgia has won the hearts and minds of the Czech political mainstream. It's common to see [comparisons](#) between Georgia's troubled relations with Russia and the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

“Where else than in the countries which

first-hand experienced aggression of Russia's imperial predecessor should Georgia find stronger support?” was a rhetorical question [posed](#) in 2008 by then-Parliamentarian Bohuslav Sobotka, who is now prime minister.

It's important “to support and maximally cooperate (with countries like Georgia), and so counterbalance economic pressure, which Russia exerts on them and in this way blackmails them,” [said](#) Jiří Pospíšil, a Czech Member of the European Parliament.

These voices are not alone: Although few closely follow developments in the South Caucasus, the symbolic resemblance is obvious for them. Accordingly, Czech politicians express firm support for Georgia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and right to choose its future.

There is a common sentiment that Czechs share with Georgians the bad experience of dealing with Russia, and accordingly should not let Georgia down. Indeed, according to a [poll](#) conducted in September 2008 by the STEM agency, 42 percent of Czechs sympathized with Georgia and only 19 percent with Russia.

These sympathies have been further strengthened by Georgia's involvement in NATO military operations. Czech politicians have taken notice of Georgia's contribution and hold it in high regard – this was clearly [articulated](#) by Czech Minister of Defence Martin Stropnický, who said that “Georgia is not a member of the Alliance, but acts as a member of the Alliance – in the best sense” and that he “can barely imagine a candidate doing more for membership” in the organization.

Nevertheless, although troubled relations with Russia served Georgia well in gaining Czech sympathy, it involves clear limits which may function as a glass ceiling for the country's future aspirations.

The Czech Republic does not share a border with Russia. Therefore, Russia's presence is not felt so strongly and only rarely is the country perceived as an existential threat. Perhaps, the thinking goes, it would be better to maintain pragmatic relations with Russia and let economic ties flourish. Accordingly, Czech resoluteness to stand against Russia has wavered at times.

This has implications for how Georgia is perceived. In line with questioning the pertinence of sanctions imposed on Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea, some have worryingly provided reminders that the Czechs should keep Russia's reaction in mind.

Paradoxically, it was Stropnický again who [admitted](#) that "Georgian membership [in NATO] is a part of a quite big package of questions" which have to be seriously discussed. One gets the feeling from such comments that even though Georgia is a highly respected and possibly even admired country, it's viewed as only a partner at best and a problem at worst.

Furthermore, this first image of Georgia is not without stains. Even the most vigorous advocate of Georgia's cause in the Czech Republic, Member of the European Parliament Jaromír Štětina, does not spare it from [critique](#) regarding concerns about selective justice and freedom of speech and the media.

Since proponents of Georgia are usually recruited among committed liberal democrats, any diversion of Georgia from the democratic path could erode its support in the Czech Republic.

"If the Russian tanks did not arrive, there would be nothing left from South Ossetia"

In the second image, one's stance toward Russia is similarly important for how one perceives Georgia. Some of the voices belonging to this category are explicitly pro-Russian and view the Caucasus as Russia's privileged sphere of influence. Others are simply suspicious of the image of Georgia as a liberal democracy valiantly defending itself against an authoritarian neighbor, but otherwise are not sympathetic toward Russia in general.

Therefore, this image of Georgia is less positive and ranges from reasonable critique of particular aspects of Georgia's politics to overt animosity toward the country's government.

For these people, a point of criticism is the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. Former Czech President Václav Klaus is well known for his willingness to stand behind sometimes controversial opinions, and thus it was no surprise when he [declared](#) Georgia's then president, government, and parliament to be the conflict's culprits.

Similarly, Tomáš Poláček, an editor of the monthly magazine Reportér, [complained](#) that Czech politicians and media failed to question the narrative about Russia being the war's only culprit. After having spent a few days in South

Ossetia speaking with locals, he came to conclusion that “if the Russian tanks did not arrive, there would be nothing left from South Ossetia.”

A more hostile stance has traditionally been taken by the Czech communist party, which is still a considerable force with 33 of 200 seats in the lower house of the Czech Parliament. European Parliamentarian Jiří Maštálka [described](#) Georgia’s conduct in South Ossetia as “acts verging on genocide” and his colleague Kateřina Konečná described Georgia in 2015 as a disintegrating country ruled by oligarchs propped up by Czech supplies of military equipment.

