

## **Kists Facing Language Policy in Georgia**

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### **Abstract**

On one hand the Russian language seems to continue to function as a lingua franca in Georgia in the Caucasus even 20 years after the split-up of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, new needs and governmental educational reforms reflect the recent pro-Western and pro-European policy of the Georgian government. Georgia has been a multiethnic country for centuries. The ethnic diversity poses challenges to the effective communication of the members of the ethnic groups in the Georgian society. The current Georgian policy focuses on the reintegration of the country. The state language policy thus seems to be addressing the minority integration issues. This paper aims to present the results of the original sociolinguistic research using the method of the semi-structured interview. Firstly, it attempts to clarify the goals of the Georgian language policy and the methods of their implementation. Secondly, it will present the results of the investigation into the linguistic situation of Kists in Pankisi Valley, whose mother tongue is the Chechen language, who receive their education in Georgian and can often speak Russian fluently as this is another language taught at local schools, along with English.

### **Situation and language policy and reforms in Georgia**

Georgia in the Caucasus has been a multiethnic country for centuries. It is a country where the Russian language continues to function as a lingua franca even 20 years after the split-up of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the recent and current governmental educational reforms reflect the pro-Western and pro-European policy as well as new needs of the members of Georgia's linguistic minorities who had previously managed to communicate by means of Russian. The linguistic minorities' limited knowledge of the Georgian language has become a hinder to their integration into the Georgian society.

The present paper aims to describe the ethnic and linguistic composition of the population in Georgia, the Georgian language policy concerning the Georgian language and linguistic minorities' rights, and establish the objectives and reveal the results of the research conducted among the Kists in the Pankisi Gorge in summer of 2011 in relation to Georgian legal framework.

Out of the total population of over 4,300,000 inhabitants (GeoStat 2011a), the Georgians (84%) make up the largest ethnic group in Georgia, including Megrelians (or Mingrelians) (the estimate is 10-18%), Svans (0.1%) and Laz, living in Western Georgia. In addition to the Georgians, there are the following ethnic groups: Azerbaijanis (6.5 %) and Armenians (5.7%), Russians (1.5%), and others with the population of less than 50,000 people such as Abkhazians, Ossetians, Greeks, Yezidi Kurds, Ukrainians and the others. One of the smallest ethnic groups are the Kists.

The ethnic composition of the country only vaguely points to the linguistic situation. There are linguistic groups in Georgia whose languages belong to distinct language families and their respective branches (Caucasian Kartvelian and Nakh, Indo-European Slavic and

Iranian, Turkic, and others), but there are also those whose languages are genetically related although not mutually fully understandable (Georgian, Megrelian and Svan). There are linguistic groups in Georgia whose members learn distinct native languages in childhood, but who, despite this, share common national identity (Georgians, Megrelians and Svans). Moreover, there are linguistic minorities whose members learn non-official languages as their native languages, but who have been achieving education either in Georgian, the current state language, or in Russian or their mother tongue (Azeris, Armenians, Ossetians, Kists, Russians, etc.). As the main aim of the paper is to present the results of the research concerning the Kists, the following section of the paper will focus on the position of the linguistic minorities whose native languages are other than Georgian, and who do not identify themselves with the Georgian nationality. The terms native language, the mother tongue and the first language are used synonymously hereafter. The Abkhazians and Ossetians living in the separatist regions will not be covered by the present paper.

How many Georgian citizens are there who do not have Georgian as their native language? Carine Bachmann (2006: 7) estimates that "thirteen percent of its [Georgia's] population does not speak Georgian, the state language, as a first language". Obviously the percentage only seems to take into account national minorities of Azeris and Armenians, but neglects the fact that some Megrelians and Svans, who declare themselves Georgian by nationality (Kurtsikidze and Chikovani 2002: 16), often acquire non-Georgian language as their native language too or they are bilingual in Georgian/Megrelian or Georgian/Svan (Vamling 2001). Therefore my own estimate is that about 20 to over 30% of Georgia's population's native languages are other than Georgian. The largest national minorities belonging to the estimated group are the Azerbaijanis and Armenians.

