

Conflict, Policy, and Threats to Linguistic Ecologies in the Caucasus

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Abstract. In 1944, nearly half a million Chechens and Ingush were forcibly deported by Soviet authorities to Central Asia. Their villages were razed or repopulated, and for thirteen years, their languages lost official status and functional domains. Upon repatriation, many of their children had become monolingual in Russian. This episode illustrates a larger pattern: armed conflict and state repression do not merely displace populations or change borders; they also reshape linguistic landscapes. Yet in the growing literature on conflict studies, the cultural and linguistic consequences of violence remain strikingly understudied. This paper argues that language loss and endangerment, especially in multiethnic conflict zones like the Caucasus, are not incidental outcomes of conflict but are structured by the same forces that drive displacement and institutional breakdown. Drawing on case studies from Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, this article examines how political violence and public policy reconfigure linguistic ecologies through demographic shocks, forced migration, and state-led cultural assimilation.

Keywords: Caucasus, ethnic minorities, demography, language policy, linguistic ecology, language death, conflict studies.

Introduction

To understand just how the linguistic milieu of Caucasian communities affected by conflict can come to be reshaped, we must first assess the true extent of the linguistic diversity of the Caucasus. Since the days of Ptolemy and Arab geographers, the exuberant heterogeneity of the Caucasus has long been noted as a sort of proverbial “mountain of languages”, yet it is only in quite recent times that scholars have attempted to take stock of precisely to what extent the Caucasus region stands apart from other parts of Eurasia. As Map 1 below shows, within the Caucasus, there are around eighty living or recently extinct languages, amounting to approximately one-fifth of the linguistic diversity of the European continent.¹

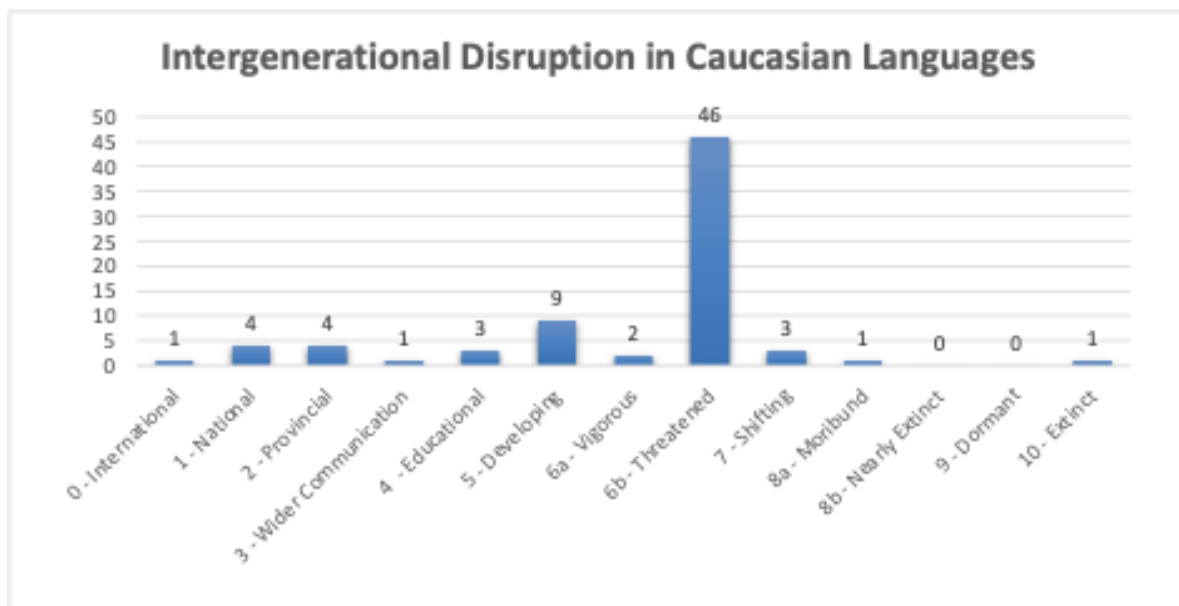
Map 1. Major autochthonous languages of the Caucasus (Koryakov 2002).



These stem from six major linguistic phyla: the three so-called autochthonous families Abkhaz-Adyghean, Nakh-Daghestanian and Kartvelian, found nowhere else; and three non-autochthonous families with links to outside the region, including Indo-European (Armenian, Iranian, Hellenic, Balto-Slavic), Altaic (Turkic, Mongolic) and Afro-Asiatic (Semitic). Some disagreement exists over the exact number of languages spoken, in part because research has increasingly revealed that many of the so-called dialects of some languages, such as Northern Akhvakh and Southern Akhvakh, or Mehweb Dargwa and Shari Dargwa, are in fact fully distinct languages with minimal mutual intelligibility between them. This had the consequence of lumping otherwise distinct languages together.

A related but distinct problem arises from how existing frameworks and data collection practices relied on normative notions of ethnolinguistic boundaries to assign names and numbers of speakers in particular communities. This meant that, even when sufficient data existed to discriminate between communities on intelligibility criteria alone, some linguistic communities nonetheless went un(der)counted because of their ethnic identity or affiliation. The set of Dargwa lects for example have but a single standard “language” for bureaucratic purposes, even though on linguistic criteria, Dargwan lects really constitute an entire family with about as much formal diversity as the entire Germanic language family (Koryakov 2021) – as if we were to lump English, Dutch, German, Icelandic and Swedish into a single “Germanic” language.

¹ A full language-by-language inventory with speaker estimates and vitality status is provided in the Appendix.

Figure 1. EGIDS Intergenerational disruption scale.

0 – international languages with large speaker bases and widely used between nations for trade, knowledge exchange and international policy; 1 – national languages used in education, work, mass media and government; 2 – provincial languages used in education, mass media and government in a national subdivision; 3 – languages without official status but nonetheless used in mass media to transcend differences across the region; 4 – educational languages in vigorous use, with standardized literature and used in institutional settings; 5 – developing languages in vigorous use with standardized literature but not yet widespread or sustainable; 6a – vigorous languages used for face-to-face communication by all generations and sustainable; 6b – threatened languages used for face-to-face communication but losing speakers; 7 – shifting languages whose child-bearing generation uses the language but whose children are not acquiring the language; 8a – moribund languages whose only active users are the grandparent generation or older; 8b – nearly extinct languages only of grandparent generation with little opportunity to use the language; 9 – dormant languages serving as reminder of heritage identity but no one has more than symbolic proficiency; 10 – extinct languages no longer used and which no longer serve as marker of identity (Ethnologue 2022).

