

# The Prospect of the Russian Language in Georgia. Insights from the Educated Youth

Daniele Artoni  
Università di Verona, Italia

Sabrina Longo  
Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia, Italia

**Abstract** After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the status of the Russian language in the new-born Republics became a central issue. In the Southern Caucasus, all the Constitutions promulgated by the three Republics opted for ethnocentric language policies that accepted the titular language as the only State Language. However, the role of the Russian language as a *lingua franca* remained crucial for international communication and everyday interaction. It followed that it continued to play an important role also in education. The present study focuses on Georgia, where a strong derussification policy has taken place in the last decades and aims at understanding to what extent the use of Russian among the young generations has contracted. In particular, we present an analysis conducted on data collected via (i) a survey for young people consisting of questions on their sociolinguistic background and a proficiency test in Russian, and (ii) semi-structured interviews for teachers of Russian and English as Foreign Languages on the research topics.

**Keywords** Georgia. Language policy. Derussification. Russian FL. Sociolinguistics.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 1.1 Language Policy. – 1.2 Georgia Today. – 2 The Study. – 2.1 Methodology. – 2.2 Data Analysis. The Survey. – 2.3 Data Analysis. The Interviews. – 3 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

30 years ago, the hammer and sickle flag outside the Kremlin was lowered for the very last time: the Soviet Union officially fell apart. The derussification process has been going on for almost three decades now, but the ex-satellite countries are still influenced by the relatively invisible, yet powerful presence of the Russian Federation and of the Russian language. There appears to be no clear trend on the way the newly emerged post-Soviet countries reacted to the collapse as, in spite of some similar traits, each of them has responded through specific language policies tailored to their geographical, sociopolitical, and linguistic characteristics. Every single country has a unique relationship with Russia, that is the result of history, cultural distance, native-language loyalty, and proficiency during the Russian Empire and before the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, what these countries have in common is what Von Gumpenberg and Steinbach call “postcolonial phantom limb syndrome” (2008, 10).<sup>2</sup> However hard for some nations to admit, Russian has an impact on the post-Soviet space that cannot be overlooked. That is why this article is going to explore the historical and geopolitical reasons for Russian to still be spoken in a country remnant of the USSR like Georgia. Georgia is one of the few examples within the post-Soviet space which is still stuck into an internationally disputed matter like the presence of the *de facto* states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (under the military, thus economic and political ‘patronage’ of Russia after the 2008 war). There is growing evidence of Georgia’s resistance to Russia (Riasanovsky 2004; Jones 2007; Stefan 2016), a country extremely proud of its unique language and culture (an attitude often referred to as ‘Georgianness’: Juneau 2017a, 2017b; Batiašvili 2012). In the post-Soviet space, Georgia was also the first country to deliberately leave the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) in 2009.

Now, it is only natural to wonder if, as of today, and considering the latest events (war with Russia, secessionism, economic crisis, etc.), the linguistic landscape has changed. It should be remembered that in the same year of the war with Russia, Pavlenko (2008) stated that the competence of Georgians in Russian was decreasing. This is consistent with the results of the 2008 and 2019 surveys about Russian knowledge in Georgia collected by the Caucasus Barometer: the overall response shows that there are fewer and fewer people who

---

**1** The authors worked together throughout the paper. Daniele Artoni wrote the sections 2.1, 2.2, 3. Sabrina Longo wrote the sections 1, 1.1, 1.2, 2.3. The design of the research and data collection was developed and administered by Daniele Artoni.

**2** The original German reference is “Postkolonialer Phantomschmerz”. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Authors.

learn, speak or have a basic/advanced knowledge of Russian. For all these reasons, this paper is going to explore how the historical and political events of the last decades have influenced the youngest generations. Not only are they the grandchildren and children of those who actually lived during the Soviet Union, but also direct proof of the latest decades' language policies. Specifically, our aim is to investigate what is the educated Georgian youth's perception of Russian and what is the underlying motivation when they choose to study this language. In order to answer these questions, the research first turns its attention to the quantitative analysis of a survey conducted among Georgian young people, who were asked questions about sociolinguistic aspects and to do a proficiency test in Russian. In a second and final stage, the paper focuses on the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with teachers of Russian and English as foreign languages (expert interviews) on the research topics.

