

The Impact of Language on Resilience in Georgia's Minority Communities

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Date	Event
1 March 2021	The European Union–Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) agreement enters into force. It was signed on 24 November 2017.
20 June 2021	Early parliamentary elections take place in Armenia. The political party Civil Contract, led by Nikol Pashinyan, wins 54% of the votes.
2 July 2021	Thirty-three Armenian non-governmental organisations call on the Armenian government to establish a fact-finding commission and implement political assessments of state capture, vetting, and an effective legislative framework for the recovery of property and stolen assets.
2 July 2021	The European Commission adopts ‘Recovery, resilience, and reform: post-2020 Eastern Partnership priorities’ as a renewed agenda for the Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) that contains resilience at its core. It aims at increasing trade, economic growth, and jobs; investing in connectivity; strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law; supporting the green and digital transitions; and promoting fair, gender-equal, and inclusive societies.
9 July 2021	The Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi announces a € 2.6 billion investment package for Armenia for the next five years. The package invests in five flagship projects: transport connectivity, resilience and recovery of the Southern provinces, energy efficiency and renewable energy, digital transformation, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises.
2 November 2021	A public discussion on ‘The course of judicial reforms in post-revolutionary and post-election Armenia’ is organised by the Armenian Ministry of Justice with the support of the Partnership for Open Society initiative.
15 December 2021	The Armenian government expresses its commitment to resilience as the main policy objective within the framework of the Eastern Partnership.
23 January 2022	European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia Toivo Klaar states in an interview that EU–Armenia relations are developing in a positive direction given the limited opportunities for cooperation.

The Impact of Language on Resilience in Georgia’s Minority Communities

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Abstract

This paper is intended as a contribution to discussions of the concept of resilience in linguistics, with a focus on minority language speakers in Georgia. For our study, representatives of three of Georgia’s largest minority groups—Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Chechens—have been interviewed. The sociolinguistic situations of the respective speech communities in Georgia only partially overlap, but all three ethnolinguistic communities maintain a strong cultural identity and they rarely engage in ethnically mixed relationships. The goal of the study is to give insights into the current language situation seen from the native speakers’ viewpoint and to testify as to whether language attitude and knowledge can benefit the resilience of minorities in the majority community.

Introduction and Theoretical Background

In linguistics, the concept of resilience has so far mainly been applied to languages as a whole, i.e., languages as

complex adaptive systems, and their capacities to go through phases of (enforced) change caused by domination of other languages and critical demographic and

economic factors that negatively impact the speech communities. In other words, resilience linguistics has drawn primarily on ecological resilience within the discussion on language vitality and how it can be achieved (e.g., Roche 2017; Bradley 2019). Minority languages can be resilient towards domination by majority languages, language shift or language death thanks to prestige, positive language attitude, financial and political support and other factors.

Another conceptualisation of resilience, namely psychological resilience of individuals, focuses on the processes of staying resilient through the native minority language. The role of culture and language in helping members of minority communities to respond to disturbing events has been investigated, e.g., for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq (Capstick/ Delan 2018), for immigrant youth groups (see the overview by Motti-Stefanidi 2018) and for indigenous communities in Greenland and Canada (Berliner et al. 2012; Kirmayer et al. 2012). Of particular importance in this respect is the function of language as a positive identity marker (Bradley 2019: 515).

In this paper we examine both types of resilience, and as case studies we have chosen to focus on Chechens, Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Georgia. The languages belong to three different language families (the Indo-European language family, Turkic languages, and Northeast Caucasian language family, respectively). The rationale behind choosing these ethnolinguistic groups is that they maintain their own strong cultural identity, which is also manifested in generally being members of religious communities other than the Georgian Orthodox Church, and they comparatively rarely engage in ethnically mixed relationships (e.g., Storm 2019: 51). The minority communities use their native language for everyday communication and sometimes even do not acquire Georgian, which de facto excludes them from full participation in social and political activities of the country in which they live.

For our study we used a qualitative semi-structured interview method. From each of our three target groups (Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Chechens residing in Georgia) we interviewed 10 members (5 males and 5 females) aged 20 to 30. Respondents were identified through personal contacts of one author (Natia Botkoveli). Because of this, a number of respondents have a university degree in philology and ties to Tbilisi. All the respondents spoke Georgian fluently or natively, such that the interviews could be conducted in Georgian.

