

**POLITICS OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES
IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AFTER 1991**

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Abstract

Language along with religion, ethnicity and nation, has become one of the most discussed and studied themes of the modern era. The political and economic configurations are decisive in forging language politics which also display social values and public moods. However, populist and nationalist tendencies are not always congruent with public preferences. The status of Russian and attitudes to English and Turkish raised politically and socially sensitive issues in the post-Soviet space. The three republics of the South Caucasus were among the first to reject the domination of Russian as the lingua franca which was associated with communist ideology.

The linguistic challenges in the South Caucasus in the past twenty years of independence differed from state to state both in their nature, intensity and implementation mechanisms. However, they also had similar symbolic and populist tones. Russian was marginalized, while the study of English gained momentum. Politicization of the language had little effect on the attitude to foreign languages especially in the era of globalization where the spread of communication technologies makes certain restrictions irrelevant. Interestingly, Russian is enjoying a modest and slightly visible comeback. Accommodation of social and political aspects of language could be a way of both maintaining the national and embracing the global. Despite the focus on the national side of the phenomena in terms of nation-building and nation-preservation, the society at large gives priority to the economic gains offered by languages.

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Introduction

The three South Caucasus republics in many respects went through almost a similar path during the seventy years of the Soviet rule. The policies initiated by the center were more or less equally imposed on all union republics. Language policies were not an exception. Russification¹ was being advanced both explicitly and implicitly. Under the guise of encouraging national languages the usage of these same national languages was discouraged from the top. The constitutional amendments in 1978 were targeted at raising the status of Russian at the expense of the native languages. This policy was protested in the South Caucasus republics with the major protest held in Georgia. As a result only these three republics were allowed to maintain the official status of their national languages.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union the newly independent republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia adopted laws on language and education where the national languages were accorded the highest status. The debates around the primary language had different directions in all the three states, considering that Armenia is the most homogeneous and Georgia the most multiethnic among them. Different social and political events spur debates about the role and importance of the national languages and the way foreign languages should be viewed in this context. The debates around the change of alphabet and the name of the language in Azerbaijan in the 1990s, the tense Russian-Georgian relations over breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Georgian President Saakashvili's initiative to replace Russian with English, the ban of Russian-language schools in the early 1990s and the recent debate in Armenia over opening of foreign-language schools are instances of language politics and politicization.

¹ Following Safran's (1992:402) and Lewis' (1972:64) interpretation, by using the terms "Russify" and "Russification" throughout the thesis the incorporation of Russian terminology, particularly of scientific-technological, political-ideological and cultural-artistic nature is presumed.

Language appears to be the most vulnerable category for manipulations towards political, ideological and social ends. Particularly during political upheavals it turns into an easy target for exposure to drastic changes. Whether these changes and modifications take an abrupt or gradual pace, they ultimately make the language undergo transformations which in the long run affect also the speakers of that language on administrative, educational, and other spheres. Language policies become a mirror reflecting the political views and tendencies of the nations which are more sharply observed in developing than in developed countries².

These tendencies cannot completely ignore the internal and external realities and cannot but take into account the surrounding circumstances and consequences, international pressure and public opinion. “Language policy agendas evolve along the development route of nations: the higher the level of development, the less the degree of ‘nation-centricity’ and politicization”³. However, this does not imply that the developed states do not face language-related issues; rather the level of tolerance and neutrality with which certain language problems are addressed is higher (the US, Switzerland, Canada).

The Soviet state exercised different approaches to language policies all aimed at serving the ideological and political end of forging a Soviet nation and establishing hegemony of the Russian language. Instead, as Suny brilliantly put it, “[r]ather than a melting pot, the Soviet Union became the incubator of new nations”⁴. Despite the perceived freedom given to the national languages, they were confined within certain boundaries, but it should also be noted that all the republics got exposed to varying degrees of the negative effects of language policies. Paradoxically, the perceived attempts of development and efforts of modernization

² Garibova, Jala. 2009. Language Policy in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Political Aspects. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 198, pp. 7-8.

³ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴ Suny, Ronald Grigor. 1993. *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford University Press, p. 87.

boomeranged and destructed the Soviet empire because of the incompatibility of the central control with democratization⁵.

The first part of the thesis contextualizes the relation between language and nation, politicization of language and linguistic nationalism, and linguistic diversity and multilingualism in the globalizing world. Language is not only a social instrument for intercourse and networking but also a political instrument for the forging of a nation and keeping the national identity. The primary question is: why does politicization of the importance of a language meet either public resistance or indifference? How can diversity in language policies accommodate both political (national) and social (communication/ employment/ networking) aspects of language? Does education in foreign language undermine the importance of the national language and how? How can focus on the national language effect on the diversification of language policies?

However, politicization of the language has little effect on the attitude to foreign languages especially in the era of globalization where the spread of communication technologies makes certain restrictions irrelevant. While political actors and nationalist forces tend to politicize language and thereby influence language policies, their efforts seem to have little effect on the broader social perception. Despite the focus on the national side of the phenomena in terms of nation-building and nation-preservation, the society at large gives priority to their economic advantages and benefits and views languages as an instrument to gain such benefits.

The theoretical rationale will be followed by a historical overview of the Soviet languages policies and their impact on the South Caucasus. There is extensive literature about the nature, true goals and implementation mechanisms of the linguistic and nationality policies of the USSR. Nevertheless, there are also claims that the studies of this field are not comprehensive

⁵ Kirkwood, Michael. 1991. Glasnost', "the National Question" and Soviet Language Policy. *Soviet Studies* 43:1, p. 74.

enough. What actually is not comprehensive and still very scarcely studied is the discourse around the language policies of the South Caucasus region since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Unlike the amount of studies and researches related to the language issues of this area in the pre-independence era, the post-Soviet period has so far seen isolated and separate case studies.

In the last chapter of the thesis the debates and discourses about linguistic and educational reforms after the long-awaited independence will be covered. In all three republics the approaches to language issues had both similarities and differences. The national language, being a decisive marker of national identity in all of the three South Caucasus republics, posed different challenges for the leaders of the new states. The political leadership has either followed the popular demand in handling with the challenges or had to employ a more accommodating stance or just carry out reforms based on the political realities and personal preferences. Besides the existing academic literature, primary and secondary sources and some empirical data will also be used to support the hypothesis.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Background

1.1 Language and Nation

Language is one of the irreplaceable and dominant factors of a nation's existence and identity. It is first of all a means of communication without which transfer of speech and ideas would have been impossible. It is also a medium of expression of its speakers' culture and spirits. The human society has also developed into a political phenomenon in the form of nation-states. In the course of this development certain political features were attributed to language. It largely figured in nation-building and has become one of the significant markers of nationhood and national identity. Therefore, it is not an exclusively social category, rather it has evolved into a political category which both influences politics and is influenced by politics⁶.

In the modern context it is impossible to talk about "language" without reference to "nation". In the academic world there is not a comprehensive and generally acceptable definition of the concept "nation". Which group of people is entitled to the status of a nation – those who possess a state, or those who do not? What are the characteristic features of a nation? Is it defined by its historical and cultural heritage, its form of political organization or both? The factors which determine a nation can be primary or secondary depending on the circumstances and the people's perception. In one instance religion can be the bridge between the people who share the sense of belonging together (Greeks and Turks), in another that decisive role can be taken by language (Poles and Germans), in a third case they can go hand in hand (Walloons, Flemings and Dutch in 1980-81)⁷.

⁶ Pelinka, Anton. 2007. Language as a Political Category: The Viewpoint of Political Science. *Journal of Language and Politics* 6:1, p. 2.

⁷ Alter, Peter. 1994. *Nationalism*. E. Arnold. London. 2nd edition, p. 7.

According to the existing definitions, nations are divided between ethnic or cultural and civic or political types and are centered on objective and subjective criteria. In the latter principle nation and state have the same weight, are on the same ground and both are understood equally. Nation is generated as a “community of politically aware citizens equal before the law irrespective of their social and economic status, ethnic origin and religious beliefs”⁸. Here subjective criteria which include political factors, such as political will and political ideals, come to the fore. These cement the union of the nation and the state as one whole.

For a cultural nation common language, religion, customs and traditions, distinct area and history are more characteristic which make up the objective criteria. In this case the existence of the nation is not necessarily conditioned by the existence of the state. These two are independent of each other but based on the common cultural and linguistic grounds the former can politicize and legitimize their claim for statehood. Despite the theoretically apparent distinctions between the two types of nations in reality convergence of subjective and objective attributes occurs⁹. The French nation as a model of political nation puts emphasis on language and history, and the Poles symbolizing the cultural counterpart, demonstrated political will for the formation of their state in the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the boundaries of both types cross and the application of the criteria is conditioned by changing circumstances and interests, Alter concludes that “the freedom to choose and decide is a crucial condition for the existence of almost any type of social organization”¹⁰.

Tomasz Kamusella draws a parallel between the concepts of “nation” and “language” and claims that both are “ascriptive labels”¹¹. He builds his argument on the groundbreaking theories of constructivist scholars Ernest Gellner (1983) and Benedict Anderson (1983) that

⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kamusella, Tomasz. 2008. *The Politics of Language and Nationalisms in Modern Central Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 24.

classical nation-states were created as a result of modernization and industrialization only in the late eighteenth century and languages were standardized to the end of ensuring mass literacy which was a requirement for the modern nation-state. The understanding and interpretation of both categories are subjective and depend on the state's will. Although the majority of the recognized nation-states are civic in terms that the state defines the nation, they still carry ethnic elements. In the same way ethnically defined states, where the nation creates the state, bear a certain degree of civic character. In this regard the ascription of civic or ethnic to a nation is arbitrary as the two paradigms intersect.