What can be said then about the current state of Caucasian languages? Like languages around the world, very many are undergoing threats to their ecological niches, both in the literal biological sense, but also in the sociological sense that their communities are undergoing rapid change. As is clear from Figure 1, around 67 percent of the languages for which reliable vitality is available are either threatened with or actively undergoing extinction, making prospects for transmission to future generations difficult to foresee. While some languages like Adyghe, Avar, Chechen, Ingush, Lezgian and Lak have vibrant speaker communities in which the language is found across many different domains of use, many others like Batsbi (Tsova-Tush), Botlikh or Svan are facing drastic, rapid declines in speaker numbers. Such declines are not geographically random, either: they are heavily concentrated in the highland regions across the Caucasus, but especially in the westerly alpine portions of Daghestan (Map 2). This is true not just of languages but also dialectal variation: speaker populations of traditional dialects are also on the decline in comparison to a century ago (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic decline of Caucasian highland regions.

<i>Region</i>	<i>~1930 Population</i>	<i>~2020 Population</i>	<i>Trend</i>
Tusheti (Georgia)	7300	100	>95% decline
Khevsureti/Pshavi (Georgia)	3700	400	~90% decline
Highland Svaneti (Georgia)	25000	11000	~50% decline
Highland Daghestan	500000	250000	>50% decline in many mountain auls
Lowland Georgia cities	300000	1200000	Growth
Lowland Daghestan	200000	1750000	Massive growth

So, the vitality of linguistic diversity has undergone various forms of threats to intergenerational transmission to future generations of speakers, but why? In many cases we can point to sudden, exogenous changes to their physical ecology of their communities. These include of course natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, avalanches, droughts, and other purely natural phenomena. In 1139, the worst earthquake in Caucasian history took place near Ganja, Azerbaijan, with a magnitude of 7.7 MLH, resulting in an estimated 230,000 to 300,000 fatalities (Brosset 1851; Rayfield 2013; Berberian 2014). It is not known precisely which languages were spoken in the region before this catastrophe, but it was likely home to many speakers of Armenian, Georgian, Persian, Turkic, and Udi and other Lezgian and Avar-Andic languages. In 1902, the Kolka glacier in North Ossetia collapsed, burying several villages and leading to the displacement of hundreds of Ossetic speakers of an unknown dialect (NASA n.d.). In 1987, heavy snowfall led to disastrous avalanches in the Georgian region of Svaneti, leading to the resettlement of around 16,000 speakers of Svan into southeastern Georgia, where Svan was not traditionally spoken (Bordokoff 2014). In 1988, the Spitak earthquake killed 25,000 people, destroyed 345 settlements and displaced around 530,000 people, including not just Armenians but also small communities of Aramaic, Kurdish and Udi speakers. Though such events bore different ultimate causes, and documentary sources are not always clear about the composition and responses of human communities to them, the changes to linguistic communities' demography and geospatial dislocation that ensued meant that speakers often found themselves in entirely different circumstances from before the events, with radical shifts in contact contexts and the decline of up to 50 percent of speakers in some communities.

Map 2. Distribution of endangered languages in the Caucasus.

In other cases, language shift results from long-term trends to how communities interact with their geographical, topographical and socioeconomic environment, and in the Caucasus, we see marked differences in climate and topography between different subregions. The south Caucasus consists mostly of hills and alluvial plains of the Rioni and Kura-Araxes river valleys, with temperate microclimates of varying aridity and soil types favourable to agriculture of various kinds of intensity. For much of its length, the Greater Caucasus range forms a sudden, sheer wall of mountains some 3000 to 5000 meters high that abut these plains, and this topographical feature influences the distribution of communities and networks of communication in the region: in the plains, settlement and movement is easy, with movement possible in more or less any arbitrary direction, while in the highlands the rough terrain constrains where and how human social networks are formed and situated. The north Caucasus on the other hand consists of numerous gorges and deeply cut valleys, some of them 1500 to 2000 meters deep, that extend for dozens of miles of uplifted terrain. The land here is far more arid, and the soil quality is poorer, with the result that communities in these regions often subsist on pastoralist economies, especially at the highest elevations where few crops can be grown.

These different kinds of specialization of communities in the north Caucasus versus the south Caucasus led to different kinds of linguistic diversity. In the south, linguistic and dialectal diversity is lower because community sizes tend to be much larger and share languages and traits with neighbouring communities, and intercommunal contact is far easier. In the north however, pastoralist economies lead to seasonal migrations of herders from the highlands in the summer to the lowlands for winter pasturage, with the result that pastoral migrants end up speaking all languages of communities below them, what Wixman called “vertical polylingualism” (1980).

These languages [of the lowlands – TRW] became dominant since it was in the lowland areas where the mountaineers brought their stock to winter pastures, where the landless mountaineers found jobs, working either in the cities or as the ‘migrant farmers’ and where the major trading centers were located. Similarly, the peoples of the lower elevations were dominant in terms of assimilation processes. In this way, many of the highlanders were being both linguistically and ethnically assimilated by the peoples at the lower levels (108).

Ethnopolitical Conflict and Language Endangerment: Indirect Causes

The literature on language endangerment also engages with nonphysical and noneconomic sources of language endangerment. Nettles and Romaine (2000) note that 80 percent of the conflicts in the world today are between nation states and minority peoples’ (21-22; see also Crystal 2000; Grenoble & Whaley 2005; Gal 1979), and consequently in many cases this has negative side-effects for the languages spoken by those minority peoples. Like the sociological and demographic tragedies discussed above, ethnic and political conflicts disturb, and sometimes even disintegrate, the social networks that keep linguistic communities alive, by directly endangering the demographic make-up of a society through warfare, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and targeted acts of cultural assimilation.²

However, in many cases, language and linguistic identity itself are not themselves the direct target or trigger, but rather indirect casualties of human conflict. While the recorded history of the Caucasus extends back into the immemorial past – the first recorded conflict occurred between

² The terms *genocide* and *ethnic cleansing* are employed here descriptively to denote large-scale, intentional disruptions of population and social structure that result in permanent demographic and institutional breakdown. The focus is not on legal classification but on the sociolinguistic consequences of such events, particularly the collapse of intergenerational transmission and functional domains of language use. In this sense, linguistic destruction is treated as an ecological outcome of political violence rather than as a separate or exclusively intentional project.