The Sociolinguistic Situation of Azerbaijanis, Armenians and Chechens in Georgia

Of the three South Caucasian countries, Georgia is the most heterogenous in terms of ethnic groups and

languages. Georgia is home to all four Kartvelian languages (Georgian, Mingrelian, Svan and Laz), one West Caucasian language (Abkhaz), pockets of Northeast Caucasian languages (in particular Chechen and Udi), Indo-European languages from various subbranches (e.g., Ossetic) and Turkic languages. The largest minority speech community of Georgia is the Azerbaijanis, followed by Armenians. Estimations of the number of Azerbaijanis living in Georgia vary between 233,000 (GEOSTAT 2016) and 500,000 (Storm 2016). According to the Census of 2014 (GEOSTAT 2016), there are around 168,000 Armenians in Georgia (not considering the around 60,000–70,000 Armenians in Abkhazia). Members of these minority communities are usually Georgian citizens.

During the Soviet period, Russian had a special status as *lingua franca* among all languages spoken in that multi-ethnic and multilingual state and therefore minority groups were not encouraged, let alone obliged, to learn the majority ('titular') language of the republic where they were residing. Instead, they usually attended Russian schools and used Russian for communicating with the majority society. This situation has thoroughly changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the Soviet past still impacts the sociolinguistic situation of the successor states, including Georgia. Today, the only official language at the national level in Georgia is Georgian. Since the independence of Georgia in 1991, language policy has tended to favour Georgian over all other languages (Storm 2016).

Small minority groups are largely bilingual, speaking both their native language and Georgian. But this does not fully apply to the more numerous Azerbaijanis and Armenians. One reason for this is that the majority of them live compactly in rural areas of Georgia—Kvemo Kartli for Azerbaijanis and Samtskhe-Javakheti for Armenians—that border with the corresponding nation states (Azerbaijan and Armenia). In the Azerbaijani- and Armenian-speaking areas as well as in Tbilisi, there are schools in which the language of instruction is Russian, others in which it is Georgian and schools that teach in Azerbaijani and Armenian, respectively (Korth et al. 2005, Tabatadze 2019). Through various programmes, the teaching of Georgian as a second language in Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Tbilisi has been extended and improved, in particular during the second presidential term of Mikheil Saakashvili from 2008 to 2013 (Blauvelt/ Berglund 2016).

Even so, the overall success of Georgian language educational efforts has remained to this point limited. There are several reasons for the lack of widespread acquisition of the Georgian language among these groups, among others lack of funding and of qualified teachers and suitable teaching materials, but other reasons per-

tain to questions of identity, social status and recognition. In any case, limited knowledge of the state language leads to social, political and economic marginalisation (Storm 2016). For instance, the number of students belonging to ethnic minorities who fail the Unified National Exams that are required to enter Georgian universities is still very high (Blauvelt/ Berglund 2016; Tabatadze 2019). In fact, many young Azerbaijanis and Armenians go to Baku or Yerevan for higher education. Nevertheless, minority groups in Georgia mostly consider it to be necessary to learn the state language, and the number of pupils attending minority schools is slowly decreasing (Korth et. al. 2005; Wigglesworth-Baker 2018; Storm 2019: 58).

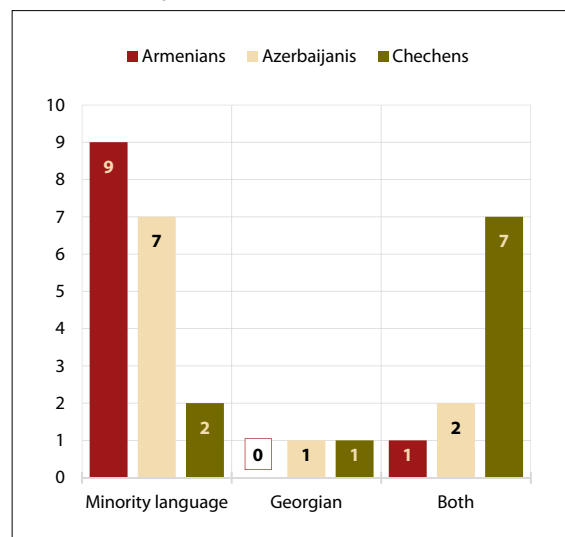
The situation for the Chechen community is quite different. First of all, the Chechen population in Georgia comprises around 6,000 to 7,000 people (Sedlářová 2011; GEOSTAT 2016) and is thus much smaller than the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities. Chechens live in six villages in the Pankisi Gorge, which borders with Chechnya (Russian Federation) to the north, and speak the Kist dialect of Chechen. They are bilingual in Georgian and Chechen (some also speaking Russian) and attend Georgian-speaking schools. In Georgia, Chechen is used only as an oral language. It is not regularly taught in school, though optional Chechen classes have been organised by local language activists. In neighbouring Chechnya, Chechen has official status but it normally not used as medium of education and is only taught as a subject in schools and universities.