The nation-state created the language out of the various vernaculars spoken within the territory for its nation, thus homogenizing the population. The face-to-face communication expanded and included more people thus ensuring social cohesion in national terms. The codified and standardized¹² written language became an instrument for the consolidation and homogenization of the people confined within the borders of the given state and was not only used for administrative or educational purposes, but also as a tool for control. Hence, besides being a means of oral and written communication bounding people, language came to draw an ethnic and national boundary. This way in addition to its social function it has also acquired a political dimension. Politicization of language is said to be more visible in nation-states which are defined in ethno-linguistic terms (for instance, Central European states), but even in civic states which are considered classic and model for others (for instance, France), this phenomenon is present¹³.

There is not a strict definition of a "nation", but it is an internationally recognized status that is granted to a group of population for the legitimization of their statehood. Belonging to a

¹² Although technically "standardization" is synonymous to "codification" when applied to language-building, by the former the political and academic aspects of the process are referred to, whereas the latter is reserved for the process of writing (ibid., Note 7, p. 957).

¹³ Ibid., pp. 6, 42.

nation creates commonality between its members which can be complemented by categories like citizenship (first of all in civic terms), and religion, traditions, history, language, and other elements of culture¹⁴. Kamusella argues that similarly, there is not a single definition of “a language” and the intelligibility or unintelligibility of languages or dialects is subjective as there is not a clear border between the two. The criterion of intelligibility is not enough to differentiate between various forms of dialects or a dialect from a language¹⁵. The decision of heightening a form of language to the official status depends solely on the will, interests and discretion of political actors. This is the reason that Kamusella assigns an “ascriptive” feature to both notions and characterizes the process as “arbitrary”, since there are no specific procedures and criteria for the elevation of a human group to the status of a nation and a vernacular to an official language¹⁶.

Languages and nations are mutually dependant. While ethnic groups can be demarcated by linguistic boundaries, linguistic differences, too, can be determined ethnically. The boundaries of a language become clear when an ethnic groups views itself as a nation and consciously differentiates itself from other groups¹⁷. People develop a collective identity based on the language they speak and maintain that language giving it a primacy over other languages. When it comes to national identity, language takes the prime role among the national characteristics¹⁸. People become very conscious about their mother tongue when faced with a foreign language and it becomes the most audible factor of national identity.

¹⁴ There are also nations sharing ethnic attributes that are stateless. Civic nations cannot be stateless.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 24-35.

¹⁷ Barbour, Stephen, and Carmichael, Cathie. 2000. *Language and Nationalism in Europe*. Oxford University Press, p. 12.

¹⁸ Abrahamian, Levon. 2006. *Armenian Identity in a Changing World*. Mazda Publishers, Inc., p. 65.

1.2 Language and Politics

Anton Pelinka argues that although language and linguistic politics constructed and created the modern nation-state, it is the subjective perception of language by the human collective that is able to have a political impact and nation-building power and not the objective existence of language itself¹⁹. Since potentially everything can acquire a political colouring and political meaning, language is not an exception. Language is a transparent and ambiguous notion but as a phenomenon it has a political power of mobilization, distortion, provocation, and competition. In this sense it is challenged by other variables which can be equally successful in a different situation (e.g. religion in Northern Ireland)²⁰.

Language, like citizenship or territory, is among those criteria which define the inclusion in a nation or exclusion from it. It performs two functions – that of uniting and dividing. Despite all the social-economic differences within the given society, a common language unites them all around a national identity creating the sense of “we”. As a social category, language is able to unite the social, economic or cultural diversity within a society, making other factors (religion, class, generation) secondary. When a language is attributed the function of integration it turns into an instrument for the creation of a nation, especially when in the ethno-linguistic paradigm a sign of equation exists between a nation and a language²¹.

At the same time, it is a marker of difference as it draws a line of separation between “us” and “them”, differentiating one nation from others. Despite the separation and differentiation along the linguistic lines, a certain degree of diversity exists also within the language which is able to create diversity and difference on the social and political levels. However, difference

¹⁹ Pelinka 2007, p. 132.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 131-132.

²¹ Ibid., p. 131, Kamusella 2008, p. 27.

as such is not a precursor of a political conflict unless that difference is perceived and later interpreted in a particular and politically charged way to provoke tension or conflict²².

Language policies and attitudes to them are shaped by cultural, geographical, or economic considerations. The economic specter is undoubtedly important and competition for economic power finds its reflection in the competition between dominant or majority and peripheral or minority language groups. However, Safran argues that if economic gains were the ultimate factor, minorities would not be reluctant to give up their languages, which in its turn is most likely to create resistance and intensify interethnic tension²³. Here the economic factor crisscrosses the political one as a control mechanism and the strong disagreement turns against political domination.

Safran points out that the causal link between language and state is incongruent since in the majority of cases languages of the world existed without the existence of a political community, thus being independent of each other (English, German). On the other hand there are many other cases when the state bears the role of legitimating and maintaining a language; therefore the formation of the state makes a great impact on its development (Israel, the Soviet Union)²⁴. Language is manipulated for both the creation of a state and the creation of a citizen for the spread and enrooting of national values. People sharing the same language may be citizens of various states (the United States, Great Britain), and people speaking different languages may be loyal to one state (Switzerland, Belgium)²⁵.

The status or fate of a language depends on the political elites and institutions either by elevating and supporting it on the institutional level or neglecting and belittling it – all

²² Pelinka 2007, pp. 134-135.

²³ Safran, William. 2004. Introduction: The Political Aspects of Language. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 10, p. 3.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁵ Safran, William. 1992. Language, Ideology, and State-Building: A Comparison of Policies in France, Israel, and the Soviet Union. *International Political Science Review* 13:4, p. 397.

implemented for certain purposes ranging from oppression and homogenization to establishment of democracy or nationalism, among others. Hence, institutional intervention in the language domain influences not only the languages in question but also their speakers.

Not all languages have the same weight in terms of culture and the same significance or value in political and economic terms, and the state cannot have an equal position towards all the languages inside its borders. Certainly, it is not recommended to eradicate the “small” languages to the end of nation- or state-building, first because it is not easy since many people use those languages at least for interethnic communication, and second, because it is inadmissible to eliminate cultural heritage. Safran emphasizes that globalization and the pressure of the market force out some of these languages. According to the figures presented by him “about 96 percent of the world’s population speaks only 4 percent of the 5.000–7.000 existing languages; and according to pessimistic estimates, 90 percent of them are destined to disappear in this century”,²⁶.

1.3 Language Facility in a Globalizing World

No matter how homogeneous a state is, it cannot be “purely” monolingual as people mostly speak more than one language due to historical developments, immigration and globalization. The mother tongue can have the official status, it can share that status with one or more other languages, but the society cannot be confined to using only one language. For political, social or economic reasons languages can be given certain official or unofficial statuses, but interaction with other societies and historical developments make speaking a variety of languages not impossible. Millar stresses that societal multilingualism is the norm, whereas

²⁶ Safran 2004, pp. 11-12.

monolingualism is unusual²⁷. Bilingualism or multilingualism is rather a rule than an exception.

As a contradiction, in officially multilingual states one language dominates over others due to standardization and the global market. English has become the global language, but the competition between the most used and the less equal or native languages should not result in the elimination of the latter, but in their coexistence. Safran finds a “rational” solution in the adaptation and accommodation of different languages for particular purposes and to different circumstances which vary on the household/subnational, regional/intranational and international levels. The functional differentiation is a reasonable way both for the promotion of native languages and preservation of multilingualism as an “important cultural value”²⁸.

State protection makes a language a more tangible or, as Taras put it, a “less metaphysical phenomenon”²⁹. It accentuates even slight differences from neighboring languages and draws borders between them the way it separates itself from other states. Swaan argues that language is no longer taken for granted and it gradually and rapidly turns into a symbol and cultural-historical treasure³⁰. With the acquisition of a foreign language people increase their “communication potential” and the choice of a language depends on its “centrality” and “plurality”³¹. It is aimed at the future and making such a lasting investment is determined not only by the number of its speakers, the learner’s perceptions, expectations and preferences, but also by the political and economic arrangements.

²⁷ Millar, Robert McColl. 2005. *Language, Nation and Power: An Introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 18-19.

²⁸ Safran 2004, p. 12.

²⁹ Taras, Ray. 1998. Nations and Language-Building: Old Theories, Contemporary Cases. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 4:3, p. 82.

³⁰ Swaan, Abram de. 1993. The Evolving European Language System: A Theory of Communication Potential and Language Competition. *International Political Science Review* 14:3, pp. 243-244.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

Linguistic diversity and multilingualism are highly affected by dominating globalization trends not only in the economic, but also in the cultural dimension. More powerful languages begin to pose a threat to national languages and challenge their viability. Since politics is “lacking a decisive global structure”³² unlike its economic and cultural counterparts, the power of nationalism rises in support of the national languages. The pressures of globalization and nationalism trigger political sensitivities. The loyalty to and enthusiasm for the national value is challenged and confronted by the logic of the global. On the one hand people do not want to lag behind the current trends and developments and increase their communication potential to meet the market needs. On the other, they adhere to their national identity marker and employ political resources to protect the national language from the threats of globalization³³.

Gaining new language skills is not to the detriment of another in the sense that one does not completely abandon the other language. Knowledge of a second language is a ladder to the third. Such an inclusive decision creates a multilingual equilibrium efficiently incorporating the global and the regional. The decision to adopt multilingualism as a vehicle for international communication in its broad sense is a “viable strategy” which enriches the language repertoire to meet the demands of the globalizing world³⁴. The equilibrium is achieved by encompassing the regional for educational, administrative and cultural matters on the local level, and the global for business and education on the international level.