Assyrian Emperor Shalmaneser III (r. 859-824 BCE) and King Aramu of Urartu sometime in the mid 9th century BCE – our understanding of the sociological consequences of such conflicts remains very limited. The following case studies will examine the historical record for several conflicts and assess to what extent demographic, sociological, and sociolinguistic features of language shift were a direct consequence.

The Great War Between the Byzantine and Sasanian Persian Empires, 602-628 CE

The first major conflict in the Caucasus for which we have substantial historical documentation is the Byzantine-Sasanian War of 602-628 CE, which was the final and most destructive conflict between the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire and the Sasanian Empire of Iran. Spanning over a quarter-century, the war devastated large swathes of the Near East and South Caucasus, leading to massive demographic upheaval and profound sociopolitical transformations. The Caucasus region – particularly Armenia, Iberia (eastern Georgia), and Albania (modern-day Azerbaijan) – was a crucial frontier theater, both strategically and symbolically contested by the two empires.

The war was precipitated by the assassination of the Byzantine emperor Maurice in 602 CE and the usurpation of the throne by Phocas. Khosrow II of Persia, claiming to avenge Maurice's murder, launched an expansive campaign that, over the next two decades, brought much of the eastern Mediterranean under Persian control, including the Levant, Egypt, and parts of Anatolia. In the Caucasus, Persian forces seized strategic fortresses, imposed new governors, and deepened their influence over vassal kingdoms like Iberia and Albania. Armenian nobilities were divided, with some aligning with the Persians and others with the Byzantines, further fragmenting local society.

The demographic effects in the Caucasus were severe. Persian military campaigns and subsequent Byzantine counteroffensives under Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641 CE) repeatedly ravaged the region. Major towns were sacked, agricultural lands devastated, and populations displaced or forcibly conscripted. The Armenian historian Sebeos, one of the major writers of this period, describes these kinds of tactics bluntly:

He had with him many auxiliaries from the forces of the innumerable races who dwell along the mountainous Caucasus the races of the Huns and also a command from the king to extirpate the men from the country of Armenia: to root out, dig out, exterminate and mercilessly destroy the land (Thomson 1999, 11).

Heraclius' series of daring counter-campaigns through the Caucasus in the 620s CE, including his alliances with local Christian rulers and the Khazars, brought fresh waves of destruction. The movement of armies and their logistical needs also led to mass requisitions, looting, and the breakdown of traditional economic life.

Sociologically, the constant shifting of imperial control in the Caucasus weakened the traditional aristocratic orders, particularly in Armenia, where the *nakharar* (noble) class suffered significant losses. Religious tensions were exacerbated: the Sasanians favored Zoroastrianism but tolerated local Christian elites when politically expedient, while the Byzantines promoted Chalcedonian orthodoxy, sometimes in opposition to the local Miaphysite majority, deepening internal sectarian divisions. Heraclius' military successes in the 620s CE, including the sack of Dastagird and the recovery of the True Cross, restored Byzantine prestige but left the entire region exhausted and depopulated. In some cases, textual records directly attest to how such calamities could lead directly to language loss; Sebeos says, of a slightly earlier period:

There was in that country a community deported from Armenia and settled on the edge of the great desert which extends from T'urk'astan and Delhastan. They had

forgotten their own language, lost the use of writing, and lacked the priestly order (cited in Thomson 1999, 44).

It is unclear from the context which precise ethnolinguistic group this could refer to, as “Armenia” in this period was anything but monoethnic, but it illustrates the pervasive destructive power that ethnic cleansing can have on the linguistic fabric of communities.

Shah ‘Abbās campaigns in the South Caucasus, 1614-1617

Around one thousand years later, between 1614 and 1617, Shah ‘Abbās I of Safavid Iran launched a series of devastating campaigns in the Caucasus, aimed at consolidating control over eastern Georgia (notably Kartli and Kakheti) and parts of western Azerbaijan. These operations were not merely military incursions but formed part of a deliberate policy of depopulation, forced resettlement, and demographic engineering designed to secure the empire’s volatile northwestern frontier and suppress local resistance.

The immediate impetus for the campaign was the defiance of King Teimuraz I of Kakheti, who, despite previous oaths of loyalty to the Safavid court, refused to submit fully to Iranian suzerainty and resisted the imposition of a Safavid garrison. In response, Shah ‘Abbās initiated a brutal punitive expedition in 1614, which culminated in the widespread destruction of Kakheti and eastern Kartli. Georgian resistance was crushed, and the Shah ordered massacres and mass deportations of the local population to the interior of Iran, particularly to provinces such as Fars, Mazandaran, and Isfahan. The Shah’s injunction to “slay all those who attribute partners to God” (i.e., all people believing in the Christian trinity) resulted in at least 60,000 deaths of not just Georgians but also Armenians, Udis and other Christian peoples of the Caucasus, and at least double that number deported deeper into Iranian controlled territory (Blow 2009: 106). Pietro della Valle, the 17th century Italian traveler who was eyewitness to these harrowing events, wrote:

Murders, people dying of starvation, robberies, rapes, children stifled in despair by their own parents, or thrown by them into rivers, others massacred by the Persians for want of good complexions.... such is the picture of this shocking expedient (cited in Blow 2009, 106).

These deportees – estimated by some contemporary sources to number between 130,000 and 200,000 – were resettled in designated colonies and often employed in agriculture, crafts, or the military, thereby serving both economic and strategic functions within the Safavid state, at the same time integrating them into new Persian and Tatar speaking socioeconomic systems. To this day, there are some 40,000 speakers of an eastern Georgian dialect in Faridan Province, Iran, descendants of these deportations.