### 1.1 Language Policy

Language policies are never neutral: they always serve specific ideological and political purposes (Garibova, Asgarova 2009), but the level of politicization usually depends on the compatibility and sense of togetherness within the speech community or society the language policy is planned for. It is fundamental to study language policies because since languages are so intimate and intertwined with our identity, controlling a language is a way of controlling the people who speak that language (Shohamy 2006).

Over the centuries, the never-ending succession of laws, impositions, policies, reforms, rules, and regulations highlights Russia's constant efforts to use language with the ultimate purpose of following its political agenda. Language becomes, in this way, an essential weapon to exert power, to easily reach the lower strata of the population, to control, and sometimes even to manipulate.

The term 'russification' takes on a fundamental meaning in this context. Brel (2017) defines russification as the "forcible imposition of the Russian language and culture at the expense of the native language" (Rannut 2012, 5034, cited in Brel 2017, 60), and "the process whereby non-Russians are transformed objectively and psychologically into Russians" (Aspaturian 1968, 159-60, cited in Brel 2017, 60).

Pavlenko (2011b) argues, instead, that the English term 'russification' is not adequate, unless the user and the reader keep in mind that the word encompasses both *obrusevanie* *обрусевание* (imposed russification) and *obrusenie* *обрусение* (voluntary assimilation). *Obrusevanie* refers to the changes in the public sphere, such as the language of the administration and education, whereas *obrusenie* shall be understood as intentional, spontaneous, and unconstrained actions.

Besides, she points out that the authorities never had the intention or the desire to eradicate all the national languages. On balance, to reconcile these two apparently contradictory viewpoints, it could be agreed that russification alternated different forms according to the time, the promoter, the sociopolitical and historical context.

Peter the Great and Alexander I (1777-1825) left considerable autonomy to most of the non-Russian provinces (e.g. Baltics, Grand Duchy of Finland) while Russian was already starting to creep into local administration and education. Nevertheless, it was during the reign of Alexander II (1818-81) that the map of Russia, therefore of Russian, was mostly redesigned. Not all his campaigns were successful, but the language measures taken during this time can be considered as season openers. Most initiatives did not directly impact the lives of ordinary citizens but rather regarded only the educated: in the case of Georgia, 1% of the population (Juneau 2017a). The authorities were starting to realize that in order to turn people into politically aware citizens, it was necessary for Russian to take roots. The task for Russia was twice as hard because the authorities needed to make faithful imperial members out of Russian peasants (mostly uneducated) and non-Russians (different linguistic backgrounds). At that time, Russian was spoken mostly by the aristocracy and middle classes, who were starting to develop a national consciousness. Because of the vastity of the Empire and a new awareness of the power of languages, Alexander II was also the first to use language to establish control: he tried to bring together the diverse regions of the Empire through Russian (Pavlenko 2006). According to Smith (2012, 27), the Tsar wanted Russian to be used instead of non-Russian languages, for it was the 'single cement' of the reign. It is essential at this point to consider that in the Southern Caucasus Russian gradually replaced Georgian as the language of instruction in primary school between 1867 and 1876. In 1880, Russian officially became the language of administration, but it had already been functioning as such since 1801. Therefore, 1801 is also the year when Georgian officially lost its status as the official language in administration and in the Church.

Despite the issue of literacy among non-Russians was not solved and school was still a privilege limited to the upper classes, russification had a slight but visible impact on the native peoples within the Empire. The 1897 census proves that Baltics and Georgians had some knowledge of Russian (Pavlenko 2011b). Therefore, although the Tsarist-era russification policies were inconsistent and chaotic, they had a considerable effect on the russification measures taken during the Soviet Union (Pavlenko 2011b), when language policies became more systematic.

According to Smith, language during the Soviet Union was basically weaponry used to "dominate and develop the peoples within and

around Russia" (2012, 7). As hegemony is based on a "subtle combination of coercion and consensus, pressure and participation" (Smith 2012, 6), language policies in the first decade (1920s-30s) were never entirely tolerant or radical. The commingling of russification and nativization prevented the locals from rejecting the new measures. The proclaimed essence of the Soviet language reform was, indeed, *jazykovoje stroitel'stvo* языковое строительство (language construction; Smith 2012). In other words, through the Cyrillization of the alphabets, the standardization of the literary languages, the literacy campaigns, the Soviet government was building a new Soviet speech community and preparing the country's future and cheaper workforce: the non-Russians.

