

Minorities within Minorities: the cases of Georgia and Abkhazia and the awkward
position of the Mingrelians

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Of the three then-Soviet union-republics (now independent states) in Transcaucasia, namely Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia was always the most heterogeneous. The last two Soviet censuses (1979/1989) reveal the following picture:

Main Population of Georgia (1979 & 1989)

	<u>1979</u>	<u>1989</u>	<u>1979</u>	<u>1989</u>
Whole Population	4,993,182	5,400,841	100%	100%
'Georgians'	3,433,011	3,787,393	68.8%	70.1%
Armenians	448,000	437,211	9.0%	8.1%
Russians	371,608	341,172	7.4%	6.3%
Azerbaijanis	255,678	307,556	5.1%	5.7%
Ossetians	160,497	164,055	3.2%	3.0%
Greeks	95,105	100,324	1.9%	1.8%
Abkhazians	85,285	95,853	1.7%	1.8%

A category of 'Others' here would include Iranian-speaking Kurds, Jews/Georgian Jews, speakers of a range of North Central/Eastern Caucasian languages, and a variety of Slavs.

As the titular nation of a union-republic, the Georgians had the right both to teach Georgian and to use it as the language of tuition throughout the educational system through grade 1 in Georgian-language schools to university¹. When in the mid-1970s a ruling was handed down from the Ministry of Education in Moscow to the effect that henceforth all Candidate theses were to be written in Russian so that there could be central control of standards, outrage was expressed in Tbilisi because (a) of a perceived slight to the status of Georgian and (b) the difficulties those who had been educated in rural areas and who thus might have an insecure grasp of this level of Russian would experience in composing their research-dissertations. Language-rights then became the focus of more serious dissent in Georgia in 1978 when, as part of Brezhnev's drive to renew the constitutions for the USSR and its constituent-units, it was noticed that in the draft for the Georgian Constitution the Georgian language had

¹Tbilisi University was founded in 1918. Until the upgrading of the Pedagogical Institute in Sukhum (Abkhazia) in 1978, it was the only university in Georgia.

lost its status as the republic's state-language. After vocal demonstrations Georgian was duly restored to its rightful place.

These events were regarded as only to be expected from a central authority that since the first days of close contact some two centuries before (contacts which had led to Georgia's eventual incorporation into the Russian (later Soviet) empire) had earned for itself (thanks to a series of measures) the reputation of being inimical to Georgian language and culture. Whether the Georgian feelings of resentment were justified or not, the Georgian language held a privileged position vis-à-vis the other languages spoken in Georgia in the final years of the Soviet Union apart from Russian itself. Russian was taught as a subject in ALL schools across Georgia and was used as the language of tuition in Russian-language schools and in the Russian sector of Tbilisi University. Of the other languages spoken in the republic their situation depended on whether they had literary status or not.

In the 1920s as part of their drive to eradicate illiteracy the Soviet authorities gave literary status to a number of languages, some of which (like Armenian) possessed a long tradition of writing, whilst others (like a few Caucasian languages such as Abkhaz) had started to be written sporadically from towards the close of the 19th century, and some others had scripts devised for them at the time. And so, in the final years of Soviet Georgia's existence certain areas had Armenian-, Azeri-, Ossetic- and Abkhaz-language schools, wherein for the first few grades tuition was in the relevant language and, following the switch at some point to Russian, the language in question remained a topic for study.

Patterns of language-teaching in Georgia's late-Soviet schools

Teaching in Georgian-Language Schools (periods per week)

Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
Geo Lang	11	9	9	4	4	4	3	2	-	-
Geo Lit	-	-	-	2	3	2	2	3	4	3
Russ Lg/Lit	4	5	6	6	5	4	5/4	3	3	3

Teaching in Russian-Language Schools (periods per week)

Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
Russ Lang	12	11	10	6	6	4	3	2	-	-
Russ Lit	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	3	4	3
Geo Lg/Lit	-	-	3	3	3	3	3/2	3	3	3

Teaching in Armenian-Language Schools (periods per week)

Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
Arm Lang	11	10	10	4	4	3	3	2	-	-
Arm Lit	-	-	-	3	2	2/3	2	3	3	3
Russ Lg	4	5	5	4	5	4/5	4/3	1	1	1
Russ Lit	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	3	2	7
Geo Lang	-	-	-	2	2	2				

