

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Social Dimensions of Ethno-Linguistic Boundaries in the Azerbaijani Community in Georgia's Kvemo Kartli Region

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Abstract

This paper addresses the topic of social dimensions of ethno-linguistic boundaries in the Azerbaijani community in Georgia's Kvemo Kartli region, including language policy, linguistic landscape and structural problems associated with quite low integration. Based on the material collected during the field visits to the Kvemo Kartli region in 2018–2023, I attempt to outline the issues which restrict this minority's access to learning Georgian and the reasons for this state of affairs. Therefore, my research makes a contribution to the study of social and language issues in the Azerbaijani minority in Georgia.

Keywords: Georgia; ethnic minorities; Azerbaijani minority; Kvemo Kartli; South Caucasus

Introduction

The language issue is a complex problem in Georgia and involves the status of languages other than Georgian which are spoken in the country by linguistic and ethnic minorities. The current population of Georgia is 3.7 million, of which 6.3% (233,000) are Azerbaijanis, who constitute the biggest ethnic minority in the country (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2016, p. 22). My goal is to outline the social dimensions of ethno-linguistic boundaries in the Azerbaijani community in Georgia's Kvemo Kartli region, including language policy, linguistic landscape and structural problems associated with quite low integration. According to the research conducted by the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI, Georgia), one of the main problems is an insufficient command of the Georgian language among Azerbaijanis ("*Qızlar oxusunlar ki, sabah heç kimə möhtac olmasınlar*", – *Gürcüstan azərbaycanlıları*, 2023). I attempt to identify the reasons behind this state of affairs and explain how minorities are excluded in terms of access to learning Georgian.

The article is based on intensive ethnographic field research conducted in Georgia in 2018–2023 as part of my doctoral thesis project (Kosicińska, 2023),¹ including interviews and conversations during numerous stays in the Kvemo Kartli region (mainly the village of Shulaveri in the Marneuli district)² and Tbilisi. My interlocutors were 30 native Azerbaijani speakers (9 women and 21 men) of different age (between 22 and 75 years old) and level of education, who are residents and activists of Kvemo Kartli (mainly the Marneuli district).

¹ The PhD thesis *Codziennosc między granicami: Mobilność i praktyki translokacyjne w południowo-wschodniej Gruzji* [Everyday Life Between Borders: Mobility and Translocal Practices in South-East Georgia] was written at the Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences under the supervision of Prof. Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska and defended in November 2023 (reviewers: Dr hab. Natalia Bloch, Prof. Oliver Reisner, Dr hab. Łukasz Smyrski) (Kosicińska, 2023).

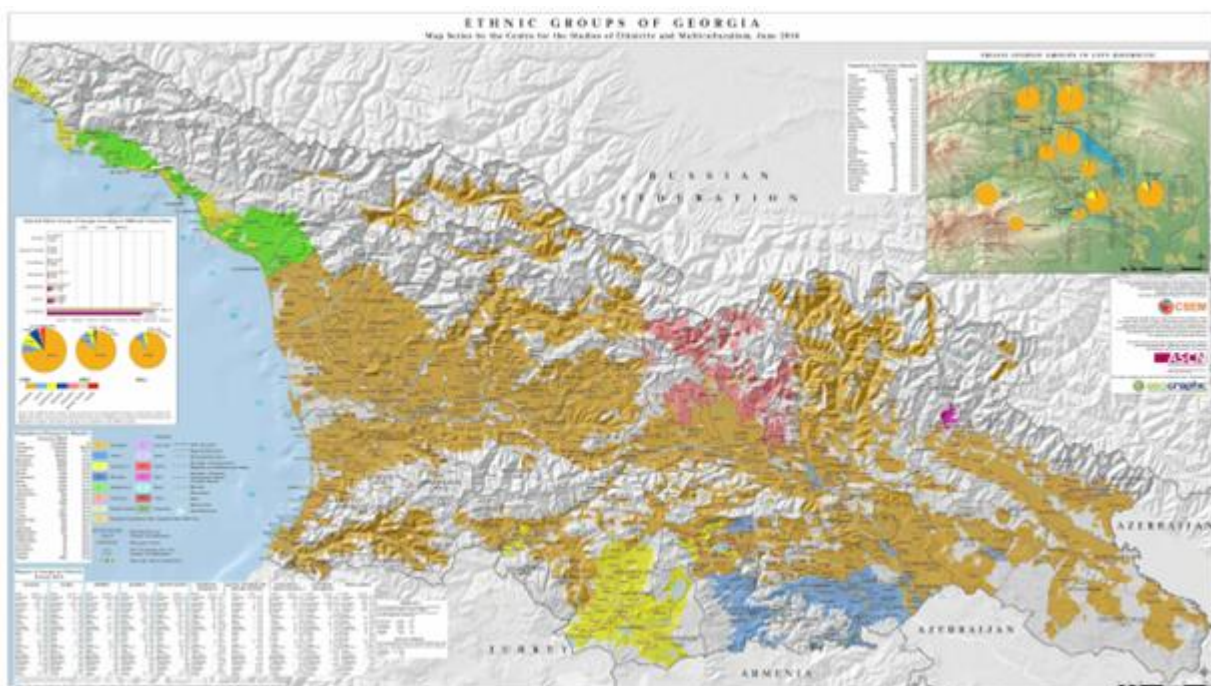
² My trips to Shulaveri lasted from one day up to two months each.