The expected economic advantages derived from the linguistic capital are not the only reason behind a particular language choice. Laitin outlines two more functions – the social status and

³² Pelinka 2007, p. 140.

³³ Laitin, David D. 1993. The Game Theory of Language Regimes. *International Political Science Review* 14:3, p. 228.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-237.

implications of assimilation³⁵. Being equipped with more than one language increases the chances of success in the international job market. However, it may also give rise to negative attitudes in the society if one is more fluent in a foreign language than in the native or if one decides to send their children to a foreign-language school. Besides, those who go through linguistic assimilation should also consider the perspective of external acceptance.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 232.

Chapter 2: Historical Overview

2.1 Soviet Language Policy

The linguistic diversity of the Soviet Union is both the legacy of historical developments and the product of policies consistently implemented by the center throughout its existence. The expansionist policies and military advancement of the Russian Empire created an immense multilingual state. The Tsarist Russia was encountered with a variety of non-uniform cultures in the vast territory under its dominion comprised of “about 180 different linguistic groups”³⁶. Besides ethnic diversity some of those peoples possessed languages with a considerable written history in a unique script (Armenians, Georgians) which, combined with the maintenance of their own forms of Christianity, further emphasized their identity³⁷. Ukrainians and Russians possessed Western traditions; others enjoyed no less great cultural heritage, such as the Armenians and Georgians, while the diverse Turkic Muslim groups greatly differed not only from each other, but also from the Western culture which drew a line of separation between them.

Before the Bolshevik Revolution minority cultures and languages were widely discouraged. Together with the incorporation of the complex ethnic and national groups, the Tsars pursued a policy of suppression and assimilation of not only the small population groups but also the large ones. The repressive strategy shaped the framework and directions of the “nationalities” policy which was persistently operated and perpetrated to hinder the enrichment and maintenance of the national cultures. Education in the native tongues was by and large denied

³⁶ Lewis, Glyn E. 1972. *Multilingualism in the Soviet Union: Aspects of Language Policy and its Implementation*. Mouton & Co. N.C. Publishers, p. 17.

³⁷ Millar 2005, pp. 175-176.

to non-Russian peoples and development of the languages in use and creation of alphabets was prevented and disapproved³⁸.

Aimed at promoting socialism and tying the peripheral regions with diverse nationalities to the new political system the Bolsheviks adopted a different strategy by which their cultural-linguistic peculiarities would be preserved³⁹. The language policies of the Soviet government were aimed at ‘modernization’ of the languages of the less-developed nations or ethnic groups but this move was not without an ideological purpose. Russian was enshrined as the first language of the Soviet Union in the law not only for economical but also ideological reasons. The promotion and advancement of socialism was tied with the ethno-linguistic policies which were carried out in three main phases: *korenizatsia*⁴⁰, bilingualism and monolingualism.

Starting from the 1920s and lasting until the early 1930s *korenizatsia* was largely supported and vigorously implemented by the center. One of the issues on the agenda was the introduction of a unified script. For instance, the peoples in Central Asia were speaking varieties of Turkic and Mongolian languages and were associated with Islamic traditions which made the Soviet authorities to be alarmed at the prospect of pan-Islamist propaganda. Alphabets were created for the peoples who did not have a written tradition and schools were opened where education in the native language was encouraged. This was a tactical approach aimed at strengthening the Soviet statehood which also contributed to the spread of literacy among the vast and diverse population.

³⁸ Lewis 1972, p. 18.

³⁹ Safran 1992, p. 402.

⁴⁰ Different authors come up with different translations of the Russian word “*korenizatsia*”. For example, Safran (1992:402) uses “indigenization”, Suny (1993:102) calls it “nativization”, Lewis (1972:71) suggests “local-rooting”. Nevertheless, the essence of the phenomenon was the promotion and consolidation of minority and native languages and encouragement of education in local languages.

On the one hand the Soviet government wanted to Russify all the nations within the state by either creating new Cyrillic alphabets for them or turning the existing ones into Cyrillic, on the other they preferred the Roman script, which they perceived as the script of progress⁴¹. In the end, “Romanization” was not seriously considered and the Cyrillic script was encouraged mostly for the Central Asian republics and the ethnic groups of Siberia. Cyrillic was imposed on some literate languages as well (Moldavian), however, older civilizations (Armenian and Georgian) or cultures with a more “modern” and Western outlook (the Baltic peoples and the Ukrainians) managed to avoid the appropriation of this policy⁴².

The administrative boundaries of the Soviet Union were largely drawn along the nationality lines. One should also take into account the fact that nationality and language were congruent since in political terms language was the major determinant of nationality. Besides, the problems of the former were related to those of the latter. On the other hand, the number of languages and nationalities were not proportional as not all peoples enjoyed the status of a nation. Lewis states that officially 150 languages were recognized in 1926, but this number gradually and significantly decreased over time to about 120 in the 1970s⁴³.

“The choice of language and the question of whether minority languages should be maintained or discouraged go beyond the matter of mere political integration and touch upon the legitimacy of the national culture and the ideology upon which the political system is based”⁴⁴. In the course of its existence the theoretical and practical aspects of the Soviet language policies were in contradiction. Theoretically the national languages were protected

⁴¹ Millar 2005, pp. 182-186.

⁴² Safran 1992, pp. 402-404.

⁴³ Lewis 1972, p. 25.

⁴⁴ Safran 1992, p. 398.

and were equal to the Russian, but in practice many of them suffered serious decline as there was an increasingly strong central control for the intensification of the Russian⁴⁵.

There were several factors which favored either the Russian language or the national, non-Russian languages. These factors varied from physical to social-political and from demographic to historical-cultural. Although the distinction between these sets of factors is not easy and is almost impossible, the physical and demographic set was a basic one⁴⁶. It was the foundation for the operational framework for the other factors, since the population size and movement are preconditions for language relations. The choice and promotion of the national languages had practical and emotional aspects which could not be ignored completely and the support of which on the top level again served an ideological purpose. It should also be noted that the support varied with the needs of the time and was a matter of political expediency. Russian not only had a numerical advantage, but the command of the language was also a way to a better career. Promotion of Russian was in-line with the political expediency, the ideology of which was to lead to the ultimate fusion of the nations⁴⁷.

It is hard to imagine a society which exists in isolation without the interaction with other communities and languages. Multilingualism is inevitable among large numbers of people, unless harsh nationalistic tendencies opt for the promotion and fostering of a single language. The Soviet Union was not an exception where although linguistic pluralism was not completely abandoned in the 1930s, but Russian became compulsory in schools⁴⁸. As elsewhere, here as well bilingualism and multilingualism were developed due to the fact that not all languages have the capacity to meet the complex needs of individuals. These needs are not confined to mere earning for living. They rather extend to the acquisition of new

⁴⁵ Barbour & Carmichael 2000, p. 270.

⁴⁶ Lewis 1972, p. 49.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 55-66.

⁴⁸ Safran 1992, p. 403.

knowledge, the human ambition of exerting power, influence and leadership and participating in decision making which not all languages can offer to the same degree⁴⁹.

Lewis points out that the socio-linguistic policies of the Soviet Union were centripetal and centrifugal which were affected by several factors⁵⁰. These factors favored either the Russian or the national languages with varying levels of intensity. Among those supportive of national languages he underscored (a) cultural inertia among rural, dispersed and nomadic peoples, (b) promotion of proletariat literacy aimed at elimination of illiteracy among the adults and (c) the assumption that national languages aided the acquisition of Russian as a second language.

The situation of Russian drastically differed from that of the national ones. Besides having numerical and geographical advantages, it was also the language of the political elite. Besides the ideological reasons it also enjoyed pragmatic benefits and its appropriateness and usefulness in various situations for various purposes was undisputable. Along with the promotion of the indigenous languages and besides the historical circumstances favoring the spread of Russian, it was also being deliberately promoted by artificial means. Technical, literary and scientific terms were being injected into the national languages thus increasing the interference and influence of Russian on these languages. In other words the indigenous languages were being re-invented and modernized by means of political contrivance.

Political expediency was determining the degree of support to either side. The general Soviet policy was to take into account the emotional attachment to the local languages and simultaneously foster Russian as the lingua franca attaching more significance to its modernizing role and functions. The strategy was to sustain the volatile equilibrium between centralization and superiority of Russian and practical and emotional aspects of the national languages. However, intensification of Russian did not completely change the preference of

⁴⁹ Lewis 1972, pp. 53-54.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 54-55.

the population and did not necessarily result in the abandonment or disappearance of national languages.

With the era of glasnost' and perestroika rapid changes started to occur on the republican level of the Soviet Union which could not bypass language policies. The Union republics voiced concerns about the status of their national languages and the damage that Russian was causing to them in the name of modernization. With the aim of protecting their native languages from losing out to Russian the republics initiated serious steps to heighten the status of these languages. The central government had to accept a compromise by letting the republics decide on the official status of their languages without discriminating against other languages and keeping Russian as the official language of the Soviet Union⁵¹. The double game around the languages of the Soviet Union which was mostly pro-Russian and anti-non-Russian backfired and instilled pride and respect in the diverse population for their native languages.

2.2 Linguistic Situation in the South Caucasus

The geographical area of the Caucasus is referred to both as the dividing line between Europe and Asia, and the meeting point of both. The Caucasus is one of the most multicultural and linguistically diverse regions in the world stretching from the Black to Caspian Seas from west to east and from the Eurasian steppe to the Armenian highlands from north to south. It is also labeled “the modern Tower of Babel” where over 50 different language groups exist.⁵² South Caucasus is part of the Caucasus, otherwise called Transcaucasia. It is comprised of three former Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and is home to a wide range of Indo-European, Caucasian and Turkic languages. Geographically, historically and

⁵¹ Kirkwood 1991, pp. 73-75.