This process involved large-scale violence against civilians, including indiscriminate killings, the destruction of settlements, and the dismantling of local elite structures. In Kakheti especially, the campaign might be characterized as genocidal in nature, *avant la lettre*, given the combination of intent to eliminate the political existence of the local population, the scale of the destruction, and the systemic nature of the deportations. The campaigns also extended into parts of western Azerbaijan, where Georgian and other Caucasian ethnolinguistic groups had previously been settled, and where local unrest was likewise suppressed through coercive relocation. Overall, the 1614-1617 campaigns represent a significant moment which upended the demographic basis and sociological structure of much of the southeastern Caucasus in the early modern period, with speakers of these communities’ languages now finding themselves widely dispersed across the Iranian commonwealth.

The Murid Wars in the North Caucasus, 1829-1859

The Murid Wars (1829-1859), also known as the Caucasian Imamate or the Russo-Caucasian War's final phase, was a protracted and highly destructive series of conflicts in the middle 19th century between the expanding Russian Empire and the Muslim highland peoples of the north Caucasus, particularly the Chechens, Avars, and other Daghestanian groups. Rooted in both anti-colonial resistance and Islamic revivalism, the war emerged as a reaction to Russian military incursions, administrative impositions, and the disruption of traditional social structures across the region.

The conflict was catalyzed by the spread of Naqshbandi Sufi teachings, which fused religious piety with political militancy. Under the leadership of Ghazi Muhammad, and later more famously Imam Shamil (r. 1834-1859), a centralized Islamic state, the Imamate, was established across much of interior Chechnya and Daghestan. This state, while doctrinally strict and often at odds with traditional local elites, served as a rallying point for resistance, offering both religious legitimacy and a coherent military strategy against Russian encroachment.

The Russian Empire responded with a scorched-earth policy of unprecedented scale, employing tactics of collective punishment, resettlement, depopulation, destruction of villages, deforestation (notably the felling of sacred groves), and the construction of military roads and forts that penetrated the mountain interior. Gammer notes (1994):

The following winter, between 20 January and 1 February 1847, Nesterov cleared the forest along the Assa river, cutting through roads to the Galasha community ... As a rule, the clearing operations were accompanied by the systematic destruction of hamlets, stocks and crops, the stamping of fields and the capture of livestock. This destruction was "intended to force the Chechens to realise the necessity to migrate into our territory, where no one would disturb them any more from indulging in peaceful occupations; they had to be shown the uselessness of any further resistance" (178).

Whole communities, including southeastern Chechnya and highland Daghestanian communities situated around Khunzakh, Gunib and Akusha, were uprooted, with civilians frequently targeted in retaliation for guerrilla warfare. Russian forces under generals like Yermolov, Vorontsov, and Baryatinsky engaged in campaigns that systematically dismantled the material and spiritual infrastructure of the highland societies. As Gammer again notes (1994):

Russian rule undermined the traditional way of life and the political, economic and social structure not only of the country under their control but of many communities which had not yet come under Russian domination ... [t]he Russian 'punitive expeditions', destroying everything in their path, further disrupted the economic life of these communities (40).

The demographic consequences were profound. Tens of thousands were killed, and an even larger number were displaced. Many sought refuge in the Ottoman Empire, initiating what became a long process of Caucasian diaspora formation, particularly in modern-day Turkey, Jordan, and Syria. The final surrender of Imam Shamil in 1859 marked the symbolic end of the war, but the violence had already shattered the traditional social fabric of the region. Clan networks were weakened, religious institutions were brought under imperial control, and centuries-old patterns of transhumance and local autonomy were suppressed.

Sociologically, the war marked the forced integration of the northeastern Caucasus into the Russian imperial system, but only at great cost. Indigenous institutions were supplanted by military governance, and traditional elites were either eliminated or co-opted. Though firm statistical

sociolinguistic data from this period is lacking, we can be sure that the Russian Empire's actions indirectly uprooted and reorganized whole communities of speakers of indigenous Nakh-Daghestanian, Mongolic and Turkic languages of the region.

Figure 2. A letter written by Imam Shamil on a pear leaf in Chechen in Arabic script (Emelyanova 2006).



The Circassian Genocide, 1863-1878

At roughly the same time as the Murid War, another set of conflicts in the western Caucasus was transpiring. The Circassian Genocide, also called the *Tsitsekun* (from Ubykh *ts'ats'ak^w'ən* “people-killing”), a term increasingly used by scholars to describe the systematic expulsion, mass killing, and forced deportation of the Circassian peoples by the Russian Empire, took place primarily between 1860 and 1867, culminating in 1864 with the formal annexation of Circassia into the Russian Empire. Occurring in the final phase of the Russo-Circassian War, the campaign marked one of the most thorough and violent acts of demographic engineering in 19th-century Eurasia.

The Circassians, a collection of ethnolinguistically related highland tribes – such as the Adyghe, Abaza, and Kabardians – resisted Russian military conquest for over a century. Despite their fragmented political organization, they maintained a vigorous armed resistance, often supported by Ottoman agents and mujahideen volunteers. Russian authorities, frustrated by the intractability of the conflict and viewing the Circassians as obstacles to imperial consolidation and Slavic colonization of the Black Sea coast, resolved to eliminate the native population as a military and cultural presence.

From the early 1860s, under commanders such as General Yevdokimov and with the approval of Tsar Alexander II, Russian forces implemented a policy of total pacification. This included the destruction of villages, confiscation of livestock, scorched-earth tactics, and the forced removal of civilians. The expulsion was carried out with extreme brutality. Entire communities were marched to the Black Sea coast under appalling conditions to be loaded onto Ottoman ships, often without sufficient food, shelter, or medical care. Disease and starvation were rampant.

The demographic effects were catastrophic. Of an estimated Circassian population of around 1 to 1.5 million before the war, between 600,000 and 1 million were killed, displaced, or died because of the deportations (Human Rights Association 2023; Karpat 1985). Most survivors were resettled in the Ottoman Empire – in Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Levant – where they often encountered hardship, famine, and hostility. Many perished during the journey or shortly after arrival, particularly during the harsh winter of 1864-1865. The North Caucasus was repopulated with Russian and Ukrainian speaking Slavic settlers and loyalist mountaineers, transforming the ethnolinguistic and confessional landscape of the region (Map 4).