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The linguistic diversity of Georgia and the situation after regaining independence in 1991

The ancient Greek geographer Strabo wrote of more than seventy ethnic groups inhabiting the Caucasus as a whole. Timosthenes, in turn, noted that three hundred languages were spoken throughout ancient Colchis (present-day western Georgia), while medieval Arab geographers called the Caucasus *jabal al-alsun* – the mountain of languages (Coene, 2010; Grant, 2007). As it is today, some researchers refer to the area between the Lesser and Greater Caucasus as an “ethnolinguistic mosaic”, since it is inhabited by more than a hundred ethnic groups unique in their linguistic distinctiveness and customs (Coene, 2010).

Figure 1. The ethnic diversity of Georgia. The main area populated by the Azerbaijani minority in Georgia, the Kvemo Kartli region, is marked in blue.



Source: Centre for the Studies of Ethnicity and Multiculturalism (2016).

Despite the linguistic diversity in the Caucasus, which also characterizes Georgia³, its only official language is Georgian, which was also included in the first independence constitution adopted in 1995.⁴ This provision had an emancipatory-symbolic function: it was intended to emphasise the dominant importance of the Georgian language in the state being built, a language which, even during the Soviet era, was not demoted in any official document to the level of a language equivalent to Russian (Tabachnik, 2019).⁵ Even though the position of Georgian as the language of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic was established in its 1978 constitution, it was Russian that was favoured as the language

³ However Dagestan has the highest language density in the Caucasus (Dobrushina & Kultepina, 2021).

⁴ Apart from Georgian, another language mentioned in the constitution of Georgia is Abkhazian, spoken only in the separatistic region of Abkhazia, which has been an unrecognised state outside the control of the Georgian government since 1992.

⁵ Even in the Soviet times, Georgian was not demoted in any official document to the level of a language equivalent to Russian (Tabachnik, 2019). Such attempts ended in an outbreak of violent protest on 14 April 1978 and resulted in the withdrawal of the USSR authorities from these plans.

of science, law and inter-ethnic relations (Amirejibi & Gabunia, 2021). Kakha Gabunia and Ketevan Gochitashvili write as follows:

The discrepancy between the legal and de facto status of the Russian and Georgian languages in the multi-ethnic Soviet republic resulted in a paradoxical situation: proficiency in Georgian was mandatory only for the titular nation, i.e. Georgians. Although minority groups had to learn Georgian, teaching was very formal and students were hardly motivated. Most of them studied either in Russian or in their mother tongue. (Gabunia & Gochitashvili, 2019, p. 39)

Nevertheless, the literal and uncompromising approach to this provision by the Georgian authorities was quickly verified by the reality in which the country found itself in the 1990s. In the state where almost every third citizen was of a different ethnic nationality (and used their own native language), it was mainly ethnic Georgians who were able to communicate in the official language. Georgia was unable to provide equal opportunities in the area of knowledge of the state language to all residents of the country, and even more so to provide adequate protection to regional and minority languages. An additional difficulty was the lack of law regulating the language policy in the country (Tabatadze et al., 2008).