⁵² Lewis 1972, p. 20.

demographically the area has been a bridge between civilizations and peoples, and at the same time a hotbed for turbulent clashes between civilizations and empires and competing interests.

South Caucasus fell under the Russian dominion in the early nineteenth century which spanned for two centuries, first ruled by the Tsarist Russia, then by the Soviet government for seventy years, lest the short-lived independent republics between 1917 and 1921⁵³. The major population groups of the region underwent varying degrees of development at a different pace. Suny points out that Georgians and Azerbaijanis were the most concentrated in coherent territories, while Armenians were scattered all around; on the other hand Armenians were the most urban, Azerbaijanis the least⁵⁴. Besides, the discourses developed and perpetuated by the educated elites and intellectuals of the three created a gap between them.

The Soviet “nationality policy” with the ensuing linguistic dimension, as well as the social-economic configuration left different marks on different peoples. The South Caucasus republics did not suffer from the effects of state-imposed Russification policies to the same degree as, for instance, Belorussia. At the same time, Azerbaijan underwent a major change in terms of alphabet changes, which Georgia and Armenia were spared. However, as Suny argues, Armenians and Georgians often complained about the detrimental effects of the “imposition of a bilingual policy”⁵⁵. Language was a sensitive issue throughout the Russian and Soviet rule which continued to be on the agenda of the three republics even after gaining independence with the dismantling of the Soviet Union.

⁵³ Suny 1993, pp. 38-76. Herzig, Edmund. 1999. *The New Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*. Royal Institute of International Affairs, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Suny 1993, p. 38.

⁵⁵ Suny, 1993, p. 108.

2.2.1 *Language Issues of Armenia before 1991*

The Armenian language has always played a crucial and essential role in the construction and maintenance of the Armenian national identity. The fifth century is considered the Golden Age in the Armenian history when the alphabet was created which boosted the opening of Armenian schools, recording of the history of Armenians in their own language and translation of foreign texts. The written language symbolized, codified and institutionalized this identity⁵⁶. Throughout the history Armenians regarded the alphabet and the language as “warriors” who defended the Armenian people from assimilation. This is one of the numerous cases when language and ethnicity are intertwined. The Armenian language is a separate branch in the Indo-European family of languages but it is divided into Eastern and Western variants, with the former institutionalized in the Soviet period and used to these days, the latter confined to the Armenian Diaspora in the West and Middle East.

For about six hundred years Armenians did not have a statehood of their own (1375-1918), became subjects of the Persian, the Ottoman and the Russian Empires, scattered around the world and were under a constant danger of assimilation and annihilation. In the absence of statehood, the literate religious elite bore the responsibility of upholding the continuity of the people⁵⁷. Repressive language policies of the Russian Empire manifested in closing schools, where national languages were the medium of instruction, with the purpose of disseminating and enrooting Russian were “responded by a series of terrorist attacks” by Armenian nationalists⁵⁸.

The year of 1920 was the beginning of Sovietization of Armenia, crashing the fragile independence of less than two years, and turning it not only into the smallest but also the most

⁵⁶ Abrahamian 2006, p. 79.

⁵⁷ Suny, Ronald Grigor. 1993a. *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History*. Indiana University Press, pp. 3-6.

⁵⁸ Abrahamian 2006, p. 75.

homogeneous⁵⁹ Union Republic. “The Soviet regime did not create Armenian nationhood, but it did strengthen it and consolidated it on a specific territory”⁶⁰. The orthographic changes from the 1920s through the 1940s were not applied on the Armenian alphabet, unlike its neighbor Azerbaijan. Instead, the rules of pronunciation and spelling were simplified to distance Eastern Armenian from Western⁶¹. After the study of Russian was made compulsory in 1938, there were both pro-Russian support and resentment at making the national culture inferior⁶². “At that point most Armenians in school were still receiving instruction only in Armenian (77.7 percent), and only a tiny fraction (2.8 percent) were studying in Russian”⁶³.

Although Armenian was the official language of the republic and maintained that status also after the constitutional changes in 1978, which failed in the South Caucasus republics thanks to the protests in Georgia, Armenians feared the weakening role of the national language in administration, business and even daily communication. Infusion of Russian terms and increasing number of Russian schools were among the major concerns of the intellectual elite. They were vigilant against any attempt that would undermine the position of the Armenian language and the 1980s passed in the struggle between those who were for the preservation of the superior status of the national language and those who were enhancing the role of Russian⁶⁴. In the decline of the Soviet period the language policy of Russification was viewed as “language genocide” or “white massacre” in Armenia⁶⁵.

⁵⁹ Panossian (2006:280-281) brings two reasons for the reinforced homogenization during the Soviet period, one being in-migration of Armenians from other Soviet republics, particularly from Azerbaijan and Georgia, for better jobs, higher education in mother tongue and more comfortable life without discrimination, the second being the out-migration of Azerbaijanis for their own republic.

⁶⁰ Panossian, Razmik. 2006. *The Armenians: from Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars*. C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, p. 265.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 344.

⁶² Ibid., p. 277.

⁶³ Suny 1993a, p. 154.

⁶⁴ Suny 1993a, p. 188.

⁶⁵ Abrahamian 2006, p. 76. Panossian 2006, p. 343 (Note 68).

However, good command of Russian was an important vehicle for upward mobility on social, economic and political arenas and one quarter of all the students in Armenia attended Russian schools⁶⁶. It was a marker of “social prestige” and Armenians were facing a problem of national identification and bilingualism. Although attempts were made, particularly by some Estonian nationalists, to “prove” scientifically that bilingualism had negative effects on the formation of the learners’ national/ethnic identity, cognitive psychologists and social scientists reject such claims⁶⁷.

2.2.2 Language Issues of Azerbaijan before 1991

The Republic of Azerbaijan is situated to the east of the Republic of Armenia, on the Caspian, the history of which has undergone multiple manipulations during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods and is contested to this day⁶⁸. The area was predominantly populated with Iranian speakers and historically formed a part of Iran in ancient and early medieval times⁶⁹. Seljuk invasions in the eleventh century spread Oghuz Turkic dialects among the population. In the nineteenth century the Muslim people inhabiting in the eastern part of Transcaucasia were known as “Tatars” or “Caucasian Muslims”, who were widely using Persian together with “Azeri” Turkish dialect⁷⁰.

⁶⁶ Panossian 2006, p. 344.

⁶⁷ Abrahamian 2006, pp. 76-79.

⁶⁸ Astourian, Stephan H. 1994. In Search of Their Forefathers: National Identity and the Historiography and Politics of Armenian and Azerbaijani Ethnogeneses, in Schwarz, Donald V., and Panossian, Razmik (Eds). 1994. *Nationalism and History: the Politics of Nation Building in Post-Soviet Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*. Center for Russian and East European Studies. University of Toronto, pp. 41-42, 52-67.

⁶⁹ Swietochowski, Tadeusz. 1991. The Politics of Literary Language and the Rise of National Identity in Russian Azerbaijan before 1920. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 14:1, p. 55. Suny 1993, p. 39.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

In the early nineteenth century the territory fell under the Tsarist Russian rule and began to undergo a process of alienation from the Iranian culture, which was expedient to the Russian Empire in terms of delimiting and neutralizing any identification with Iran. The policies of the Russian empire created a gap between the Azerbaijani Turks of Caucasia and their linguistic and religious compatriots in Iran⁷¹. The rise of the media encouraged by the Russian authorities inculcated interest in the Azerbaijani language which was short-lived because illiteracy was widespread and it only circulated among a narrow circle of intellectuals. Separation from Iran inclined the Sunni minority towards the Ottoman Empire, but this tendency of “Ottomanization” the language and publications in any Turkic language were disapproved by the Russian authorities⁷².

A new spur around the Azerbaijani language emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, caused by the inter-communal riots in 1905 until the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the Young Turks Revolution in 1908, which began to be tied with the Azerbaijani identity. Rejecting Ottoman Turkish as a written language, the Azerbaijani intellectuals codified and standardized the Azerbaijani vernacular which was put into practical use by newspapers and theater⁷³. Usage of the Ottoman language was criticized by the proponents of writing in the Azerbaijani vernacular. Faridun bay Kocharli, historian of literature, made the following statement:

“A nation could lose its wealth, its government, even its territory and still survive, but should it lose its language, not a trace of it would remain. That was the threat hanging over the Caucasian Turks, who have just recovered their written language after a long period of domination by Persia, but now are

⁷¹ Suny 1993, p. 39. Both Suny and Swietochowski (1991:56-57) claim that in the nineteenth century the population identified themselves mostly with Islam and the Muslim world rather than with ethnicity or language. The name “Azerbaijani” was applied only in the late 1930s to denote a separate ethnic group with the purpose of distancing them from their “Turkishness” and Pan-Islam (Suny 1993:39; Svante 2011:39, Altstadt 1994:118 (Note 7)).

⁷² Swietochowski 1991, pp. 56-57.

⁷³ Svante, Cornell E. 2011. *Azerbaijan since Independence*. Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus, p. 14.

being pressured to replace it with Ottoman. ...The language of the Caucasian Turks has become full of Ottoman words and expressions. In our opinion such aping, such conduct, amounts to national treason (*Molla Nasr al-din* 1913, no. 22).”⁷⁴

An Azerbaijani state per se came to existence only in 1918 and the two years of independence before the Soviet rule strengthened their national aspirations. However, “the official name for the Azerbaijani language was *Turk or Tiurskii* (in Russian) and for the inhabitants of the land was Turks (*Turki* in Russian)”⁷⁵. During the Soviet period the people of Azerbaijan once again had to tackle with several changes of script, starting with the Latinization of the Arabic script in 1926⁷⁶. After less than twenty years of usage the Latin alphabet was abruptly exchanged for a Cyrillic one by the Stalin regime thus cutting cultural ties with Turkey and turning the whole population illiterate who had hardly managed to use the Latin script⁷⁷.

