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Role and Perception of the Russian Language among Ethnic Minorities in Georgia

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Abstract. This study aims to understand whether and how the recent geopolitical events have affected the role and perception of the Russian language among ethnic minorities in Georgia, for whom Russian has long been a *lingua franca*. This crucial role of Russian has been challenged by the *Georgian Law on Official Language*, which states that the study of the Georgian language is compulsory in institutions where the language of instruction is not Georgian (Article 7), and by the increasing anti-Russian sentiment after the large-scale invasion of Ukraine. To understand if and to what extent the Georgian language policy and the geopolitical situation have affected the perception of the Russian language among ethnic minorities in Georgia, we analysed data collected via a questionnaire addressed to members of ethnic minorities, mainly Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The questionnaire investigated the informants' usage of Georgian, English, and Russian across a variety of contexts, their perception of Russian from a political perspective, its role in their careers, and their attitudes toward Georgian. Finally, the respondents were asked whether they shifted to other languages after certain historical or political events. Data analysis shows that Russian is still popular, but its prestige and importance have decreased. Conversely, the respondents acknowledge the role of Georgian in various contexts.

Keywords: Georgia, language policy, Russian, derussification, ethnic minorities.

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Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in every country that was part of it, language policies have been adopted to restore the role of the titular languages and downsize that of Russian, while supporting, at the same time, the local minority languages (Spolsky 2018). This process is called language shift.

The post-Soviet successor states adopted different language policies, depending on historical, geopolitical, and socioeconomic factors, as well as on religious orientation and the relationship between these countries and Russia. For example, political and economic tensions between Georgia and Russia escalated, also due to the Russian Federation's support for the secessionist Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Spolsky 2018), which influenced the activation of language policies. Moreover, demographic factors and the language proficiency of local populations must be taken into consideration.

Some countries opted for a dual-language policy, with Russian as the dominant language; this is the case in Belarus. In countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, a dual-language policy has been adopted, where the titular language has become the state language and Russian is an official language (Pavlenko 2013). Other countries have chosen a single-language policy, such as the Baltic states. In some cases, this single-language policy has turned out to be a de facto bilingualism, as in Ukraine, or has led to Russian serving as a de facto lingua franca; that is the case in Moldova, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.[1] The last three countries are the only ones where the titular language had become the sole official language before the collapse of the Soviet Union (Pavlenko 2008). By 2007, they had successfully promoted their titular languages, leading to a decrease in the use and proficiency of Russian; this shift was facilitated by the strong cultural identities and traditions that have historically characterised these nations (Pavlenko 2008). Nevertheless, Russian has always been a lingua franca among members of ethnic minorities in these countries (Spolsky 2018; Pavlenko 2013).

Pavlenko (2013) describes four interrelated processes that emerge when it comes to language policies in the post-Soviet successor states: russification, nativisation, assimilation and commodification.

Russification consists of the use of the Russian language in a non-Russian environment. This results in high proficiency in Russian and is a legacy of Soviet-language policies. On the one hand, this process leads to associating the Russian language with modernity and the titular languages with underdevelopment; on the other hand, it has served as the basis for the rise of nationalist movements (Pavlenko 2013).

Nativisation refers to the use of titular languages in the public domain, i.e., media and education. In many countries, the study of Russian is no longer compulsory, and they have got rid of many borrowings from Russian. Moreover, English is taught as an alternative lingua franca.

When it comes to assimilation, minority language communities are required to know and use the titular language. In multiethnic countries, language reforms for minorities were needed; one issue was that a large part of the population spoke only Russian, which was often used in interethnic communication.

Commodification refers to preference for a language based on communicative functions rather than its expressive or identity-related value. For example, knowledge of the Russian language opens major economic opportunities.

Anyway, in the post-Soviet successor states, the Russian language has been gradually marginalised in various spheres of social, political, and economic life, starting with official

[1] The concept of *lingua franca* is broad and, while it always refers to a language used in interactions among speakers who do not share the same first language, its functions and scope may vary considerably. In this study, we distinguish between *international lingua franca* and *interethnic* (or *areal*) *lingua franca*: the former denotes a language used for general international communication, whereas the latter refers to a language employed among speakers of different ethnic groups within the same country or region.

documentation and communication, state-sponsored media, and public signage (Pavlenko 2008; 2013). Many titular languages resumed using the Latin alphabet instead of Cyrillic, new alternative forms were introduced to replace some Russian neologisms, and Russian proper names were modified to sound more like local names (Pavlenko 2008).

As far as education is concerned, there was a move towards compulsory teaching of the official state language while, at the same time, aiming to preserve other minority languages and cultures by maintaining schools where teaching took place in minority languages (Spolsky 2018). Step by step, however, these began to decrease, and even children from minority ethnic groups were enrolled in mainstream schools (Spolsky 2018). Many members of minority groups still chose Russian-language schools because they believed education was better and that they could continue their education in Russia (Spolsky 2018). But due to the language shift, these Russian-language schools became fewer, and the number of Russian classes decreased (Pavlenko 2008; Mustajoki et al. 2019).

The current study focuses on language use in contemporary Georgia, particularly among the country's ethnic minorities.

Minorities in Georgia

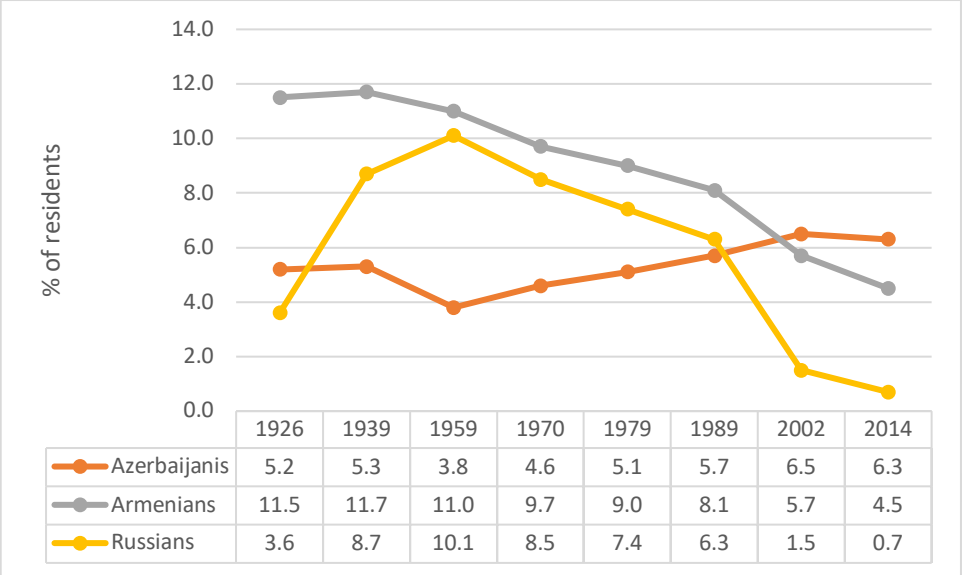
Georgia is a multiethnic country with a dozen minority languages spoken in its territory (Smith et al., 1998). According to the Population Census 2014 (GeoStat), out of ca. 3.7 million residents in Georgia, 86.83% of the population is ethnic Georgian. Among the largest ethnic minorities are Azerbaijanis (6.27%), Armenians (4.53%), Russians (0.71%), and Ossetians (0.33%).[2] It is important to note that the Census forced respondents to indicate only one ethnicity, leaving out people with mixed national backgrounds.