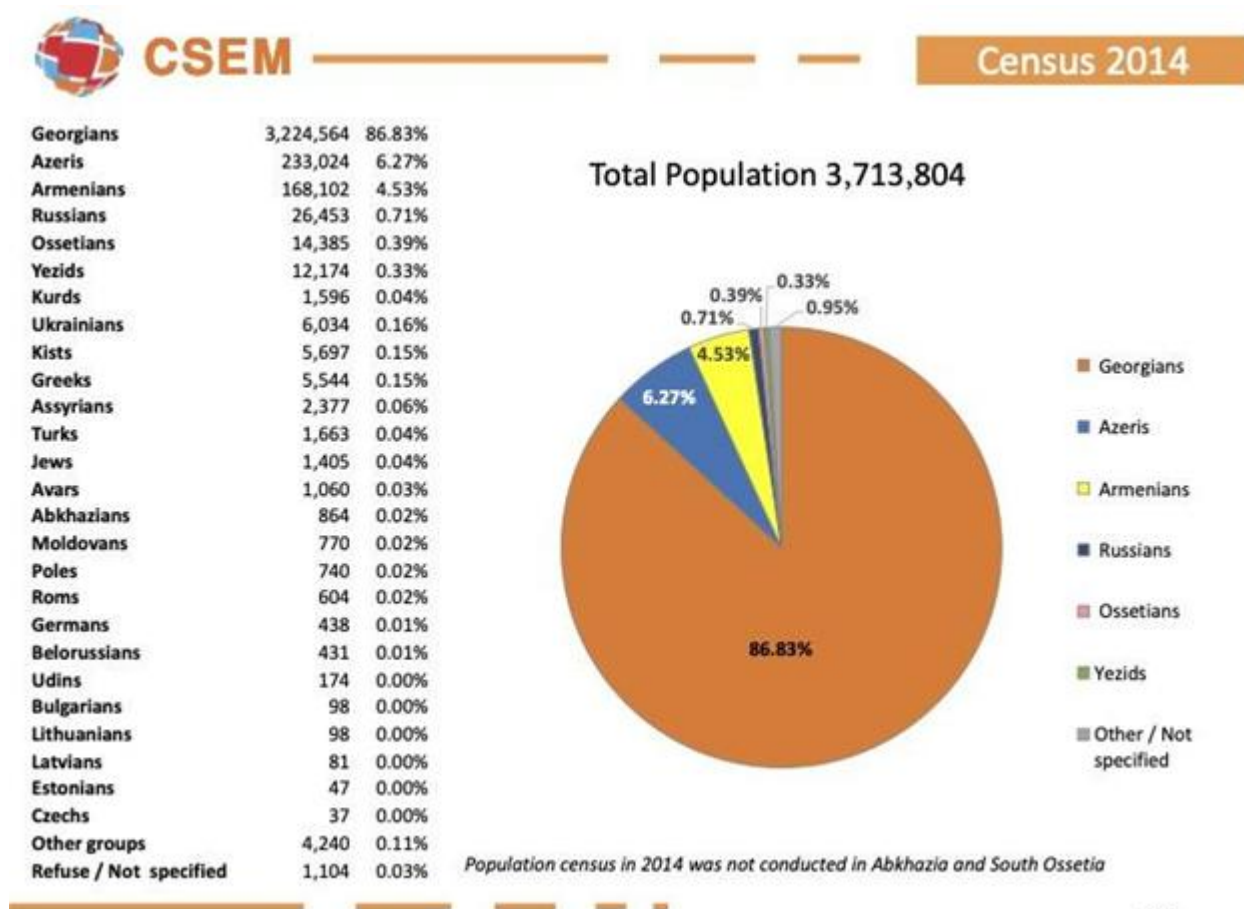
Pursuant to the Law on Citizenship of 25 March 1993, all residents in Georgia were recognised as Georgian citizens with no exceptions (Freni, 2011; Gachechiladze, 1997) and there was no clear requirement to know the Georgian language. Georgian citizenship was automatically granted to all those who resided within the territory of the state at the time (Reisner, 2010; Tarasiuk, 2013), without a distinction being made between national minorities or linguistic competence of their members.

The 1995 Constitution included a provision on equal rights for the country's national minorities, prohibiting discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds (Constitution of Georgia, 1995, Article no. 8). The constitution also protected the right of minorities to receive education in their native languages within the public system of education.

However, already towards the late 1990s, languages other than Georgian were gradually pushed out of use in public space, including cultural space, in favour of Georgian.⁶

⁶ In Otar Ioseliani's classic movie *Giorgobistve* [Falling Leaves] (1966), one of the scenes features Azerbaijani vocal music played on the streets of Tbilisi (Ioseliani, 1966). According to my observations, it is difficult to see a similar scene in contemporary reality or even in a film production.

Figure 2. Ethnic Composition of Georgia, 2016.



Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (2016).

In 1999, Georgia was admitted to the Council of Europe and pledged to sign the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, aiming to protect marginalised languages and those in danger of extinction. The Charter includes the stipulation that the protection of and support to regional or minority languages should not be to the detriment of the official languages and the need to learn them. Some scholars considering the rationale behind the Georgian government’s refusal to ratify the Charter (even more than twenty years after the document was signed) argue that one reason is the fear of strengthening local separatist aspirations and disintegration of the country (Adamczewski, 2016; Wicherkiewicz, 2010). This makes it clear that despite Azerbaijani language being used by at least 233,000 Georgian citizens (given the statistics on the number of its native speakers), the official status and function of the language has not been confirmed. It remains mostly in the informal space as well as other minority or regional languages in Georgia.

National minorities and education

As it is today, there are 208 public schools in Georgia with languages other than Georgian as the medium of instruction, and 89 so-called non-Georgian-language school sections,⁷ where the medium of instruction is Azerbaijani, Russian or Armenian; the total number of

⁷ Sometimes there are two different language sections in one school building.

students attending these schools and sections is almost 52,000 (Amirejibi & Gabunia, 2021). According to the Georgian law on universal education, the language of communication in all educational institutions in Georgia is Georgian, while at the same time national minorities have the right to receive primary and secondary education in their mother tongue (Mekhuzla & Roche, 2009). Nevertheless, the standard of Georgian language teaching in schools attended by minorities is neglected. Researchers point out that Georgian Azerbaijanis are dissatisfied with this state of affairs, as it means, among other things, that they have to pay for private Georgian lessons (e.g. Kosicińska, 2023; Mammadli, 2021; Wheatley, 2005). A number of minority representatives tend to see this as a deliberate policy of the authorities, aiming to encourage emigration among the younger generation of Azerbaijanis (International Crisis Group, 2006): particularly those without knowledge of Georgian emigrate to Russia and other countries; in addition to helping their families through remittances, they also support the Georgian economy.⁸ Some minority representatives also express concern about the inferior status of the Azerbaijani language and the lack of support to it at the state level. This might be the aftermath of the policy of the USSR, under which the social prestige of Azerbaijani was also low (Balaev, 2005).