In the 1970s the national and religious revival began to gain momentum in Azerbaijan due to weakening of repression and increased Russification. Azerbaijani was the official language of the republic only on paper. The usage of the language declined and was confined to social interactions, whereas the importance of Russian kept being emphasized by the Azerbaijani government and it was, indeed, the language of science, business and officialdom. On the one hand there was an increasing fluency in Russian, on the other the retention rates for the national language were also rising⁷⁸. Some degree of freedom offered by the weakening of repressions in the final decade of the Soviet Union allowed widespread discussions on education in the mother tongue and disapproval and criticism of the usage of Russian⁷⁹.

⁷⁴ As quoted by Swietochowski 1991, p. 61.

⁷⁵ Swietochowski 1991, p. 62.

⁷⁶ Kirkwood 1991, p. 62, “It was introduced by decree in 1922 and in 1926 the First All-Union Turkological Congress adopted a resolution that the Latin script should be adopted for all the Turkic languages.” This was later called the New Alphabet.

⁷⁷ Svante 2011, p. 39.

⁷⁸ Kirkwood 1991, pp. 68-69.

⁷⁹ Svante 2011, pp. 45-47.

2.2.3 Language Issues of Georgia before 1991

Georgia, similar to its neighbor Armenia, is proud of a specific alphabet and language with its roots in the fifth century, which have been fundamental in the development and maintenance of the national self-conception. Although they moved through history along linguistically and religiously distinct paths from each other, they had similar cultures, and the aspiration to emphasize the distinction plays a major role even today in terms of the creation of the Georgian alphabet as a matter of “prestige”⁸⁰. The Georgian language belongs to the southern Caucasian language group known as Kartvelian.

Georgia existed as a number of states long before the formation of the first Russian state and it has always been multiethnic comprised of Armenians, other Caucasian Christians and various Muslim peoples⁸¹. Only in the 1960s did Georgians become a majority in the Georgian capital where Armenians and Russians demographically and politically prevailed. Unlike Armenians and the Jews, who were the most dispersed, Georgians were the most compact in the Soviet Union which was essential for national consolidation⁸².

Georgians were annexed to the Russian Empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century who managed to maintain their distinct culture. Since the schools in national languages were abolished and Russian became mandatory in all schools, Georgian also shared the fate of other languages of the Empire and became inferior both in law and in popular attitudes⁸³. Georgian was taught only in private schools only as a separate course, and gradually the number of schools where all the subjects were taught in Russian increased. Towards the end

⁸⁰ Whether the Georgian alphabet had an Armenian origin or not is a matter of dispute in their historiographies respectively (Abrahamian 2006:79-80; Suny 1993:58).

⁸¹ Suny 1993, pp. 58-61.

⁸² Suny, Ronald Grigor. 1988. *The Making of the Georgian Nation*. Indiana University Press, pp. 298-299.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

of the nineteenth century Georgian literature began to flourish protesting against diminishing of the language and promoting education in Georgian.

Following the Russian Revolution Georgia also had a short period of independence and was Sovietized in 1921. Here the pattern of tacit Soviet policies in the following decades was the same as in the neighboring South Caucasus republics. In the first half of the Soviet rule illiteracy diminished, Georgian culture flourished and the Georgians were given “the dominant role in a republic that still possessed significant non-Georgian minorities”⁸⁴. However, it is worth mentioning that Georgians, in comparison with Armenians and Azerbaijanis, were more conservative in their reactions to the Russian influence and more radical in issues related to the national language⁸⁵. According to the 1979 census the percentage of fluency in Russian was the lowest among the Union republics – “only 26.7 percent of ethnic Georgians were fluent in Russian”⁸⁶.

Their resistance was clearly demonstrated in the protests against the proposed constitutional change in 1978 which would give Russian and other languages an equal status in the republic. The leaders of the republic had to concede to the demands of the rising civil society in Soviet Georgia⁸⁷. The intellectuals in Georgia were also overtly expressing their grievances against bilingualism and forced imposition of submitting dissertations in the Russian language. This was treated as a violation of the constitutional right and diminution of Georgian scientific thought Together with slightly yielding to the people’s will, the authorities were on the other

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 281-282. Armenians and the Abkhaz felt the restrictions on minorities most acutely, since the former were pressured to move to Armenia, and the latter were introduced to a modified alphabet.

⁸⁵ Lewis 1972, p. 15. Abrahamian 2006, p. 72.

⁸⁶ Suny 1988, p. 300.

⁸⁷ Suny 1993, p. 123.

hand still promoting learning Russian as a means to “broaden the horizons of the Georgian people”⁸⁸.

⁸⁸ Suny 1988, p. 310.

Chapter 3: Independence and Language Debates

With the disintegration of the Soviet state the former Union republics embarked on the painstaking task of nation-(re)building with multiplied efforts. The national language became a national cause championed by the first democratically elected non-communist presidents who were all, surprisingly or not, linguists-philologists by profession⁸⁹. National languages were stipulated in the respective Constitutions as state languages⁹⁰. The governments of these three newly independent states applied various approaches to language legislation depending on the ethnic composition⁹¹ of their states, the political upheavals that engulfed the region with the collapse of the USSR, and the regional animosities and affinities.

Though adopted policies varied from state to state, but to some extent they all discouraged the use of Russian. As Kreindler put it elegantly “the Russian star in the constellation of world languages [was] dimming”⁹². Despite the economic and cultural ties many intellectuals advocated for the drop of Russian questioning its relevance, and acknowledged English or Turkish to be a more useful and convenient language in the region for communication. One of the reasons for the retreat of Russian in the post-Soviet space was that people learnt it to the

⁸⁹ Levon Ter-Petrossian, President of the Republic of Armenia in 1991-1998, is a scholar of dead languages and is fluent also in more than five modern languages. Abulfaz Elchibey, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1992-1993, was also a historian and history professor. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, President of the Republic of Georgia in 1991-1992, was also a translator, literary critic and human rights activist.

⁹⁰ Constitution of the Republic of Armenia adopted on 5 July 1995 – Article 12 (<http://www.parliament.am/parliament.php?id=constitution&lang=eng>).

Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan adopted on 12 November 1995 – Article 21.1 (http://archive.president.az/browse.php?sec_id=52&lang=en).

Constitution of the Republic of Georgia adopted on 24 August 1995 – Article 8 (http://www.parliament.ge/files/68_1944_951190_CONSTIT_27_12.06.pdf). With an amendment to the Constitution in 2002 Abkhazian became the official language of Abkhazia together with Georgian. (All accessed 15 March 2012).

⁹¹ The space and scope of this thesis does not allow a detailed account of the minority languages and their issues in the South Caucasus. However, a brief overview of the situation in Azerbaijan and Georgia as multiethnic states will be given below in the respective sections.

⁹² Kreindler, Isabelle T. 1993. A Second Missed Opportunity: Russian in Retreat as a Global Language. *International Political Science Review* 14:3, p. 267.

detriment of their national languages, unlike other foreign languages which they learnt in addition to their own⁹³.

Notwithstanding nationalistic sentiments, in Azerbaijan Russian still continues to be widespread, and the political and intellectual elites are more fluent in Russian than in the national language. Georgian authorities continues to be more antagonistic to Russian, but a recent research has revealed that even the younger generation who was born after the independence have a favorable attitude to Russian and keep it separate from the political situation⁹⁴. In Armenia the anti-Russian policies were directed mostly against refugees from Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, who were fluent in Russian and the majority did not speak Armenian.

According to a Gallup Poll conducted in post-Soviet states in 2007 there is a favorable attitude towards the Russian language after its decline as an aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Countries showing increasing interest and find learning Russian very important include Georgia (64%) and Armenia (75%). The percentage of those who preferred to take the survey in Russian was 97% in Armenia, 94% in Azerbaijan and 92% in Georgia⁹⁵. Certain level of divergence from this statistics today is not excluded and can be explained, but it is indicative of an emerging trend of re-incorporating Russian on the background of advance of Western languages which is conditioned by high rates of migration, involvement in science and job market.

In all three republics the national languages are mandatory and are the language of instruction in the majority of secondary schools and higher educational institutions. All of the three

⁹³ Ibid., p. 269.

⁹⁴ Kleshik, Sonya. 2010. "I am my language": Language Policy and Attitudes towards Language in Georgia. MA thesis. Central European University, p. 44.

⁹⁵ Gradirovski, Sergei, and Esipova Neli. 2008. Russian Language Enjoying a Boost in Post-Soviet States. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/109228/russian-language-enjoying-boost-postsoviet-states.aspx> (accessed 25 March 2012).

countries have a system of both public and private schools. Russian, Turkish, Romance and other languages are taught as foreign languages in most of the schools; however there are also foreign-language schools. Public schools are state-funded, whereas private ones are fee-based which are not affordable to the majority, although the quality of education is considered to be high. When most parents cannot and do not want to pay for education in a private school, most are doing their best to afford their children's education in higher educational establishments which are predominantly on a pay basis. Unlike private universities public ones offer limited places called "state-order". State-order admission is not only very competitive, but also highly contested because of corruption risks.

In Georgia there are some public secondary schools where the language of instruction is other than Georgian, especially in areas where ethnic minorities reside. There are also several international private secondary schools in Tbilisi where the language of instruction is English, Turkish or German. Some private and semi-private universities where the language of instruction is English (or Turkish to a lesser extent) are also popular.

Azerbaijan is the only South Caucasus state where Russian-language schools were not shut down after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Apart from that there are a number of English and Turkish-language private schools, as well as a Georgian-language school in Georgian-populated regions. Armenian-language schools functioned before the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. There are also private universities where the medium of instruction is Russian, English or Turkish.