The distribution of ethnic minorities is not uniform across the country. The Azerbaijani population is concentrated in the regions bordering the Republic of Azerbaijan, namely Kvemo-Kartli, where it accounts for 41.75%, and Kakheti, where it accounts for 10.16%. Similarly, the Armenian minority clusters in the South-Eastern regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti, where it is even a majority (50.52% of the population), and Kvemo-Kartli (5.07%). Azerbaijanis (4.82%) and Armenians (1.37%) are also the largest minority groups in the capital city of Tbilisi, where the historical Armenian and Azerbaijani neighbourhoods of Abanotubani and Avlabari are located.

In the last century, the ethnic composition of Georgia has changed significantly. Figure 1 is based on data from the USSR and Georgian censuses (Demoscope; GeoStat) and shows the variation in the percentage of minorities across Georgia over time.

[2] The latest Georgian census was conducted in 2024, but data on the nationality of the respondents is not yet available (last consultation: June 2025). The census did not cover the occupied *de facto* autonomous territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Figure 1. Minorities of Georgia in the last century.



	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989	2002	2014
Azerbaijanis	5.2	5.3	3.8	4.6	5.1	5.7	6.5	6.3
Armenians	11.5	11.7	11.0	9.7	9.0	8.1	5.7	4.5
Russians	3.6	8.7	10.1	8.5	7.4	6.3	1.5	0.7

A first tendency noted in Figure 1 is the fall in the percentage of minorities after Georgia's independence. Many people belonging to ethnic minorities emigrated to their kin states or assimilated into the dominant Georgian group (Sordia 2009, 8). In detail, Figure 1 shows how the Azerbaijani population decreased to 3.8% in 1959 and increased to over 6% after independence. Conversely, the Armenian population has been steadily declining since 1939, when it peaked at 11.7%, to 4.5% in 2014. An even more dramatic change affected the Russian population, which grew from 3.6% in 1926 to 10.1% in 1959, and then decreased to 0.7% in 2014. However, the contemporary presence of Russians cannot be fully understood just by considering the data collected in 2014. Since 2022, because of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and the successive partial mobilisation, many Russian citizens have fled to Georgia. The size of the phenomenon can be grasped by some data published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, which counted that more than 220,000 Russian citizens entered Georgia in September 2022 alone, an increase of 511% over September 2021, of whom about 110,000 might have moved to Georgia for a mid-to-long term period (police.ge). Such an increase has consequences.[3] According to data, Georgians express significant distrust towards Russian migrants, due to the colonial past, recent conflicts and concerns about economic and cultural impacts (Fabos 2024).

To complicate this already intricate scenario, one's ethnicity does not always correspond to one's native language. First, many people are native speakers of more than one language and, in such contexts, unconscious and hybrid uses of several languages are common; for instance, the Armenian people of Tbilisi tend to address locals in Georgian, foreigners in Russian, and to use Armenian with a high degree of code mixing with Russian when talking to other Tbilisian Armenians. Secondly, some people who identify as ethnic Georgians are speakers of Kartvelian languages other than Georgian, such as Svan, Megrelian, and Laz. Finally, when presenting data on one's native language, we should always keep in mind that such information is self-assessed by the informants. Multilingual people might have different interpretations of the adjective "native", as first, fluent, childhood, ethnic or heritage language (for a discussion on the ambiguity of the term *rodnoj jazyk* 'native language' in Soviet censuses, cf. Grenoble 2003, 28-31).

Although the status of ethnic minorities in Georgia is not strictly at the core of the current research, we should not forget that the topic is sensitive. The violent Russian-backed secession of

[3] The available data refer to the total number of Russian citizens entering the country and do not distinguish between relocants and short-term visitors such as tourists. Moreover, the marked increase in arrivals compared to 2021 should be interpreted with caution, as travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic were still in place during 2021.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia after Georgia's independence can be read in the light of ethnic tensions against a Georgian national project, and Saakashvili's reforms on anti-corruption and decentralisation of power have especially affected the areas inhabited by minorities (George 2009, The World Bank 2012). The full integration of minorities into Georgian society is thus a primary goal for the state.

Part of this integration policy is connected to the educational sphere. Mekhuzla and Roche (2009) show how a low command of the Georgian language prevents national minorities, especially those living in rural areas, from fully participating in the political, social and cultural life of the state. Since 2010, minority students have had access to a one-year-long intensive course in Georgian before beginning their university studies, and the 2015 "Law on the State Language" requires educational institutions to provide minority pupils with appropriate programmes and resources that comply with the national education standards in the official language as well as in their native language (Parliament of Georgia 2015); despite these efforts, a widespread proficiency in Georgian in some areas has not been achieved, leaving some citizens without access to state services (Gegenava et al. 2024). In particular, whereas minorities in urban areas – especially the capital Tbilisi and Batumi – are exposed to Georgian and multilingualism more frequently, in the regions densely populated by Armenians and Azerbaijanis, monolingual contexts are dominant. In such contexts, interethnic communication either does not occur at all or relies on the areal lingua franca, i.e. Russian.

The Russian language in Georgia

The Russian language in Georgia has played a role since Georgia's annexation by the Russian Empire in the early 19th century, when Russian became the language of administration and interethnic communication. Russification targeted primarily local elites, as public education focused mainly on promoting the imperial language. Although education in Georgian was neither banned nor formally obstructed, it was never supported as part of state policy (Blauvelt and Vacharadze 2017).