The power of this image should not be underestimated. While the mainstream Czech media report on Georgia only occasionally, two “alternative” internet media sources are far more active: the Czech arm of Russia’s Sputnik and Parlamentní listy. Both websites have been [designated](#) by researchers from Masaryk University as using “manipulation techniques” as well as being known to publish articles reinforcing the above image.

For instance, an author frequently published in Parlamentní listy is the American economist Paul Craig Roberts, who [suggested](#) that “[Vladimir] Putin should have hung Mikheil Saakashvili, the American puppet installed as president of Georgia” and that Russia should “reincorporate Georgia into the Russian Federation.” Roberts’ opinions have also been [acknowledged](#) by Czech communists.

To date there have been no studies measur-

ing the impact of such alternative media sources, but given the lack of quality coverage of Georgia in the mainstream media, its presence should serve as a warning.

“Georgia - A country where time has stopped”

There are two types of coverage of Georgia that predominate in Czech media: Politics and tourism. Although it may seem that the two are completely unrelated, researchers have demonstrated how tourism interacts with geopolitics to produce and reshape the identities of others – for instance, how [travelling tourists](#) affect prevailing modes of domination in parallel with the movement of soldiers.

Accordingly, the third image is dedicated to the touristic experience of Georgia. The product of these encounters is an orientalising narrative that emphasizes Georgia’s pitiable situation. On one hand, it is a story about the kind and hospitable Georgian people who like to produce and drink wine and have a long history of Christian statehood. On the other hand, it’s also a narrative about a poor and backward country with weak governance and dirty, disordered streets.

“Georgia - A country where time has stopped. Just during the breakup of the Soviet Union”; “A land promised to travellers. Georgia with backpack and almost for free”; “Georgia will move you by beautiful nature. But you have to adapt to brutal traffic, otherwise you will not survive.” These are just titles of articles covering the touristic experience of Czechs traveling in Georgia.

Some travel writers even dare to provide analysis of Georgia's culture and mentality. "It obviously suited ordinary Georgians to have everything in their life pre-determined and to have someone who would be constantly telling them what to do and how to do it," [assumed](#) one journalist on the basis of a single conversation with a taxi driver and continues his article with a number of similar judgements.

From an academic point of view, analyses based on such sources can't be taken seriously and rather serve as the [basis for jokes](#). These texts are usually not meant to harm. Most are based on the romantic imaginations of tourists who think they've gained insight into the nature of local people during their holiday. However, such touristic encounters and subsequent accounts serve to establish and confirm prejudices and stereotyped images.

Some scholars [note](#) that old geopolitical imaginaries revolving around concepts of East and West have been replaced by new mental-geographical divisions separating "Order from Chaos" and "Civilised from Violent."

If such images are reproduced, Georgians can hardly expect to ever be genuinely accepted by people who view them as amiable and pitiable barbarians. In such case, Georgia would be viewed simply as an exotic tourist destination rather than a part of "Europe" and a potential partner for political or security co-operation.

For the majority of Czechs, Georgia remains something conceivable only in the very abstract, so one shouldn't exaggerate the potency

of this image. Nonetheless, the [growing numbers](#) of incoming tourists may change this and have an influence on the reasoning of politicians who themselves have only vague notions of Georgia.

What can Georgia do to project a more positive image?

The Czech perception of Georgia is not uniform. Although this text introduced just three ways in which Georgia is viewed, alternative images remain which serve as frameworks for thinking about this country.

These images are not and cannot be objective, because we lack access to objective reality other than through language and representations. However, as was already outlined in the introduction, images do matter and states must work according to them.

Following from the three images analyzed above, here are a few takeaways regarding Georgia's projection of a positive image in the Czech Republic and beyond:

1) Although the history of relations with Russia attained sympathy among Czech politicians, some of them may not be willing to provoke Russia by supporting Georgia's deeper integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. It might help to develop a narrative which can cast a positive-sum light on the situation between Georgia and Russia.

2) Democratic backsliding could result in the loss of many supporters in the Czech Republic. Georgia must remain devoted to the

full establishment of democratic institutions.

3) With Georgia getting closer to Euro-Atlantic structures, Russian efforts at disinformation are intensifying. Many Czechs have only a vague notion of Georgia and other countries in the Caucasus, making them vulnerable to deception. Therefore, Georgia should be more assertive in promoting counter-narratives that combat disinformation.

4) Georgia should also take day-to-day issues into consideration. Tourists often leave the country with orientalisising impressions and stories which can reinforce stereotypes that inhibit political and security cooperation with Georgia.

THE GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)
is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.



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