In Armenia there are a few private universities where the language of instruction is English, French and Russian. Public secondary schools are mostly in Armenian with tracks in a foreign language and only a few Russian-language schools operate in the country where some a

special track in Assyrian. Other private schools offer classes of foreign languages, but the general language of instruction is Armenian.

3.1 Debate around the Primacy of the Language in Armenia after 1991

In the Soviet period both Armenian- and Russian-language schools operated in Armenia. Those where the language of instruction was Russian were in major cities and towns, whereas the rural areas had only Armenian-language schools. In higher educational establishments education was offered in both languages. Russian-language schools were considered high quality and prestigious and were more preferred if someone wanted their kids to achieve professional and educational heights.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the wake of the liberation and independence the number of Russian language schools was reduced which in a way artificially created a division between Russian- and non-Russian speakers in the mostly monoethnic state. Anyway, there was a gradual process of transition instead of an immediate switch of the language of instruction from Russian into Armenian. This move to some extent facilitated the integration of Russian-speaking Armenian refugees into the Armenian society. “[T]he anti-Russian language policy in Armenia was in a sense an expression of purist trends” aimed at cleaning the language from Russian and Russified words and expressions⁹⁶. The Armenian legislation stipulated that education in all the general educational institutions is only Armenian throughout the whole territory of the country.

Already from the late 1990s to recent times there were not any major language-related disturbances. But April 2010 gave birth to a heated debate in Armenia over the opening of

⁹⁶ Abrahamian 2006, p. 73.

foreign-language schools. Seventeen years later, after the first post-Soviet wave of anti-Russian language sentiments, the Government of Armenia initiated opening foreign-language schools and proposed a bill to make relevant amendments in the Law on Language and the Law on General Education. Representatives of the government claimed that the goal of this step was modernization of the educational system which would enable to meet international standards and would strengthen ties with the Diaspora.

The opponents of this project viewed this as a pro-Russian policy and called this “re-opening” instead of “opening” referring to the former Russian-language schools, although the bill did not specify the foreign language as a language of instruction in these new schools to be opened. The opposition to this initiative had a wide range of arguments to mention but a few: the Armenian language will become secondary and a foreign language will become the language of the elite and intellectuals; the educational system of Armenia has more serious problems that need to be addressed in terms of curricula, textbooks, educational program, recruitment of professional teaching staff, financing and salaries; most importantly foreign-language schools pose a threat to the Armenian identity, nation preservation and national security .

The opposition was comprised of some of the parties in the Parliament and a group of intellectuals who initiated a public movement called “We are against re-opening of foreign-language schools”, demanded the resignation of the Minister of Education and Science and started a Facebook campaign together with street protests and demonstrations. Under the pressure of the public opinion and the opposition parties the bill was presented to the National Assembly for approval with some changes in the draft amendments. Among others, these amendments included limiting the number of these schools from 15 to 11 and fixing the 7th grade as a basis for the operation instead of the 6th. On December 22, 2010 in an extraordinary session the National Assembly approved the draft changes to the Law on

Language and the Law on General Education. The bills entered into force after the President of Armenia signed them on January 19, 2011 which brought a new wave of protests by the opposition. Pursuant to the amended law the first two foreign-language schools will be opened in 2013 in two towns.

One of the institutions fiercely protesting against the Government initiative was Ararat Center for Strategic Research which was actively organizing public discussions, conferences and meetings voicing their concerns. In the light of these events the speech of Armen Ayvazyan, Director of this Center, which he delivered in May 2010 at a discussion called “Burning Issues of Language Policy in Armenia” held in the Center, can be regarded as the overt articulation of the opposition camp⁹⁷. In order to get a clear picture of the concerns of the opposition and the interpretation of the Government’s stance in the discourse, some of the aspects of that speech are worth some analysis. The speech is centered on the idea that the Government’s initiative of legitimization of foreign-language schools contradicts the provisions of the “Strategy of the National Security of the Republic of Armenia”.

The categories that the speaker highlights are “national security”, “language protection” and “preservation of the Armenian identity”. It is worth mentioning that the word “nation” is used at least thirty times both separately and as a part of other words (national, anti-national, intra-national, all-national) in relation to language, culture, identity and security. The actions of the Government are qualified as “deconstructive”, “anti-scientific”, “anti-national”, “weak”, “bypassing the Armenian issue”, aimed at the “derogation of the state language” and “hindrance of the development of the Armenian culture and other branches of the Armenian Studies”. The highlight of the speech can be the following paragraph:

⁹⁷ <http://blog.ararat-center.org/?p=397#more-397> (accessed 18 February 2012). The speech is only in Armenian, so my own translation of the statements will be provided.

“If this malicious initiative of the RA ([Republic of Armenia]) Government becomes a success and opens a door in the RA for the de-Armenianization of Armenian children linguistically and culturally, then those schools will become a hotbed of intra-national animosity from which external enemies and all the pro-imperial forces will benefit. Therefore, there must be no foreign-language schools in Armenia!

This infringement on the Armenian language, development of the Armenian education and science by the Armenian Government is an infringement on the preservation of the Armenian race. History is a proof that the Armenian people have fought numerous battles (wars) for the protection of their kind...It is both in their and everybody’s interest that this anti-national project against education in the Armenian language is forever shrouded in the garbage dump of history. The sooner the better!”

Besides references to culture in general throughout the whole speech, there are also spatial and temporal references demonstrated also in the above-mentioned paragraph. Temporal reference includes not only the present in terms of encroachment on national values, but also the past by recalling historical battles and the future in terms of threats to the Armenian identity and security that the Government’s initiative is likely to cause. In this section anticipated future developments are intensified by the usage of expressions, such as “opening door...for de-Armenianization”, “hotbed of intra-national animosity” and “external enemies and pro-imperial forces”. With the latter he refers to the pro-Russian stance of the Armenian Government.

There are no direct spatial references to the actual physical or geographical location of the state. Instead, metaphorically it is implied in the references to the two parts of the Armenian nation – the population in Armenia and in the Diaspora, emphasizing the role of language as a bridge between the two segments and the most powerful means for their consolidation. This is well illustrated in the following statements:

“When we say that the Armenian nation dispersed all over the world is split, first of all we mean the very linguistic split which does not allow to create an efficient intra-national information space because a significant part of Armenians living especially abroad is not able to communicate in the native language – receive and send any kind of information...The fastest, most accurate, most native and comprehensive means of intra-national information exchange can be ensured only via the mother tongue”.

The speaker also overtly accuses the Government of crimes for the perpetuation of distorted mentality and identity in the younger generation:

“It is as clear as crystal that by initiating the distortion of the still not formed individuality of the Armenian children and their national identity by means of foreign-language education, the RA Government is committing an obvious official crime which is stipulated in the Articles on “Abuse of Official Duties” (No 308) and “Official Negligence” (No. 315) of the RA Criminal Code”.

It should be noted that the opposition was not opposing the learning or teaching of a foreign language. Their main concern was that in the long run the children would grow up thinking in a foreign language, which would pose a threat to the national identity and security. This is manifested in a statement made by one of the intellectuals – “If you change the language, you change the nation as well”⁹⁸. Another crucial point in the speech was the call for the maintenance of Armenian as the language of science – an achievement gained during the Soviet period. Although the opposition was not successful in their demands for the abolition of the proposed amendment in the linguistic legislation, they were able to make the government concede to some degree. The implementation and consequences of this initiative remain to be seen after 2013.

3.2 Debate around the Primacy of the Language in Azerbaijan after 1991

Formation of Soviet Azerbaijan further separated the Azeri people from their Turkic and Iranian kin in terms of language and religion. During the seventy years of Soviet rule they became “the most westernized of all the Turkic peoples though they remain[ed] Muslims”⁹⁹. This does not mean that they were spared the pressures of the Soviet system. Azerbaijani as the national language of Azerbaijan was also easily and heavily influenced by the penetration

⁹⁸ <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61317> (accessed 12 February 2012).

⁹⁹ Lewis 1972, p. 33.

of Russian. Despite being the official language Azerbaijani was suppressed by Russian to the extent that professional and academic development and success was impossible if one gave importance only to Azerbaijani. Indeed, this situation was not confined only to Azerbaijan, but the central government showed certain degree of favor to some republics “because their leadership had closer relationships with Moscow”¹⁰⁰.

The number of Azerbaijani language speakers was decreasing for a number of reasons – both written and unwritten. Intermarriages were encouraged which, given the fact that one of spouses was non-Azerbaijani (Armenian, Russian, Jewish), was naturally promoting the preference of Russian. Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, with its big minority population was itself a catalyst of Russian dominance, considering that Russians there and elsewhere in the Soviet space were reluctant to learn the local language¹⁰¹, and the minorities in urban areas, unlike rural areas, were more disposed to Russian for communicative and educational purposes. Hence, “Azerbaijani survived and flourished mainly through its expansive usage in folklore and poetry, rather than in science, medicine, or business”¹⁰².

The turmoil created in the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union, among other more important problems, gave rise to debates about the alphabet and the name of the language in Azerbaijan. If the debate around the latter lasted three years (1992-1995), the legislation and implementation of the former took longer – until 2001. The dispute over the name of the language evolved around three versions, each of which was an indication of the stance of its proponents. When the extreme nationalistic party Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA) and its leader Abulfaz Elchibey came to power in 1992, the adopted Language Law assigned Turkish

¹⁰⁰ Garibova 2009, p. 13.

¹⁰¹ The Russian-speakers in almost all newly independent states found themselves in a disadvantageous situation when Russian began to be downgraded and the supremacy of national languages elevated.

¹⁰² Garibova 2009, p. 15.