The Soviet period witnessed a complex interplay of language planning, involving both russification and nativisation (the so-called *korenizacija*) policies, with a significant discontinuity in terms of both area and time. During the early years of the Georgian SSR, in line with *korenizacija*, Georgian was granted official status in 1924 and became the State language in 1936 (Grenoble 2003). This recognition of Georgian led to the script standardisation of other minority languages, like Ossetian and Abkhazian, which were written with the Georgian alphabet.[4] The USSR's language policy turned to russification in the 1930s. In 1938, the Russian language became a compulsory subject in non-Russophone schools, education in the Russian language became more popular, and in 1954 Abkhazian and Ossetian switched to the Cyrillic alphabet. As pointed out by Pavlenko (2011), Russification encompasses both *obrusevanie* (imposed russification) – i.e., language planning in the public sphere – and *obrusenie* (voluntary assimilation) – intentional, spontaneous, and unconstrained. This latter phenomenon is based on the concept of "prestige" attached to a certain language or its variety, and has a deep impact on language use, as a prestigious variety will be preferred by some speakers on a voluntary basis. However, unlike other peoples under Soviet rule, Georgians have actively resisted Russification. The prestige of the Georgian language, due to its long-standing written history and high literacy rate, led to the maintenance of linguistic separatism, which resulted in a preference for schooling in the Georgian language, a low admitted knowledge of Russian, and mass protests whenever the institutional role of the Georgian language in education was threatened by the introduction of Russian – as happened under Shevardnadze's rule (Kaiser 2023, Grenoble 2003).

Such a situation paved the way for a quick derussification once Georgia gained independence in 1991. The 1995 Georgian Constitution has a specific Article on the role of the Georgian language (Article 8, which became Article 2(3) after the 2018 amendments) that reads, "the official language of Georgia shall be Georgian, and, in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, also Abkhazian. The official language is protected by the organic law". This Article, together with the subsequent organic

[4] This did not affect the Armenian and Azerbaijani languages, which had their own standardised scripts.

law "On State language", amended in 2017, creates the legal basis for the full implementation of the Georgian language in all spheres of public life (Gegenava et al. 2024). The derussification process had to face the role the Russian language had in higher education and in the international context, often aiming at replacing Russian with English as the new lingua franca for international communication; however, the overall lower competence in English compared to Russian still grants the latter a preferred role as lingua franca, at least at the areal level, especially among older generations (Blauvelt 2013). In this respect, Figure 2 shows the evolution of Georgian respondents' self-declared knowledge of Russian (in orange) and English (in blue) in the last two decades, according to the data collected by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (Caucasus Barometer).

Figure 2. Percentage of Georgians who declared to have some knowledge of Russian and English (after Caucasus Barometer).

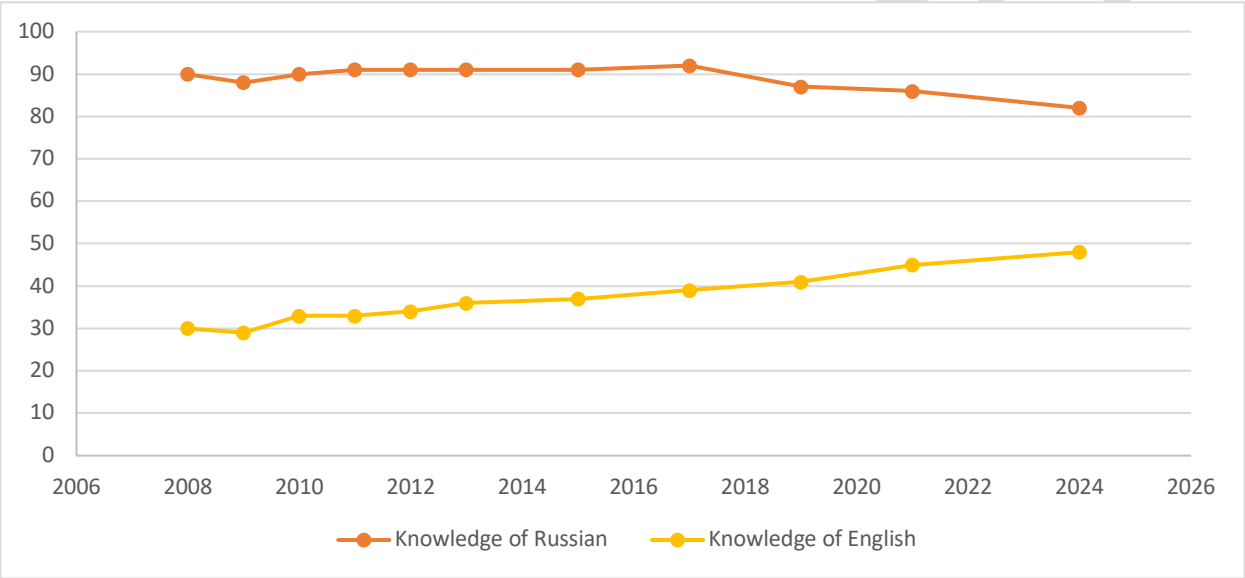
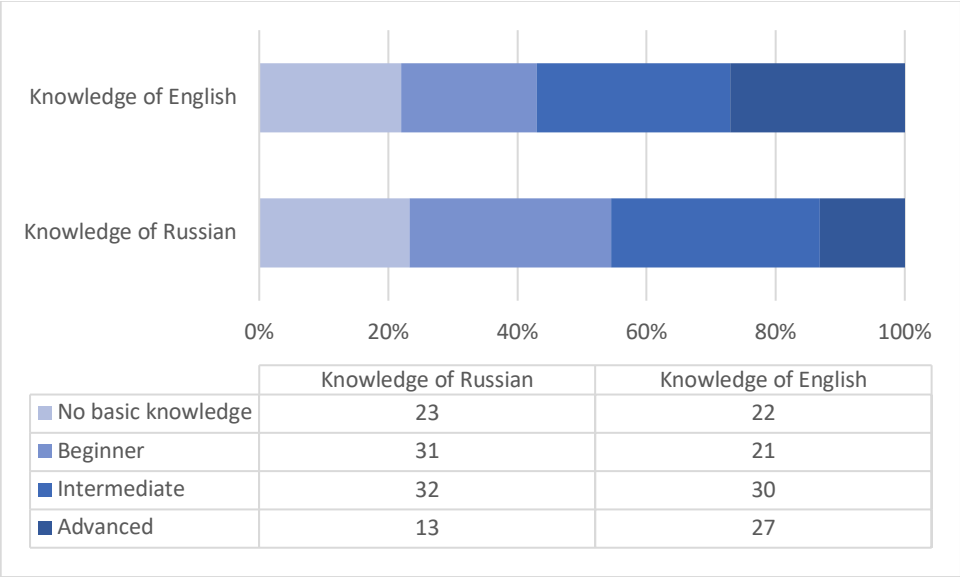


Figure 2 shows that the percentage of people with some knowledge of Russian is by far higher than that of people knowing English; conversely, even as knowledge of Russian has been in constant decline, knowledge of English has risen from 30% in 2008 to 48% in 2024. The gradual substitution of Russian with English in its role as the international lingua franca is evident among the young, as shown in Figure 3, which shows the levels of English and Russian knowledge in 2024 among respondents aged 18-34 (Caucasus Barometer 2024).