Mother Tongue, Language Attitude and Identity

The concept of a ‘mother tongue’ is not always clear in multilingual communities because it is not necessarily the language that a speaker knows best or uses most. Often the mother tongue is the language with which speakers have the closest emotional links and which they were exposed to in their family during their childhood. In some speech communities, language plays an essential role and there are strong ideas about language ideology according to which one can have only one mother tongue, as one has only one mother. Other communities are more pragmatically oriented and do not have a monolingual language ideology. These different views are reflected in our data presented in Figure 1. Armenians and Azerbaijanis favoured their respective minority languages, whereas most Chechens consider both Georgian and Chechen languages as their mother tongue.

Armenians demonstrated the most homogeneous attitude. They take pride in their mother tongue and knowledge of Armenian is a marker of being dedicated to the community and of ethnolinguistic identity. By contrast, language attitude towards Georgian is rather

Figure 1: Mother Tongue as Identified by the Respondents



instrumental in the sense that the language scores high with respect to importance and utility.

‘No one can argue that the Georgian language isn’t important in this country. Although I am happy with my Georgian language skills, I still try to improve my knowledge, read books or write something in Georgian. I need Georgian to be successful person, and I need to maintain my Armenian because it is my mother tongue and it allows me to communicate with my community.’
Armenian (25, female).

Linguistic attitude can impact language use and is therefore important when it comes to minority languages and possible language shift towards the majority language. All Chechen respondents held very positive attitudes toward the minority language. Interestingly, two speakers from the Armenian group and one speaker from the Azerbaijani group stated that they would have had ‘a better life’ had they been born into a monolingual Georgian family. In these cases, bilingualism was seen more as a struggle rather than an asset, and when it comes to resilience, we can hypothesise that the fact of being a member of a minority group and knowledge of a minority language can have a negative impact on individual psychological resilience.

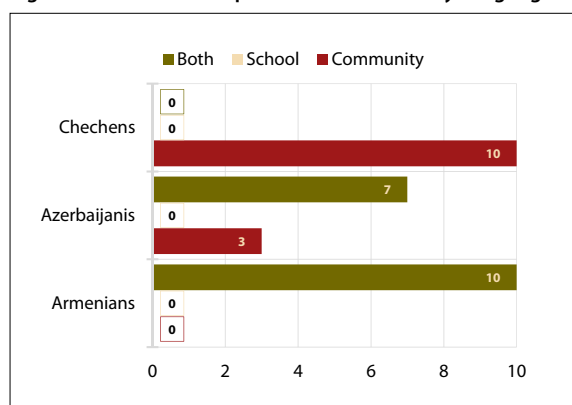
However, in practise ideologies and linguistic attitude often differ from actual linguistic behaviour, and this is also reflected in our data. The majority of our respondents believes that their traditional culture cannot survive without its language. At the same time, only 60% of all interviewees stated that it is important to maintain their language and that they teach or would teach their mother tongue to their children.

Education

Education is obviously an important issue with respect to minority languages. This concerns the language(s) of education and the teaching of individual languages as subjects, be it so-called ‘mother-tongue education’, which is based on the assumption that students already speak the language, or be it second or foreign language teaching. McCarty et al. (2008: 300) argue that, if a dominant language is used as the primary or only medium of instruction, the minority language is not likely to survive because indigenous and minority students educated in an alien language are not likely to pass on their mother tongue to their children and grandchildren.

Figure 2 summarises our data on the place of acquisition of the respective minority languages. We differentiate between the school and the community (including one’s own family) as the two major places where languages are learnt and used.

Figure 2: Place of Acquisition of the Minority Languages



Our data reflect the different sociolinguistic situations in the three communities. Only Armenians and Azerbaijanis have the opportunity to receive education in their own languages, whereas Chechen is not used as medium of instruction. All Armenians who we interviewed have embraced the opportunity to further develop their minority language skills at school as well as in family settings. Azerbaijanis demonstrated more variation in that regard, because some parents decided to send their children to Georgian schools to help them to better integrate into the Georgian culture, and based on the data, it seems this trend is getting stronger. For example, one of our Azerbaijani respondents who works at the local school in Marneuli (a town in Kvemo Kartli) said:

‘Right now, there is almost a competition between the young parents to have their children as fluent in Georgian as possible — they often hire private teachers for them. This practice is not appreciated by our grandparents, but we

are young and we see that without Georgian, our children will not be successful.’

Azerbaijani (28, female)

Thus, among young Azerbaijanis Georgian is seen as necessary and instrumental for future study and job possibilities in Georgia. One Azerbaijani respondent even maintained that minority language classes at school are unnecessary and Azerbaijani language teaching should take place on a purely voluntary basis as an extracurricular activity.

Armenians and Azerbaijanis who have received education in their minority languages have expressed almost identical attitudes towards language classes, textbooks and teachers. According to the respondents, many teachers demonstrated negative attitudes towards the fact that some of their students embraced bilingualism:

‘My Armenian language and literature teacher was a bit old-fashioned and believed that if I studied Georgian very well, I would forget Armenian, which, of course, never happened.’

Armenian (28, male)

Teachers’ incompetence was also named as one of the most significant issues with schooling. Not to speak of many teachers not being professionals in their field, teachers often spoke only one language, either Georgian or the minority language, which made it difficult to give comprehensive explanations and clarify complicated terminology. Another pertinent problem concerns accessibility of textbooks and teaching materials. Armenian and Azerbaijani students receive their language and literature textbooks from Yerevan and Baku, respectively. However, the students did not always get enough books for each student to receive one of their own:

‘When I was a student, we were getting our books from Armenia. The books which were at the school library were not enough, and at least three students had to share one book. Of course, this was causing lots of inconveniences.’

Armenian (25, female)

As stated above, Chechens face a different and more complicated situation. In 2013, with the support of the United Nations, Chechen language activists from Georgia reached their long-time goal of introducing their minority language at schools as a separate subject. However, after one year the financial support was terminated and the future of Chechen lessons was questioned again. In order to keep up the momentum, the representatives of the local community sent a letter to the respective authorities in Tbilisi asking permission to teach Chechen as a compulsory subject; in the end, they were only authorised to teach it as an optional sub-

ject to the children who want to take it. The decision had been justified with the statement that Chechens are not a national minority according to governmental officials in Tbilisi, and therefore have no right to education in their mother tongue. As a result of this decision, some local schools gave up on the idea of teaching the minority language, while others tried to maintain it. The only way to get the necessary textbooks was now to reach out to friends and family living in Chechnya and send books from there to Georgia. A few of our respondents have been involved in these processes, and they spoke about the challenges:

'We were promised that the textbooks would be prepared and published in Georgia, but it never happened. So from 2017 to now I have had to call my friends in Grozny and ask them to buy the textbooks there, then I simply rip some pages out of those books, propagandist pages which promote Kadyrov, Russia, Putin...'
Chechen (30, male)

Unsurprisingly, the majority of Chechen interviewees think that the Georgian government has to take more responsibility when it comes to supporting minority groups and languages.

Discussion

The pictures of the three minority communities that we can draw based on our data show some similarities, in particular with respect to their knowledge of Georgian and its practical value, but also a number of differences concerning language ideologies. All our interview partners were at least bilingual and generally have positive attitudes towards the majority society. In particular those respondents who believe their future professional lives lie in Georgia accept the necessity of a good command of Georgian as the national language of the country of which they are citizens. Such an attitude is more instrumental for Chechens than for Azerbaijanis and Armenians because the functional domains of the Chechen language are smaller. Azerbaijani and Armenian are fully-fledged national languages that cover all functions of public and private life in the respective countries, but this does not apply to Chechen. In our data, this difference is reflected in the fact that all Armenians and the majority of the Azerbaijanis acquired their languages not only in the community, but also in school. Such schools are nonexistent for Chechens, who therefore all learned the language solely in their community.

The language ideologies of the three communities show some further interesting differences in terms of the role of the mother tongue. Armenians demonstrate the highest sympathy for a monolingual language ideology,

and community members express strong attachments to the language. This fits into previous research on language ideology and linguistic attitudes of Armenians. For instance, a study of Armenians in St. Petersburg has shown that for the Armenians living there, a similar language ideology prevails: 'speaking Armenian is not necessary, while regarding it as a value is an obligation' (Tokmantcev 2014: 221). And even in a small Armenian community such as the one in Jordan, where only around 4,000 Armenians live and the shift to Arabic has reached a very advanced stage, the Armenian language continues to be an important symbol of identity (Al-Khatib 2001). We hypothesise that a language ideology that places Armenian above any other language might be due to the long history of literacy and the close relationship between language and religion.

