

Slavic Folktales in Georgia: Translations, Adaptations, and Folklore Scholarship

Historical aspect

Georgia and the Slavic regions (including Ukraine, Poland, Bulgaria, Belarus, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the broader Balkans) share a rich tapestry of cultural and historical connections. These connections extend to various aspects, including politics, religion and literature. The relationship between Poland and Georgia can be traced back to the early seventeenth century, a period during which both countries confronted the expansion of the Ottoman Empire as a shared challenge. In the eighteenth century, both nations were threatened by the emergence of the Russian Empire. The shared struggles for independence and efforts to preserve national cultures under the pressures of the Russian Empire fostered early literary and intellectual exchanges, particularly during the Romantic period, when themes of national identity and cultural memory were emphasised. Georgian-Bulgarian relations have deeper historical roots, grounded in shared Byzantine influence. The Ukrainian-Georgian literary context, as part of the cultural and scholarly history of both nations, includes a substantial body of artistic, translated, and scholarly-critical literature. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a tradition devoted to the study of Georgian literature first began to take shape in Ukrainian academic writing.

The project, which was highly productive and carried out in the 1960s, has been described as a kind of oxymoron – a “Soviet Erasmus”. The programme facilitated exchanges among universities in the Soviet republics intending to foster mutual study of languages and cultures, as well as training new specialists. The origins of this exchange can be traced back to the establishment of a partnership between the universities of Kyiv and Tbilisi in 1964.

In the Soviet period, official cultural policy emphasized the doctrine of the “Friendship of Peoples,” positioning translation not only as a moral duty but also as an instrument of ideological guidance. Within this system, translated literature – including folktales – occupied a dual role: it was peripheral in aesthetic terms, yet central in its ideological function.

Folklore, in particular, was seen as a politically safe medium; its popular and flexible nature allowed it to be adapted to convey narratives of shared historical struggles and collective values.

Soviet Georgia thus became both a recipient and a producer of translated folklore, illustrating how subsystems of the cultural polysystem interacted dynamically. Publishing houses such as *Nakaduli*, *Sakhelgami*, *Ganatileba*, *Merani*, *Sabchota Sakartvelo* and others commissioned translations of Slavic folktales, often including introductions and commentary that framed the narratives in terms of socialist moral lessons or cross-cultural solidarity. At the same time, Georgian folklorists and translators were engaged in comparative studies, using Slavic materials to illuminate parallels with Caucasian narrative traditions.

Slavic and Caucasian Folklore Parallels in Georgian Scholarship

In Georgian folkloristics, scholars have frequently emphasized parallels between Georgian and Slavic mythological and fairy-tale motifs, thereby contributing to the development of comparative folklore studies in Georgia. This research reflects a sustained interest in tracing common symbolic structures and motifs that extend across the oral traditions of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

Vakhtang Kotetishvili compares a Belarusian song to a Georgian folk poem "I Saw a Dream Last Night". The tree is compared to the parts of the human body.

In the context of comparative mythology, the gender of the luminaries is compared to that of the sun and moon in Slavic mythology, the astral nature of the horse in Slovak fairy tales and Georgian fairy tales. He compares the appeal to a horse in Ukrainian and Georgian heroic poems. His sources are:

Ksenia Sikharulidze has compared Georgian, Ukrainian and Belarusian fairy tales.

Mikheil Chikovani, investigated parallels between Georgian and Serbian folk poetry, particularly those related to the motif of the victim immured in a fortress. In Georgian tradition, this theme appears in the legend of the Surami Fortress. According to the tale, which is set in a time preceding the Common Era, the fortress repeatedly collapsed during construction until a human sacrifice was made. A young man named Zurab, the only child of his family, volunteered to be immured within the walls to secure the fortress's stability. His

mother, powerless to prevent the act, was left to mourn at the fortress wall for the rest of her life. Folklore maintains that her ghost, clothed in black, still appears at the site.

Chikovani compared this Georgian legend with the Serbian tale of the building of the Skadar Fortress. In this narrative, three brothers undertake the construction of a fortress that collapses each night. They resolve to sacrifice whichever wife brings food last to the workers. The youngest brother's wife, Rozafa, is chosen. She consents to her fate but requests that openings be left for her eye, hand, foot, and breast so that she might continue to care for her infant child. After her immurement, the fortress stands firm, and her breast turns to stone, a lasting symbol of maternal sacrifice.

In the ethnographic works by **Neli Bregadze** are the comparative analysis of Georgian and Bulgarian agricultural traditions.

My research on dragons in Georgian and Bulgarian folktales, published in *Études balkaniques*, focuses on Eastern European narrative traditions, particularly the figure of the supernatural adversary, which frequently appears as a dragon, snake, or giant.

At present, my work concentrates on the motif of magical birds and singing trees in the tale types ATU 550 (*The Bird, the Horse and the Princess*), ATU 551 (*The Water of Life*), and ATU 707 (*The Three Golden Children*). By tracing these motifs across Georgian and Slavic oral traditions, my research demonstrates the existence of a rich and enduring network of shared folkloric motifs, revealing that such narratives function not only as entertainment but also as vehicles of moral instruction and cultural continuity. Within these fairy tales, singing birds—often golden birds in Slavic traditions and the nightingale in Georgian folklore—occupy a particularly prominent position.

Editions of Slavic Folktales

Since 1953, Georgia has published a series of Slavic and Eastern European folktales, reflecting sustained interest in regional folklore.

The circulation of translated fairy tales in Georgia provides a particularly illuminating example of mediated or secondary-language transmission. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, Eastern European folktales enjoyed remarkable popularity in Georgia. Yet it was precisely Russian, functioning as a mediating linguistic channel, that facilitated the wide

reception of Slavic and Eastern European narratives. Russian served as the primary conduit through which children's literature, theatrical repertoires, and illustrated editions reached Georgian readers.

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Even though Russian often served as the intermediary language, Slavic folktales felt closer and more familiar to Georgian audiences than Russian fairy tales. This is especially visible in the popularity of fairy-tale films: productions from Central Europe, particularly Czechoslovakia, were more warmly received in Georgia than Russian fairy-tale cinema. Their aesthetics, storytelling, and emotional atmosphere created a stronger sense of cultural proximity.

Translation strategy

In the Georgian translations of South-Eastern European folktales, the rendering of fantastic creatures offers a particularly telling example of culturally motivated translation strategies. Rather than preserving the internationalized Latin or Slavic forms (e.g., *drago*, *zmei*, *zmija*), translators consistently employ the Georgian folkloric term *gveleshapi*. This choice reflects a conscious domesticating strategy: the foreign creature is not simply transferred as an exotic entity but is assimilated into the Georgian mythological system, where serpentine and aquatic dragon *gveleshapi* ("snake-whale", *gveli* – serpent, *veshapi* – whale) occupy a central position. Such decisions illustrate how translators navigate the tension between maintaining the cultural specificity of the source text and ensuring recognizability, resonance, and narrative coherence for Georgian readers.

In Slavic folktales, fairy-tale antagonists typically appear as dragons and snakes. Both scholars and ordinary readers acquainted with South Caucasian traditions readily perceive the typological parallels among these figures. The Slavic *zmei* family – Polish *źmij*, Belarusian *змеі*, Russian *змеѣ*, Bulgarian *змиѝ*, Macedonian *змеѝ*, Serbian *змaj*, Croatian *zmaj*, Slovene *zmaj*, Ukrainian *змії*—belongs to a broader category of serpentine adversaries widely attested in the region. In the South Caucasus, dragons play a similar role. They are associated with water, danger, liminality, and the protection or violation of natural boundaries. The Georgian compound *gvel-veshapi* further underscores the hybrid nature of this creature.

In contrast to the domestication of mythological terminology, Georgian translations generally preserve the Slavic personal and place names with a high degree of precision. This strategic use of foreignisation reflects a deliberate translational balance: while culturally specific supernatural beings are adapted to the Georgian mythological system, proper names remain unchanged to maintain the narrative's geographic and ethnic anchoring. By retaining the original anthroponyms and toponyms, translators ensure that the cultural provenance of the tale remains visible, allowing Georgian readers to situate the story within its Slavic context even as certain narrative elements are assimilated into local folkloric conventions. This dual strategy underlines how translation deals with the conflicting demands of maintaining fidelity to the source culture and achieving functional integration into the target culture's literary polysystem.

Contemporary Stage Adaptations of Slavic Folktales in Georgia

Current stage adaptations of fairy tales in Georgian theatres fulfil a dual role, combining educational and entertaining elements. The contemporary Georgian theatrical repertoire presents several challenges, and there is a question as to whether theatre functions primarily as an entertainment or an educational medium. In addition to the scenic adaptations of Grimm's, Perrault's and Andersen's fairy tales, Georgian theatres also stage selected Slavic folktales. In 2012, performances based on Czech fairy-tale motifs were staged at the Theatre for Young Audiences, including *The Golden-Haired Princess*, directed by Anatoli Lobov.

A reinterpretation of the Slovenian folktale *The Twelve Months* was staged at the Marjanishvili Drama Theatre in Tbilisi in January 2025 as part of its Christmas programme. This well-known fairy tale, classified as ATU 480 *The Kind and the Unkind Girls*, is deeply

rooted in the folk traditions of South Eastern Europe and exemplifies the extensive journey of a folktale across languages, media, and cultural contexts. It is evident from these contemporary productions that Georgian interest in Slavic folktales extends beyond shared moral values. In fact, it is also sustained by emotional resonance, cultural familiarity, and the enduring appeal of its narrative charm.

Conclusion

Fairy tale collections are more than mere stories; they are mirrors of culture, reflecting the fears and values of the societies that tell them. In Georgia, the translation of Slavic folktales flourished during the Soviet period, revealing a complex interplay between artistic creativity, cultural exchange, and ideological oversight. These translations were produced under the shadow of Russian imperialism, within a framework that imposed political and social constraints. However, they also opened channels for dialogue, mutual understanding, and enduring cultural connections. Far from being passive reproductions of foreign texts, these tales became active agents in shaping Georgia's literary and folkloric landscape. Slavic folktales keep a strong presence in contemporary Georgia, engaging audiences without ideological constraints or censorship. The ongoing circulation, translation and adaptation of folktales for theatre and audio media reveal the ability of such tales to function as dynamic cultural texts, effectively negotiating linguistic, temporal and performative boundaries.

Georgian editions of Slavic folktales

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Tbilisi: Nakaduli.

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Bulgaruli zgaprebi. 1975. [Bulgarian Folktales], translated by N. Arjevanidze, K. Nadiradze, and M. Zubadalashvili. Tbilisi: Nakaduli.

Chekhuri zgaprebi. 1969. [Czech Folktales], translated by L. Eristavi. Tbilisi: Nakaduli.

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- Erben, Karel. *Chekhuri zgaprebi*. 1953. [Czech Folktales], translated from Czech by E. Eristavi. Tbilisi: Sakhelgami.
- Iugoslaviuri zgaprebi*. 1974. [Yugoslavian Folktales]. Tbilisi: Nakaduli.
- Polonuri zgaprebi*. 1970. [Polish Folktales], compiled, translated from Polish, and provided with an introduction and notes by G. Chichinadze. Tbilisi: Nakaduli.
- Rusuli zgaprebi*. Antologia. 2014. [Russian Folktales. Anthology], translated by T. Babuadze. Tbilisi: Bakur Sulakauri Publishing.
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- Slovakuri zgaprebi*. 1971. [Slovak Folktales], translated by L. Eristavi. Tbilisi: Nakaduli.
- Ukrainuli zgaprebi*. 1957. [Ukrainian Folktales], translated by V. Khazalia. Tbilisi: Sakhelgami.
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