(Türk) as the language of the state – an explicit manifestation of their pro-Turkish tendencies, which caused public indignation.

PFA's initiative bore anti-Russian tones and was directed against speakers of Russian and non-Turkic languages. Apart from that, association of Azerbaijan with Turkey instead of the emphasis of the distinctiveness of Azerbaijani identity was protested by the opposition. Incorporation of Turkish words into the vocabulary and broadcast of Turkish programs was a part of this policy. The distinction between "Turkish" and "Turkic" was a matter of another controversy in this debate¹⁰³. Hence, the government was accused of the "Turkeyization of Azerbaijan"¹⁰⁴ and their nationalism, which was strongly embracing pan-Turkic stance instead of promoting the uniqueness of Azerbaijani culture, was questioned.

Even when under the pressure of the opposition the government had to concede and change the name of the language into Azerbaijani Turkish, it still was far from being satisfactory. On the one hand it drew a line of slight distinction from Turkish and on the other it still stressed its relation to Turkish¹⁰⁵. Besides, by adopting the Language Law the Soviet Constitution of 1978 had not been revoked pursuant to which the language of the state was Azerbaijani. This made the new law invalid. The disputes and contradictions between the extreme pro-Turkish nationalists and liberal pro-Turks advocating for the above variants of the language respectively ended in 1995 when the new Constitution stipulated Azerbaijani as the state language.

The other major language-related debate was that of the script which was changed from Cyrillic to Latin only a few days after the official disintegration of the Soviet Union marking

¹⁰³ According to the proponents of this initiative "Türk" meant "Turkic" which encompasses all the Turkic people, and not "Turkish" which refers to Turkey and the Turkish nation, (Garibova 2009:16).

¹⁰⁴ As quoted by Marquardt, Kyle L. 2011. Framing Language Policy in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Political Symbolism and Interethnic Harmony. *Central Asian Survey* 30:2, p. 183.

¹⁰⁵ Marquardt 2011, p. 183.

“a momentous and visible divorce from a Russian-influenced identity”¹⁰⁶. In regards to this issue pragmatism and nationalism were again in dissonance when the carriers of the former considered another such change disruptive, whereas the latter wanted to recover the pride injured during the Russian or Soviet domination. Besides, there was more support for getting rid of the Cyrillic as a symbol of oppression and identifying more with the West and other Turkic states in the form of the Latin script. The support of Turkey to the Latin script was expressed in a number of acts ranging from foreign aid and trade to Turkish language television programs and opening of Turkish-language schools¹⁰⁷.

One can say that the transition was slow and gradual when both scripts were used interchangeably and side by side for about ten years. Heydar Aliyev launched successful implementation of the legislation adopted by the former government when a deadline was set in 2001 for the mandatory usage of the Latin script in the government and the media. Yet, a dilemma about the close similarity of Azerbaijani and Turkish was lingering which was settled by accentuating the difference of three letters in the alphabet of the former. Despite this slight emphasis on their unique script both languages are still mutually comprehensible. The legislation of 2006 banning broadcasting in foreign languages can be viewed as a step towards distancing both languages. Although there were arguments against dubbing Turkish into Azerbaijani as an unnecessary step, the government did not step back from differentiating both on the legal base¹⁰⁸.

Aliyev was maintaining the equilibrium between his support for Russophones and the Russian language and promotion of Azerbaijani identity. Even though Russian was not heightened to the same level as Azerbaijani in the Constitution, the government showed general support for

¹⁰⁶ Hatcher, Lynley. 2008. Script Change in Azerbaijan: Acts of Identity. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 192, p. 111.

¹⁰⁷ Hatcher 2008, p. 113.

¹⁰⁸ Marquardt 2009, pp. 186-187.

Russian-language education and media. This way the damage caused to the Russian-Azerbaijani relations by the former nationalist government gradually alleviated. During the presidencies of Heydar Aliyev and his son Ilham Aliyev the elite in the Azerbaijani capital had and has a favorable attitude to Russian, thanks to which it keeps enjoying social prestige¹⁰⁹.

Although Russian classes were reduced, none of the four hundred Russian schools were closed down. However, since the academic literature was mostly in Russian and resources in Azerbaijani were scarce, many students with lack of sufficient knowledge of Russian encountered difficulties with using the available Russian-language materials especially when Western literature was mostly inaccessible for financial and practical reasons. Apart from that there were also concerns that the Azerbaijani literature in the Cyrillic script would become largely inaccessible to the youth¹¹⁰. On the other hand Turkish intervention into the educational sphere functions successfully with the establishment of public and private schools, as well as a private university¹¹¹. Some of those schools operate for free making them accessible also for the rural segment of the population.

The pro-Russian language stance of the political figures in Azerbaijan goes in parallel with the development of Azerbaijani which Marquardt describes as “symbolic” due to the fact that the legislation aimed at “purification” of the language in terms of terminology and names is largely left without any major interference¹¹². The government believes that the evolution of the language should happen naturally with little interference from the top. As to the

¹⁰⁹ Garibova 2011, p. 26.

¹¹⁰ Hatcher 2008, p. 113.

¹¹¹ Although foreign-language schools, especially Turkish-language ones, are popular in Azerbaijan, opinions about the prices and quality of education diverge. The head of Delta Education Elshad Mammadzade told Turan Information Agency that “the training in them is not worth the investment”, but parents keep sending their children there to keep them from going abroad. <http://contact.az/docs/2011/Economics&Finance/09159454en.htm> (accessed 2 March 2012).

¹¹² Marquardt 2011, p. 191.

competition between English and Russian, according to the government officials the preference for English is also occurring naturally and depends on the roles of the languages in the society. Although Russian has registered a slight decline in Azerbaijan, and the younger generation feels motivated to use English as the “model of life or society”¹¹³, but communication in Russian is still prestigious in social circles. Azerbaijan encourages plurilingualism attaching great importance to the ability of its population to interact in different languages¹¹⁴.

Both the administration and the opposition encourage maintenance of ethnic minority cultures and languages in Azerbaijan but the case of Nagorno Karabagh makes them be cautious with much support for ethnic identities¹¹⁵. Some minority languages face the danger of losing to linguistic assimilation but the current policy allows minorities to practice their languages. They receive little but certain degree of support from the government for the maintenance of their culture and broadcasting and media publications in their languages. Naturally, they are expected to learn Azerbaijani to be able to engage in the public life of the country¹¹⁶.

¹¹³ Mammadov, Azad. 2009. The Issue of Plurilingualism and Language Policy in Azerbaijan. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 198, p. 70.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 68. The author distinguishes “plurilingualism” from “multilingualism”, the former meaning “the competence...to use more than one language”, and the latter being “the presence of languages in a given geographical area”, p. 67.

¹¹⁵ The beginning of the 1990s also saw short independence movements revived by the Talysh and the Lezgin. The Lezgin are the largest ethnic minority of the Caucasian group in Azerbaijan residing along the border with Dagestan. The Talysh inhabit the border areas with Iran and belong to the Persian ethnic group.

¹¹⁶ Marquardt 2011, pp. 188-190.

3.3 Debate around the Primacy of the Language in Georgia after 1991

The most drastic changes in language policies happened in Georgia, which is ethnically and linguistically the most diverse among the South Caucasus republics¹¹⁷ and which continues to face problems with its ethnic minorities. The Georgian language policies since independence in 1991 have been greatly influenced by Georgia's relations with Russia on the one hand and with its minorities on the other. The political trends have been reflected in these policies not only after independence but also during the Soviet period. Even the level of hostility to the Georgians as the majority ethnic group was judged by the level of knowledge of the Georgian language by the Abkhaz and Ossetians¹¹⁸.

The collapse of the Soviet Union exacerbated existing and nascent problems and conflicts and the immediate state-building efforts brought language issue to the fore. Although Georgians, as the titular nation, were a majority but in certain areas of the country they were a minority and their language also had a minority status in those areas. Armenians and Azerbaijanis were and still are the largest national minorities and inhabit the frontier areas of their kin states¹¹⁹. Especially in the Soviet era language was not a major issue for them since they had their national schools and had the opportunity to further their careers even without the knowledge of Georgian. The same referred also to Russians who were enjoying privileges before the

¹¹⁷ According to the census of 1989 Georgians comprised 70% of the population, followed by Armenians (8.1%), Azerbaijanis (5.7%), Russians (6.3%), Ossetians (3%), Greeks (1.9%), Abkhaz (1.8%), Jews (0.5%), Assyrians (0.1%), Kurds (0.6%). Kobaidze, Manana Kock. 1999. *Minority Identity and Identity Maintenance in Georgia*. Lund University. *Working Papers* 47, p. 149.

¹¹⁸ Jones, Stephen F. 1995. The Georgian Language State Program and its Implications. *Nationalities Papers* 23:3, pp. 539-540.

¹¹⁹ Armenians are densely inhabited in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti bordering Armenia, and Azerbaijanis are a majority in the region of Kvemo-Kartli, neighboring Azerbaijan to the south. Their full integration to the Georgian society is partly because of their poor command of the Georgian language. However, the level of knowledge of the language differs between the rural and urban residents. For more details see Mekhuzla, Salome, and Roche, Aileen. 2009. *National Minorities and Educational Reform in Georgia*. ECMI Working Paper No. 46. *European Centre for Minority Issues*.

turning point for the Soviet Union. In the light of such neglect for Georgian the new leadership of the independent Georgian republic gave priority to the national language.