Teaching in Azeri-Language Schools (periods per week)

Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
Azeri Lang	12	10	9	5/4	3/4	3	3	2	-	-
Azeri Lit	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2	3	3
Russ Lg/Lit	4	6/5	6	4/5	6/5	4	4/3	3	4	3
Geo Lang	-	-	-	2	2	2	1			

Teaching in Abkhaz-Language Schools (periods per week)

Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
Abkh Lang	7	6	6	3	3	3	4	2	-	-
Russ Lg	8	9	9	6	6	4	4/3	2	1	1
Abkh Lit	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2	3	3
Russ Lit	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	3	3	2

Teaching in Ossetic-Language Schools (periods per week)

Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
Oss Lang	8	6	6	2	2	2	2	1/2	-	-
Russ Lg	7	9	9	6	6	5	3	2	2	2
Oss Lit	-	-	-	2	2	1	2/1	2/1	2	2
Russ Lit	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	3	3	2

[Note the absence of Georgian in the timetables for Abkhazian and Ossetian schools]

One significant language-community within Georgia has not so far been mentioned, and this is the community of Mingrelian-speakers. The language-family to which Georgian belongs (the S. Caucasian or Kartvelian family) has the four members: Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz and Svan. Svan is the most divergent and spoken by only about 50,000 people concentrated in the mountainous upper reaches of the Ingur and Tskhenis-ts'q'ali rivers (N.W. Georgia). The majority of the Laz live in Turkey with pockets of speakers around Batumi and Sukhum. The Mingrelians are centred in the lowlands of western Georgia, where they historically split the Abkhazians from the Georgians. From around 1930 all Mingrelians (plus Svans, Laz and the few speakers of the North Central Caucasian language Bats in eastern

Georgia) have been classified officially as 'Georgians' (which is why I regularly place this census-designation in quotes and recommend use of the less loaded and (to my mind) more accurate designation 'Kartvelians'), and so no-one really knows how many there are: anecdotal evidence suggests perhaps over one million, though probably fewer than half a million speak the language, which is mutually intelligible only with Laz amongst the sister-languages. The Mingrelians are the most sizeable Caucasian people to lack official literary status for their language. However, there was a time when it was written. When A. Tsagareli wrote his 'Mingrelian Studies' in the 1880s in St. Petersburg, he used the Georgian script and thereby demonstrated how easily the language could be reduced to writing. In 1899 a Cyrillic-based script was used for the publication of a little primer (as had previously been done for some liturgical texts, but I have not seen these latter texts, if indeed any have survived, as they were reported incinerated upon dissemination by Mingrelians angry at having a Mingrelian liturgy foisted upon them), and then in the 1920-30s at the time when many other Soviet languages were being given literary status and having alphabets devised some books came out, including another primer, this time again sensibly utilising the Georgian script. As is quite well-known a Mingrelian newspaper appeared in the regional capital Zugdidi on 1st March 1930 called *Q'azaxishi Gazeti* (Peasant's Paper), which from 1932 became a daily — on these early publications see Enwall 1992. Less well-known is the fact that virtually every town in Mingrelia seems to have had its own local paper or journal during the early 1930s, which suggests that Mingrelian for a time at least did indeed enjoy literary status, though it is unclear to what extent (if at all) the language was taught in schools². In 1936 the *Q'azaxishi Gazeti* was replaced by the half-Mingrelian, half-Georgian *K'omunari* (Man of the Commune), which in turn was replaced in 1938 by the wholly Georgian *Mebrjoli* (Warrior). Thereafter through to the various private Mingrelian publications that have appeared since Georgia's independence the only materials published with official sanction in Georgia were collections produced for such specialists as linguists or ethnographers — in other words, the Mingrelians were discouraged from seeing themselves as anything other than Georgians from the year when their most prominent son Lavrent'i Beria (born near Sukhum in 1899) became head of Stalin's secret police in Moscow (1938). And essentially the same official attitudes persist today, such that even linguists in Georgia who recognise Mingrelian's status as a distinct language still apparently have no compunction about styling it a 'sociolinguistic dialect' of Georgian on the grounds that, like true Georgian dialects, its use is reserved for non-

²Wolfgang Feurstein has over recent years collected examples of many of these regional publications as part of a determined campaign to champion Mingrelian (and Laz) culture. For his general views see Feurstein 1992.

literary purposes (e.g. home-use). We shall return to the Mingrelians below (but for more on its downgrading within Georgia see Hewitt 1995).

The majority of Georgia's Armenians live in the south-western province of Dzhavakheti, a long-disputed area which found itself on the Georgian-side of the Georgian-Armenian border as a result of political machinations at the time of general regional turmoil during the Ist World War; Georgian has always been poorly known here. The majority of Georgia's Azerbaijani population similarly live compactly in the neighbouring, southern districts of Dmanisi and Marneuli, and again knowledge of Georgian is not widespread. Without going into the history of the Georgian-Abkhazian or Georgian-Ossetian disputes, the former of which I have described in a number of publications (see especially Hewitt 1993), the repressive actions taken in these regions first by the Menshevik Georgian government (1918-21) and then by Stalin and Beria in the final years of Stalin's rule (1937-53), which were designed to squash the relevant languages and cultures, still figured prominently in the local collective memories; apart from those educated between the closure in the mid-1940s of local-language schools in these two regions and their reopening in 1953, Abkhazians and Ossetes tended not to know Georgian, and even those who did preferred not to speak it as a form of socio-political protest. Periodic demonstrations took place in Abkhazia against Georgian policies in the area, and one of these at the time of the constitutional debates in 1978 already mentioned resulted in Edward Shevardnadze, then Party Boss in Georgia, rushing to Sukhum, capital of Abkhazia, to cool the temperature by promising that Georgia's second only university would be established not in the Adzharian capital Batumi, as had been planned, but in Sukhum with the upgrade of the local Pedagogical Institute, which thus became the Abkhazian State University. Though the largest of the three sectors here (Abkhazian, Russian, Georgian) was the Georgian one, which thereby provided for higher educational opportunities for the Georgian speaking population of the whole of western Georgia (especially the province of Mingrelia), nevertheless this move only served to reinforce the perception amongst Georgia's majority-population that the Abkhazians were a privileged minority, rewarded for their hostility and being serial trouble-makers.

As Moscow's grip started to weaken across the Union after three years of *perestrojka* and *glasnost'*, nationalist movements sprang up in various republics and sub-units thereof. One manifestation of these was the preparation of drafts for laws on language-provision. In Georgia the relevant document appeared in the second half of 1988. Among its provisions was a requirement that anyone entering Tbilisi University would have to pass a test in both the Georgian language and Georgian literature. This presented a potential difficulty (not to say out-and-out disqualification) to those wishing to study in Tbilisi after a pre-university education in an essentially non-

Georgian speaking part of Georgia — for some time there had operated a system of so-called 'limits' whereby a certain number of places were reserved at Tbilisi University for high-quality students from such regions as Abkhazia, and, though Abkhazia had had its own university at this stage for 10 years, not all subjects were taught there. Whilst the question of increased safeguards for Georgian vs the perceived threat to such minority-languages as Abkhaz (buttressed by the attempt in 1989 to open a branch (*filial*) of Tbilisi State University in Sukhum in direct competition with the Abkhazian State University from which the teachers in the Georgian sector had resigned en bloc earlier in the year) played its part in the developing crisis, other factors too were at play as nationalism swelled and the central authorities found themselves at odds not only with Abkhazians, but also Azerbaijanis and Ossetes — July 1989 saw the first outbreak of fighting between Abkhazians and Georgians in Abkhazia and between Azerbaijanis and Georgians in the south of the republic. Little attention was paid at the time to the latter clashes, and since then the muddy waters have remained undisturbed thanks partly to the rapprochement between Tbilisi and Baku over the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, but, as everyone knows, the other crises continued to grow until the outbreak of full-scale war in Abkhazia on 14th August 1992. The fighting effectively ended at the close of September 1993, when the Georgian forces were compelled to flee. Since then Abkhazia has been *de facto* independent but exists, unrecognised by a world more concerned with protecting often arbitrarily drawn lines on maps in the name of preserving territorial integrity, in a precarious state of 'no war, no peace' and lacking much needed investment. The frontier between Abkhazia and Georgia's province of Mingrelia along the R. Ingur is patrolled by a CIS (in reality Russian) peacekeeping force, who themselves are watched over by 150 or so UN troops in an operation known as UNOMIG. Georgia's attitude is one of suspicion towards the Russians, on whom they lay (however unjustifiably) responsibility (whether ultimate or proximate) for the conflict in the first place and whom they suspect of continuing to manipulate the stand-off for their own regional advantage. In international law Abkhazia is deemed to be part of Georgia, and all internationally sponsored attempts at reconciliation are based on that premise, whereas the Abkhazian government is adamant that any resolution has to proceed on the understanding that two states are, and will continue to be, involved.

What is the picture presented by post-war Abkhazia? The main denizens of the then-autonomous republic at the time of the last Soviet censuses were as below:

Main Population of Abkhazia (1979 & 1989)

	<u>1979</u>	<u>1989</u>	<u>1979</u>	<u>1989</u>
Whole Population	486,082	525,061	100%	100%
Abkhazians	83,097	93,267	17.1%	17.8%
'Georgians'	213,322	239,872	43.9%	45.7%
Armenians	73,350	76,541	15.1%	14.6%
Russians	79,730	74,913	16.4%	14.2%
Greeks	13,642	14,664	2.8%	2.8%

The overwhelming majority of the so-called 'Georgian' population were Mingrelians, by no means all of whom spoke Georgian, whilst in the Upper K'odor (K^W'ydry) valley there are a number of Svan villages, this being the one part of Abkhazia still nominally under the control of Tbilisi, as the Abkhazians never entered to reestablish control over the area at the end of the war.

The demographic picture in Abkhazia today presents a somewhat different picture, though official figures are unavailable. Hundreds of Abkhazians died in the fighting, and many Greeks were evacuated to Greece during the war³, whilst most of the Kartvelians fled over the mountains to Svanetia or over the R. Ingur to Georgian-controlled Mingrelia. Since the war a number of Abkhazians have been compelled to migrate for financial reasons to Russia, but the Armenian community is rapidly growing with immigrants either from Nagorno-Karabagh or Armenia proper. It is estimated that some 80% of the residents of Abkhazia's south(-east)ernmost province of Gal, which by 1992 had come to be almost exclusively occupied by Mingrelians, whatever their true ethnic origin (see Hewitt 1993) might have been, have returned, though Kartvelians are thin on the ground in areas where they flourished in pre-war days (such the capital Sukhum, the provinces of Ochamchira and Gulripsh to the south of Sukhum, and in the northern towns of Gagra, Tsandrypsh and G^hachrypsh, the latter two being better known to Georgian-speakers as Gantiadi and Leselidze, respectively). If one assumes the likely population-total today to be around 325,000-350,000, made up of roughly equal communities of Abkhazians, Kartvelians (Mingrelians), Armenians and somewhat fewer Russians, one will not be far wrong. And so, from being minorities within (Soviet) Georgia, these peoples now find themselves as joint-minorities (in the sense that none holds an overwhelming numerical advantage) within Abkhazia, even if, from the point of view of political power, the Abkhazians dominate. But how does this correlate with language-rights?

Within Abkhazia (and S. Ossetia) it is essentially the Soviet system of education which still applies, though the Abkhazian authorities decline to sanction the teaching of/in Georgian, which is what many of the republic's Kartvelian (viz. mostly Mingrelian) residents, concentrated in the south(-east)ernmost Gal District, are

³There was a similar evacuation to Israel of the Jewish community.

demanding. Unsurprisingly, Abkhazia's main *lingua franca* remains Russian. However, it surely goes without saying that the widest opportunities possible should be afforded to the territory's indigenous language. What should constitute these 'widest possible opportunities' is for local educationalists to determine. But the curriculum that existed for Abkhaz during the later Soviet period should, I feel be viewed as the absolute minimum (with, of course, improvements in quality where necessary), providing the foundation for quantitative expansion, as and when the means allow. Those means would include the provision of modern text-books not only covering the grades for which the Soviets established Abkhaz as the medium of instruction in Abkhaz-language schools but to be introduced (gradually no doubt) for grades beyond the traditional switch-over point to Russian. This extension of the curriculum of tuition through the medium of Abkhaz will depend on essential preparatory work on the creation of suitable terminology and the composition of new text-books by local linguists and specialists in the subjects taught through the medium of Abkhaz, as well as on the availability of a sufficient body of suitably qualified teachers in both the language and the subjects concerned. At a time when finding both teachers and the money to pay them to cover just the barest essentials of education is no easy matter (because of the economic restrictions applied to Abkhazia to try to force it back within the Georgian fold), this may seem a pipe-dream, but I am talking about ideals. If nothing is done to improve education in Abkhaz, it will prove impossible to establish a truly Abkhazian educational system, especially when many take the view that standards are higher in Russian-language schools and think that children will be best set up for life, if they simply undergo their entire education in Russian. This is a dangerous view, as it is a powerful first step towards complete russification of the young. And one of the beliefs to be inculcated is the recognition that, for Abkhazia to retain its identity, the Abkhaz language has to have pre-eminence, whilst Russian has to be assigned nothing higher than the status of main foreign language, subordinate in importance to the mother-tongue.

Interestingly, and here I'm quoting directly from a project on bilingualism in Abkhazia being submitted this year by my younger daughter, Gunda, in her final year at Durham University: 'According to Taali Jopua [a recent Minister of Education in Abkhazia's government of Vladislav Ardzinba], in 1970 Abkhazia was offered an initiative from Tbilisi to have all teaching in Abkhaz. The Georgians were willing to finance the translation of texts into Abkhaz as well as their publication. Abkhazians refused this in the belief that they would as a consequence be restricted to education only in Abkhaz and thus denied access to the greater range of opportunities flowing from a Russian educational background. Although it was perhaps ill advised to reject the offer in view of the chance it offered for Abkhaz language-revitalization [...], this

was by no means an act of altruism on the part of the Georgians; it was very much an opportunistic move to impede Russian influence in Abkhazia [...]. Thus, to this day many Abkhazians feel the right decision was made', but, one might add, perhaps not all would share that opinion. For good or ill, Abkhazia seems politically to be becoming ever more of a Russian protectorate, and, if that Abkhazian reaction in 1970 was understandable in the conditions then prevailing, local decision-makers need to plan carefully now for the current conditions, for, if these conditions of ever closer ties with Russia continue, one could envisage Abkhaz finding itself liable to become even more easily swamped by Russian than was the threat in the Soviet period.

It goes without saying that primers, aids to the learning of spelling, and children's books in general should be of good quality, but the most important observation one can make in the field of language-learning is this: if Abkhaz-speaking parents do not speak the language to their children and give them the fullest possible grounding in it in the years prior to their starting school, they are depriving their children of the most precious of gifts, namely the key to participating freely in all aspects of Abkhazian culture and thus becoming full members of the Abkhazian community. Many Abkhaz-speaking parents (as in many other communities around the world) fail to appreciate this (even those who should by virtue of their profession know better⁴) and

⁴The following translation from a newspaper-article of August 2005 illustrates the point:

"Grandad, Speak to me in Abkhaz!"

True, we have Abkhazian schools, but in them the Abkhaz language lacks appropriate attention. They have the title 'Abkhazian schools', but in both their organization and in the children themselves there is no indication that they are Abkhazian schools. Apart from one or two pupils, the rest all speak in Russian. Today it has become 'the fashion' when speaking in Russian occasionally to toss in some Abkhaz words too. (Maybe they utter them to justify themselves in the eyes of listeners). Why should we speak only of schools and school-children? Let's take our intelligentsia, (we can't lump them all together, but) there are those whose children don't know even a word in their native language. Why? What happened to them?

I want to adduce here an illustration. Recently, not far in front of me, my gaze fell on a lecturer who teaches Abkhaz language and literature for youth at the State University and his grandchild as they were walking together. I had already also watched several TV-appearances by this person who enthuses our youth with passion for their native language. He spoke about questions pertaining to what should be done and decided to save and develop the Abkhaz language.

When I started getting close to them, I could hear quite clearly their conversation. Thinking at first I was mistaken, I took a good look round, but, no, I was not mistaken. Our Abkhazian writer, the grandfather, who instructs us on what is to be done to save the Abkhaz language and how children should be spoken to in their native language, was talking to his grandchild in Russian...

Recently there has been an increase in the number of Abkhazian families who avoid sending their children to Abkhazian schools and place them in Russian schools. They seem to see that as more important, but isn't a child to be pitied, if as an Abkhazian, he finds himself unable to converse in Abkhaz? You should know your language well; when you know it, protect it and aid it as best you can, that's when you are considered an Abkhazian.

As we see, our youth are today more interested in foreign languages. But no-one blames you for not knowing another language; it's when you have not learnt your own language when you get blamed.

must be encouraged at every possible opportunity to take pride in their ancestral tongue and understand how crucial it is to pass on their knowledge of it to their children. They need to be told (via improved media-outlets) how experiments have demonstrated that children can learn very easily in their early years any number of languages to which they are exposed, such that there is no need for them to feel that their offspring should be exposed only to Russian in those first years of life for them to achieve fluency in this foreign language, which they will undoubtedly need for the foreseeable future; exposure to both Abkhaz and Russian will cause them no difficulties, and, if their Abkhaz is weak or non-existent in the early years, circumstances are sadly likely to ensure that matters will not improve later in life, whereas the same is not true if the weakness at the first stages of a child's development is in Russian. In other words, early relative weakness in Russian can be easily corrected, but the same does not apply if the weakness is in Abkhaz.

If what I have said so far applies to Abkhaz-language schools, how should other schools in the republic be treated? Firstly, let's stress that the Abkhaz language should be compulsorily studied for a certain number of hours per week upto whatever grade is judged appropriate by local educationalists, but why should this not be from the start of primary through to the end of secondary education?

The Russian-language schools in Abkhazia continue to function as in Soviet days with easy importation of textbooks and new teaching-materials from Russia.

There are reported to be 40 Armenian schools in the whole of Abkhazia. Again, texts are available in Armenian so that pupils can be taught in Armenian throughout their education, thanks to the availability of materials imported from Armenia. Interestingly, the former Minister of Education, Taali Jopua, has stated that there is no desire on the part of Abkhazia's Armenians for Armenian to be introduced as the language of tuition for all humanitarian subjects in post-4th-grade classes; she notes: 'The majority of the Armenian community asks to be taught in Armenian until the 4th grade, after which they themselves prefer to be instructed in Russian. As for higher education in Armenian, there is little on offer; their only option is to seek further education in Armenia itself (or even Iran), with the result that parents tend to put their children into Russian schools straightaway' (Jopua — p.c.) [quoted from Gunda Hewitt's Durham final-year project-essay].

There remains one huge problem — Abkhazia's Kartvelian residents. Let us return to where we began, Georgia's Draft Language Law of 1988. We have alluded to the discriminatory nature of that bill as regards the barrier to entry into higher education that the bill's requirement on passing a test in Georgian language and literature put in

Such being the case, all you grandads, speak to us in Abkhaz!
Source 'Word of the Youth' (a new insert into the paper 'Apsny' [Abkhazia], p.2)
August 2005.

the way of those ethnic groups whose young members did not know Georgian. This measure was but one example of the exclusive nature of the Georgian state that was being designed by political leaders in Tbilisi at that time — this deliberate alienation of the various minorities was one of the main reasons for the failure of the post-Soviet Georgian state in its early years of independence. It seems to me that a prime, if not the only, ingredient for a successful state is an overarching principle of inclusivity, which should dictate that the needs of all its citizens are met. Distasteful as I know it to be to many Abkhazians, it has to be recognised that the Kartvelians living in Abkhazia, primarily in the Gal District, want to be educated through the medium of Georgian, and, in my judgment, they should be allowed that right. That said, we are essentially talking about Mingrelians, and most of these Mingrelians speak from birth their own native language, Mingrelian. I have long argued, quite independently of the Georgian-Abkhazian dispute, in favour of the provision of some level of teaching of Mingrelian as a means of buttressing the survival of this sadly neglected language. This is a highly contentious issue within Georgia, because of the widespread inability there to distinguish between language-rights and independence-movements⁵. Though it has been interpreted as a blatant provocation, Abkhazia has made contributions to Mingrelian culture: Gedevan Shanava's Mingrelian translation of Rust(a)veli's 'The Man in the Pantherskin' (Georgia's national epic) was published in Sukhum in 1991⁶, and after the war, the trilingual newspaper 'Gal' was instituted in Abkhaz, Mingrelian and Russian, a development I wholeheartedly support, though I would have adapted the script somewhat (as I have indicated to the editor) and, naturally, would have made the content less 'Soviet' and consequently more interesting. But what of schooling for the Mingrelians of Gal? I would suggest offering a bargain: the Abkhazian state will give full support to tuition through the medium of Georgian on two conditions: (a) teaching of Mingrelian must be included in the curriculum for ALL grades⁷; (b) no Georgian historical textbooks will be tolerated as long as

⁵I personally would advocate a radical federalisation of the Georgian polity, with wide political rights for the regions (including Mingrelia, Dzhavakheti, and Ach'ara), and, had such a reformation been part of the goals of those calling for Georgian independence from the late 1980s instead of the rabid nationalism that all too easily found a fertile soil there, maybe the wars in S. Ossetia and Abkhazia could have been avoided.

⁶K'ak'a Zhvania's translation had been banned by Tbilisi during the 1966 800th anniversary celebrations of Shota Rust(a)veli's birth, though the translation of his poem into ANY language was otherwise always greeted with great pomp in the Georgian capital in those days.

⁷In the original version of this talk, presented in Abkhazia in 2004, I left the suggestion for schooling in Gal at this. However, in view of comments received about the amount of language-teaching that my proposals would require in such schools, I would adapt my suggestions slightly as follows: language of tuition = Georgian;

anything like the distortion of the history of the Western Caucasus inherent in such nonsensical theories as that of P'avle Ingorogq'va, still so widely believed and disseminated (see Shnirelman 2001), is propounded in them⁸.

The advantages of this approach could and should be: 1. Abkhazia is seen both internally and in international eyes as an essentially inclusive state, willing to recognise the cultural/educational rights of all its citizens; 2. a legitimate grievance of an important part of the population should disappear; 3. a spur will be given to Mingrelians in the Mingrelian homeland to think about how they too might secure parallel rights for Mingrelian in Georgia; 4. the survival of Mingrelian will be helped; and, most importantly from the Abkhazian perspective, 5. if ethnic tensions are lessened in Abkhazia and the state can secure the support of all of its citizens, the future of the Abkhaz language itself will be better safeguarded.

I am not the first to express the fear that, if Abkhazia's Kartvelian/Mingrelian citizens remain disaffected over (in part, at least) language-rights, they could with supreme irony present the Abkhazian state with exactly the same problem that the Abkhazians and other minorities presented to the Georgian republic as it sought (rather miserably) to forge for itself a viable independence in the dying days of the Soviet Union.

For comparison, in 2004 Georgia had 86 Russian, 127 Armenian, 117 Azeri, and 73 mixed schools subordinate to the Ministry of Education (in addition to 2,023 Georgian schools), and in all of them Georgian is taught from grade 1. Mingrelian remains untaught, though with the post-independence rise of private publishing, a number of Mingrelian publications have appeared for popular consumption. I close by repeating an observation I have often made over recent years — if Georgians were to shew some generosity towards one of their related languages and offer some language-rights to Mingrelian, this move away from the rigidity of proclaiming nationalist rights exclusively for Georgian⁹ could conceivably have a positive effect on the Abkhazians, who still fear a resurgence of violent nationalism and thus

obligatory lessons in the local Abkhaz and Mingrelian languages; foreign language choice = either English or Russian.

⁸The essence of the Ingorogq'va distortion is that the ancestors of the ethnic group known today as the Abkhazians arrived on 'Georgian' soil only in the 17th century. For a critique of a parallel distortion propounded by Academician Tamaz Gamq'relidze see Hewitt (1993a).

⁹Recall that Georgia also has small communities of speakers of Greek, Assyrian, Chechen (in the now infamous Pankisi Gorge), Bats and some Daghestanian languages (e.g. Udi and Bezhta). Whilst Bats is actually moribund, Udi, Svan, Laz (even in Turkey) and Abkhaz are endangered, as in the longer term will be Mingrelian, which has been losing ground from the east to Georgian since the 19th century, unless appropriate measures are taken.

adamantly reject any thoughts of again placing the destiny of themselves, their land and their language in Tbilisi's untrusted hands.

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