Sociologically, the genocide eradicated a centuries-old highland culture that had once dominated the northwestern Caucasus. The complex tribal structures, customary legal systems (*adat*), and indigenous forms of governance were obliterated. The survivors in exile struggled to maintain their identity, though they formed strong diasporan communities, especially in modern-day Turkey, Jordan, and Syria, where Circassian language and identity often fused with Ottoman and later national identities. In the North Caucasus itself, only a remnant Circassian-speaking population remained, largely confined to designated areas such as Kabardino-Balkaria and Adygea, under the heavy control of Russian imperial and later Soviet authorities. The Circassian Genocide thus stands as one of the clearest examples of 19th-century state violence used to consolidate empire through ethnic cleansing and forced migration.

Table 3. Estimated declines of speakers after the Circassian Genocide.

Language	Est. speakers in NC before deportation	Est. speakers in NC after deportations	Decline percentage
Ubykh	50k-80k	Nearly zero	100%
Adyghe	300k-500k	150k-200k	50-60%
Kabardian	300k-400k	150k-200k	50-60%
Abkhaz	100k-150k	60k-80k	50-60%

The Ardakh Genocide, 1944-1957

The Ardakh Genocide (or Ardakhar, lit. “exodus”) refers to the mass deportation and partial extermination of the Chechen and Ingush peoples by Soviet authorities in February 1944, during the Second World War. Carried out under the direct orders of Joseph Stalin and executed by the NKVD under Lavrenti Beria, this operation, codenamed *Operation Lentil* (*Operatsiya Chechevitsa*), resulted in the forced removal of nearly 500,000 people from the North Caucasus to remote areas of Central Asia and Siberia, under conditions widely recognized by historians as genocidal (Werth 2008, 412; Ther 2014, 118; Joes 2010, 357).

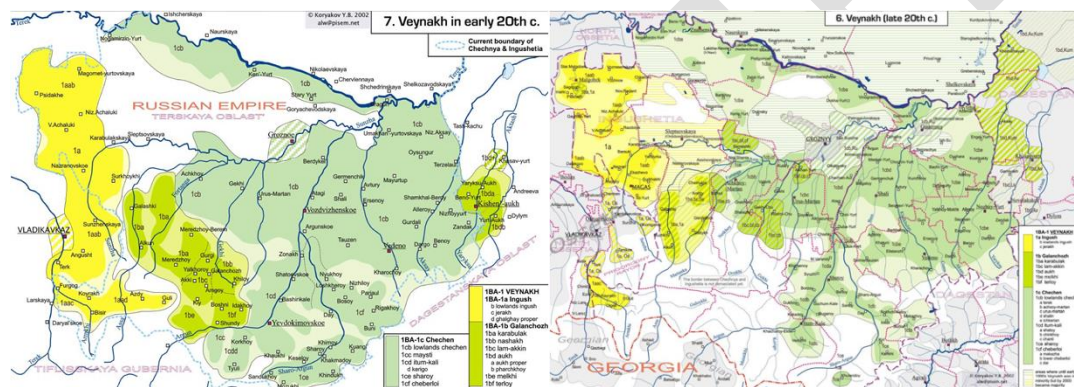
The pretext for the deportation was an unsubstantiated accusation that the Chechens and Ingush had collectively collaborated with Nazi Germany, even though no German forces ever occupied Chechen-Ingush territory and many locals had fought loyally in the Red Army. The real motivations were likely tied to longstanding Soviet fears of highland nationalism, resistance to collectivization, and the perceived unreliability of Muslim frontier populations. The deportations were part of a broader pattern of Soviet ethnic cleansing during the war years, targeting other groups such as the Crimean Tatars, Balkars, and Karachays.

Beginning on 23 February 1944 – the anniversary of the Red Army’s founding and a date symbolically chosen to mask the operation’s violence – the entire Chechen and Ingush populations were rounded up by armed NKVD units. Villages were surrounded without warning; residents were given minutes to gather belongings before being marched to collection points and loaded into cattle cars for transport to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, a journey that took weeks. Thousands died *en route* from cold, starvation, disease, and abuse. Entire mountain communities were annihilated, with some massacred outright when resistance or logistical delays occurred – most notoriously, in the Khaibakh massacre, where hundreds of Chechens, including women and children, were reportedly burnt alive in a barn (Mikaberidze 2013).

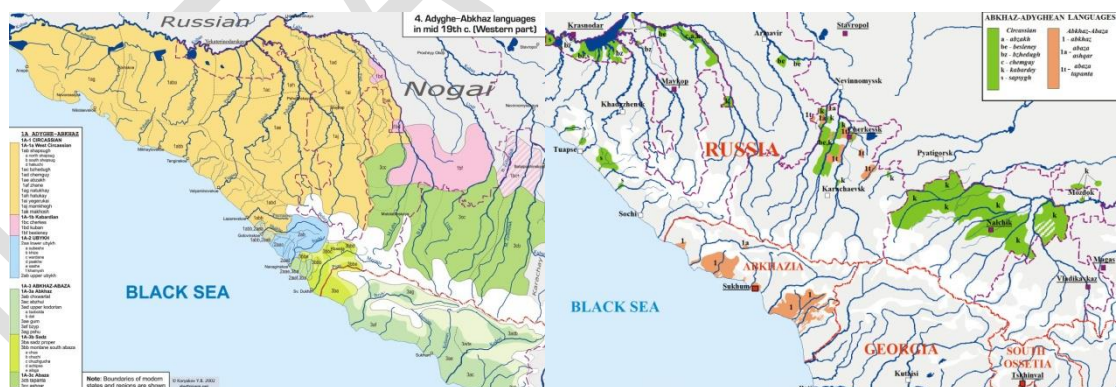
The demographic consequences were devastating. Of the roughly 496,000 deported, estimates suggest between 100,000 and 150,000 perished from hunger, illness, and exposure in exile (Dunlop 1998). Survivors lived under special settlement regimes, stripped of civil rights, and subjected to forced labor. The Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was dissolved, and its territory redistributed to neighboring republics, such as North Ossetia, Daghestan, and Georgia. Russian and Ossetian settlers were brought in to repopulate strategic areas, while place names of Chechen and Ingush origin were systematically erased.