In Georgia, in particular, the initial "momentum of tolerance" (Juneau 2017b, 40) was a double-edged sword: by standardizing other minor languages in the territory, the Soviet authorities were attempting to further weaken the status of the Georgian language, thus avoiding the danger of a nationalistic awakening. Moreover, in Georgia illiteracy was not a problem as serious as in the other Republics: by the 1930s literacy level almost reached 100% of the population. Georgian was accorded official status in 1924 and became the state language in 1936 (Juneau 2017a; Grenoble 2006), while the other Kartvelian languages were still being ignored. Standardization in Georgia meant for minority languages – such as Abkhazian or Ossetian – to be written in the Georgian alphabet and to unify the language knowledge of the Georgians. By supporting Georgian, it was easier for the Soviet government to reach the Georgian population because they would only need one language.

From the thirties onwards, the linguistic policy made a U-turn: the Soviet government started to push towards Russian, rather than Georgian. For instance, Abkhazian and Ossetian had to switch the alphabet again: this time to Cyrillic, used to this day. Georgian was becoming less popular beside Russian, still idealized as the language of science, media, and progress. This assumption is confirmed by the fact that the number of 106,000 Russophone students learning Georgian in 1959 dropped to 32,000 in 1964 (Juneau 2017a). Yet, Georgian was still the most preeminent language of instruction in Georgia: education in Russian was anyway not adequate to meet the Russian language requirements demanded by the government. The last decades of the Soviet Union were chaotic for all the Republics, and Georgia was no exception. Contradictory political measures, the prominence of Russian in many spheres of society, the discontent of linguistic minorities, and the ending of the Soviet era between the 1980s and 1990s caused not a few problems. Georgia's sovereignty was proclaimed in 1990 and all the treaties from 1921 onwards were declared void, thereby affirming that Georgia had been occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union (Stefan 2016).

## 1.2 Georgia Today

After Georgia became independent in 1991, the country hardly had any rest. Making its way through civil wars and discontent, Georgia has ever since engaged in a process of derussification. Juneau (2017a) states that, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Georgian government has made many efforts to improve the citizens' competence in Georgian while protecting the linguistic minorities - at least on the paper. The linguistic minorities and the autonomous regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) are sources of tension with the Tbilisi government to these days as well as a bone of international dispute with Russia.

Today, pursuant Article 2 of the Constitution, amended several times, Georgian is the only official language, but since 2002, the government has also 'virtually' acknowledged Abkhazian as the second official language in the territory of Abkhazia (Stefan 2016, 274): "The state language of Georgia shall be Georgian, and in Abkhazia - also Abkhazian" (Parliament of Georgia 1995).

Even if not officially, Russian is still used as a *lingua franca* (Pavlenko 2013), can be studied as an optional second foreign language up to the 5th class, and is nonetheless important in secondary and higher education (Pavlenko 2006). There are still Russian schools in Georgia, where students are not only ethnic Russians but also Assyrians, Kurds, Armenians, Greeks, and of course Georgians, whose parents decided to educate their children in Russian for a variety of reasons (Pavlenko 2008).

The attitude towards Russian remains ambiguous. In this respect, factors such as the generational gap and the ethnicity of the speakers must be taken into account. It is palpable that those who grew up during the Soviet era tend to feel more connected to the Russian language and to recognize its inner prestige, whereas the rollercoaster of pro-Western and pro-Russian orientation in the Georgian politics is to be considered in the analysis of the following generations. It is surely no coincidence that the presence of ethnic Russians in Georgia has significantly decreased: from 6.3% in 1989 (Demoscope 2013) to 0.7% in 2014 (Geostat 2016). In fact, Russian is preferred among and by the ethnic minorities, and although it is not the official language of the state, it is tolerated in the context of communication with local and regional authorities (Stefan 2016).