During my field observations, I tried to pay attention to the issue of native Azerbaijani speakers choosing schools with particular languages of instruction, and I also asked about this during interviews and conversations with people who have school-age children or grandchildren. In the available sources, I did not find any statistics providing information on the correlation between preferences for the choice of language of instruction at school and ethnic origin or sense of ethnic or national belonging, and to my knowledge such statistics are not collected. During my research, however, I observed that Azerbaijanis often choose to enrol in schools where the medium of instruction is Azerbaijani or Russian (cf. Nodia, 2002), but also that there are families opting for Georgian-language schools.⁹ At the same time, some Azerbaijani residents are concerned about the ideologies linked to religious values that could be transmitted to the student during the course of their education (Baazov, 2002; Berglund, 2016; Komakhia, 2004). Data on the number of students attending individual schools by nationality is not available, and parents' decisions and motivations are not investigated.

Once in a while, one can hear the voices of Azerbaijani activists who criticise educational institutions intended for minorities, accusing them of fostering the separation of ethnic groups from each other and ineffective teaching of the Georgian language. Some call for their closure. One such voice is that of a young entrepreneur and activist from a village located about twenty kilometres from the town of Marneuli. He has lived in Turkey, Poland and Ukraine.

⁸ Remittances from Russia play a significant part in Georgia's economy. In 2021 (before a large influx of Russian citizens into Georgia, which started after Russia's full scale war against Ukraine), they amounted to almost 38 mln dollars, according to the National Bank of Georgia.

⁹ During my fieldwork I had a non-structured, spontaneous conversation with the Azerbaijani principal of the Russian school in Shulaveri, which took place in spring 2021. I asked him about the schools his grandchildren were enrolled in and he replied that they attended different ones: the boy was at a Georgian school "because he will stay in Georgia, with his family", and the girl attended a Russian school "because she will marry in Russia in the future". Given the patterns of Azerbaijani marriages in Georgia that I have observed during several years of research, the future husband might be an Azerbaijani migrant living in Russia, perhaps holding Russian citizenship or a Russian residence card. When I quoted this conversation to my friends who come from Marneuli, they did not seem surprised: they confirmed that there is such a pattern.

[I31:] Just one hour of Azerbaijani lessons every day is enough for us. And the others [other school subjects]? Why does maths have to be in Azerbaijani? Maths is maths, right?

[Researcher:] So you are saying it should be in...?

[I31:] Georgian. We even wrote a letter to Garibashvili once, when he was prime minister. But [I31:] Georgia doesn't want to change it. They say people won't accept it. (Interview I31, man, 34, 2020, conversation in English and Russian)

Although during my research I did not see much criticism of Azerbaijani schools from residents who were not involved in public activities, I noticed that some of the relatives of children attending Russian schools seemed to be lost about the choice or regretted not having chosen a Georgian one. However, according to one interlocutor, an activist and employee of an Azerbaijani corporation in Georgia, the relatively recent practice of sending Azerbaijani children to Georgian-language schools is detrimental. In her opinion, they do not have a good command of Georgian after such a school, because the level is too high and they do not start learning it from scratch; neither do they speak their mother tongue properly. These issues are also raised by some researchers. For instance, Christofer Berglund (2016) writes about the problem of private Azerbaijani language lessons taken by children who go to Georgian-language schools and whose parents are keen for them to have a good command of their native language. On the other hand, those who choose to take their final exam in their mother tongue Azerbaijani are required to take an additional exam in Georgian literature if they plan to study Georgian philology. According to my interlocutors, the problem is that Georgian literature is not taught in Azerbaijani-language schools. For this reason, some students take private lessons preparing them for this exam.

Many of those who take final school exams in their native languages rather than Georgian opt for the so-called "1+4 programme", whereby they take a one-year preparatory Georgian course and then move on to a four-year university study programme in the field of their choice (Amirjanova, 2022). There is also a pool of places allocated to members of ethnic minorities (Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2017; Tabatadze et al., 2020).¹⁰ This means starting the actual study programme one year later, after an intensive Georgian course at university.¹¹ The problem is that many non-native speakers of Georgian do not have the opportunity to learn it at school to a level that would enable them to enrol at university without the need to join the 1+4 programme. However, there are also exceptions: there are students whose command of Georgian after an Azerbaijani-speaking school is not weaker than that of its native speakers who graduated from Georgian-language schools.

Language ideologies

The research allowed me to identify the main linguistic ideologies, i.e. sets of beliefs about languages, language users and discursive practices. Like other ideologies, linguistic ideologies are related to political and moral issues and are culturally shaped (cf. e.g. Ahearn, 2012; Irvine & Gal, 2000; Woolard, 1992). I identified them on the basis of interviews and field observations. They concern the perception of the Georgian language by its non-native speakers.

¹⁰ The programme began in 2010 (Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, n.d.).

¹¹ According to a native English instructor at one of the major state universities and at a private one in Tbilisi, some of his students stated that in fact this programme is not helpful for those with beginner-level Georgian, while others noted that there is a stereotype that they do not know the Georgian language.