Sociologically, the Aardakh shattered the social structures of the Vainakh peoples (Chechens and Ingush). Clan networks (*teips*), customary law (*adat*), and oral historical traditions were disrupted, while elders and religious leaders often died in exile. A collective trauma emerged, centered on themes of betrayal, martyrdom, and exile, which continue to inform Vainakh identity to this day. The memory of the Aardakh became a forbidden history during Soviet rule, with even discussion of the deportation criminalized until the era of glasnost.

Map 3. Distribution of Nakh languages in the early (left) and late (right) 20th century (Koryakov 2002)



Map 4. Distribution of Abkhaz-Adyghean languages in the mid-19th century (left) and in the late 20th century (right) (Koryakov 2002)



In 1957, after Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign, the Chechen and Ingush peoples were formally rehabilitated and allowed to return, and the ASSR was reestablished. However, interethnic tensions, particularly with Ossetians and Russians who had settled during the deportation period, persisted and intensified after the Soviet collapse. Some Nakh groups, such as the Galanch'oz, became permanently dispersed, and their distinct form of speech (intermediary between Chechen and Ingush and sometimes considered a distinct language) became almost completely extinct consequently (Map 3).

The Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict of 1992-1993

The Abkhaz-Georgian War (1992-1993) was a separatist conflict in northwestern Georgia's autonomous republic of Abkhazia, rooted in Soviet-era nationality policies, demographic shifts, and post-Soviet political instability. By the late 1980s, ethnic Georgians made up over 45 percent of Abkhazia's population, while Abkhaz were less than 18 percent, fueling fears among Abkhaz elites of cultural and political marginalization.

On 14 August 1992, amid civil strife in Georgia, the State Council under Eduard Shevardnadze deployed troops to Abkhazia, officially to protect transport routes and hostages. The Abkhaz leadership, led by Vladislav Ardzinba, viewed this as an assault on autonomy. Georgian forces quickly occupied Sukhumi, but Abkhaz militias, supported by North Caucasian volunteers and covert Russian aid, mounted a strong resistance. Fighting was marked by sieges, shelling, and atrocities on both sides.

In September 1993, Abkhaz forces broke a ceasefire agreement and broke Georgian defenses, capturing Sukhumi on the 27th with overt Russian military support. The fall of the city was followed by the mass killing and expulsion of ethnic Georgians in what multiple international bodies have described as ethnic cleansing. Between 200,000 and 250,000 Georgians, most speakers of both Georgian and Megrelian along with smaller minorities such as Greeks, Armenians and Russians, fled or were deported. Thousands died during the fighting and subsequent displacement.

The demographic balance shifted dramatically: the once-pluralistic region became dominated by Abkhaz and other groups aligned with the separatist cause. The Georgian and Megrelian languages largely vanished from public life in Abkhazia. Abkhaz was elevated as the titular language, though Russian emerged as the main *lingua franca*, deepening Abkhazia's integration into the Russian cultural sphere. Sociologically, the war entrenched ethnic polarization and a pervasive sense of historical grievance on both sides. In Abkhazia, the conflict became central to a narrative of survival and independence, legitimizing close ties to Russia. Among displaced Georgians, it fostered a strong refugee identity and demands for the right of return. Postwar Abkhazia remained militarized, economically dependent on Russia, and isolated internationally, with the war's demographic and linguistic effects persisting to the present day.

Ethnopolitical conflict and language endangerment: direct causes

The above case studies illustrate vividly how ethnopolitical conflict can lead indirectly to the complete disordering of communities with sustainable populations of speakers of indigenous languages. In each case, conflict led to the physical redistribution of speakers (as refugees) or the simple elimination of populations, with the result that any residual speaker populations found themselves exposed to different dominant matrix languages in completely different sociolinguistic contexts, completely different socioeconomic statuses and completely different ecological conditions.

However, language can itself be a direct target of political decision-making, and during periods of conflict or revolution, the effects of such language ideologies take on heightened consequence. Language ideologies are by no means a modern phenomenon. In the 10th century, the Georgian monk and hagiographer Giorgi Merchule remarked: "And Kartli consists of that spacious land in which the liturgy and all prayers are said in the Georgian language" (cited in Rapp 2003, 437).

He thus effectively equated the boundaries of the polity with the use of Georgian as the exclusive language of worship. By making linguistic practice a criterion of territorial identity, Merchule effectively transformed the Georgian language into the primary marker of political legitimacy and communal belonging, at the same time erecting a social hierarchy of language use in Georgian lands, to the exclusion of other languages like Megrelian, Laz and Svan. While his attitude may not have been universally held amongst his contemporaries, it illustrates an early

example of language ideology directly constituting the conceptualization of a political community, and such attitudes may have contributed to the near total lack of attestation of those other no liturgical languages before the 18th century.

By the nineteenth century, similar ideological commitments appear in the context of imperial governance. The Russian Empire, in consolidating authority over its multiethnic territories, increasingly prioritized administrative rationalization and uniformity, and did so through the medium of the Russian language. Blauvelt and Vacharadze (2017) note that “while curtailing native language literacy was never a goal or priority in itself, it became a consequence of the desire for administrative uniformity” (17).

The state’s bureaucratic ideology did not explicitly target minority languages for suppression, yet the privileging of Russian as the medium of administration effectively marginalized vernacular literacies. The result was a gradual erosion of institutional support for minority written traditions such as the indigenous use of Arabic script for Avar, Chechen and other local languages. This case underscores how an ostensibly neutral commitment to bureaucratic uniformity can, as a secondary effect, generate conditions that accelerate processes of language endangerment.

