

## **Approaches to Language Education and Schooling in Post-Conflict Phase in Georgian Context**

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*Received: 23 August 2021*

*Reviewed: 26 July 2022-11 November 2022*

*Accepted: 23 December 2022*

*Published: 30 December 2022*

### **Abstract**

Language education and schooling are important topics in post-conflict contexts. This study explores the existing situation of mother tongue education in the de facto Abkhazia. The study had the following research questions: (1) What was the ethnic composition of Abkhazia during the Soviet Union, and how Russian occupation changed it? (2) How well is the ethnic composition of the occupied territory of Abkhazia reflected in language schooling? (3) What type of language education policy is used in Abkhazia? The research revealed that the opportunity for mother-tongue education is restricted for minority as well as majority ethnic groups in Abkhazia. Based on this finding, a new language education policy approach emerged. The language education policy in de facto Abkhazia is classified as an "Invasional Approach," implying Russian language domination. All other languages, including the language of the majority ethnic group, are ignored. Based on this finding, the new language education policy framework is identified, including Reconciliational, Oppressional, and Invasional approaches.

**Keywords:** Language Education; School Instruction; Conflict-affected Regions; Ethnic Groups; Georgia;

### **Introduction**

Education, specifically language education, is a crucial issue in conflict-affected regions (Tabatadze, 2018a; Tabatadze, 2018b; Zembylas, 2010; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2013). There are different and contested practices of language education arrangements in post-conflict contexts. These educational practices, policies, and approaches differ and are contextualized based on political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of each specific region (Bekerman, Zymbalas & McGlynn, 2009; Comai & Venturi, 2015; Deeb & Kinani, 2013; Iovu, 2017; Krstevska-Papic & Zekolli, 2013; Tabatadze, 2018a; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2013).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, two ethnic conflicts started in Georgia, which continue to persist. As a result of the conflicts, the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia are not controlled by the Georgian Government. This study explores the ethnic composition of the occupied territory of Abkhazia, the dynamics of the changes in demographics, and its reflection on the education system and opportunity for mother tongue education in the conflict-affected territory of Abkhazia. This research is crucial to address the current lack of studies in the conflict-

affected region of Georgia and contribute to the development of scholarship in the field of language education in post-conflict contexts.

#### Georgia and background of conflict in Abkhazia

Georgia is a country located at the crossroads of Asia and Eastern Europe. Russia, Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijani are bordering countries. Georgia is a multi-ethnic country with a population of more than 3,700,000 (National Office of Statistics of Georgia, 2014; Tabatadze, 2019). The majority of the population are ethnic Georgians. The second largest group is Azerbaijanian, which constitute 6.3 % of the total population. (Tabatadze, 2017; Tabatadze, 2018a). There are compact settlements of the Armenian population in Georgia. Armenians constitute 4.5 % of the total population of Georgia. Other ethnic groups also reside in Georgia: Ossetians, Russians, Assyrians, Kists, Jews, Chechens, Greeks, Ukrainians, Abkhazians, Yezidis, etc. (Tabatadze, 2015). Abkhazians live between the Enguri river and the Phsou river in Abkhazia, the North-Western part of Georgia. Roughly 100,000 Abkhazians were living in Georgia by the time of the fall of the Soviet Union. Ossetians are compactly settled in the territory of Tskhinvali. According to the census of 1989, 165,000 Ossetians were living in Georgia (Tabatadze, Gabunia & Odzeli, 2008).

Abkhazia gained de facto independence after the Georgian-Abkhazian war. After the Georgian-Russian war of 2008, Russia recognized Abkhazia as an independent state and Russian military and security personnel created separation lines (GRASS, 2015). Beyond political deviation, Russian policy restricted cultural, educational, and economic cooperation between Georgians and Abkhazians. This broken bridge still creates artificial boundaries for meaningful interaction between the different groups and keeps societies away from the social, cultural, and economic benefits of cooperation. Three large ethnic groups living today in the occupied territory of Abkhazia consist of Abkhazians, Georgians, and Armenians. (OSCE HCNM reports 2008, 2012; Gogia, 2011; GRASS, 2015; Tabatadze, 2018a, Tabatadze, 2018b).

### **Literature review**

#### Language education in conflict-affected regions

Education in conflicted societies is a topic worthy of discussion (Zymbalas & Bekerman, 2013). Language education plays an important role in conflict-affected areas; however, language policy planning greatly varies between different conflicts and regions. Although language education is an important tool for the conflict mitigation and reconciliation process, it is often used for discrimination and oppression "to create or preserve privilege" in "the use of education as a weapon of cultural repression" (Saltarelli, 2000, p. V). As reflected in published studies on the topic, the two most widely used approaches are the (a) reconciliation approach—striving at using language education for conflict mitigation and reconciliation purposes, and the (b) oppressional approach—striving to use language education for discrimination, oppression, and assimilation. The following paragraphs provide examples of both approaches.

The reconciliation approach is used in a different post-conflict setting. Integrated schools are seen as an essential tool of reconciliation approach in conflict mitigation and reconciliation and have been implemented on numerous occasions. Israel is one example of an integrated bilingual educational program. In 1984, the first integrated school opened in Israel, and from the beginning, taught two languages, Arabic and Hebrew, to the students. Later, Jewish and Palestinian students were separated. Jewish students were taught Arabic as a second language and Palestinians as a Native language and vice versa (Deeb & Kinani, 2013). Attempting to unify and equalize majority and minority groups in conflict is an important approach that has met with success, even

though the program's implementation encounters many challenges, problems, and shortcomings (Salman, 2013).

An integrated school approach was implemented in Macedonia, amidst a conflict between Macedonians and Albanians, where the educational system had previously been segregated. Two educational programs were introduced: the Nansen model of integrated and bilingual education and the Mozaik project in preschools. Both projects were evaluated positively in terms of conflict transformation, the quality of education, and positive effects on students, teachers, and schools (Krstevska-Papic & Zekolli, 2013; Tabatadze, 2018b).

Language education was also an important tool for conflict transformation in Northern Ireland. Even though some challenges and shortcomings accompanied the integrated and shared education implementation, this example is regarded as a successful educational experiment in a conflict-affected society. Furthermore, as parents established the integrated schools of Northern Ireland, it demonstrated the importance of parental involvement for the model's success. It represents an example of parents attempting to create peaceful coexistence between the two disparate communities through the educational system (Bekerman, Zembylas, & McGlynn, 2009; Tabatadze, 2018b).

Integrated schools in Cyprus provide one more example of a positive language education policy in conflict-affected regions. It is important to underline the segregated system of education in Cyprus, where Turkish Cypriots attend schools in the north and Greek Cypriots attend schools in the south. However, integrated schools were established in South Cyprus beginning in 2003. Greek and Turkish Cypriots study together with migrant students in these institutions (Bekerman, Zymbalas, & McGlynn, 2009). Such educational practices based on reconciliation are initiatives undertaken by different groups and are not regarded as part of Cyprus' official language education policy (Zembylas, Bekerman, Haj-Yahia, & Schaade, 2010).

The oppressional approach to language education is presented in Northern Cyprus and Transnistria. Turkish authorities do not allow the Greek population to get a mother tongue education in Northern Cyprus (Tabatadze, 2018a). European Court on Human Rights discussed a case of Cyprus vs. Turkey (application no 25781/94). The court underlined that Turkey violated the educational rights of Greek Cypriots to get an education in their native language (European Court of Human Rights, 2014). This court case of Greek Cypriots in Northern Cyprus had great importance as the court underlined the right to get an education in the mother tongue as an important right in conflict-affected regions. The Human Rights Court emphasized clearly the significance of mother tongue education and made the following conclusion "in spite of the fact that students formally had access to receiving education, ... the practice of Cypriot-Turkish authorities amounted to the denial of the substance of the right to education" (p. 22, Public Defender of Georgia, 2015).

The second example of the oppressional approach in language education policy in conflict-affected regions is Transnistria. There were 165 public schools in Transnistria in 2013, and approximately 87% of students were enrolled in schools with the Russian language of instruction, around 10 % of students in schools with Moldovan (Cyrillic script) language of instruction and 1,46% in Ukrainian schools (Iovu, 2017). In 2004 there was an attempt to close down the schools in Tiraspol, Bender and Ribnitsa districts forcefully. The de facto authorities requested these schools to work under the legal framework and educational system of Transnistria (Hammerberg, 2013). European Court on Human Rights assessed the policy of de facto Government of Transnistria toward Latin script schools as a violation of human rights in the Case of Catan and Others vs. Moldova and Russia (Public Defender of Georgia, 2015). The Court considered that the forced

closure of the schools as a violation of rights of access to education in the native language of students. The situation with Latin script schools underlines that the pluralistic approach reflected in the de facto state legislature is not implemented in practice toward the specific language groups (Comai and Venturi, 2015).

### Research methodology

This research describes and analyzes mother tongue education's policy and practice in the Russian-occupied territory of Abkhazia. The study compares the ethnic composition of de facto Abkhazia with the opportunities of obtaining mother-tongue-based education in public schools of Abkhazia. The study addressed the following research questions: (1) What was the ethnic composition of Abkhazia during the Soviet Era, and how did the Russian occupation change it? (2) To what degree is the ethnic composition of the occupied territory of Abkhazia reflected in language schooling? (3) What type of language education policy is used in Abkhazia?

This case study used qualitative content and secondary statistical data analysis research methods. The research utilized various sources for content analysis, including (a) scholarly articles and books, (b) reports of international and non-governmental organizations, (c) legal acts, and (d) policy papers and documents. The statistical analysis was conducted based on raw data of the following agencies: (a) De facto Ministry of Education of Abkhazia; (b) Department of Statistics of the de facto Republic of Abkhazia; (b) De facto Educational Department of Sokhumi; (d) National Office of Statistics of Georgia; (e) Gali District Educational Resource Centre of Georgia. (f) News Agencies working in the territory of Abkhazia. The primary raw data were analyzed statistically, and tables and figures were developed according to the study's objective.

### Research results

The ethnic composition of Abkhazia during the Soviet Union/how Russian occupation changed it.

The first data on the Abkhazian population were available in 1886 (Trier, Lohm, & Szakonyi, 2010). The first census after the establishment of the Soviet Union was conducted in 1926, and a total of six censuses were conducted during the Soviet era. Table 1 shows the ethnic composition of Abkhazia's population during the Soviet era.

Table 1. Ethnic Composition of Abkhazia during the Soviet Union

Year	Georgians	Georgians %	Abkhazians	Abkhazians %	Armenians	Armenians %	Russians	Russians %
1926	67.494	33,6%	55.918	27,8 %	25.677	12,8 %	12.553	6,1%
1939	91.967	29,5 %	56.197	18%	49.705	15,9 %	60.201	19,3%
1959	158.221	39,1%	61.193	15,1 %	64.425	15,9 %	86.715	21,4%
1970	199.595	40%	77.276	15,9 %	74.850	11,4 %	92.889	19,1%
1979	213.322	43,9 %	83.097	17,1 %	73.350	15,1%	79.730	16,4%
1989	239.872	45,7%	93.267	17,7 %	76.541	14,6 %	74.914	14,3%

Source: <http://www.ethno-kavkaz.narod.ru/rnabkhazia.html>

The proportion of different ethnic groups in Abkhazia varied from census to census. These changes were associated with different political and social developments in the country. Overall, during the Soviet era, the proportion of Abkhazians decreased, while the proportion of other ethnic groups such as Georgians, Armenians, and Russians increased. Even though these proportions

changed during the Soviet era, the numbers of all major ethnic groups that resided in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia increased. From 1926–1989, the ethnic Abkhazian population increased by 160%—the ethnic Georgian and Russian populations increased by 360% and the ethnic Armenian population by 220%. These differences can be explained by the structure of population increase among these groups. Russian, Georgian, and Armenian population increased both through migration and naturally. The number of Abkhazians increased only naturally, without migration (Chirikba 2008).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, the ethnic composition of Abkhazia changed dramatically. After the war of 1992–1993, most Georgians left Abkhazia, and only approximately 55,000 returned to the Gali district (Chirikba, 2009). The de facto government of Abkhazia conducted population censuses in 2003 and 2011, and both showed an increase in the Abkhazian ethnic population. The population increased from 93,267 in 1989 to 122,069 in 2011, Table 2 presents official data and visualizes the pattern of population increase of ethnic groups in Abkhazia in the period of 1989-2015.

Table 2. Increase of different ethnic groups in Abkhazia

Year	1989	2003	2011	2015	Change since 1989 %
Ethnicity					
Abkhazians	93267	<b>94606</b>	122 069	<b>124 455</b>	32,1 %
Armenians	76541	44,870	41,864	41875	-45,3%
Russians	74914	23420	22077	22320	-70,20
Georgians	239872	44041	46367	46773	- 80,5%

The following section of the article will discuss the proportion of population and access to education in their first language in de facto Abkhazia.

#### Ethnic composition and schooling

##### *Ethnic composition and language education in the Soviet era*

The process of building Abkhazia's educational system did not begin until the Soviet era, although some attempts were made even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; however, these were only fragmented and isolated examples (Gvantseladze, 2010). During the Soviet era, the educational system and language instruction in Abkhazian schools reflected the republic's multi-ethnic composition. Its principal ethnic groups had opportunities to be educated in their respective mother tongues (Comai & Venturi, 2015). Georgian, Russian, Abkhazian, Armenian, and even Greek schools functioned in the Republic of Abkhazia until 1938 (Comai & Venturi, 2015). Of the 313 schools in Abkhazia by the end of the Soviet Union, the language of instruction, and the number of schools teaching in that language, were as follows: Abkhazian (52), Georgian (165), Russian (21), Armenian (43), Russian-Georgian (19), Georgian-Abkhazian (3), Russian-Georgian-Abkhazian (3), and Russian-Abkhazian (3) (Gasviani, 2013). The number of schools in the autonomous republic reflected its ethnic composition almost proportionally: 53% of schools used Georgian as the language of instruction, and the Georgian population of Abkhazia was 45.7%. The Abkhazian population constituted 17% of the total population, and 17.7% of all schools used Abkhazian as the language of instruction. The same pattern was observed in Armenian schools, which constituted 14 percent of the total number of schools, and the ethnic Armenian population in Abkhazia was 14.8 percent (Gasviani, 2013).

##### *Ethnic composition and language schooling after the conflict*

The Abkhaz language is the state language in de facto Abkhazia, while the Russian language is the official language. The law on state language adopted in 2007 by the de facto Parliament of Abkhazia stipulates: "The language of instruction in the Republic of Abkhazia is [the] State Language as well as Russian." It also indicates that Abkhazian citizens "have the right to obtain an education in their mother tongue within the limits of possibilities offered by the system of education." Abkhazian language is a mandatory subject in all schools (Tabatadze, 2018a).

Detailed statistical data on schools in Abkhazia after the war became available only in 2008. There were 169 schools in 2008 (Today, there are 156 schools in Abkhazia with a student population of approximately 27,000). Officially, schools in Abkhazia are differentiated by the language of instruction and include Abkhazian, Russian, Abkhazian-Russian, Armenian, and Georgian schools (De facto Department of Statistics of Abkhazia, 2019). Table 3 lists the number of schools in Abkhazia by the language of instruction.

Table 3. Number of schools by the language of instruction in Abkhazia

Language of Instruction	Number of Schools	Percentage
Abkhazian	59	36,50%
Abkhazian-Russian	15	9,60%
Russian	46	30,20%
Armenian	25	16,70%
Georgian	11	7%
Total	156	100,00%

Source: De facto Department of Statistics of Abkhazia, 2017

It is worth noting the number of students by the ethnic background in Abkhazia and analyzing the possibility of mother-tongue education for each ethnic group. There are approximately 27 000 students in Abkhazian schools. The majority of students are ethnic Abkhazians and constitute 53.5 % of the total student population. The share of Georgian students is 17.8%, while Armenians constitute 17.1 percent of the total student population, and Russians 7.90 percent. Although Abkhazian students constitute 53.3 percent of the total student population, only 31.5 percent is enrolled in schools with Abkhazian language of instruction (De facto Department of Statistics of Abkhazia, 2017; Sputnik-Abkhazia, 2016).

On the other hand, there are only 7.90 percent ethnic Russian students in Abkhazia, while more than forty percent of the total student population is enrolled in schools with Russian language of instruction. There is also a clear disproportion in the Armenian and Georgian schools and the ethnic composition of the student population. The same pattern is observed in all districts of Abkhazia. In Sokhumi, where the majority of the population (67%) is Abkhazian, only 36% of students attend Abkhazian schools (De facto Department of Statistics of Abkhazia, 2017; Sputnik-Abkhazia, 2016). In Gali, the majority of the population is Georgian (more than 90%), and the majority of students attend schools with the Russian language of instruction (65%) (Gali Educational Resource Centre, 2017a). In Gagra District, almost 50% of the population is Armenian and only 15% of students attend schools with Armenian language of instruction (De facto Department of Statistics of Abkhazia, 2017; Sputnik-Abkhazia, 2016; Tabatadze 2018a; Tabatadze, 2018 b). Figure 1 shows the ethnic distribution of students in Abkhazia in each district.

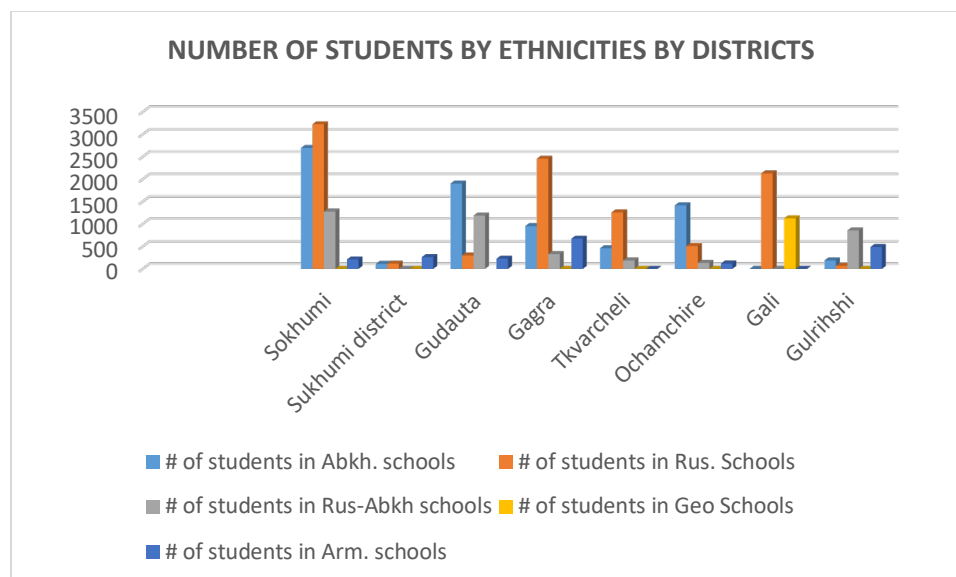


Figure 1. Distribution of schools by the language of instruction and district in Abkhazia  
Source: The figure is developed by author based on raw data from the De facto Department of Statistics of Abkhazia, 2017 and Sputnik-Abkhazia, 2016

The available statistical data enabled to analyze the proportion of students who receive education in their mother tongue. Table 4 presents the data for Abkhazian, Armenian, and Georgian students. These data will be analyzed more fully in subsequent sections that address each specific ethnic group of students. Table 4 clearly shows the system's incapability to assure mother-tongue education for the multiple majority or minority ethnic groups.

Table 4. Ethnic background of students and mother-tongue instruction

Ethnicity	Number of Students	Number of Students in schools with mother tongue education	% of students with mother tongue education
Abkhazians	14234	7726	54%
Armenians	4548	1974	43,40%
Georgians	4753	513	12%
Russians	2097	2097	100%

Source: Sprutnik-Abkhazia

#### Armenians and Armenian schools in Abkhazia

According to the Soviet Union's 1989 census, 76,541 Armenians were living in Abkhazia (Tabatadze, Gabunia & Odzeli). Their number decreased to 44,860 in 2004 and 41,867 in 2011 (Census of Abkhazia 2003, 2011). Even though the number of the Armenian population was decreased, the proportion of Armenians has increased in the total Abkhazian population since 1989 (Matsuzato, 2011). Armenians compact settlements are in Gagra, Gulripshi, and Sokhumi districts of Abkhazia.

According to official data, there are 25 Armenian language schools in Abkhazia with 1,974 students. The number of Armenian language schools has decreased since 2006 (De facto Department of Statistics of Abkhazia, 2008). According to UNICEF survey data, there were 34 Armenian schools with 2,312 students in 2006 (cited in Trier, Lohm, & Szakonyi, 2010), and 32 in 2011 with approximately 2,000 students (Comai, 2011). Goncharova, Dobroshtan, and their

colleagues surveyed ethnic Armenian students. Only 44.9% of survey participants indicated that they have a good knowledge of the Armenian language, while 10% of survey participants admitted that they could not speak the Armenian language at all (Goncharova, Dobroshtan, Lukianova, Omelchenko, Sabirova, & Starkova, 2007). As Comai and Venturi (2015) studies show, 43.4% of Armenian students officially receive their mother tongue education. Unofficially that number is even lower, and only 25% of Armenian students are educated in their native language (Comai & Venturi, 2015; Comai, 2011).

Based on a scholarly literature review about the situation in Abkhazia, the problems of mother-tongue education of Armenians are classified into four groups (Tabatadze, 2018a): First, there is a difference between the Armenian languages used in Abkhazia and in Armenian literary settings. Thus, the language taught in schools is different from the language spoken at home (Comai, 2011). Second, teaching in the Armenian language is provided only for grades I-IV. Students are switched to instruction in the Russian language from grade fifth, even in Armenian-language schools. As a result, many parents prefer to educate their children from grade first in Russian, as “there is a widespread understanding that Russian language education will offer considerably more opportunities later in life” (Comai & Venturi, 2015, p. 897). Third, the Russian language is more useful in Abkhazia compared to other languages, and graduates from schools with instruction done in Russian will have a better chance of future employment (Comai, 2011). Fourth, teaching and learning materials are not available in the Armenian language for teaching in schools. In addition, Armenian-language schools' teachers do not have professional development opportunities (Trier et al., 2010; Comai, 2011).

#### Georgian schools and mother tongue education for Georgians in Abkhazia

Ethnic Georgians mostly populate the Gali district. The ethnic Georgian population was forcibly removed from Abkhazia in 1993, and they were allowed to return only to the Gali district (Gogia, 2011). At the end of the Soviet Union, 58 schools operated in the Gali district, 90% of which had Georgian as a language of instruction. There were only two Russian language schools and four mixed sector schools (three Russian-Georgian schools, and one Georgian-Abkhazian school). There were 13,180 students and 1,638 teachers serving these Gali District students (Gali District Educational Resource Centre, 2017b).

Today, there are 31 schools in the former Gali District, with 4,363 students, of which the majority (4,272) is Georgian. Georgian students compose more than 97 % of the student population in the former Gali district. There are 70 ethnic Abkhazian students, 18 Russian, one Greek, and two Ossetians in schools of the former Gali District (Gali Educational Resource Centre, 2017a). As the borders of the Gali District were changed in 1994 by the de facto Government of Abkhazia, the Gali District was divided into “lower” and “upper” zones, and some villages of the former Gali District became part of Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli districts. The following is the number and location of current schools in the redrawn Gali District: 11 schools are located in the “lower zone” of Gali, nine schools are in “upper zone,” 10 schools are in Tkvarcheli, and one school is located in Ochamchire District (Tabatadze, 2018a; Gali Educational Resource Centre, 2017a).

The Georgian language schools in the occupied territory of Abkhazia were gradually and forcefully transformed into Russian language schools. In Tkvarcheli and the Ochamchire District, Georgian language schools switched to Russian as the language of instruction from 1995–1996. The same practice was in place in the upper zone of Gali from 2005–2006 academic year, and finally, Georgian schools in the lower Gali zone were switched to the Russian language of instruction for grades 1–4 from 2015 (Gogia, 2011; GRASS, 2015, Public Defender of Georgia,



2015). There will be no instruction in Georgian in Abkhazia from the 2022–2023 academic years (GRASS, 2015, Public Defender of Georgia, 2015). The Georgian language as one subject is taught 2 hours per week in the upper and lower zones of Gali district, while the mother tongue is not taught at all in the Tkvarcheli and Ochamchire zones. Georgian students in the Tkhvarcheli, Ochamchire and upper Gali zones cannot be educated in their mother tongue, and only a small number (513) of Georgian students are taught in their native language in the lower zone of Gali district in 2015-2021. The instruction in the Georgian language will be canceled from September 2022. See figure 2 for details.

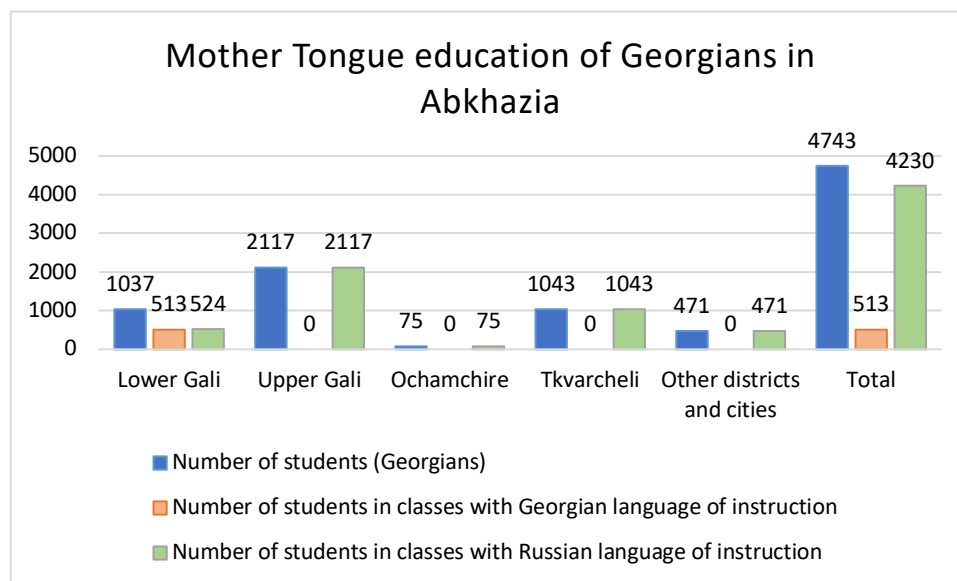


Figure 2. Mother tongue education of georgians in Abkhazia  
Source: Gali Educational Resource Centre (2017b)

#### Abkhazian schools and mother tongue education for abkhazians in Abkhazia

Abkhazians are the majority cultural group in Abkhazia today. There are 59 Abkhazian language schools in Abkhazia, with 7,726 students enrolled (De facto Department of Statistics of Abkhazia, 2017). There are 15 Abkhazian-Russian language schools as well; however, most students study in the Russian sector. For example, in Capital city, 1,278 students study at Russian–Abkhazian schools. More than 91% of students are enrolled in the Russian sector (De facto Department of Education of Sokhumi, 2016). It is worthwhile to mention the tendency of the declining number of Abkhazian students in Abkhazia schools. According to Chirikba (2009), 31 percent of Abkhazian students did not attend Abkhazian schools in 2008. This number was increased; by 2017, 46 percent of the Abkhazian student population did not attend Abkhazian language schools (Tabatadze, 2018a). Figure 3 shows the decline of the Abkhazian student population in Abkhazian schools.

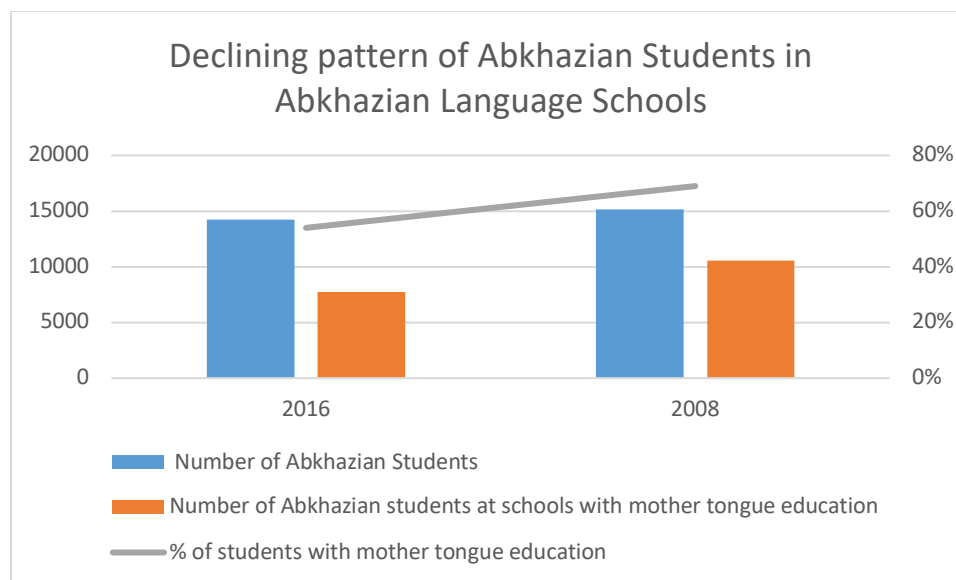


Figure 3. Number of Abkhazian students in Abkhazian language schools

Source: The figure is developed by the author based on the following sources: V. Chirikba [2008] and Sputnik-Abkhazia, 2016).

Figure 3 illustrates the challenging trend in the incorporation of the Abkhazian language in the educational system of Abkhazia. As Tabatadze points out (2018a), “further analyses reveal a worse situation. Among the 57 Abkhazian schools and the 15 sectors of Abkhazian-Russian schools, only grades 1–4 are taught in Abkhazian and grades 5–11 are taught in Russian” (p.186). There are no more than 3,000 students in grades I-IV in Abkhazian schools. This means that out of 14,234 Abkhazian students in practice, less than 25% receive instruction in the Abkhazian language.

Scholars identify several important obstacles to providing mother tongue-based education for Abkhazians, including (a) the old infrastructure and inability to develop learning and teaching materials in the Abkhazian language; (b) the difference between Russian and Abkhazian languages in terms of prestige and power of languages, as the Russian language has more importance for political, social and economic life in Abkhazia; and (c) inappropriate models of bilingual education in Abkhazian language schools to develop bilingualism in school students (Tabatadze, 2018a)

#### Russians and Russian language instruction in Abkhazian schools

As already mentioned, the important player in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict was Russia,. The invasional policy of Russian is reflected in language education policy and planning implemented by the de facto Government of Abkhazia with Russian supervision. Almost 75,000 Russians were living in Abkhazia before the conflict (Trier et al, 2010). More than 70% of the Russian population left Abkhazia due to war, and now only 22,454 Russians live in Abkhazia (De fact Department of Statistics of Abkhazia, 2017). Even though the number of Russians dramatically declined in Abkhazia, the Russian language and schools' role in the Russian language increased intensely. There were 21 Russian schools in Abkhazia before the collapse of the Soviet Union, serving more than 74,000 Russians (Gasviani, 2013). The number of Russian schools grew to 46 in Abkhazia, and the number of enrolled students was more than 10,000. Of these students, only 2,097 were ethnic Russians, and 80% of students in Russian language schools were Abkhazians, Armenians, and Georgians (Sputnik-Abkhazia, 2016). In Abkhazian schools, where

7,726 students are enrolled, grades 5–11 are taught in Russian, and approximately 4,700 students of Abkhazian language schools are enrolled in Russian language instruction. The same pattern is observed in Georgian schools of the Gali district. One thousand thirty-seven students are enrolled in Georgian schools of Gali district; out of them, 524 students are enrolled with the Russian language of instruction, and only 513 Georgian students studied with the Georgian language of instruction in 2015–2021. Students in schools with Armenian language of instruction are also taught in Russian language from grade fifth. Accordingly, all students in grade V–XI are instructed in Russian language in Abkhazia. Additionally, more than 12 000 students are enrolled in Russian schools or Russian language sectors in grades I–XI. To sum up, out of 27,000 total students in schools in Abkhazia, more than 22,000 (more than 80%) are instructed in the Russian language.

### Discussion and conclusion

The study has important implications for Abkhazian society and the Abkhazian educational system. First, the access to Mother Tongue-based education is decreased for the majority, Abkhazian ethnic group. Abkhazians, the majority ethnic group in Abkhazia today, are not fully guaranteed education in the mother tongue for political, institutional/structural, and pedagogical reasons. In 1991, out of 82,000 students of Abkhazia, 3,059 students were enrolled in grades 1–4 of Abkhazian schools (Gasviani, 2013). Even though the number of Abkhazian population has increased by 32% since 1991, the number of Abkhazian students in schools with Abkhazian language of instruction did not increase (De facto Department of Statistics of Abkhazia, 2016). Figure 4 clearly shows the dynamics of the proportion of ethnic groups in the total population and the share of students instructed in the mother tongue compared to the situation by the end of the Soviet Union.

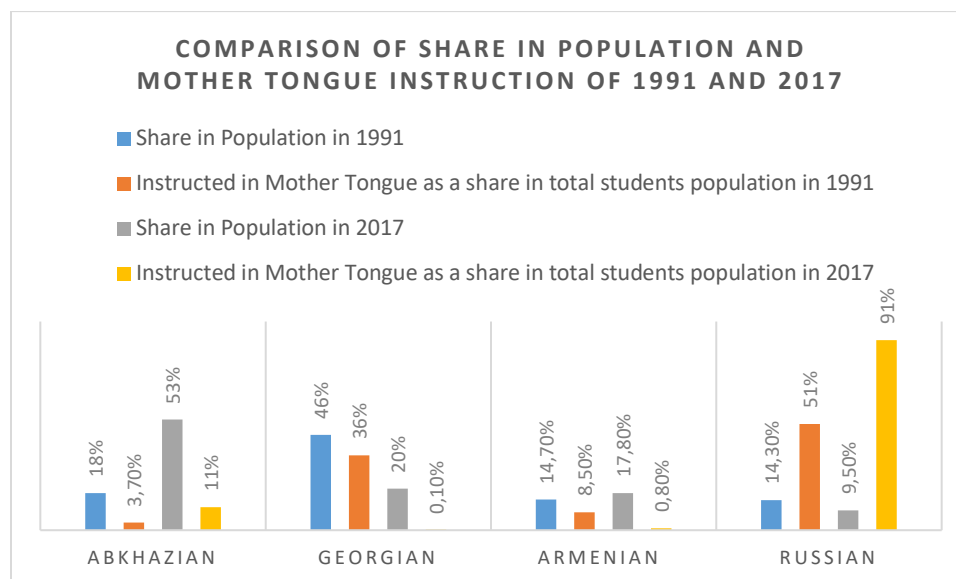


Figure 4. Comparison of Population Ethnicities and Mother Tongue Instruction of 1991 and 2017  
Source: The figure is developed by the author based on statistical data of the following sources: (a) Gasviani, 2013; (b) De facto Department of Statistics of Abkhazia, 2016

Even being the majority cultural group in Abkhazia today, Abkhazians do not have full access to mother tongue education. As Bourdieu (1991) underlines, language is not only a means of communication but also the representation of power and dominance in society and social life.

Bourdieu also proposes a new approach to how language is seen in the policy domain as a symbolic character of power (1991). Applying Bourdieu's theorization Abkhazian language education context makes clear that Russian language domination is the symbolic representation of Russia's political, economic, and social domination in Abkhazia. As Ogbu (1987) points out, minority and dominant status is defined not in terms of numerical representation of population but rather on the basis of power relations.

Second, the right to receive mother-tongue instruction was drastically decreased in the case of Georgians and Armenians. However, the explanation of the current situation for each ethnic group is different. Georgians are currently "involuntary minorities" in de facto Abkhazia. They became minorities after the 1992-1993 Georgian Abkhazian war. . Discrimination and oppression are the main language educational policy toward Georgians (GRASS, 2015, Gogia, 2011, Sinergy Network 2015, Public Defender of Georgia, 2015). Unlike the Georgian minority, the Armenian community in Abkhazia semi-voluntarily refused to get an education in their mother tongue. Some institutional and pedagogical barriers are imposed on Armenian minorities to get mother tongue education in Abkhazia (Tabatadze, 2018a). However, there are tendencies in Armenian families when they voluntarily refuse to receive education in their mother tongue. They prefer to be educated in Russian due to occupational perspectives (Huot, Cao, Kim, Shayari, & Zimonjic).

The third important finding of this study is the new approach emerging in applying data analysis to language education policy in conflict-affected regions. As underlined in the literature review, two approaches dominated in the field: the oppressional and reconciliation approach. The language education policy in de facto Abkhazia can be classified as the "Invasional Approach," which implies domination of the Russian language, the language of the country occupying the territory; all other languages, including the language of the majority ethnic group, is ignored. The invasional approach to language education policy includes the oppressional approach in it. The case of Georgians in Abkhazia is clear evidence of this. Based on this finding, a new language education policy framework can be identified, including Reconciliational, Oppressional, and Invasional approaches in conflict-affected regions.

#### Declaration of conflicting interest

There is no conflict of interest in this paper.

#### Funding acknowledgment

No funding received for this paper.

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