Figure 3 shows that the self-declared knowledge of English has overtaken Russian, especially at the advanced level (13% for Russian vs 27% for English).

Figure 3. Knowledge of English and Russian among young people – 18-34 years old (Caucasus Barometer 2024).



	Knowledge of Russian	Knowledge of English
No basic knowledge	23	22
Beginner	31	21
Intermediate	32	30
Advanced	13	27

The knowledge of Russian does not necessarily correlate with its prestige. In a previous study by Artoni and Longo (2019), Georgian young informants, despite their knowledge of Russian, demonstrated a harsh negative attitude toward Russia, its politics, its role in the economy, and its culture; many respondents even added the motto "My country is occupied by Russia" in the remarks section, to highlight their opinion when required to comment on their attitude toward the Russian language. This repulsion for the Russian language as a legacy of the colonial threat of Russia has increased after the large-scale invasion of Ukraine (Boman 2023) and the subsequent exodus of Russian citizens to Georgia. Furthermore, the mass protests that have been going on since November 2024 often blame Kobakhidze and his government for implementing Russian-like regulations (hence the motto *ara rusul kanons!* 'No to the Russian law!') and for driving Georgia back under Russia's influence.

In such a delicate context, where Georgian has fully become the only functional language of the State, English is successfully replacing Russian as the language of international communication, and, conversely, the ethnic minorities still struggle with Georgian and tend to rely on Russian as a lingua franca, the current study aims to investigate the role and perception of the Russian language among the ethnic minorities in Georgia. Our study addresses the following phenomena, spelt out as research questions:

RQ1. [Commodification] Do ethnic minorities consider Russian a useful language?

RQ2. [Assimilation] Do ethnic minorities consider Georgian the preferred lingua franca in Georgia?

RQ3. [Derussification] Is English becoming the areal/international lingua franca among ethnic minorities?

RQ4. [Russification] Is the Russian language prestigious among ethnic minorities? If so, in which contexts?

Methodology and data collection

To determine whether and to what extent the Georgian language policy and the geopolitical situation have affected the perception of the Russian language among ethnic minorities in Georgia, we analysed data collected from members of ethnic minorities from February to April 2024. The data

were collected via a questionnaire in English, submitted via a link forwarded via email and social media. The questionnaires were filled in English, Georgian, and Russian.

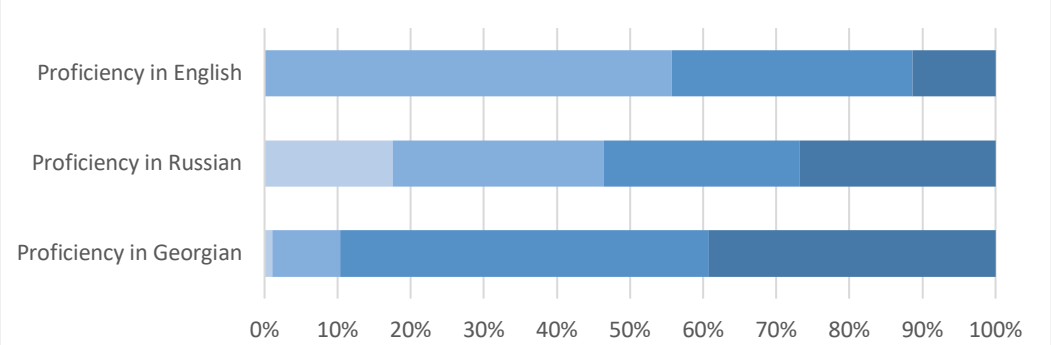
We investigated the informants' use of Georgian, English, and Russian – alongside their ethnic language – in a variety of contexts, their perceptions of Russian from a political perspective, its role in their careers, and their attitudes toward Georgian, the state language. Moreover, the respondents were asked whether they shifted to other languages after certain historical or political events, such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian war or the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

A total of N=97 respondents took part in the online questionnaire, most of whom are Armenians (N=42) and Azerbaijanis (N=54); only one informant is Abkhazian. Almost 90% of them are aged 18-24, the generation that experienced the latest reform in education. Most respondents live in the southern regions of Georgia, i.e., Kvemo-Kartli (N=27), Samtskhe-Javakheti (N=14), Kakheti (N=3), and the capital city, Tbilisi (N=50).

Analysis

In the first section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to report their knowledge of Russian, Georgian and English. The answers are shown in Figure 4, where the darkest colour represents advanced knowledge, while the lightest one indicates that the respondent has no knowledge of the language.

Figure 4. Language proficiency in English, Russian, and Georgian.