The current linguistic situation in Georgia is characterised by the symbolic dominance (Bourdieu, 1991) of one language: Georgian. On the one hand, as the official language of the country, it is perceived as the language of prestige and social advancement, offering a chance to integrate into Georgian majority society. According to Jadwiga Zieniukowa, the question of prestige usually becomes apparent under conditions of interaction, appreciation, rivalry, and sometimes conflict between two or more languages co-existing in a given area (Zieniukowa, 2003). On the other hand, due to a strong culture of migration and transnational and translocal practices, Georgian is perceived as impractical and unnecessary because it is only spoken within one country (unlike, for example, Russian; English is also often mentioned as a second “useful” international language). This is illustrated by a comment made in a conversation I had in Shulaveri about the position of Georgian and Russian languages: “You don’t need to learn Georgian; you need to learn Russian, in which you can communicate everywhere you go” (Field Diary, man, 35, 2018, conversation in Russian).

Furthermore, my interlocutors pointed on the difficulties associated with learning Georgian. This is due to the “impracticality” and limited range of Georgian described above, as well as contacts with Georgians. Also relevant is the fact that the place of reference for many Azerbaijanis with whom I spoke is not Georgia as a state or Tbilisi as the capital, but Marneuli. They still call the region in which it is located, Kvemo Kartli, by its historical name: Borchalo.¹² This reflects the translocal practices of local inhabitants and their patterns of mobility (Kosicińska, 2023). For my interlocutors, unfamiliarity with Georgian provokes number of difficulties and challenges, e.g. related to access to public institutions, medical assistance, transport, difficulties with understanding state media broadcast in Georgian and how to navigate the country’s legal system. This issue became particularly apparent to the public during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, when Azerbaijanis in the Kvemo Kartli region became victims of xenophobic attacks related to their knowledge of the Georgian language. They were intimidated by some ethnic Georgians who, through social media, outrageously attacked Azerbaijanis claiming that their low level of education and knowledge of the state language caused the spread of the virus in Georgia. (Kosicińska, 2020, p. 352).

The state of affairs presented above is also reflected in educational choices, although they are slowly beginning to change in favour of schools with Georgian as the medium of instruction. Berglund (2016) points out that until a few years ago, the proportion of Azerbaijani students attending Georgian schools oscillated between 40% and 80% (2015 figures). Their popularity continues to grow, and some families even hire taxis to enable their children to get to a distant Georgian school (Berglund, 2016). Georgian schools are becoming more attractive, as is continuing education at universities in Georgia rather than Azerbaijan, which was not a common practice a few years ago.¹³ The aforementioned “1+4 programme”, which enables school graduates from minority communities to study at Georgian universities, also plays an important role here.

I observed that Azerbaijani families perceive schools with Russian as the language of instruction as the most beneficial for their children; they believe that graduating from such a school and being fluent in Russian will also increase their chances of finding a job abroad (whereas Azerbaijani can be acquired in their immediate environment, through interaction with family and neighbours). I view the concerns of my interlocutors, irrespective of their position on the choice of the language of instruction, as significantly

¹² Historically, the area encompassed present-day Kvemo Kartli and parts of north-western Azerbaijan and northern Armenia.

¹³ This information comes from my interview with the sociolinguist Kakha Gabunia in Tbilisi in 2023.

related to ideologies about language, which will be discussed further below. The examples of linguistic attitudes cited may stem from the perception that the Azerbaijani language has a low status in Georgia, combined with the systemic strengthening of the status of the official language at the expense of minority languages. Some of my interlocutors openly expressed the opinion that their language – often referred to as *Musulman dili* (Muslim language) – is a key element of their cultural heritage. They stressed that common language is an important part of their community, perceiving it as the way to upgrade the status of an ethnic minority.

However, often schools with Georgian as the language of instruction are considered as a better choice:

[I31:] [...] Even in Kvemo Sarali, all the rich people who have enough money arrange a special bus and send their children to Marneuli or Shulaveri, to Georgian schools. [...] I say, OK, people don't want to, but why do they pay money and send their children to Georgian schools?

[Researcher:] Oh, they pay for it?

[I31:] Of course they pay for it, for that bus. Because it's something extra. You don't want your child to go to a public school in Kvemo Sarali because it's Azerbaijani and it's not as good. (Interview I31, man, 34, 2020, conversation in English and Russian)

In his comment quoted further above, my interlocutor objected against the presumption on the part of Georgian authorities that Azerbaijanis would not accept increasing the number of Georgian lessons in Azerbaijani schools. His view was based on the fact that, as observed, people are ready to pay for special transport so that their children can attend Georgian schools, often far from Azerbaijani villages and difficult to get to. According to “word on the street”, only those with ample resources can afford such transport. In fact, however, according to many observations, ordinary people put all the money they save into their children's education.

We can compare an excerpt from this conversation to a story quoted by Mathijs Pelkmans, writing about the experiences of old intelligentsia in the Georgian-Turkish border region of Adjara, economically degraded after the collapse of the USSR. One of Pelkman's interlocutors explained the frustratingly long closure of a newly built kindergarten near his home. He seemed convinced that when the time comes for a grandson of one of the still influential former politicians in the region to go to kindergarten, the building would be up and running. However, according to the interlocutor, only well-to-do people would be able to afford to pay. Pelkmans argues that this illustrates the emptiness caused by the loss of prosperity and the prevailing distribution of power in the region. His interlocutor's words also suggest that the attendant inequality is perceived as something that prevents people from access to resources and modern facilities, which in this case are represented by the institution of kindergarten, potentially accessible but actually, though not obviously, inaccessible (Pelkmans, 2006). We can see a connection between these two cases related to access to educational institutions.