The Soviet Union, while initially departing from imperial precedents, likewise demonstrates the paradoxical effects of ideological commitments to language. The policy of *korenizatsiya* (“indigenization”) aimed to elevate the titular nationalities of the Union republics by promoting their languages and recruiting their members into Party and administrative structures. In principle, such measures should have bolstered linguistic diversity. However, as Blauvelt (2020) emphasizes, the policy also generated new hierarchies: speakers of smaller minority languages often found themselves compelled to adopt the language of a more politically significant titular nationality – such as Armenian, Georgian, or Azerbaijani – to access education, employment, and political participation. Blauvelt notes a particularly salient example is the forced Georgianisation of the Abkhaz ASSR by Soviet authorities:

1. Abkhaz toponyms were Georgianised;
2. All texts written in Abkhaz with Latin alphabet were replaced with ones in a Georgian *mkhedruli* derived alphabet;
3. Lavrenti Beria engineered a mass resettling of Megrelian/Georgian-speaking peasants into Abkhazia, radically changing the ethnolinguistic demographic balance of the region;
4. Primary and secondary education in the Abkhaz language were replaced by Georgian medium schooling.

Thus, even as *korenizatsiya* sought to counterbalance Russification, it had the unintended consequence of accelerating the assimilation of smaller groups into larger minority communities. This illustrates how policies designed to promote linguistic inclusion can, in practice, produce exclusionary outcomes.

These examples collectively demonstrate that political ideologies have exerted direct and often decisive influence on language vitality. Merchule’s formulation in the medieval Caucasus reveals the use of language as a symbolic marker of territorial integrity and intellectual legitimacy. The Russian Empire’s administrative ideology illustrates how bureaucratic priorities can indirectly curtail minority literacies. The Soviet Union’s nationalities policy shows how even ostensibly protective measures can restructure linguistic hierarchies in ways that disadvantage smaller communities. In each case, language was not merely a passive casualty of political upheaval but an active site of ideological contestation.

Conclusions

The preceding discussion has shown that political conflict and repression reshape the linguistic ecology of the Caucasus in ways that are strikingly similar to the effects of nonpolitical forces. Whether brought about by earthquakes, epidemics, or state-sponsored deportations, the mechanisms by which languages become endangered converge around the same underlying criteria: the demographic basis of the speech community, its geospatial distribution, the institutions that sustain its prestige and legitimacy, and the domains in which it is used.

First, demographic shocks, whether caused by natural disasters or by war, undermine intergenerational transmission, the most basic requirement for the survival of a language. Just as the Spitak earthquake of 1988 displaced Armenian, Kurdish, and Udi speakers, the Aardakh deportations of 1944 uprooted nearly half a million Chechens and Ingush. In both cases, children grew up in environments where the dominant matrix language was different from that of their parents, accelerating language shift. The proportion of speakers within an ethnic group, rather than the absolute number of speakers, is often decisive; once a critical threshold is passed, intergenerational continuity becomes fragile regardless of the cause of disruption.

Second, the spatial distribution of speakers conditions the extent and intensity of their contact with other groups. The rugged topography of the North Caucasus fostered a residual zone of linguistic diversity (in Nichols' terms), but it also left small mountain communities vulnerable to assimilation when forced into new geographies. Volcanic eruptions, avalanches, and climate change could prompt migration to the plains, just as imperial military campaigns compelled whole villages to resettle in lowland colonies. In both scenarios, altered geographies transformed the networks of multilingual contact and shifted the balance of linguistic dominance.

Third, institutional supports play a decisive role in determining whether a language can withstand demographic and geographic shocks. The autocephaly and institutional independence of the Georgian and Armenian churches historically provided a bulwark for their liturgical languages, allowing them to retain prestige across centuries of foreign domination. By contrast, communities lacking such institutions – such as the highland Daghestanian groups without a written tradition – were far more susceptible to imperial policies privileging Russian or, under Soviet *korenizatsiya*, the languages of larger titular nationalities. Here again, political conflict does not introduce a new dynamic so much as magnify the vulnerability that already attends the absence of institutional protection.

Finally, domains of use such as schools, churches, courts, and the media determine the extent to which languages remain central to social life. Earthquakes, famines, or trade route shifts can erode the viability of these domains, but so can deliberate state action. Giorgi Merchule's identification of Kartli with the Georgian liturgy exemplifies how language can be sacralized within a domain, while the Soviet replacement of Abkhaz-medium schooling with Georgian demonstrates how political power can reassign or eliminate such domains altogether. In both cases, the effect is to redefine the circumstances under which a language can be transmitted, reproduced, and valued.

Seen in this light, political conflict does not introduce fundamentally new mechanisms of language endangerment. Rather, it operates through the same channels – demographic stability, spatial distribution, institutional supports, and domains of use – that govern linguistic vitality under nonpolitical conditions. What distinguishes political conflict is not the kind of pressure it exerts, but its scale, intentionality, and capacity to interact with existing vulnerabilities in especially destructive ways. The ecological framework of language endangerment therefore allows us to situate war, repression, and ideology within the same continuum as natural disasters, epidemics, and socioeconomic transformation. Political violence amplifies processes already present in the sociolinguistic environment, turning ordinary fragilities into existential threats.

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Appendix. Linguistic Diversity in the contemporary Caucasus (Wier forthcoming).

Language	Phylum	No. L1 Speakers	Source	Vitality
Abaza	Abkhaz-Adyghean; Abkhaz-Abaza	36,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	5 - Developing
Abaza, Tapanta	Abkhaz-Adyghean; Abkhaz-Abaza	15,000	John Colarusso, p.c.	6b – Threatened
Abkhaz	Abkhaz-Adyghean; Abkhaz-Abaza	124,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Adyghe	Abkhaz-Adyghean; Circassian	115,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	2 - Provincial
Agul	Nakh-Daghestanian; Lezgian	27,000~29,300	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6a - Vigorous
Akhvakh, Northern	Nakh-Daghestanian; Avar- Andic	9500	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Akhvakh, Southern	Nakh-Daghestanian; Avar- Andic	8000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Andi	Nakh-Daghestanian; Avar- Andic	22,500	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Andi, Muni- Kwakhidatl	Nakh-Daghestanian; Avar- Andic	4000	Koryakov et al. 2022	6b – Threatened
Archi	Nakh-Daghestanian; Lezgian	970~1500	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Armenian, Eastern	Indo-European; Armenian	3,800,000 in all countries	Ethnologue 2022	1 – National
Armenian, Western	Indo-European; Armenian	1,600,000 in all countries	Ethnologue 2022	5 - Developing
Avar	Nakh-Daghestanian; Avar- Andic	693,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	3 – Wider Communication
Azerbaijani	Altaic; Turkic	9,000,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	1 – National
Bagvalal	Nakh-Daghestanian; Avar- Andic	1500~5500	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Batsbi	Nakh-Daghestanian; Nakh	500	Dobrushina et al. 2021	7 – Shifting
Bezhta	Nakh-Daghestanian; Tsezic	6500~6800	Dobrushina et al. 2021	5 – Developing
Bohtan Neo- Aramaic	Afro-Asiatic; Semitic	500~900	Fox 2019; Ethnologue 2022	7 – Shifting
Botlikh	Nakh-Daghestanian; Avar- Andic	210~7400	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Budukh	Nakh-Daghestanian; Lezgian	200	Dobrushina et al.	6b –