Among the Georgian population, if for some Russian remains the language of the colonizer, for others it is regarded as the language of progress. Blauvelt (2013) highlights the presence of Russian in urban areas and the correlation between the language and higher education or social status, a fact that reminds the case study carried out among Armenian youth proposed by Rabanus and Barseghyan (2015). Georgian schools, instead, dedicate limited time to Russian language and

literature; even textbooks have plenty of mistakes. On the authority of Pavlenko (2006; 2008; 2013), it can be argued that the overall low level of competence in Russian in Georgia can be traced back to the country's historically high literacy rates also during the Soviet era and to the strong national identity and heritage. In sum, the fact that Georgia is not a Slavic country and has a specific cultural consciousness (Stefan 2016) led to the overall resistance to Russian.

## 2 The Study

### 2.1 Methodology

The previous section has shown how language policy has always mirrored the relationship between Georgia and its northern neighbour. We are convinced that, in order to understand the efficacy of language policy, a good touchstone is to analyse the use and perception of languages among the generations educated according to specific language policy.

The case of Georgia is of particular interest, in that the strong derussification that followed its independence in the nineties could have led to a dramatic decrease of proficiency in Russian among the young generations, i.e. those who were educated in a system that has demoted Russian to an eligible foreign language and promoted English as the only compulsory foreign language.

The objective of our research is to understand to what extent such language policies have affected the spread and use of Russian among the Georgian youth. On the one hand, we have tested their language proficiency in Russian; on the other hand, we have investigated what are the students' motivations in learning Russian and if they reflect the attitude young people have towards Russia, its culture, and its language.

In order to understand this, we have collected data in a two-fold way: (i) a survey for young people consisting of questions on their sociolinguistic background and a proficiency test in Russian; (ii) a semi-structured interview for teachers of Russian and English as Foreign Languages on the research topics.

The survey was based on Rabanus and Barseghyan (2015), who were interested in the role played by Russian among the Armenian youth, in a context hardly comparable to the Georgian one, despite its geographical proximity - in fact, the relations between Armenia and the Russian Federation are definitely less tense than those between Georgia and Russia. Rabanus and Barseghyan (2015) collected data about the participants' sociolinguistic background, their attitude towards Russian culture, literature, and politics, and their perception of the Russian linguistic landscape in present-day Armenia. Similar-

ly, the first part of our survey collected data about the informants' mother language(s), age, sex, education, ethnicity, language(s) spoken within the family, perceived command of English and Russian, frequency of contact with Russia, frequency of use, utility and contexts in which Russian is spoken, perception on the Russian-speaking population, interest in Russian literature and culture, perception of Russia from a political and economic point of view. In order to account for the different degrees of ratings, the latter questions were provided on a 1-to-5 Likert scale.

Unlike the previous studies investigating the level of competence in Russian that were based on self-assessments, the second section of the survey aimed at testing the informants' proficiency in Russian. In order to do so, the participants were required to fill in a cloze test composed of 42 sentences. The targeted structures were case selection within the verb phrase and the prepositional phrase, genitive case governed by quantifiers, adjective-noun agreement, verbs of motion (intransitive and transitive, with and without prefixes), verbal aspect and *Aktionsart*, participles, gerunds, passive voice, and indeterminate pronouns.

The second part of the research involved a different population, i.e. instructors of Russian as a Foreign Language (RFL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The approach used to examine the effects of language policies among their pupils and students aimed at collecting information directly from 'experts' in the field. For this reason, we decided to conduct semi-structured expert interviews. On the one hand, semi-structured interviews are flexible, in that starting from quite general queries, the respondents were led to answer in a more open, conversational way, where the questions are only the starting points of their reflection, thus leaving space for further discussion. On the other hand, the so-called expert interviews are significant for the position the interviewees cover in society and their vision on the topic (Littig 2009). In particular, language instructors can provide their expertise in the issue, but at the same time by no means could they influence the language policy of their country; for this reason, the conversations we held were 'expert' interviews, and not 'elite' interviews – the latter used to analyse attitudes and beliefs of people in powerful positions (Odendahl, Shaw 2002; Kvale, Brinkmann 2009).

The interviews were conducted according to a list of questions targeting a variety of topics. The first part aimed at collecting information about the teachers' formation and expertise; the second section explored the type of motivations among their students – both with and without the support of a list of possible motivations (Table 1); the last group of questions considered the perception, spread, and usefulness of English and Russian in contemporary Georgia.