The two minority groups, the Azerbaijanis and Armenians, live in the border areas of their kin countries, the Armenians in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, which is close to Armenia, and the Azerbaijanis in the region of Kvemo-Kartli, neighboring Azerbaijan to the south. Until recently the government has run the "national schools in the regions, which had been the inheritance from the Soviet era. The positive aspect of such schools is the opportunity for the children to be educated in their mother tongue, which enhances the children's chances to learn successfully (Dutcher 2003: 1). Their negative aspect has appeared in the present disintegration of the linguistic minorities from the Georgian society because of limited knowledge of the state language, also due to negligence of the Georgian language education at such schools. The disintegration is now considered to be a threat to the state's integrity. It shows at several levels; it is an obstacle to communication with the authorities and state administration, entering universities, finding employment as well as entering the active political life in Georgia.

The disintegration of the above-mentioned ethnic groups led to the unrests in the Javakheti region in 2005/06, and resulted in the government's concerns about irredentism. Irredentism is a sensitive topic in Georgia after the Abkhazian and Ossetian conflicts arose several years ago, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia got out of control of the Georgian Government. As a consequence of these events, the Georgian Government's goal is the re-integration of the country as well as the integration of the disintegrated people.

Considering the Georgian language policy, transition towards the Georgian language education thus became the fundamental aim of the language reforms. The language reforms are being implemented primarily through the body of the Ministry of Education and Science (hereafter MES) of Georgia and its programs. The implementation of the state language into general education is stipulated by law. As Articles 4 and 7 of the Law of Georgia on General Education (2005) (Mekhuzla and Roche 2009: 8) stand, all Georgian citizens are entitled to receive general education in the state or in the native language. The same law, however, requires that the state language is used as a language for conducting the subjects of the

Georgian language and literature, history and geography. The reform ensuing from the law was to be implemented by the school year 2010-2011 (US English Foundation 2006). However, the reforms have only been initiated recently, and it will take a few years to finish the transition towards the state when the Armenian and Azeri children will be able to speak Georgian fluently.

In 2010/2011 only 40 multilingual schools started teaching history and geography both in the native language and Georgian (there are still over 100 national schools where the implementation of the reforms has not been initiated) as there is an apparent shortage of Georgian language teachers. Approximately one third of the learnt content was to be taught in the Georgian language (Kilasonia 2010). The amount of the curriculum taught in Georgian should rise to two thirds in the next school year (Barabadze 2010). In a 24 Saati daily newspaper interview, Akaki Seperteladze, First Deputy Minister of Education and Science explained the process of supporting the state language, enumerating its following stages: "Teaching will be held in the state language as well as the native language in order to achieve the equivalent competency in the native and state languages. ... But studying the subjects in the state language will increase after time. Transition to the state language will be held step by step. ... subjects envisaged in the national curriculum will be taught in the state language, but the native language will be taught as the subject and it will be given maximal hours" (Kilasonia 2010).

On one hand, the importance of multilingual education as "the main supporter of human rights protection and integration" is emphasized by Seperteladze. When speaking about human rights protection, the First Deputy Minister seems to have in mind the availability of university education, enhancing job opportunities, and opportunity to participate in the political life for Georgian citizens. On the other hand, the multilingual education is regarded as a tool of multilingual transitional education program (see the previous paragraph quotation – Kilasonia 2010) which should lead to the implementation of the state language as the major language of education for minorities. This way the native language of the minority would be only taught as a subject and kept on the sidelines in the future. This would result in minorities' integration into the Georgian society, but also assimilation, minority rights infringement (in case individuals prefer the minority language for general education), and have even further, harmful consequences to the minority children's successful learning.

Numerous studies have proved that education in the mother tongue has certain advantages. Nadine Dutcher (2003: 1) states that "[t]he outlook for successful education is brighter when the school builds on the foundation of the mother tongue in teaching a second and third language. Such is the promise of mother tongue education." Teaching the mother tongue as a second language while the child receives the general education in another language might then lead to deterioration in children's successful learning. To summarize the issue, I will quote the speech given by the President Mikheil Saakashvili (2008) in the Council of Europe in January 2008 "What about the children who are denied the right to learn their own language? ... The way forward must be based on political negotiation that ensures Georgia's territorial integrity and respects fundamental human rights, including minority rights." It is time to start these negotiations and ask the Georgian citizens in what language they intend their children to achieve education.