The language issue was especially burning in Georgia given the concerns of loss of the Georgian language in the southern areas inhabited by Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and among Abkhazians and South Ossetians who were antagonistic to Georgians. Considering also that the Azeri, too, raised issues of autonomy, and later ethnic unrests sprung in the Armenian-populated region, separatism became a serious issue on the political agenda threatening the territorial integrity of the state¹²⁰. The Georgian government embarked on eliminating asymmetric bilingualism when many Georgians and its minorities were more fluent in Russian than in Georgian and initiated a language program in the final years of the Soviet Union. This was meant to maintain the high status of the state language in business, education and administration, but it also created even more discontent among minorities who saw “the program as a threat to their social and economic position”¹²¹.

“Georgians view the minorities’ use of Russian as a zero-sum game: where Russian gains, Georgian loses”¹²². During his two-year tenure in office Zviad Gamsakhurdia he had a chauvinistic attitude towards minorities and his ethnocentric rhetoric and policies in various areas of public life, including “Georgia for Georgians” campaign escalated inter-ethnic tensions and violence. His government “Georgianized”¹²³ education by reducing the number of Russian-language schools, decreasing the number of Russian hours at schools and increasing the number of Georgian-language schools particularly in areas settled by non-

¹²⁰ Jones 1995, pp. 537-538. Sedlářová, Lenka. 2011. Kists Facing Language Policy in Georgia. *The Scale of Globalization: Think Globally, Act Locally, Change Individually in the 21st Century*. University of Ostrava, p. 293.

¹²¹ Jones 1995, pp. 539-541.

¹²² Ibid., p. 536.

¹²³ Jones, Stephen. 1994. Populism in Georgia: The Gamsakhurdia Phenomenon, in Schwarz, Donald V., and Panossian, Razmik (Eds). 1994. *Nationalism and History: the Politics of Nation Building in Post-Soviet Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*. Center for Russian and East European Studies. University of Toronto, p. 133.

Georgian minorities, and glorifying the Georgian language. His assertive and unfavorable campaign intimidated the minorities and failed to ensure the elevated status of Georgian among them¹²⁴.

The subsequent government led by Eduard Shevardnadze adopted a more accommodating position aimed at alleviating the tension and discrimination created by the former government and at encouraging the integration of minorities by giving more freedom to their native languages, but it did not succeed in overcoming the enrooted distrust and the language issue was not addressed in a due manner. The “Rose Revolution” in 2003 was followed by new linguistic legislation which could not bypass national minorities. The language policies are undoubtedly linked with education reforms. Mikheil Saakashvili’s government set an objective to integrate the national minorities by improving their knowledge of the Georgian language for educational and employment purposes on the one hand, and guaranteeing education for them in their native languages on the other¹²⁵.

Not considering the two break-away regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, poor or no knowledge of Georgian by the minorities especially in the regions where they live in substantial numbers hinders their full participation in various spheres of life in the country. Only 24.6% of Armenians and 16.9% of Azeris in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli respectively have command of Georgian in contrast to 96.4% and 95.6% of those living in Tbilisi¹²⁶. They communicate mostly in their native languages or use Russian for interethnic communication and maintain closer relationship with their kin-states rather than Georgia. The Georgian state acknowledges the urgency of overcoming this obstacle for the unity and

¹²⁴ Jones 1995, pp. 542-543.

¹²⁵ Sedlářová 2011, p. 293. Mekhuzla and Roche 2009, p. 4.

¹²⁶ Mekhuzla and Roche 2009, p. 6.

integration of minority communities, but the efforts still do not encourage the minorities to overcome the fear of “Georgianization”¹²⁷.

Saakashvili’s linguistic reforms have certain negative implications not only for minority languages, but also the Russian language. The hostile political relations between Russia and Georgia, which have rapidly deteriorated particularly after 2008 because of the full support of Russia to Abkhazia and South Ossetia in their claims for independence, left their heavy footprint also on the language issue. Since 2002 English began to quickly replace Russian as the younger generation is more encouraged to opt for the former. The Georgian authorities link the economic development of the country with the improvement of the educational system. Dimitri Shashkini, the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia, said in an interview that “ensuring that every child knows English is a part of that objective”¹²⁸.

The pro-Western President of Georgia justifies his pro-English linguistic revolution with the view that English is the language of modernity. His efforts are aimed at removing Georgia out of Russia’s influence and moving towards the US. Earlier in 2011 he said that the language policies are not designed against the Russian language. “If tomorrow Russian becomes a universal language for communication, if the Chinese, Norwegians, and Americans need Russian to succeed in life, we will have to study it as well”¹²⁹. His government initiated a program of recruiting around 1500 teachers of the English language from English-speaking countries to boost the study of the language at schools. Only recruitment is not enough for the promotion of this aspect of the education reform, since the educational system as a whole is in a poor condition, particularly in rural areas. There is a shortage of textbooks and education

¹²⁷ Trier, Tom et al. 2007. Georgia’s Policy towards its National Minorities: Tolerance or Integration. *Transparency International Georgia*, p. 10.

¹²⁸ Levy, Clifford J. 2011. Still Fighting Russia, This Time With Words. *New York Times*. January 23. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/24/world/europe/24georgia.html?_r=1 (accessed 15 March 2012).

¹²⁹ Saakashvili closes down Russian schools in Georgia. July 2011. <http://rt.com/politics/saakashvili-russian-schools-education/> (accessed 15 March 2012).

materials, the school buildings and classrooms are far from ensuring normal conditions for the learning process, and the local teachers of English are lacking adequate language skills. Under such conditions the government's emphasis on English is being questioned also by the foreign teachers.

After making English mandatory at schools to start from the first grade and making Russian optional like French or German, reports appeared in the media in the summer of 2011 that Russian was going to be completely removed from the educational system by shutting down all Russian-language schools. Besides, teaching Russian was going to move from the third to the seventh grade. Saakashvili was explaining that over years the number of graduates preferring English to Russian as a foreign language for exams was increasing. If in 2010 the proportion was equal (40%:40%), in 2011 it became 70%:10%¹³⁰.

There is, though, an opposition to such trends and policies among the older generation of Russian-speakers who do not consider such actions as a wise move and note that irrespective of the political waves the country cannot change either its history or geography and both languages are necessary. Besides, the Georgian higher education relies on the extensive specialized Russian-language literature in the libraries of the universities which makes it impossible to purge Russian completely from the educational system¹³¹.

According to an article of ITAR-TASS news agency some organizations accuse the President and the government of turning English into virtually the second state language in the country and showing preferential attitude to English to the detriment of other foreign languages¹³².

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Kleshik 2010, p. 21.

¹³² Georgian Pres urges young people to study Russian language. *ITAR-TASS News Agency*. April 2012.

http://www.lexisnexis.com/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T14764517556&format=GNBFI&sort=BOOLEAN&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29_T14

However, Saakashvili sometimes retreats from his harsh anti-Russian language rhetoric and admits that learning Russian is important. He acknowledges that “[w]e do need the Russian language and it should be studied”, but he keeps reiterating that for the younger Georgians English is becoming an “important source of information”¹³³.

[764517560&cisb=22_T14764517559&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=384326&docNo=10](#)
(accessed 5 May 2012).

¹³³ Ibid.

Conclusion

Language along with categories like religion, ethnicity and nation, has become one of the most discussed and studied themes of the modern era. Ethnic identity and language appear to be an inseparable and integral part of each other, although there are also cases when they are not always linked. Emphasis on linguistic distinction is a marker of uniqueness and superiority. This is a dimension which besides being a vehicle for imparting and receiving information, turns into a powerful medium for political and economic power, thus uniting and dividing communities. There comes a point of time in a society when political neutrality towards language issues becomes almost impossible.

States adopt laws and regulations to ensure the protection of the official languages and guarantee the maintenance of minority cultures, but there are always malfunctions in this thread not only in the subnational-national but also national-international chain. The political and economic configurations are decisive in forging language politics which also display social values and public moods. However, populist and nationalist tendencies are not always congruent with public preferences. On the one hand people retain their mother tongue despite economic gains offered by the dominant language, on the other the prevailing language also suffers a certain loss of importance in relation to the global language of communication towards meeting the current needs and demands of modernity.

The status of Russian and attitudes to English and Turkish raised politically and socially sensitive issues in the post-Soviet space. Soviet language policies both established hegemony of the Russian language in all spheres of life in the Soviet republics and contributed to the enhancement of national pride and consolidation of national identities. Encouragement of ethnic and linguistic diversity achieved to a level that made its eradication attempts futile. It

was one of the numerous reasons that accelerated the disintegration of the Soviet Union and emergence of independent and nation-conscious republics.

The whole area became open and receptive to new political, cultural and economic ties. It was rapidly reflected also in the language domain. The Soviet government failed to establish a complete supremacy of the Russian language during the seventy years of rule and the decline of Russian continued also in the post-Soviet period although at a varying pace in various republics. The three republics of the South Caucasus were among the first to reject the domination of Russian as the lingua franca which was associated with communist ideology. The new leaderships of Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian republics stipulated the elevated status of their national languages which they managed to maintain also during the Soviet rule. The new language policies were in-line with the national ideologies and the initial response was more emotional than rational.

The three republics had to tackle with linguistic challenges in the past twenty years of independence which differed from state to state both in their nature, intensity and implementation mechanisms. However, they were also similar in the sense that some of their initiatives and linguistic reforms had symbolic and populist tones and some raised popular resistance. Russian lost some of its attractiveness, became marginalized and turned into a foreign language of choice, while the study of English gained momentum especially among the youth and asserted its position as a vehicle of global communication – from commerce to entertainment.

Interestingly, Russian is enjoying a modest and slightly visible comeback which is conditioned both by the economic ties of the South Caucasus republics with Russia and by the choice of the people to keep political realities separate from their preferences of language. Despite attempts of politicization when the pendulum of choice may swing based on not only

the political impositions but also personal preferences, language remains a social and cultural attribute which increases the communication potential. Accommodation of social and political aspects of language could be a way of both maintaining the national and embracing the global.

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