By contrast, for Chechens a bilingual language ideology dominates. This may be due to the relatively short history of literacy and the resulting clear functional division between Chechen as the oral language of the community and Georgian as the written language in the public domain. Azerbaijanis are somewhat in the middle in the sense that they have a less pronounced monolingual ideology than Armenians and show a greater sympathy towards bilingualism, but not as much as the Chechens. Possible reasons for this can be found in the historical development of the Azerbaijani language and connecting language ideologies. Azerbaijani does not have a close link with religion as Armenian does, nor does it have a comparably long history of literacy or implication of uniqueness as Armenian. However, it is also not a minority language that is restricted to the private sphere and by and large used only orally as Chechen is. The recognition of Azerbaijani as a separate language that is distinct from Anatolian Turkish varieties and its development into a full-fledged national language started comparatively recently. The language has gone through numerous alphabet changes in the past hundred years. Since the independence of Azerbaijan there have been clear tendencies toward nationalism: the concept of 'Azerbaijanism' (as opposed to 'Turkism') has been introduced, and a distinct Azerbaijani culture that is different from Turkish culture has been promoted (Tokluoglu 2005). Thus, we hypothesize that language attitudes of Azerbaijani speakers in the homeland and in Georgia will continue to shift towards a more monolingual ideology as is dominant among Armenians.

With respect to resilience, in terms of language vitality, all three minority communities are doing well. We did not observe language shift even though there are some indications, in particular within the Azerbaijani community, that language attitudes might change towards preference for the majority language Georgian. Our data also showed that the impact of minor-

ity languages on individual resilience is ambiguous. As markers of group identity and contributors to collective values they can be a source of pride, and thus positively influence resilience. On the other hand, if a minority

ethno-linguistic group is stigmatised, speakers may conceal their linguistic knowledge and the minority language may be experienced as causing stress and thus negatively influence psychological well-being.

About the Authors

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Reaching across the Atlantic to Support Resilient Self-Defence for Georgia

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Abstract

The Eastern Partnership and closer integration with European Union (EU) Member States has had an undeniable impact on democratization and economic progress for Georgia. Brussels has demonstrated its commitment to support Georgia's security and territorial integrity through the EU's third-party mediation role during the 2008 Russia–Georgia war and its ongoing unarmed civilian border monitoring mission. However, the EU contends with disparities between and contestations from its Member States regarding collective defence and security decisions. Therefore, support from other actors is also critical for establishing resilient defence capacity in Georgia. Georgia's participation with NATO and bilateral agreement with the United States offer valuable means through which Georgia can meet its security and defence objectives. This article discusses these partnerships in order to show that they provide a unique contribution that is necessary for establishing resilience in Georgia's security and defence capacity alongside the democratic, political, and economic objectives of the EU–Georgia partnership.

Introduction

Georgia has closely aligned itself with EU norms and standards since joining the Eastern Partnership in 2009. Additionally, the EU offered to be the sole third-party mediator during the 2008 Russia–Georgia war and still monitors borders, although from an unarmed position via a peacekeeping mandate.¹ The close relationship and strategic partnership between Georgia and the EU has been an important priority for both sides. Nevertheless, the lack of immediate EU accession prospects has led the Georgian government to take more control over its European integration, and insist on better, or more concrete, recognition of its democratization and economic progress from Brussels (Makszimov 2021). Given the unexpected and divergent outcomes of the Eastern Partnership instrument, the initial ambitions for EU Membership for Eastern Partner countries have lately been

called into question (Kakachia et al. 2021; Lebanidze 2020). Not all the Eastern Partners have the same concerns, opportunities, or interests, and this is reflected in the different paths the partnership processes have taken.

For Georgia, the push to become an EU Member State can be explained not only by economic benefits, but also the pressing security concerns with regard to Russian aggression and continued occupation of Georgian territory. Support for these concerns from the EU is critical. However, the EU's internal defence and security policy mechanisms are prone to longstanding contestations, and at times disparity between Member States, that can cause delays or stalls in decision-making (Maurer/ Wright 2020 2021). Therefore, it is not able to target increasing military or defence capacity abroad as would a state-level actor or security-oriented organisation.

1 European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, <https://www.eumm.eu>. For their mandate, see 'Our Mandate', https://www.eumm.eu/en/about_eumm/mandate.