### **Kists and their language situation**

The next section of the paper will introduce the Kist ethnic minority, describe their sociolinguistic situation, and discuss their attitude to the state language policy. Kists are the Vainakh (Chechen) people who started migrating to the Pankisi Gorge in Eastern Georgia, Akhmeta District, in Kakheti Region about 200 years ago. The population of Kists is more than 7,000 people (GeoStat 2011a) in the present, most of whom live in six villages in the

Pankisi Gorge. Most of the Kists are Sunni Sufi Muslims. The highlander customary law (adat) is present in Pankisi and it seems to prevail over the Islamic law of sharia (Interview with Kist women in summer 2011; Sanikidze 2000: 273).

The aim of my research was to find out about the local linguistic situation. As a sociolinguist, I was interested in different varieties local Kists use to communicate in different situations, and in their attitudes towards the state language policy. The research presented here is mainly based on the two semi-structured expert interviews conducted in the village of Duisi in August 2011. Two female members of the local Kist community were interviewed. One was a 42 year old representative of the local teachers, a teacher of the Georgian language in a local school. The other was a 22 year old representative of the young generation, a University postgraduate student with a bachelor's degree.

The two interviews have revealed the following: The situation in the Kist villages in Pankisi Gorge can be described as a broad diglossia, i.e. the existence of two genetically unrelated languages, one of which is used as a high variety and the other as a low variety complementing each other while used for communication in distinct social domains. The local Kists speak the Kist dialect of the Chechen language, which functions as a low variety in the community. They learn it as their native language in childhood in their families. The Kist dialect of the Chechen language belongs to Nakh languages of the Caucasian language family (Čermák 2009: 67). The Kist dialect displays a number of words adapted from the Georgian language. There are sub-dialects of the Kist dialect in the Pankisi Gorge. The main distinctive feature of each sub-dialect is its specific intonation, and its speakers come from a different village.

All the Kists in the valley speak to other Kists in the Kist dialect in everyday communication. They claim to be passing on the Chechen language skills well, and there does not seem to be a language shift (Holmes 2001: 51-65), according to the interviewees' statements. Kist Chechen is also the language of communication between Kists and their Chechen relatives and friends from Chechnya, with whom they maintain close contact. Kists watch TV programs in three languages, Chechen (broadcasting from Chechnya), Georgian and Russian. The interviewees did not seem to prefer programs in one language to the ones in the other two.

The Kist children learn the Georgian language only after entering the school, where they receive education in the Georgian language, which functions as a high, literary variety in the local community. Georgian is a language in which they learn to write and read first. Then the language is used for general education and for communication outside their community. They usually cannot write or read in the Chechen language with the exception of a few individuals who have learnt the Chechen version of the Cyrillic alphabet with special letters for distinct Chechen sounds in special courses, e.g. when studying at university in Tbilisi or living and going to school in Chechnya. In the past the Chechen language was to be introduced into the curriculum before the split-up of the Soviet Union according to the older of the interviewees, but the tumultuous political changes destroyed the plans.

The local community of Kists has recently decided to introduce the Chechen language into their school curriculum within the framework of general education. Their aim was to teach it as an obligatory subject to all Kist children in the local schools. The interviewee herself gave the main reason for their decision: "The Chechen language will stop developing in Pankisi if the children do not learn to write and read in it." Therefore the representatives of the local community sent a letter to the respective authorities in Tbilisi asking permission for teaching Chechen as a compulsory subject. However, they were only allowed to teach it as an optional subject to the children who want to take it. The reason for the decision has been provided; Kists are not a national minority according to governmental officials in Tbilisi, therefore have no right to achieve their education in their mother tongue. The older interviewee's response to

this was that she as well as most of her neighbors in the valley certainly feel to be Kists by nationality, in spite of the fact that Kurtsikidze and Chikovani (2002: 14) claim that "[t]o this day, they identify themselves as Kists, and for official purposes declare themselves of Georgian nationality." The nationality issue will be further discussed and analyzed below. The interviewees also realize that the Chechen language issue is "a sensitive topic" in the time of the country's attempts at reintegration and the recent threats of irredentism in the Javakheti region.

After I have examined the 2002 Census questionnaire, it has been discovered that it does not allow choosing any other nationality than Georgian, Abkhaz, Ossetian, Azerbaijani, Russian, and Armenian. Thus the fact that Kists choose the Georgian nationality might not be surprising. The Census of 2002 results as presented online (GeoStat 2011a), however, do not include Kists into the Georgian ethnic group either. The state's approach to the national minority issue thus seems to be inconsistent.

As has been mentioned above, children achieving education in the mother tongue are more successful learners. It was also confirmed by the teacher-interviewee that it is a hard job to teach the Kist children anything in the Georgian language as they begin to think in Georgian only in the sixth or seventh grade of school (i.e. at the age of ten or eleven). Therefore the learners' success when achieving general education is again at stake. Contrary to her own complaint about the difficulties children have to face when being educated in Georgian, the older interviewee presented another aspect of the issue: "It is good to learn the Chechen language at school as a subject but it is not good to learn in the Chechen language. Not for Kists in Georgia. We do not have textbooks. Georgian is necessary if you want a job and study at university." Therefore she seemed to realize the importance of the integration function of the state language for their community.

In addition to the above-mentioned consequences of receiving education in a non-native language, the fact that Kists cannot read or write in their mother tongue prevents them from reading the Chechen literature in the Chechen language, thus disintegrating them from their own culture. The younger interviewee's own motivation to learn writing and reading in the Chechen language is also the desire to read literature in it. She has taken a Chechen language course at university in Tbilisi as an optional subject.

The Kist children started learning the English language as an obligatory subject from the first grade like children at all schools of general education in Georgia in 2010/2011. Considering the situation of Kists, whose children already learn another non-native language from the first grade, this is a controversial innovation for their community. Learning two non-native languages, Georgian and English, puts a double strain on the children, and does not ensure their successful learning.

In spite of the hardship, Kists seem to have positive attitude to learning English. In 2008 The Roddy Scott Foundation was established in Pankisi by Roddy Scott's parents. Roddy Scott, a British journalist and filmmaker, who spent months with Kists and refugee Chechens in Pankisi while making a film about them, died during fights in Ingushetia in 2002. The foundation provides funds for Roddy Scott Education Centre in Duisi, where the local Kist children learn English and IT skills. The Centre also provides a nursery. It offers children classes of English after compulsory school hours. The English teachers employed in the centre are local Kists who have been trained for teaching English.

I made an attempt to elicit Kists' opinion on advantages and disadvantages of learning foreign languages. Russian classes are being gradually replaced by the classes of English in the Pankisi three schools. English seems to be a popular language here, symbolizing pro-Western reforms and improvement in the economy. The younger interviewee stated that English may be useful for Kists or any Georgian citizens' individual plans, for their careers. The knowledge of English is required from most applicants for qualified jobs in the present,

Russian is only regarded as an advantage. So English is the language good for finding employment, although doubts had been expressed if English can be useful for finding a job in all European countries, where people speak national languages. Further, English is the language which opens the door for students to study from textbooks and journals in English, it might become the language of international conferences in the future. In everyday life English can be used in communication with tourists coming to Pankisi with development of agro-tourism. The tourists' money are one of few opportunities to increase local families' budgets as unemployment is high there. English is the language of computers and the internet. One can also find the knowledge of English useful when having to read instructions on a product.

Another language, which is still a number one lingua franca in communication between local linguistic minorities and Caucasian or Western tourists in Georgia, is Russian. Russian is still taught at schools in Pankisi, even if it seems that the number of classes of Russian will be reduced in the future according to the local teacher. In spite of the fact that Russian is not an obligatory subject at schools in Georgia, it is obligatory for children in Pankisi, they are not offered another language to learn as an option at the moment. Russian is a language which can be used in communication to people from other post-Soviet countries, e.g. when one travels to Kazakhstan. Even at Tbilisi University a Russian section has been opened recently for the students from the neighboring countries who intend to study Caucasian regional studies. The local people seem to consider knowledge of Russian very important.

Last but not least we should mention another language that is important for Kists. Kists are Sufi Muslims, which means that they use Arabic in praying. The elder generation, both men and women, still practise "zikr", a meeting in a mosque where members of the community chant God's name and Arabic rhymes and dance rhythmically. Some of them learn to read in Arabic to be able to read Koran, but it does not seem to be a common practice in Pankisi.

### **Conclusion**

The Georgian administration's argument against establishing the Chechen language at Kist schools as a compulsory subject is that Kists are not a national minority. There is no clear-cut definition of a national minority, and not even experts agree on it. Different countries and institutions define the term in a different way in relation to objective facts, subjective attitudes of the people concerned and the context. The objective facts may include for example number of individuals within the group of people, whether they are traditional occupiers of the region they live in, or whether they arrived recently, etc. The document "Ethnic Minorities in Georgia" prepared by the Committee for Human Rights and Ethnic Minorities of the Parliament of Georgia (Zakareishvili, Zedelashvili and Urjumalashvili 1996) reveals the Georgian approach to this issue. The document claims that there are representatives of one hundred nationalities living in Georgia, but only some of them can be considered as belonging to local ethnic minorities. The main factors used for qualifying as a national minority are their number and the settlement compactness. However, after reading the document it has been discovered that the Abkhazians are not considered an ethnic minority as they are regarded "as the native population" (Zakareishvili, Zedelashvili and Urjumalashvili 1996). Therefore the historic factor seems to play a significant role in this issue too. Kists are not regarded as a national minority in this document despite living in compact settlements in relatively high numbers. The reason might be that they arrived in Georgia only 200 years ago.

The subjective attitudes also play role in determining whether individuals belong to a national minority. The attitudes actually involve individual people's identity. For example, most of the Muslim Kists state they are ethnically Vainakh but some of the Christian Kists might also claim to be as Georgian as Kist and fill in the Georgian nationality in census questionnaires (Kurtsikidze and Chikovani 2002: 14).

The European and Western world perception of the minority concept has also been developing over the time. The typical elements in the first definitions appearing in Europe in 1970s is numerical inferiority of the minority group and its different ethnic, national, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics as well as a non-dominant position of a group of citizens within a state. However, none of the first definitions took into account the fact that a majority group may occur in a non-dominant position, thus achieving a minority group feature and becoming a minority. Helton (1998) comments on this dominancy aspect of the definition as follows: "The question of who constitutes a minority, thus, has more to do with political and power relationships than with numerical characteristics."

In the 1990s another element, the right to self-determination, is added to the definition of minorities, in particular national minorities. The definition of national minority in the Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE 1990) states that: "(32) To belong to a national minority is a matter of a person's individual choice and no disadvantage may arise from the exercise of such choice." The appearance of the subjective element in the definition of the national or other minorities seems to legally protect the minorities against the situation in which the state might want to deny their existence with the aim not to recognize their rights. The following quotation is also in support to the status of the Kists as a national minority: "The existence of a minority does not depend on a decision by the State, determined by objective criteria such as language, ethnicity or religion, but on self-identification. It depends on the will and decision of those individuals who collectively see themselves as different to the majority, on a sense of belonging to the group and a commitment to the preservation of the identity of the group" (CSCE 1992).

The last paragraphs of the paper will be devoted to the issue of the legal framework established in Georgia in relation to the rights of linguistic minorities. No law on minorities exists in Georgia, and the minority issue is only vaguely mentioned in the Article 38 of the Constitution of Georgia, which gives its citizens "the right to develop freely, without any discrimination and interference, their culture, to use their mother tongue in private and in public." At the same time the Article 38 balances this right by promoting the country's integrity and obviously even placing it above the minority rights: "...the exercise of minority rights shall not oppose the sovereignty, state structure, territorial integrity and political independence of Georgia." Concerning the court, the Constitution ensures that individual people who do not speak and understand the state language are provided with an interpreter as legal proceedings are to be always held in the state language (Article 85). Being a member of the Council of Europe, Georgia ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 2005, which is the only minority rights protection legal framework in Georgia at the moment.

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages has not been ratified by Georgia in spite of the fact that Georgian political representatives promised to do so years ago. The above description of the situation in Georgia seems to be in agreement with Popjanevski's statement that "Governments [Georgian and Azerbaijani] have remained reluctant to ratifying instruments at all, as they are believed to be counter-productive to integration of national minority groups" (Popjanevski 2006: 8). The reintegration of the country and the integration of the disintegrated population are priorities in the present state policy controlling also minority rights protection. Elene Tevdoradze, Chair of the Parliamentary Human Rights and Civic Integration Committee, expressed her opinion that the legislation on language policy would not be changed, nor will Georgia sign the Charter before the restoration of territorial integrity (Transparency International Georgia 2007: 7).

In order to protect linguistic minorities' rights, it is necessary for Georgia to find a balance between integration aims and minority rights protection, reconsider the national minority

definition, acknowledge the existence of the national minorities such as Kists, and in agreement with the official MES statements on the present language policy, provide them with such conditions that would give them the opportunity to choose the language of general education for their children.

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