Distancing from prejudices

Another aspect important for my study are the political contexts of the position of the Azerbaijani community in Georgia. One of the country's significant economic partners is the Azerbaijani oil company SOCAR (The State Oil Company of the Republic of Azerbaijan), while Turkey – considered a state with close political-economic and ethno-linguistic ties

with Azerbaijan – ranks among Georgia’s biggest trade partners (Cieślewska & Kosicińska, 2025). Despite the fact that until recently a significant number of Marneuli residents would have chosen to seek employment in Azerbaijan (Wheatley, 2005), Russia or Turkey, this pattern is beginning to change. Indeed, it was greatly influenced by the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 and the restrictions on movement between Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as the war between Russia and Ukraine and the fact that EU countries (especially Poland and Germany) are becoming increasingly more popular destinations of seasonal migration for Georgian citizens, following the introduction of agreement on visa-free travel to the Schengen Area and liberalisation of access to the EU labour market (2017) (Kosicińska, 2023).

I had the opportunity to observe economic migration practices on a number of occasions during my stays in the field. For instance, during a fieldwork trip in summer 2022, I met a construction worker who had emigrated to Germany. Our conversation was occasioned by his visit to my landlady’s house (which was part of a tour of his relatives). The following comment he made shows how some Azerbaijanis living in Georgia perceive their position in the country and their migration choices:

In Georgia they don’t want to speak Russian, they call us occupiers. [...] Glory to Ukraine, they don’t want Russians. And in Russia, they call us black asses, without respect. For a German it doesn’t matter what nationality you are as long as you do what you are supposed to do. (Field Diary, Kulari temi, 28.08.2022, conversation in Russian)¹⁴

The popularity of Azerbaijani TV channels among Marneuli residents, such as the main government channel AzTv, but also Russian-language channels, is due to the language of their broadcasts and their easier accessibility than that of Georgian TV (Kosicińska, 2018), which, despite its gradual loss of dominance, remains the main news source for half of the adult population in Georgia (Vacharadze & Kobaladze, 2022). The peculiarities of the Marneuli region, which is the area of the most intense interaction between the Azerbaijani, Armenian, Georgian, Greek and Russian populations, also play an important role, and Russian still functions as the local *lingua franca*, allowing communication between residents speaking their native languages, who have heterogeneous linguistic competences (Kosicińska, 2018, 2023). This diversity is partly due to the history of the region, famous for its developed small-scale textile and food industries, and its former appeal as a place of work for many residents of the then Soviet republics (Kosicińska, 2023).

Another interlocutor with whom I spoke in 2020 comes from Mtskheta, ancient capital of Georgia, located sixteen kilometres from Tbilisi. He is an Azerbaijani activist engaged in protecting the rights of Azerbaijanis in Georgia. A member of the “Salam” association and the Social Justice Centre, he is involved in projects organised, among others, in the Kvemo Kartli region. His first languages are Georgian (he graduated from a Georgian-speaking school in his hometown) and Azerbaijani; he also speaks English, which he learned while studying in the United States. He believes that the predominant problem is not necessarily the fact that Azerbaijanis do not speak Georgian; rather, one should look at Georgians’ attitudes towards minority groups in terms of society’s approach to political and social participation. He also draws attention to marginalised groups within the minorities themselves, as a minority is not a homogeneous community with similar cultural capital

¹⁴ The Georgian term *temi* refers to a rural administrative district, usually including 5–6 villages. I decided to avoid using the names of the villages; instead, I use the name of their *temi*.

throughout; however, it is often reduced to its most distinctive characteristics, leading to its essentialisation:

The people, ethnic Azerbaijanis, are encouraged to learn Georgian and they want their children, relatives, young people to learn Georgian, and they do everything in their power to make it happen. But at the same time, there are people who – because of the consequences, the real situation they live in, because of the collapse of the USSR and the law – have not been able to learn Georgian. And these people say – this is one of our biggest findings of the research – that it is good, that it should be normalised that one knows Georgian, knowledge of Georgian should be the norm, but discrimination based on ignorance should not be tolerated, a kind of discrimination or objectification of people because they don't speak the language. It should not be an insult to these people. It's clear that this approach among the dominant ethnic group and on the political, strategic and conceptual scene is first of all, that if you are an ethnic minority, you don't speak the language. Even if I speak the language, Georgian, correctly and perfectly, they can still say, "Oh, you people don't know the language", yes?

First of all, that's the problem, that if they don't know the language, the dominant group frames them and it hurts, if you know what I mean. They can say, OK, it's not my fault that I don't speak Georgian, that I didn't learn how to speak [it] because there was Russia, you had to learn Russian and Georgian wasn't a necessary language. And at the same time there are people, many people who say that the state didn't prepare them, the state didn't give proper resources in education and in schools, wherever, to help these people learn Georgian, you understand what I mean. So, here is the challenge. On the one hand, the dominant group says that all the blame falls on the minority groups because they don't speak the official language and they don't look beyond that or they don't try; and this is the final point of their analysis: when they say that if you want to be fully Georgian, a Georgian citizen, you have to speak Georgian. (Interview I35, man, 34, 2020, conversation in English)

He also points out the shortage of learning resources, a problem that is often overlooked when discussing the issue of the level of command of Georgian among Azerbaijanis (See also *Gürcüstan azərbaycanlıları. Soydaşlarımız bu ölkədə ən böyük etnik qrup sayılır*, 2012).

Minority ethnic groups, specifically ethnic Azerbaijanis, say: we want to learn Georgian, but [laughter] some people are 60 years old and they don't have enough resources or opportunities, I mean, it's not that I'm insulting them, but they don't have the resources to learn Georgian. No, even if they had the resources, what is happening now? You don't have the right to insult or discriminate against me just because the state didn't support me or equip me with these resources, so I wasn't able to learn Georgian and now you're blaming me, insulting me, just because I don't speak the language. (Interview R35, man, 34, 2020, conversation in English)

Learning and practising Georgian is hindered with little material and environmental resources, and for some also limited contact with native speakers and access to state media. Without knowing the state language it is practically impossible to find a job. One of my interlocutors, a woman under forty, maintained that the only job she could find was

working in a greenhouse, as she had been unable to complete school in the 1990s and therefore did not know Georgian.

Another of my interlocutors is from the village of Algeti¹⁵ in the Marneuli district. She is a well-known activist fighting for the position of Azerbaijanis in Georgia, and her domain is women's rights. She is involved in numerous political and social projects as a leader and advisor. During one of our conversations, she said that she had not been particularly fluent in Georgian until the age of 16, had graduated from an Azerbaijani-speaking school, and had, as she put it, "the mentality of a traditional Marneuli girl". At the age of 17, she started to study Georgian intensively and then entered the university in Tbilisi. She became involved in social activism in 2008, at the age of 20. She later graduated from the private and prestigious GIPA journalism institute, a school considered one of the best in Georgia. Active on social media, she also kept a blog in which she described, among other things, her memories of the 1990s in Marneuli, attacks from a Georgian ethnic group called Svans, and her parents' concerns about her safety when she went to study in Tbilisi.

[I36:] [...] many Georgians have spoken out against hate speech against the Azerbaijani community. [...] And this [hate speech] is very, very bad for us, because we have a lot of problems and we have no time for you, sorry, but this is not the time for hate speech. We get sick too, so we asked them to stop. We also started this "please stop" campaign, that it's not good.

[Researcher:] You mean that campaign when people were making videos and saying in Georgian "I'm Azerbaijani, I speak Georgian and I follow the rules"?

[I36:] Yes, I follow the rules and I am not a bad person [laughter].

[Researcher:] Did you also post a video?

[I36:] Yes, I participated and then I also made a video in two languages with some hashtags "please stop". (Interview I36, woman, 32, 2020, conversation in English)

Creating invisible spatial boundaries

Spaces can connect, but they can also create physical divisions (Lawson, 2001). A similar observation can be applied to linguistic space. A boundary based on linguistic division runs between spaces that do not seem to exist or are invisible. My interlocutors mentioned the difficulties of finding themselves in Tbilisi, moving around the city and communicating in a language other than Azerbaijani. In their experience, it turned out that Russian is not readily spoken by ethnic Georgians. According to Azerbaijani speakers that I talked with, ethnic Georgians accept Russian as a language of communication with foreigners when they interact with tourists. However, they often do not apply this rule to Georgian residents of different ethnic origin, "internal strangers", when their place of birth or residence in Georgia comes up in the course of an interaction. Native Georgian speakers criticise native Azerbaijani speakers who do not know Georgian, and argue that they should be able to speak it as they were born in Georgia and they are citizens of the country.

Fatima, one of my interlocutors from a village near Shulaveri, grew up in Moscow and often expressed concern about her inability to communicate in Georgian and problems with adapting to a foreign-speaking urban environment. Some of our conversations took place in September 2022 in Tbilisi, when I hosted her and her small daughter on their overnight trip to the city and we could talk freely. I noticed her uncertainty as she was getting things done. I also noticed the peculiar, sometimes rather harsh and even rude attitude with which native Georgian speakers treat local people who do not speak the

¹⁵ The Azerbaijani name of the village is Gorarxi.

language but communicate in Russian. These were embarrassing situations for both my research partner and me. On other occasions, Fatima asked me to help her find the way to a particular place in Tbilisi or to find the address of a specific building. It turned out that she preferred to get around by bus rather than metro, even if this meant taking a longer route. On the metro, due to her lack of command of the language, she could experience problems getting information about the direction of the train or the destination station.

Her case illustrates problems faced by many members of minority communities. They often experience fear of feeling lost, of getting inferior service or being confronted for not knowing the language in a city where openness to multilingualism is limited. As a result, it has become a practice among young men, when planning a trip to the Georgian capital, to take along one of their friends who speaks Georgian at a communicative level and can act as their interpreter.

It is also important to note that the knowledge of Russian among the younger generations is no longer as common as it used to be several years ago. In 1991, the process of gradually abandoning its teaching in schools began, while the government tried unsuccessfully to impose Georgian as the main language of communication (Storm, 2016). Especially after the Rose Revolution, the presence of Russian in schools and media space began to be reduced to a minimum (Akerlund, 2012; Melikishvili & Jalabadze, 2021). As a result of these trends, today there are no longer many young Azerbaijanis able to use Russian as a means of communication. With no knowledge of any language other than their native one, they are doomed to linguistic exclusion and confinement in a minority enclave. The sense of alienation among Azerbaijanis in Georgia caused by its language policy is visible in the material collected by the Georgian ethnographers Natia Jalabadze and Lavrenti Janiashvili:

In Soviet times, education was in Russian; almost all knew Russian and we spoke with each other in Russian. Now the young generation does not speak Russian and the representatives of different nationalities scarcely have contact with each other. Georgian is taught at schools but this is not enough for our children. Only those who live in mixed villages, or in close neighbourhood, know Georgian better. They even know each other's languages. In Soviet times, when we had some problem or we did not like something, we made a complaint to Moscow and thus achieved our object. But now? Our Georgia does not like Russia anymore! In those times we got everything from Moscow. If you had ten roubles, you could go to the market, you could buy all you wanted and even bring change back home! And now?! You will not be able to take even a single step! In those times, beans cost twenty kopeks, tomatoes five kopeks, cucumbers twenty kopeks. Now we do not live; we merely exist (Field material, Tsalka 2008). (Jalabadze & Janiashvili, 2013, p. 285)¹⁶

Changing place names

In 1993, the then Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze introduced a law that changed Azerbaijani place names to Georgian or Georgian-sounding names, although their "Georgianisation" had already been taking place in 1990–1991 (Berglund, 2016; see also: Report.az, 2019). According to my observations, there are two types of such changes – one type is a direct translation of a name into Georgian, as in the case of the village of Kvemo Sarali (formerly Yuxari Saral); the other type is a complete replacement of a name, as in

¹⁶ Extract from an interview conducted during field research in the Tsalka district of Kvemo Kartli region in 2008.

the case of Talaveri (formerly Faxrali), mentioned by the interlocutor quoted below. There are also places whose names have been modified to their Georgian-sounding versions, as in the case of Amamlo (formerly Hammamli). Many of the old place names are still used by Azerbaijanis, even though they cannot be found on maps or in official documents. Proper names have an important identifying function for the culture of a national minority as they reinforce community and influence consciousness through the messages they send (Rzetelska-Feleszko, 2000), but as we can see also in this respect Azerbaijani language is neglected in the state's language policy. This problem was raised in one of the interviews:

[I31:] When they changed the names of the villages, do you remember? Thirty-one village names changed in one day; who gave the proposal to the municipality,¹⁷ who gave it? [...] In Bolnisi alone, thirty-one or thirty-two villages have been renamed. Have you been to Faxrali?

[Researcher:] No, where is it?

[I31:] In Bolnisi, and they changed the name in '92 and wrote "Talaveri". People still say "Faxrali" anyway. You have to ask people. Imagine if in Poland they changed their name without asking, [for example] Poles in the village of Kazimierz and you don't ask them and change it to "Ivanovka". (Interview I31, man, 34, 2020, conversation in English and Russian)

He believes that the restoration of proper names should be fought for in parliament. This is still a lively topic in the Azerbaijani community in Georgia.

Conclusions

The goal of this article was to present the voices of actors involved in the issue of minority and language policy, but also of those who, for various reasons, do not have a voice at all or have been deprived of it. The participation of minorities in the public and political life of the country is still very limited, which is also pointed out by researchers (see e.g. Amirejibi & Gabunia, 2021) as well as Azerbaijani media in Georgia and media in Azerbaijan (see, for example, Agsunews, 2015). This state of affairs is largely due to language use and the resulting restrictions on the Azerbaijani speaking community, which are rooted in the socio-economic situation of ethnic minorities in Georgia. Ethno-religious nationalism, which is related to the language ideologies, treats ethnic Georgian, Christian and Georgian speaking majority as a group which should receive more privileges than other groups. According to Mariam Shalvashvili, "although the Constitution of Georgia does not differentiate between Georgian citizens on the basis of ethnicity, ethno-religious nationalist ideas are so dominant that they become an integral part of the everyday language of government officials" (Shalvashvili, 2021, p. 8). In a survey made by one of Tbilisi based research organisations, one-third of the population still think that only ethnic Georgians should be allowed to be Georgian citizens (Caucasus Research Resource Centres, 2021, p. 12). Researchers point to the historical background of this narration, dating back to the USSR, when religion would not be recognised even if it was the marker of ethnicity. For this reason the native language began to be seen as an important differentiator between ethnicities (Amirejibi & Gabunia, 2021). Kakha Gabunia, one of the developers of educational programmes for minorities in Georgia, emphasises the quality of native language teaching and the level of its command as crucial for further language learning, basing his observations on the theory proposed by Jim Cummins, an author of studies on bilingual teaching and language transfer (Cummins, 1981).

¹⁷ The interlocutor talks about the Marneuli district, in Georgian: *marneulis municipaliteti*.

The problems I have attempted to outline in this article play a highly important role in the current linguistic situation among the Azerbaijani minority. These include the memory of the events in the 1990s (such as the changes of place names), the lack of trust in the state, problems with local transport, the absence of pre-school facilities in many villages, the lack of conveniently located Georgian schools in many towns, and the sense of alienation in the Georgian-speaking space outside the Kvemo Kartli region, as well as prejudice and mutual stereotypes.

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