**Table 1** List of elements affecting the students' motivation in learning English/Russian

Job opportunity	Возможность работы
Interest in the language itself	Интерес к языку и языкознанию
Interest in literature	Интерес к литературе
Interest in the political situation	Интерес к политике
Everyday communication	Каждодневная коммуникация
Interethnic communication	Межнациональная коммуникация
International communication	Международная коммуникация
Desire to look like the people who speak English	Желание выглядеть как русскоговорящие
Desire to get high marks	Желание получить хорошие оценки
Desire to please their family	стремление получить одобрение от семьи
They use it for travelling	Для путешествия
Leisure time (FB, VK)	Для отдыха (ФБ, ВК, и т.д.)
Interest in culture	Интерес к культуре

The list of elements shown in the table was spelled out in order to account for a variety of motivations, such as 'integrative' motivation - the positive attitude towards the targeted language group - opposed to 'instrumental' motivation - the potential utilitarian gains of knowing the language (Gardner, Lambert 1972), or between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' motivations, thus ranging from the motivation to engage in learning for its own sake to as a means to an end (Pintrich, Schunk 2002; Dörnyei 2001).

Data collection took place in November and December 2018 in several educational centres - both private and public - in Tbilisi and Kutaisi. With regards to the survey, the informants were required to fill in the questionnaire in Russian or English, whereas the interviews with teachers of RFL and EFL were conducted in Russian and English, respectively. All the participants were given a consent form in which they acknowledged information about the study and their right of withdrawal, as well as the fact that all the collected data would have been anonymized and analysed as aggregated data.

The survey was taken by N=70 young Georgians, aged 18-25. However, only 43 out of 70 informants completed the questionnaire until the very end of it. The informants had a varied educational background, in that they are (or were) enrolled in different university courses, such as pharmacy, IT technology, philology, law, etc.; in order to avoid the bias connected to their area of interest, those who reported to be students at the faculty of foreign languages were not included in the data set. The results of the questionnaires were transferred to a Google Form, which allowed the organisation of the data in an Excel Sheet.

The semi-structured interviews involved 5 teachers of RFL and 5 teachers of EFL, 9 ethnic Georgian and 1 Armenian, all born and resident in Georgia, whose age ranged from 45 to 60. On average, the interviews lasted 30 minutes; the dialogues were recorded, transcribed, and tagged. The informants were pseudonymized according to their profession, i.e., 'RFL' to teachers of Russian as a Foreign Language and 'EFL' to teachers of English as a Foreign Language, followed by a number from 1 to 5.

## 2.2 Data Analysis. The Survey

The first striking element in the data collected among the young Georgian students is the high number of informants who did not complete the questionnaire, i.e. 27 out of 70 (39% of the total). In a study published by one of the authors (Artoni 2019), in which the same survey was conducted among Armenian and Azerbaijani – as well as Georgian – young people, it was highlighted how the Georgian abandonment rate is unusual, in that less than 10% of the Armenian and Azerbaijani informants did not complete the questionnaire. If, on the one hand, this might be due to the fact that the Georgian respondents had an overall lower competence in Russian, which resulted in tiredness and discouragement, on the other hand, a few participants put a note in the comment section reading “My country is occupied by Russia” – one of the most popular mottos used by Georgian protesters against the support the Russian Federation has shown to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The high abandonment rate can, therefore, be explained as an act of protest against a survey that was – undeservedly – perceived as pro-Russian. Furthermore, this voluntary withdrawal from the survey has affected the statistical significance of the data, which is overall quite scarce.

Moving to the sociolinguistic questionnaire, 20% of informants (N=14) reported they speak Russian with some family members, whereas 13% use Russian in shops and markets (N=9), and 27% (N=19) with friends. Interestingly, 27% (N=19) of informants stated they use Russian to communicate with people who belong to a different ethnicity and live in Georgia, thus corroborating the fact that Russian still serves – to a certain extent! – as a *lingua franca* for interethnic communication.

The data regarding the perceived utility of the Russian language in various fields of everyday life are summed up in Table 2.

**Table 2** Percentage of answers to the questions related to the utility of mastering Russian per field

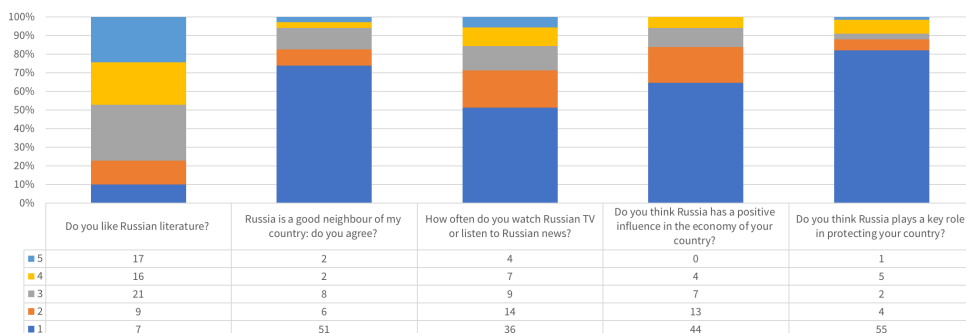
	<b>% yes (N=70)</b>	<b>% maybe (N=70)</b>	<b>% no (N=70)</b>
Study/science	43	20	37
Work	43	24	33
Leisure time	24	31	44
Travelling	47	33	20

The relatively high percentage of positive answers in the fields of study/science (43%), work (43%), and travelling (47%) reveals the instrumental role played by Russian in those areas, where knowing Russian increases the level of opportunities. Conversely, less than one fourth thinks that Russian is helpful in leisure time, thus showing how Russian social media and entertainment products are not so relevant among the Georgian youth.

With regards to the self-assessed knowledge of Russian on a scale from 1 to 5, the mean of the informants' answer is 2.4, a value that is slightly below the medium value, though significantly inferior to the self-assessed knowledge of English (mean value: 3.8). In fact, 70% of informants declared to have a better command of the English language compared to their level of Russian, whereas only 12.9% stated to know Russian better than English.

Despite Russian seems to be a language used on a daily basis for many informants, the attitude towards the Russian world is not positive at all. Table 3 shows the answers provided on a variety of questions that aimed at understanding how the Russian literature, culture, economic influence, and politics are perceived. The answers ranged from 1 (totally disagree, in a lighter shade) to 5 (totally agree, in a darker shade).

**Table 3** Perception of Russian literature, culture, economy, and politics (N respondents, Likert scale)



Whereas the questions involving the perception of economy and politics definitely demonstrate a hostile attitude towards Russia, it is less so for cultural products from Russia, in particular with regards to literature. Almost half of the respondents appreciate Russian literature, and this suggests a clear distinction between Russia as a political entity and the Russian culture – the former being perceived as a colonizing force, the latter as a grand civilisation.

With regards to the language proficiency test, the percentage of correct answers among the Georgian informants reached an average of 37.1% – compared to 70.6% of Armenian and 80.8% of Azerbaijani respondents (Artoni 2019). Looking at the single questions, good scores were performed in case marking (both within the verb phrase and the prepositional phrase), verbs of motion, indefinite pronouns, and aspect. The most widespread errors occurred in the use of participles, gerunds, and *Aktionsart*. The problematic structures are the ones pertaining to the written style – i.e. participles and gerunds – thus requiring formal instruction in order to be mastered, and those involving semantic nuances, like *Aktionsart*.

In sum, data analysis on the survey demonstrates how the Russian language is still a language of certain importance in everyday life, despite the increasing prestige played by English, which has exceeded Russian also in terms of self-perceived competence, and a widespread hostile attitude towards the Russian Federation as a political entity. At the same time, the low mastery of the Russian language seems to concern particularly the areas connected to formal instruction, thus suggesting an overall better command of the Russian language in everyday contexts.

### 2.3 Data Analysis. The Interviews

A useful starting point for the analysis of this study is the students' motivation. According to their teachers, the Georgian students' motivation to study English FL and Russian FL is mainly instrumental: they aim at higher grades, strive for a better education abroad, and desire a better job. However, the main difference is that English is compulsory, while Russian is a language of choice. This implies that when the student is not influenced by external circumstances (i.e. a Russian-speaking family forcing them to learn Russian), intrinsic motivation is higher for students of RFL, since they voluntarily choose to study the language, it is not just part of the programme. English, in this sense, seems to be almost taken for granted, both in a negative and positive way: on one side, it comes in the form of a routinized subject the student does not take up consciously; on the other side, this means that its role of a useful, global *lingua franca* is acknowledged as essential in a student's curriculum, no matter what is their course or field of

studies. The interviewees appear to agree on the status of English as *lingua franca*, even RFL teachers. No competition can be sensed between the two languages and among those who teach these languages.

None of the EFL teachers interviewed has ever lived in an English-speaking country; paradoxical as it may seem, the only one who affirms to have lived in the United States for three years is a teacher of RFL. This is a practical example of the fact that RFL teachers do not show any hard feelings against the ‘competitor’, the English language. Among those interviewed, it appears clear that the status of English as a global language is acknowledged alongside its usefulness as a job requirement. Also teachers of RFL consider English the world’s most privileged means of communication, “*jazyk nomer odin v mire*” язык номер один в мире (the number one language in the world), to quote Teacher RFL 4. The interviews also suggest that English is largely used for international communication in Georgia, though playing a minor part in the interethnic exchange. According to their teachers, students also appear to enjoy social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.), computer games, movies, and books in English, but they are not interested or not yet able to read literature in English. The desire to please their family is not particularly significant, as well as the cultural interest does not appear too popular among the students. With regard to the item ‘desire to look like English speakers’, one teacher (Teacher EFL 1) also notes that there is not a great divergence between English native speakers and Georgians, supporting the idea of Georgia as a westernized country.

The difference in the relationship and attitude towards Russian is evident on many levels. First of all, the subjects show to have close relations to Russian, i.e. they come from a Russian-speaking family, someone in their family teaches or used to teach Russian, they claim to love Russian literature; but what is even more interesting is the fact that this is not limited to RFL teachers, but also involves EFL ones. Students as well are said to have some kind of bond with Russia, i.e. they have relatives or friends in Russia, and also, in this case, it does not affect only those who learn Russian but also learners of English. When asked which language is the most useful and what they think about English, RFL teachers acknowledge English as *lingua franca* but do not give in to the provocation. They recognize the importance of English as a scientific, indisputable fact, but are overtly attached to Russian, the language they teach.

Teacher RFL 1: It is useful to know English. Absolutely. There is no competition. It’s just desirable to know Russian, of course. Since we are specialists of Russian, we are for Russian.

Teacher RFL 2: I think that first of all, you know, the first [foreign] language here is English; well, I certainly very much promote the

Russian language. I am a patriot of the Russian language and the Russian culture. I don't concern myself with the rest.

The opinion of the respondents is in line with both the general perception of English in Georgia and the already mentioned generation gap. English is, indeed, praised as the language of globalization and economics since Georgia is highly dependent on foreign investments and President Saakašvili's pro-Western orientation (Robinson, Ivanišvili 2010) could not help but influence this tendency and increase, once again, the generation gap between those who were born and raised during the Soviet Union - the so-called *staraja gvardija* (старая гвардия (the older generations) - and those who came after. As a matter of fact, the interviewed emphasize a high intrinsic interest in the Russian language, culture, and sometimes literature, especially when compared to English. Teachers report a growing fascination and motivation for the learning of Russian in recent years. This concurs well with the answer to the desire to look like the people who speak, respectively, English and Russian. If with English this desire seems rather low, with Russian it can be argued that rather than look, Georgian students try at least to speak like them, i.e. by following their accent, the accent of their teacher or by making contact with native speakers on social media. It is also noteworthy that Russian is defined as the language of their 'neighbours', whereas English remains a foreign language.

As a consequence, in general, English appears a normal part of the Georgian educational system, without the students asking too many questions about its learning because they are aware of its importance but at the same time it is safe to say that they hardly ever choose it consciously or out of passion. Russian instead is not compulsory and unless their (in some cases Russian-speaking) family or other external causes call for its learning, it remains a subject of choice. From all this, it follows that the influence of Russian in Georgia is undeniable and, despite a dramatic decrease of its role after the collapse of the USSR, it is far from being wiped off completely from the Georgian society. