

# The Loss of Minority Language Schooling in the South Caucasus

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The South Caucasus is in a state of transition in terms of ethno-linguistic diversity. Each country – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – has experienced a noted increase in ethnic homogenization because of modern trends such as urbanization and an emphasis on national languages. The result has been a decrease in the use of minority languages publicly and in the activity of the institutions that support their growth. Minority language schooling, which acts as the foundation for the preservation of these languages, is under threat because of a lack of awareness of their importance. Because ethnic minorities play a significant role in healthy multi-ethnic, multicultural societies, it is paramount that the inclusion of these groups and their languages is institutionalized in their communities through schooling and instruction. Groups often find themselves feeling marginalized when there is a decrease in language institutions, and that marginalization may manifest itself in anything from politicization to at inter-ethnic friction. Therefore, an analysis of the current state of a few cases of minority language schooling will help illuminate what impact the decline in support for schooling may be having.

The South Caucasus region itself is composed of three nationalizing states, and therefore, numerous ethnic minorities that have an extensive history within the region have continually seen a decline in cultural prominence since the fall of the Soviet Union. For the case of this discussion three ethnic minorities, one from each of the South Caucasian states, will be analyzed based on interviews and conversations in 2022 and 2023. The Lezgins in Azerbaijan, the Yezidis in

Armenia, and the Ossetians in Georgia.

Let me briefly introduce the three groups. First, the Lezgins are a Caucasian ethnic group who generally reside in northern Azerbaijan. Qusar district is the only region in the country in which Lezgins make up a majority, and the Lezgins there seemingly have the highest degree of sentimentality towards the preservation of Lezgin language institutions. Second, the Yezidis are an ethno-religious group that live in rural farming communities along the Armenian-Turkish border. Originating from Iraq and Syria, Yazidis migrated in the late 19th and early 20th century to modern-day Armenia in an attempt to escape religious persecution. Often confused with Kurds, Yazidis emphasize their cultural independence from them. Regardless of their origins, Yazidis in Armenia have little connection to Yazidis that continue to live in Iraq and Syria. Third, the Ossetians in Georgia, and more specifically unoccupied Georgian territory (for South Ossetia has been occupied by the Russian Federation since 2008), are at a precarious point given the region's recent turbulent history. Part of the Iranian group of Indo-European languages, the Ossetian language is unintelligible to speakers of Georgian (Kartvelian). Since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the ethnic Ossetian population and their language have been in decline within Georgian territory. Ossetians have fled to Russia and seen their cultural representation in Georgia decrease drastically.

Even with these dramatically different backgrounds and circumstances, the Lezgins, Yezidis and Ossetians have one thing in common. Minority language institutions in their home countries are in decline, resulting in a slow loss of cultural identity among the younger generation and a lack of inclusion as ethnic minorities in the states they call home.

Given the reality of the nationalizing states in the region, it seems to be a natural progression of modern society for ethnic minorities to increasingly speak the national language

of their given country, but the reality is that this is counter to an inclusive multicultural society. This can be seen in the territorial dispute in Georgia in which the breakaway state of South Ossetia acts as constant reminder of where minority strife can lead. While it cannot be disregarded that the Russo-Georgian War over this territory was influenced by the act of a larger power, the reality is that claims of a lack of Ossetian governmental and cultural representation had been registered for decades leading up to 2008. In the aftermath of the war, ethnic Ossetians continue to live within undisputed Georgian territory (outside South Ossetia) and find themselves in ever decreasing prominence because of a lack of awareness of their communities and culture within the country. Since 2008 there are a few schools around the country continuing to teach the Ossetian language, but those schools have not seen any support from the central government in Tbilisi. The result has been that Ossetians in Georgia have been increasingly Georgianized, while simultaneously a bitterness among Georgian towards the South Ossetian breakaway territory has grown. For the Ossetians that continue to live near the de facto border between South Ossetia and Georgia and the Georgian region of Kakheti, an increase in support for Ossetian language schooling in the Georgian government would be beneficial to these communities and may have some impact on ethnic Georgian resentment towards issues relating to ethnic Ossetians moving forward.

The Yazidis in Armenia are undergoing similar challenges. Because they are in an almost entirely ethnically homogeneous country – nearly 98% of the population is ethnic Armenian – the Yazidis in Armenia are at risk of being fully assimilated into the ethnic majority. With a history of marginalization throughout the entire history of the ethnic group, from Syria to Turkey and now to Armenia, it is the responsibility of a democracy like Armenia to represent the at-risk portions of their population and in this instance protect minorities' culture and language. In a conversation with a female Yazidi

activist in Armenia, when discussing the significant points of Yazidi culture, the first thing she noted was the importance of language as part of cultural identity. Language, she argued, acts as backbone for an independent cultural identity and is most at risk when minority groups are increasingly assimilated. In the case of this activist, like others from around the region, an increase in minority language schooling is essential for minority communities to live on.

Unlike the aforementioned cases, the Lezgins have a much more prominent position in terms of minority representation, which has included support for the Lezgin language curriculum in schools. In recent years, because of increasing globalization and nationalization in Azerbaijan the Lezgin language has seen a decrease in use, but it has retained a substantial foothold in Qusar. Given that Lezgins make up a local majority in Qusar, there is communal support for the curriculum on the language because it is used on a daily basis in public settings. This is corroborated throughout the Lezgin community within Qusar and other districts in which Lezgins do not make up a local majority. Lezgins within Qusar are often regarded by the Qusar Lezgin community itself and the Lezgin outside of the district as having the *purest* dialect of the language, with fewer loan words from Azerbaijani, resulting in Qusar Lezgins having a much higher degree of sentimentality towards preservation of Lezgin language institutions. This case does not come without its caveats. Community members in interviews and conversations claimed that there has been a decrease in days that the Lezgin language can be taught in schools from two to one day per week, marking a significant hit to the Lezgin language curriculum. Likewise, it should be noted the language is not used as the primary mode of instruction but a taught language conducted in Azerbaijani or Russian. This backtracking on language schooling should be observed warily as Qusar is the only district in which significant support for Lezgin language learning exists. Any further backsliding of Lezgin language institutions could have a much greater impact

on how minority communities view their place within the country like in the cases of the Ossetians and Yezidis who have complained of assimilation and marginalization.

The discussed decrease or lack of minority language schooling should be viewed as detrimental to minority representation and ethnic relations in the region. As noted in the case of the Ossetians, actual or perceived marginalization by a minority group can have grave impacts, such as politicization or ethnic friction. While this example is drastic and is not the outcome in all cases of minority cultural marginalization, it does show that resentment can have a profound impact. In smaller cases, the loss of language schooling could merely result in some politicization of a minority group or interethnic group resentment. These grievances may manifest themselves in local leadership that attempts to establish cultural preservation institutions, like schools and school curriculum, or in grievances towards a group they feel they are being oppressed by. All this said, even without dramatic outcomes a key to healthy ethnic relations is understanding the desire of minority groups that their culture be represented and supported, and the backbone of that is through their language. As this trend of modernization continues, in which majority languages continue to make up a larger majority proportion of societies in the Southern Caucasus, an increase in awareness and institutional support for minority learning and (to some extent) retention of their language will go a long way in quelling those minorities' perception of marginalization.