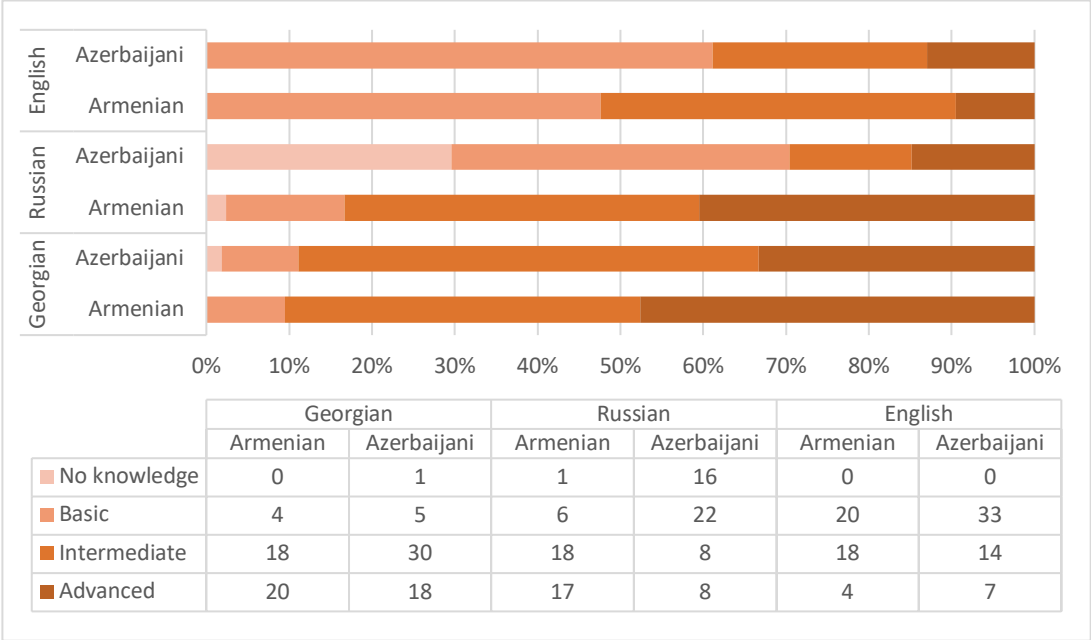


	Proficiency in Georgian	Proficiency in Russian	Proficiency in English
No knowledge	1	17	0
Basic	9	28	54
Intermediate	49	26	32
Advanced	38	26	11

As Figure 4 shows, almost 80% (N=87) of the informants have intermediate or advanced knowledge of Georgian; only one person has no knowledge of it. About half of the informants claim to have a basic knowledge of English (N=54) and about 10% (N=11) have advanced knowledge of this language. As far as Russian is concerned, N=17 people do not know it, whereas the rest are almost equally distributed along the basic (N=28), intermediate (N=26), and advanced (N=26) levels.

Figure 5 shows the abovementioned results divided by the ethnicity of the respondents.

Figure 5. Language proficiency per ethnicity.

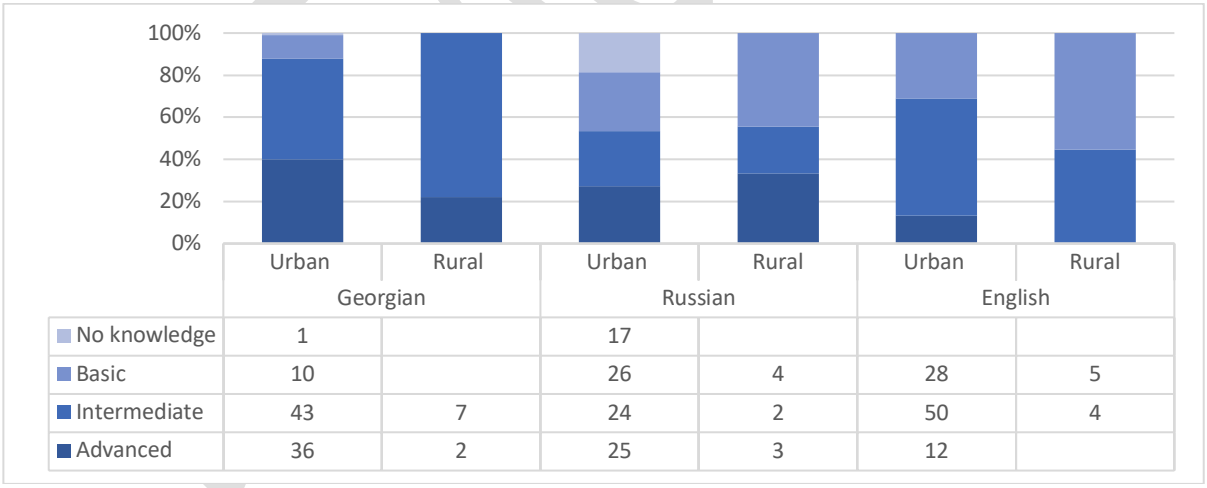


	Georgian		Russian		English	
	Armenian	Azerbaijani	Armenian	Azerbaijani	Armenian	Azerbaijani
No knowledge	0	1	1	16	0	0
Basic	4	5	6	22	20	33
Intermediate	18	30	18	8	18	14
Advanced	20	18	17	8	4	7

Looking at the answers by ethnicity in Figure 5, we can notice there is no big difference between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in their proficiency in English and Georgian; as to Russian, most Armenians have an intermediate (N=18) or advanced (N=17) knowledge of it, while most Azerbaijanis know it at a basic level (N=22) or do not know it at all (N=16).

Given the diverse contexts and language exposure to multilingualism in urban and rural areas, Figure 6 illustrates language proficiency among ethnic minorities in both urban and rural settings.

Figure 6. Language proficiency: urban vs rural areas.

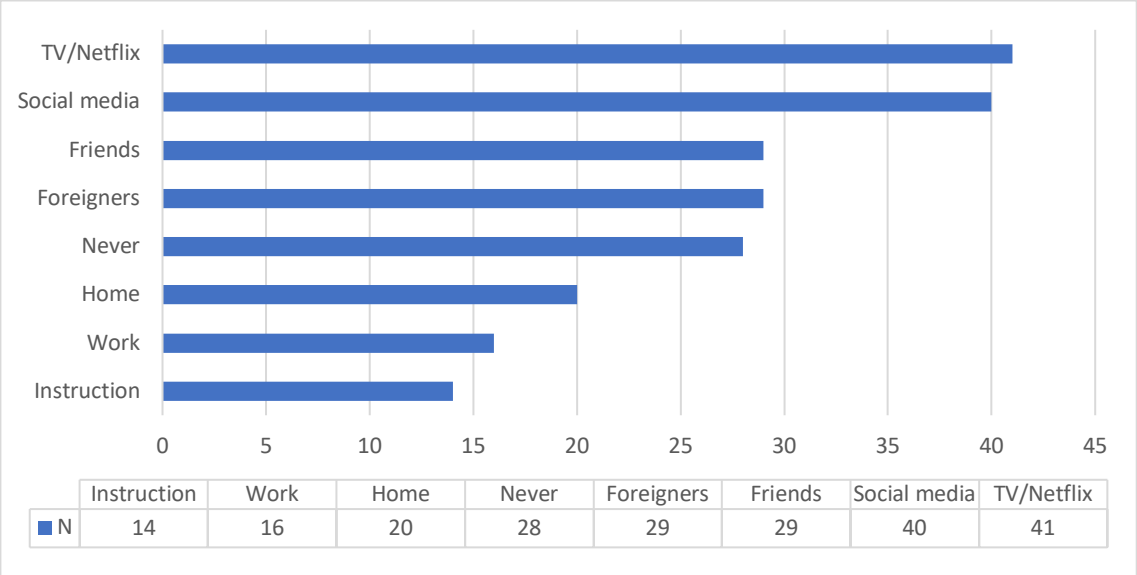


	Georgian		Russian		English	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
No knowledge	1		17			
Basic	10		26	4	28	5
Intermediate	43	7	24	2	50	4
Advanced	36	2	25	3	12	

Figure 6 shows a similar distribution of proficiency in Georgian, Russian, and English among the respondents. However, the small rural sample size (N=9) limits the reliability of broader comparisons between urban and rural respondents.

The respondents were then asked in which situations they use Russian (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Contexts of use of the Russian language.



	Instruction	Work	Home	Never	Foreigners	Friends	Social media	TV/Netflix
N	14	16	20	28	29	29	40	41

One third of the respondents (N=28) declared they never use Russian. According to Figure 7, the respondents use it especially when it comes to TV, social media, and platforms like Netflix. Russian is used to communicate with friends or foreigners in N=29 cases; for N=20 people it is spoken at home, for N=16 at work, for N=14 at school or university.

When asked to motivate their choices, the respondents declared they do not know why they use Russian in most situations, because they do not think about the language when speaking with their family, with friends, at work, at school or at university. One third of the informants prefer Russian on social media, because it is possible to find more or better content in this language. Some respondents report greater ease in finding information in Russian, as in (1), and better film translation into the Russian language than into Georgian, as in (2).

(1) *It is better and faster to find the information I need in Russian.*
(2) *I understand Russian more than English, and movies are translated better than in Georgian.*

There is also a tendency to use it as a lingua franca in inter-ethnic communication, as in (3), and with foreign customers who do not know Georgian or in schools and universities, because they feel more confident using Russian instead of the state language, as in (4).

(3) *My friends are from different ethnic groups, and Russian is the only language we can both communicate in.*
(4) *My knowledge of the Georgian language is not very good, and because of this, I tend to speak in Russian with my Armenian or Georgian classmates.*

Informants were asked whether they shifted to another language after specific historical or political events, such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian war or the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

As the answer was optional, only 6 people out of 60 respondents claimed they had changed their communication language, as in (5).

(5) A. *I do not want to speak and learn Russian anymore.*
B. *Yes, and I have never learned Russian anyway.*

The 47 informants who stated they had not switched to another language reported that their knowledge of Russian was not related to the war or to political reasons, as in (6).

(6) C. *The knowledge of a language … is useful primarily to you, I should not limit my knowledge and capabilities because of such events.*

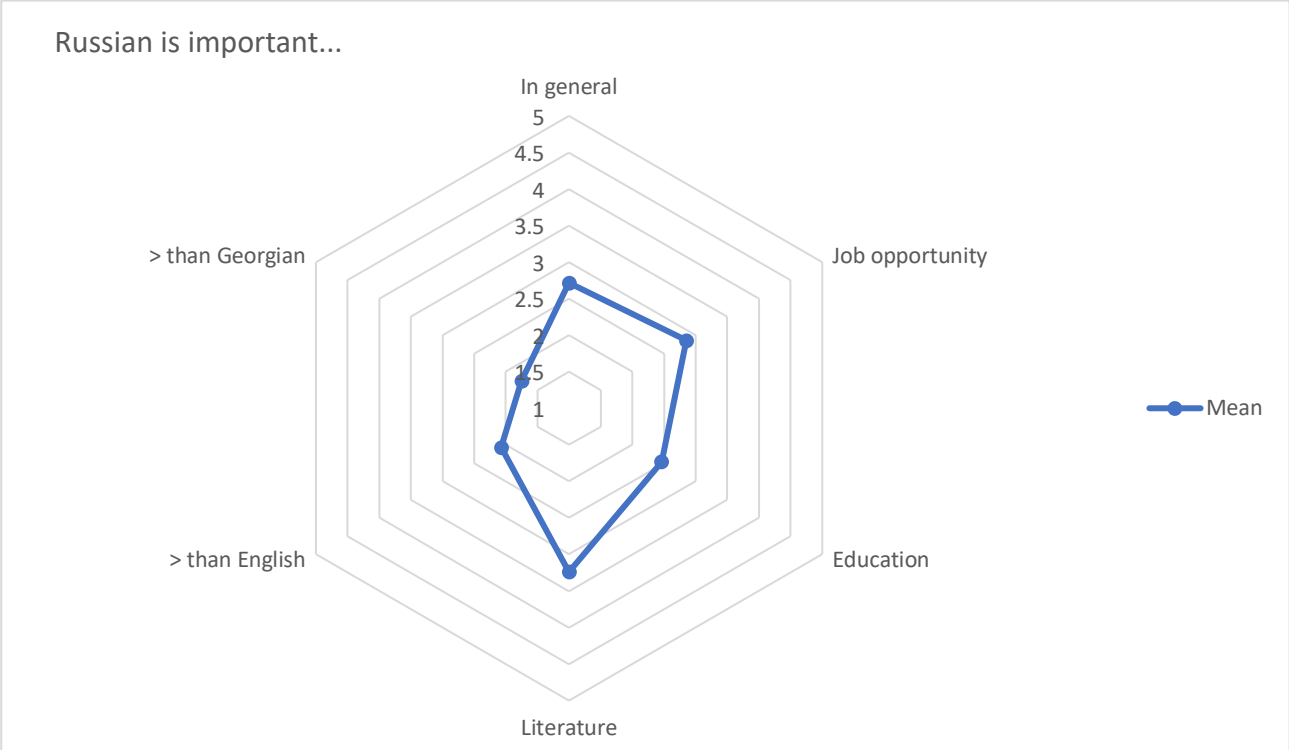
D. *No, my knowledge of the Russian language is not connected with the war or other political reasons.*

E. *No, I just speak the language others feel more comfortable speaking. I do not relate my political views to my preference for the language I use.*

In sum, most respondents do not establish a connection between their knowledge and use of the Russian language and its symbolic role in the Russian world.

Then we investigated the prestige of the Russian language from a variety of perspectives (see Figure 8), asking informants to indicate their agreement or disagreement with statements on a Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).

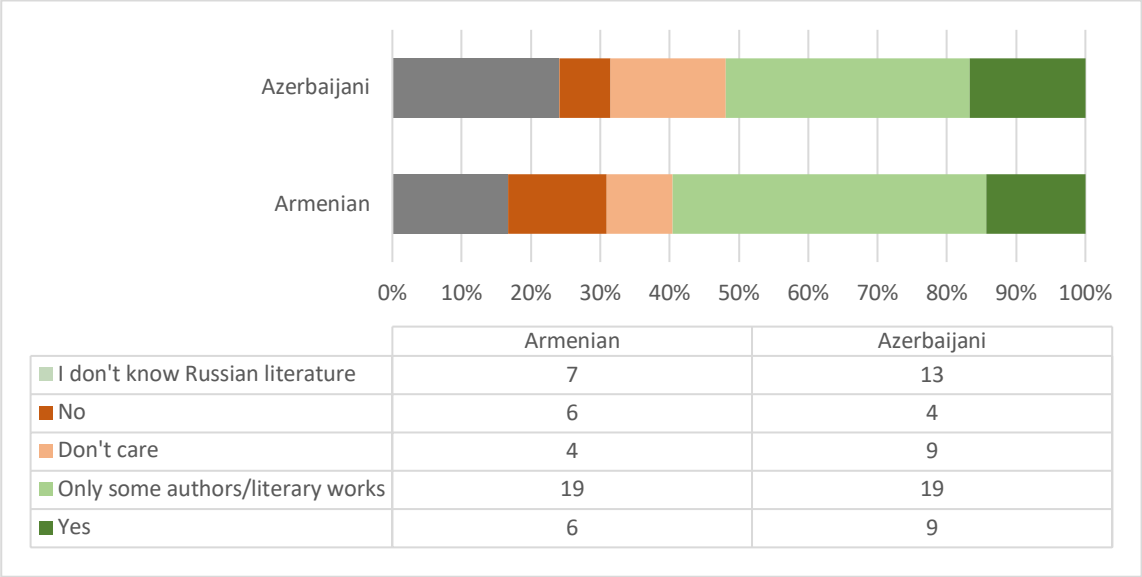
Figure 8. Prestige of Russian in different contexts, mean of Likert scale 1-5.



In Figure 8, the threshold for appreciation is set to 3 (halfway between 1 and 5). Only one area, i.e., "Literature" scores higher than 3 (m=3.24). Among the strongest disagreements are the statements that Russian is more important than Georgian (m=1.75) and English (m=2.07). Below the threshold are the importance of Russian in general (m=2.72), in education (m=2.46), and career-wise (m=2.85).

The appreciation for Russian literature is further explored in Figure 9, which presents the respondents' detailed answers, grouped by ethnicity.

Figure 9. Appreciation of Russian literature per ethnicity.

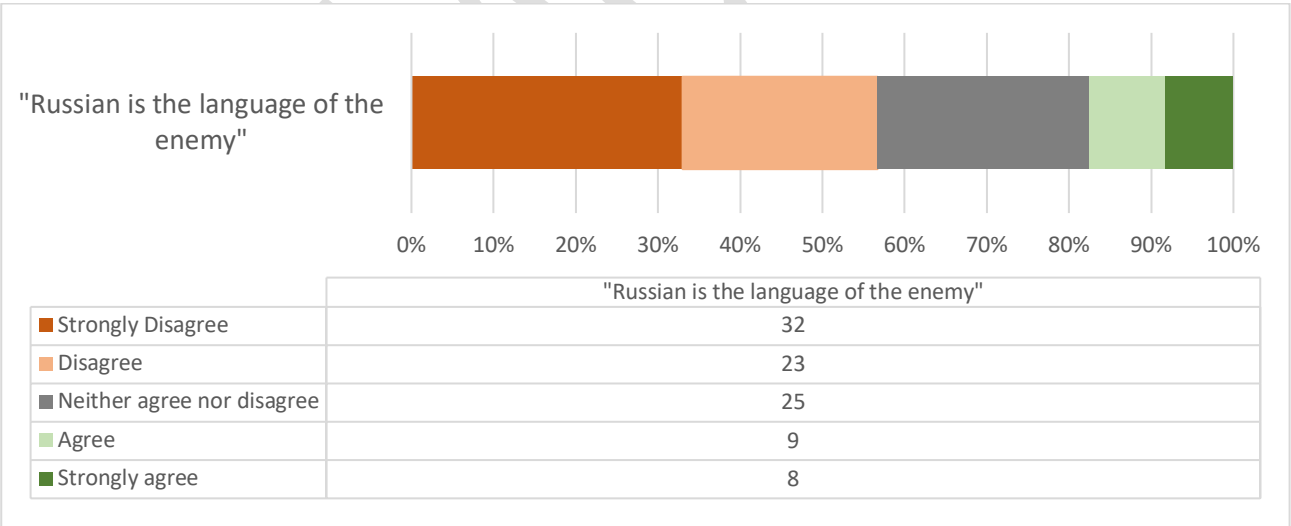


	Armenian	Azerbaijani
I don't know Russian literature	7	13
No	6	4
Don't care	4	9
Only some authors/literary works	19	19
Yes	6	9

About half of the respondents totally (N=15) or partially (N=38) appreciate it; N=13 people do not care about it, while N=10 people do not like it. N=20 people do not know it. Also in this area, there is no big difference between the answers given by Armenians and those given by Azerbaijanis.

Given the geopolitical situation and the symbolic value of the Russian language and its connection to the Russian Federation, we asked the informants to express their agreement or disagreement with the provocative statement "Russian is the language of the enemy". The results are shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Agreement on considering Russian as the language of the enemy.



	"Russian is the language of the enemy"
Strongly Disagree	32
Disagree	23
Neither agree nor disagree	25
Agree	9
Strongly agree	8

In Figure 10, it can be noticed that N=17 people agree with this statement, whereas about 60% of the respondents reject (N=23) and strongly reject (N=32) the correlation between the Russian language and the role of the Russian Federation.

Finally, the respondents were asked about their language of education and whether they were satisfied with that. 44 of the 66 respondents received – or are receiving – their education in Georgian. Some of them are satisfied and consider it right, because it is the official language of the country they live in, as in (7).

(7) *My education was offered in Georgian as it should be, and I have no problems with that. Because I live in Georgia, I should learn most of the things in Georgian. Otherwise, how could I learn the language?*

Others, on the contrary, would have preferred to be taught in English and would like more space to be given to the teaching of this language in schools and universities, as in (8).

(8) *I think English should be given more importance in universities and schools.*

A small number of respondents studied in minority languages, and some respondents claimed to be satisfied with the opportunity to study in their native language. Eight people reported having been educated in Russian; while one of the respondents was satisfied with that, considering it as an opportunity to learn an additional foreign language, as in (9), others would have preferred to be taught in Georgian, as it is the state language, as in (10).

(9) *I am satisfied because it helped me to learn one more foreign language.*
(10) *[I was educated] in Russian. I am not satisfied with that, I would have liked to receive education in Georgian, which is my country's official language.*

Nevertheless, some of the respondents claim it is difficult to learn the official language, partly due to the poor quality of teaching in minority schools, as in (11).

(11) *I've studied in an Azerbaijani school in Georgia. I also learnt Georgian, English and Russian there. However, the quality of the other language lessons wasn't good enough to speak that language fluently. So, I couldn't even speak Georgian when I finished school. I'd like to increase the education quality in minority schools.*

To summarise the results of the questionnaire, it can be noted that Russian plays a different role for the respondents: for some, it is relevant and used to communicate with family, friends, or classmates. For others, on the contrary, it is not considered essential: indeed, one-third of the respondents do not speak Russian at all. We may already assume that the informants assign different roles to the Russian language simply because they have different levels of knowledge of it.

We can notice how Russian is overall perceived in a positive way from a cultural point of view, though it no longer has the same importance as a lingua franca: its prestige has decreased, and it is no longer an essential prerequisite in the workplace. Several respondents think it is right to learn Georgian, as it is the official language, and that it should be used instead of Russian in interethnic communication. Therefore, we can state that the process of language shift has also benefited minorities; for example, the most used language for reading among three-quarters of the respondents is Georgian, followed by native languages, and only afterwards by Russian.

Despite belonging to ethnic minority groups, the informants feel a strong desire for integration into the country they live in, as in (12), which also involves the linguistic aspect.

(12) *I think that living in Georgia, everyone should know the Georgian language.*

It can also be noticed that eleven respondents answered the questionnaire in Georgian, which can mean they feel more confident using this language instead of Russian and English, and that Georgian is not perceived as a foreign language anymore, although it is not their native language.

Nevertheless, it does not seem that the perception of the language is related to the current geopolitical and military situation, as there is a clear gap between the conception of the countries Georgia and Russia on the one hand and that of their respective languages on the other.

The fact that only 17 people agree with the statement "Russian is the language of the enemy" and that most respondents still use this language in their daily life denotes an attitude of tolerance towards the language, as well as a perception of the language itself that is detached from the political and military spheres. Indeed, some respondents claimed that the phrase "language of the enemy" should not have been in the questionnaire, and they found it exaggerated to change their language habits in response to political events.

Comparing the answers given by Armenian respondents with those given by Azerbaijanis, it can be noticed that for the former, Russian plays a more important role. First of all, most Armenians have intermediate or advanced knowledge of Russian, while most Azerbaijanis know it at a basic level or do not know it at all. As a result, half of the Azerbaijani respondents do not consider Russian an essential language in their life and do not believe its teaching should be compulsory in Georgia, while about one-third of the Armenian respondents have the opposite opinion. Beyond that, there are no big differences between the answers given by ethnic Armenians on the one hand and those given by ethnic Azerbaijanis on the other. Both ethnic minorities are mostly in favour of using Georgian in interethnic communication, and there is no hostile attitude towards the Russian language, to the point of considering it "the language of the enemy" or of changing the communication language after political or military events in which Russia is involved.

Discussion and conclusions

Our first question (RQ1) investigated the commodification of Russian: do minority speakers in Georgia regard Russian as a useful language? The survey reveals that, despite one-third of respondents rarely using Russian, a significant number of informants demonstrate at least intermediate competence and actively engage with Russian-language media, social networks and communication channels. This pattern confirms that Russian continues to serve as a practical asset, facilitating access to diverse information sources and content. These outcomes echo Pavlenko's (2013) concept of commodification, wherein minority speakers use Russian for its functional and economic advantages. Conversely, we should not forget that a certain degree of comfort and "ease of use" with Russian compared to Georgian and English among ethnic minorities can be linked to the USSR's language legacy and the spread and availability of Russian-language materials.

The second question (RQ2) examined assimilation: to what extent do ethnic minorities endorse Georgian as Georgia's lingua franca? Our data indicate overwhelming adoption of Georgian, with roughly 90% of participants reporting intermediate or advanced proficiency and the majority having been educated in Georgian-medium institutions. Respondents' narrative comments frequently cite expectations to employ Georgian in public and professional spheres, reflecting Spolsky's (2018) assertion that language policy and educational mandates exert significant assimilation pressures on minority populations. However, this assimilation process should not be read as a passive imposition over ethnic minorities, as many respondents overtly expressed their willingness to master the language of the state in which they live.

RQ3 addressed derussification, asking whether English is emerging as the new international lingua franca among these groups. In line with national indicators, our minority sample suggests growing English proficiency among young Georgians overall. As predicted by Blauvelt (2013), the shift toward English has been growing over time.

Finally, RQ4 explored russification: does Russian retain prestige, and in what domains? Participants assign positive cultural value to Russian, especially regarding literature, while attributing lower instrumental importance in careers, education, or general social status. Notably, only a minority stigmatise Russian as the "language of the enemy". Such ambivalent attitudes align with Pavlenko's (2008) observations of enduring cultural prestige amidst diminished geopolitical influence.

By integrating these four processes, i.e., commodification, assimilation, derussification, and russification, our study affirms that minority languages in Georgia are shaped by overlapping and sometimes contradictory forces. This complexity parallels findings from other post-Soviet settings

but also highlights Georgia's distinctive trajectory: the 2015 Language Law and subsequent educational reforms have accelerated the elevation of Georgian, yet Russian persists as both a utilitarian tool and a site of cultural identity.

Our results underscore the decoupling of language attitudes from political sentiment. Minority speakers negotiate multiple identities, such as pragmatic users of Russian and Georgian, English learners, and upholders of their ethnic heritage, balancing policy imperatives with personal needs.

However, a clear interpretation of the results is affected by the limitations of this study, such as the small sample size of respondents, the form and language of the online questionnaire – accessible only to digitally connected people with some knowledge of English – and the disproportionate representation of the young population among our informants. To deepen our understanding of minority language dynamics in Georgia, future work should address these limitations. Furthermore, to better understand language performance, identity, and ideology, it will be necessary to utilise mixed-methods approaches, such as semi-structured interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and participant observation.

In sum, our study illustrates the layered and evolving interplay among utility, identity, and policy in shaping language attitudes among Georgia's ethnic minorities. A deeper understanding of these dynamics is essential for better recognition and integration of language policies in the Georgian multilingual context.

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