

How far is Europe from the Caucasus?

National Images of Europe in the Minds of Georgian Students

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Abstract

Utilizing a mixed methods approach, survey and focus groups, the study shows that psychological distance of Georgian students to Europe is much smaller than the geographic one. 100 students from two Tbilisi universities filled out a questionnaire while 40 students provided qualitative data through four focus groups. We measured social distances towards ethnic and religious groups, some related to Europe and the United States, and others to minorities of Georgia or the country's neighbors. The quantitative measure of social distances revealed that Georgian students feel closer to Europeans and Christian culture representatives than to their neighbors or minorities and non-Christian cultures. Qualitative data provided explanations for such distances: national images of Europeans and of minorities or neighboring countries' representatives differ from each other; Georgian students favor European values and lifestyle more than those of their neighbors, and experience closer ties to Christian cultures.

Keywords: *attitudes, national images, social distance, ethnic and religious groups.*

Geographically, Caucasian region is located around the range of the Caucasus Mountains, between Europe and Asia. Northern Caucasian countries belong to the Russian Federation; the Southern Caucasus constitutes of three independent countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, all three former Soviet Union republics,

nation states currently. However, among the three nations Georgia is the sole country whose foreign policy proves its aspiration to the European Union. Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014 which is the first step towards the EU integration, and later, in 2016, committed itself to Deep and Comprehensive Trade Area (DCFTA) component of the agreement. In its turn, in 2014, the EU committed €131 million for bilateral assistance to Georgia under the European Neighborhood Institute (ENI), mostly for justice system and agriculture development (European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, 2014).

Georgia's declared integration policy is pro-European. The previous Georgian government that held power for about ten years used to declare the same goal repeatedly (Siroky & Dzutsev, 2012; Gvalia, Siroky, Lebanidze & Iashvili, 2013) and documented it in a number of legislative texts aimed at harmonizing the country's legislation to that of the EU (National Security Concept of Georgia, 2005; Foreign Policy Strategy, 2006). The present Georgian government, elected in 2012, also declares its strive to join the European Union and the NATO. Moreover, 'Georgia is the most pro-western of the three South Caucasus states, and since its independence in 1991 it has consistently sought to maintain an autonomous foreign policy that partially rids the country of Moscow's domination, whilst simultaneously becoming more Westward-looking' (German, 2012, p. 1651). Georgia is described as 'the most self-consciously European' among the South Caucasian states (De Waal, 2012, p. 1720); and Georgia is 'an aspirant western state, if not actually belonging to the West' (Duncan, 2012, p. 11). These observations of Western scholars are backed by a similar local statement: 'Georgia's pro-western foreign policy orientation has never been disputed since its independence. The country survived several wars and constant pressure from Russia, its powerful Northern neighbor, but never agreed to change its course towards the West' (Gogolashvili, 2013, p. 5). Cooley and Mitchel (2010) claim that NATO and EU membership for Georgia would serve as a shield against Russian threats (Cooley & Mitchel, 2010).

The path to the EU chosen by the Georgian political elite is also supported by the general public: a poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in April 2018 showed that 85% of respondents support EU integration of Georgia; similarly, 77% wants Georgia to join NATO (International Republican Institute, 2018). Furthermore, according to the research of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted in 2016, Georgians' support for the country's European Union and Euro-Atlantic aspirations is strong, with NATO support at 75% and EU support up to 81% (National Democratic Institute, 2018).

At the same time, current studies indicate high religiosity among Georgians, and a lack of secularity in the country. 95% of the urban population declares themselves as believers (International Center on Conflict and Negotiation, 2008), 52% says they are religious or very religious and 90% of the country population states that religion is important in their everyday life (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2015). Furthermore, according to NDI's polls of 2016, 35% of the population surveyed states that parish and priests' political opinions are important to them in making decisions when voting at the parliamentary elections. Roots of such deep religious sentiments can be traced back from the 5th century AD through the 1990's, that is, the post-Soviet period. There is a popular and widely accepted conviction in Georgia that the Orthodox Church has been protecting Georgia as a nation since Christianity was officially established in the country. In fact, the Church has been credited as a guarantor of Georgia's survival amid constant historical hazards (Kekelia, Gavashelishvili, Ladaria & Sulkhanishvili, 2013). As historical sources and literary texts suggest, this conviction has a solid basis: beginning from the 5th century, Orthodox religion has been an important, if not the determining part of Georgian national identity. Given that Georgia is located in the Islamic region¹, it had been under constant attacks from the Ottoman Empire (former Turkey), Iran, and Arab countries. Thus, the Orthodox religion played the role of a unifier and was a value that should be kept at all costs. Moreover – and for the reason noted above – religious commitment of Georgians turned out to determine the political faith of the country as in the late 18th century it chose to seek the patronage of the Russian Empire, also an Orthodox Christian country. The latter, for its part, took advantage of the situation as – ideologically – it became easier for Russia to assimilate Georgia into its Empire. The Soviet regime (Georgia being one of the USSR states) was accompanied by the elimination of religion. Religious sentiments of Georgians have started flourishing after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Given such background, where on the one hand, both the government and people explicitly strive towards the EU, and on the other hand, high levels of religiosity lead to somewhat prejudiced attitudes in general (Scheepers, Gijsberts & Hello, 2002), we got interested in psychological distances of Georgian students to Western Europeans as well as in the distances to neighboring countries' representatives and minorities living in Georgia. The article focuses on social distances of Georgian students to the Western Europeans and shows that the distance to Europe is much smaller than the actual or geographical one.

¹ Georgia is neighbored by Turkey and Azerbaijan, two Islamic states, and Armenia and Russia, Orthodox Christian and Armenian Apostolic Church representatives, respectively.

Social distance is a term introduced by an American sociologist, Robert Park (1924) and turned into a measurable construct by his student, Emory Bogardus who regularly used his social distance scale to measure attitudes of American population to its immigrants (Bogardus, 1925, 1929a, 1929b, 1933a, 1933b, 1938, 1940, 1958). The studies continued after his death, and currently, modified versions of social distance scale are used all over the world (Kleinnpenning & Hagendoorn, 1991; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000; Adewuya & Makanjoula, 2005; Snellman & Ekehammar, 2005; Sakuragi, 2006; Weaver, 2008; Binder et al., 2009).

In the present study, we hypothesized that Georgian students would show closer social distance to Europeans than to their neighbors and minorities residing in Georgia; also, Georgian students would reveal the farthest social distance to Muslims.

We then collected qualitative data to explain attitudes/social distances of Georgian students. The focus group data that had the form of narratives provided us with enough material to be able to interpret and explain why Georgian students have particular distances. We consider these narratives as 'national images' of the European countries in the minds of Georgian students. The term 'national image' was introduced by social scientists in order to emphasize the possibility of discrepancy between an image of a group and the actual situation beyond it (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005).

Method

A mixed methods approach was used for the current study. We collected two types of data: quantitative and qualitative ones. In the first study we collected survey data from 100 Georgian students from a number of universities of Tbilisi.

The survey instrument used was a modified version of the social distance scale. The social distance scale is one of the instruments to study prejudice. Introduced by Bogardus in 1924, it is considered to measure the behavioral component of prejudice. Items range from the closest distance, such as willingness to marry a representative of a particular group, to the farthest, such as unwillingness to admit the representatives of some ethnic groups to one's country. Georgian students were asked to provide social distance judgments to 13 ethnic and five religious groups (Javakhishvili, Schneider, Makashvili & Kochlashvili, 2012, 2013). Usually, Bogardus scale and other similar instruments are used to measure attitudes or prejudice to minorities. For this

study we utilized a longer list of out-groups, many of which do not represent minorities for Georgians. We did this on purpose to be able to address our research question – to compare the attitudes to Europeans who do not represent minorities in Georgia to the attitudes to actual minorities.

The quantitative data gathered by measuring social distances proved insufficient to account for the implications as to what Georgian students find attractive or repulsive in national images of the groups surveyed. In the second study, we conducted a number of focus group discussions with students to explore reasonable motives and cognitions shaping national images. In total, four focus groups were conducted with ten students in each (two groups for discussions on ethnic distances and two for discussing religious distances). The age and gender distribution of the students were similar to those of the students surveyed. Thus, the following interpretation of social distance judgments of Georgian students is backed by quantitative as well as qualitative data.

Results and Discussion

The mean social distances of Georgian students to different ethnic and religious groups vary (see *Tables 1* and *2*). Georgians would like to have the closest relations with the representatives of Western European countries and the United States, and the distant relations with those ethnic groups that represent minorities in the country or are its neighbors.

Table 1. Ethnic Social Distances

	<i>Mean Social Distance</i>	<i>Rank</i>
Italian	2.14	1
Ukrainian	2.72	2
English	2.87	3
German	3.02	4
Dutch	3.21	5
French	3.28	6
American	3.31	7
Greek	3.42	8
Russian	3.77	9
Turkish	4.86	10
Armenian	4.88	11
Azerbaijani	5	12
Iranian/Persian	5.34	13

In terms of religion, Georgian students showed close distances towards Christians and far distances to Muslims. Both, Catholics and Protestants represent Western European countries and the United States, while Turks, Azeri and Iranians are Muslims.

Table 2. Religious Social Distances

<i>Religious Groups</i>	<i>Mean Scores</i>	<i>Std. Deviations</i>
Catholics	2.74	1.523
Protestants	3.80	1.881
Muslims	4.16	2.007

The first, quantitative, study supported our hypothesis that Georgian students feel closer to the Western Europeans who do not represent minorities in Georgia, with the exception of Ukrainians, who constitute a small portion of minorities in the country and are geographically closer to Georgia than the Western Europe or the United States. In addition, Ukraine is a former Soviet Republic. The reason for close distance might be that Ukraine is considered an ally to Georgia as it similarly strives to the EU, while the two countries have strong business relations with each other. Our expectation that Georgian students would feel farthest to their neighbors and minorities was also supported, again, with the only exception of Iranians, who are neither minority, nor neighbors, but are held at far distance because of their religion as explained by the focus group participants.

Focus group discussions held with the students revealed that the attitudes towards various ethnic groups might be explained by a multitude of aspects. Students demonstrate positive attitudes towards certain countries since they perceive them as international political allies and as having strong economics, a good education system and democratic values. At the same time, students described and gave examples of experienced cultural and religious similarity with some countries. The perceived cultural similarity turns out to be one of the important factors in shaping social distance, as will be discussed below.

Italy is the only country from those held at closest distances where cultural similarity is emphasized; in the perception of Georgian students, Italians, being the Southerners, closely resemble Georgians in terms of temperament and lifestyle: *‘Georgians and Italians are very similar to each other by their character’*, said one of the participants of a focus group. Another Georgian student stated, *‘a friend of mine went to Italy, and lived with an Italian family. She got really close to them and they still maintain very warm relationship’*.

The qualities that Georgian students find attractive in the Western countries are economic power, broad consumer market and educational possibilities, order and punctuality, democratic values, and especially respect for human rights. *'Europe is associated with everything positive, order, punctuality, good education system'; 'People who come back from the West adopt different values, more democratic values. For example, their attitudes towards gay people change positively'*. According to them, market opportunities offered by these countries are among important factors accounting for their prestige that translates into a close distance. *'Europe deserves positive attitudes. You go there with nothing; it's enough to have talent to succeed there. In Georgia you are not appreciated. You can't get a decent career just because of your talent and skills'; 'There is a broad consumer market; my cousin is a musician, his monthly income has never exceeded 100 Laris in Georgia whereas in Europe he earns so much more, I'm sure he will never come back to Georgia'*.

It is considered attractive to continue long-term education in Europe. In students' view, European universities are leading academic institutions, and they *'highly admire'* the education system there.

Such aspiration towards Western culture often motivates students to visit these countries for education and employment purposes. It turns out that the positive image of a country stimulates contacts with it and encourages personal relations with its representatives, which, in turn, increases attractiveness of this country and reduces social distance.

One of the striking features of the current data is that all of the countries placed on the shortest social distances are from Christian cultures. Social distances were closest to Catholics and Protestants and farthest to Muslims. According to various studies, only 11% of the population aged over 56 declares that religion is not important in their life and 5% of the population under 35 states the same (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2010); The Orthodox Church is the most trusted institution, enjoying the loyalty of 82% of respondents in 2015 (Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2015) and 71% in 2017 (Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2017). The majority of respondents surveyed (65.9%) identifies themselves more with a 'veritable Christian' rather than with a 'citizen of Georgia' (Sumbadze, 2012) and about half (49.9%) considers politicians who do not believe in God unfit for public office (Sumbadze). As NDI's 2014 poll suggests, The Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia has the highest, 96%, popularity rating among the Georgian population (National Democratic Institute, 2014), and, according to NDI's 2012 data, his activities are not regarded as bad or very bad by a single participant of the poll, while the same religious leader explicitly sympathizes with

Russia and even with Stalin, emphasizing the important role of the Orthodox Church both, in Georgia and in Russia (Ilia The Second, 2013; Metskhvarishvili, 2013).

As the above-mentioned recent studies confirm, since the fall of the Soviet Empire in 1991 up to now, the impact of the Georgian Orthodox Church has been increasing constantly. The Orthodox Church filled in the socio-political vacuum left after the fall of the former ideology, and quickly occupied an influential niche (Kekelia et al., 2013). The 1990's witnessed remarkable strengthening of Orthodox institutions, many new churches were built and religious education was introduced in public schools. Thus, it might not be surprising that 'the vast majority of religiously active population are young people, living in the capital city, with higher education, who spent their childhood in 1990's – in the most harsh (insecure) political and economic situation' (Kekelia et al., p. 70).

Given that religion plays an important role in Georgians' daily life, it seems to determine whether a specific country is perceived as culturally similar or not. To put it in the words of one of the focus group participants, *'religion is very important. A nation seems closer to you when you know that they are Christians.'* Thus, since religious loyalty is one of the important aspects of Georgian identity, religious beliefs are significant components in cultural compatibility and determine the composition of the countries placed closest by Georgian students.

Based on focus group discussions, this argument is more apparent when it comes to ethnic groups placed on larger distances, that is, when students talk about the importance of cultural dissimilarities: *'Those countries [the Azerbaijani, Iranians, Turks] have different religions'; 'Different religion means different lifestyle as well'. For example, 'Iranians are associated with women wearing veils, such restriction is hard for us, Georgians, and all this is caused by their religion'; 'This different culture is an obstacle for close distances'.*

Somewhat ambivalent attitudes can be observed in the distances towards Russians. Given the centuries-old and recent political tension between Russia and Georgia (one third of Georgian territories being occupied by Russia), the rank order of the former might even be a bit surprising. However, the reason behind this rank can be cultural similarity. Furthermore, Russia is a representative of the same Orthodox Church as Georgia. Georgia is considered to have much commonality with Russia in terms of shared culture. According to Schwartz (1999), 'Shared cultural values in a society help to shape the contingencies to which people must adapt in the institutions in which they spend their time. As a result, the members of each cultural group

share many value-relevant experiences and they are socialized to accept shared social values' (Schwartz, 1999, pp. 25–26). Thus, the centuries-old shared cultural context, together with interpersonal ties between Georgia and Russia, continues to manifest itself in the perceived social distance of the Georgian sample, making their attitude somewhat positive towards Russians. In the words of focus group members, *'some students have Russian grandparents. Many Russians live in Georgia. These are the reasons students have a positive attitude; 'We are culturally close to each other and that is the reason for such an attitude.'*

However, although the greater part of the Georgian population has a basic knowledge of the Russian language and consequently has an access to Russian culture, the majority of the respondents surveyed favors English to be taught at schools, while only a small part chose Russian language (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2012).

The case of Turkish people is likewise interesting. Turkey is placed on a middle distance, apparently, because of its economic development but low cultural similarity, being a Muslim state. In addition to personal interactions between the Georgian and Turkish people, Georgian students recognize the prestige of Turkey as an economically developed country, whose citizens generate income and employment opportunities in Georgia through tourism and business activities: *'We have business relations with Turkish people. They are in construction businesses and provide jobs for Georgians.'*

Turkey is the leading business partner of Georgia. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 'Turkey is Georgia's largest trade and economic partner. Free trade and visa-free regimes operate between Georgia and Turkey. Deepening economic, energy, and transport relationships, and the successful implementation of other projects, are of strategic importance for both countries' (National Security Concept of Georgia). On the other hand, 'while hundreds of thousands of Turkish citizens entering Georgia yearly is a cause for celebration in Tbilisi statistics offices, the swelling crowds of visitors have stoked tensions in some parts of Georgia. Gambling, which is illegal in Turkey, has turned into a major industry in Georgia and especially in Batumi [...] It has [also] been a cause for consternation among some Georgians who allege that such tourism has brought with it other vices, including [...] prostitution' (Cecire, 2013, p. 3). This trend more or less manifested itself in the results of our study.

Georgian students' preference lies with Western countries. Such attitudes are consistent with the official policy of the Georgian government that holds Euro-integration and pro-Western values as priorities for the

country. This complies with the reference-group theory, according to which social groups will admire successful and highly advanced out-groups as they become the sources for aspirations, for comparing and evaluating their own qualities and for determining their identities and attitudes.

The tendency of demonstrating less liking for representatives of neighboring countries was revealed as early as by the pioneer study of attitudes involving respondents from eight countries (Buchanan & Cantril, 1953): 'sharing a common boundary was slightly more likely to lead to disliking than to liking' (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005, p. 350). We suggest that attitudes towards various ethnic and religious groups are mainly perceived as 'national images' that do not always coincide with the reality and are rather based upon a combination of hard and soft power. '[...] All of our attitudes are based on our perception of the environment rather than on actual, objective situation. But in the field of foreign affairs, the gap between perception and reality is apt to be especially large' (Oskamp & Schultz, p. 345).

The components of the soft power are political relations between countries and perceived similarity or dissimilarity in values, cultures and lifestyles. As for the hard power, it is mainly represented by the economic development of the country. Country's economy is important for two reasons: on the one hand, Georgian students place at a closer distance representatives of economically developed countries, such as Western Europe, and on the other hand, keep at larger social distances those ethnic groups, e.g. Turks or Armenians, who, in their view, act as competitors over Georgia's economic resources. European countries, held at closer distance, are considered as well-off, with broad employment and good remuneration opportunities.

The concept of soft power was developed by the American political scientist Joseph Nye to describe the ability of a country to exercise influence on an international arena through culture, values, and policies, in contrast to military and economic coercion. According to Nye (2004), 'A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it' (Nye, 2004, p. 5). The scholar farther argues that 'seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive' (Nye, p. 10). Soft power, jointly created by the government and population, is aimed at building and exporting nation's images; these images, in turn, are held in people's perceptions. Indeed, as Tarver-Wahlquist and Tsygankov (2009) argue, 'state behavior is shaped by emotions

and power calculations, but each can only be understood in contexts of everyday interactions and socio-historical development' (Tarver-Wahlquist & Tsygankov, 2009, p. 11).

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data reveals that Georgian students hold at close social distances those ethnic and religious groups who they know either personally or through mass media and aspire to them. They perceive at a large distance those ethnic and religious groups who they either know to a lesser extent or dislike. Georgian students feel more familiar with the Western Europe, which exercises much stronger hard and soft power than Georgia. Similar findings on Georgian students were reported in 2005 (Javakhishvili), according to which Georgian students held Europeans at closer distances than their geographic neighbors most of whom, at the same time, represented ethnic minorities (Javakhishvili, 2005).

In this contribution, we argue that combination of hard and soft power of nations on the international arena are reflected in the minds of populations and foster their attitudes towards various ethnic and religious groups. It is remarkable that most of the countries whose representatives are held at a close distance by Georgian students appear among the top 10 in a soft power study conducted by the trendsetting international media organization, Monocle (A Soft Power Survey, 2015/16).

It has to be noted once again that these are perceptions of Georgian students, in other words, 'national images' that do not necessarily coincide with the reality. Our article follows a social constructivist approach in an attempt to understand attitudes of students. A social constructivist approach claims that the reality itself is important, but the more important is how it is understood and interpreted by the actors. Our data on students' attitudes towards ethnic and religious groups is an example of hard and soft power intertwined in their perceptions of 'national images'.

As in the case of given article, the research population only consists of students, our findings cannot be generalized nationwide. At the same time, it should be noted that while most of the studies using Bogardus scale are limited to student samples (Wark & Galliher, 2007), their results prove to be quite similar to the results of the few studies conducted on a nationwide scale (Kleg & Yamamoto, 1998). It would be interesting, though, to conduct a similar study with elder generations to judge whether social distances of students and non-students are different. We believe the findings of our research will remarkably contribute to Caucasus studies that are underrepresented in the scholarly output of social scientists (Kemoklidze et al., 2012).

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