			2021	Threatened
Chamalal	Nakh-Daghestanian;Avar-Andic	9600	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Chamalal, Hihatli	Nakh-Daghestanian;Avar-Andic	1600	Koryakov et al. 2022	6b – Threatened
Chechen	Nakh-Daghestanian; Nakh	1,300,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	2 – Provincial
Dargwa, Amuzgi-Shiri	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	200~400	Dobrushina et al. 2021	7 – Shifting
Dargwa, Chirag	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	2000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Dargwa, Gapshima	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	2300	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Dargwa, Kaitag	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	23,600	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Dargwa, Kubachi-Ashti	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	6200	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Dargwa, Mehweb	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	800	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Dargwa, Muira	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	34,500	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6a – Vigorous
Dargwa, Northern	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	133,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	4 – Educational
Dargwa, Sanzhi-Itsari	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	2000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Dargwa, Shari	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	1200	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Dargwa, Tanti	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	13,700	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Dargwa, Tsudaqar	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	30,500	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Dargwa, Usisha-Butri	Nakh-Daghestanian; Dargic	7,600	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Domari	Indo-European; Indo-Iranian	280,670 across all regions	Ethnologue 2022	6b – Threatened
Georgian	Kartvelian; Georgian-Zan	3,380,000	Ethnologue 2022	1 – National
Godoberi	Nakh-Daghestanian;Avar-Andic	3200	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Greek, Cappadocian	Indo-European; Hellenic	‘a few in Georgia’	Dobrushina et al. 2021	8a – Moribund
Greek, Pontic	Indo-European; Hellenic	30,000~40,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	7 – Shifting

Hinuq	Nakh-Daghestanian; Tsezic	450	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Hunzib	Nakh-Daghestanian; Tsezic	1000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Ingush	Nakh-Daghestanian; Nakh	293,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	2 – Provincial
Kabardian	Abkhaz-Adyghean; Circassian	505,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	5 – Developing
Karachay- Balkar	Altaic; Turkic	299,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	5 – Developing
Karata	Nakh-Daghestanian; Avar- Andic	11,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Khinalug	Nakh- Daghestanian; Khinalug	2200	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Khwarshi	Nakh-Daghestanian; Tsezic	2200	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Khwarshi, Inkhokwari	Nakh-Daghestanian; Tsezic	1000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Kryz	Nakh-Daghestanian; Lezgif	4400	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Kumyk	Altaic; Turkic	403,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	5 – Developing
Kurdish, Northern	Indo-European; Indo- Iranian	60,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Lak	Nakh-Daghestanian; Lak	140,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	4 - Educational
Laz	Kartvelian; Zan	22,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Lezgian	Nakh-Daghestanian; Lezgif	546,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	5 – Developing
Lomavren	Mixed Language	50	Ethnologue 2015	8a - Moribund
Megrelian	Kartvelian; Zan	300,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6a - Vigorous
Noghai	Altaic; Turkic	73,000~87,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Ossetic, Iron	Indo-European; Indo- Iranian	500,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	2 - Provincial
Ossetic, Digor	Indo-European; Indo- Iranian	up to 100,000	Comrie 1984	6b – Threatened
Romani	Indo-European; Indo- Iranian	34,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Russian	Indo-European; Balto-	8.3m~8.5m L1 in	Dobrushina et al.	0 - International

	Slavic	region	2021	
Rutul	Nakh-Daghestanian; Lezgitic	27,300	Dobrushina et al. 2021	5 – Developing
Sign-Language, Armenian	French Sign Language family	3150	Ethnologue 2022	Unestablished
Sign-Language, Azerbaijani	French Sign Language family	3457~4800	M.Zaslansky, p.c.	Unestablished
Sign-Language, Georgian	French Sign Language family	2500	Makharoblidze2012	Unestablished
Sign-Language, Russian	French Sign Language family	~700,000 in all countries	Ethnologue 2022	Unestablished
Svan	Kartvelian; Svan	35,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	7 - Shifting
Tabasaran	Nakh-Daghestanian; Lezgitic	117,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	5 – Developing
Talysh	Indo-European; Indo-Iranian	77,400	Dobrushina et al. 2021	4 - Educational
Tat	Indo-European; Indo-Iranian	33,000	Ethnologue 2022	6b – Threatened
Tat, Judeo-	Indo-European; Indo-Iranian	up to 101,000	Ethnologue 2015	6b – Threatened
Tat, Shirvan	Indo-European; Indo-Iranian			
Tindi	Nakh-Daghestanian;Avar-Andic	9,300	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Tsakhur	Nakh-Daghestanian; Lezgitic	up to 20,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Tsez	Nakh-Daghestanian; Tsezic	12,300	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Tsez, Sagada	Nakh-Daghestanian; Tsezic	700	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Tukita	Nakh-Daghestanian;Avar-Andic	1300	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Turkish, Meskhetian	Altaic; Turkic	85,000	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6a - Vigorous
Ubykh	Abkhaz-Adyghean; Ubykh	0	Fenwick 2011	10 - Extinct
Udi	Nakh-Daghestanian; Lezgitic	4900	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened
Ukrainian	Indo-European; Balto-Slavic	110,000 in region	Dobrushina et al. 2021	1 – National
Urmian Jewish Neo-Aramaic	Afro-Asiatic; Semitic	500	Dobrushina et al. 2021	6b – Threatened

Urum	Altaic; Turkic	190,000 in all countries	Ethnologue 2015	6b – Threatened
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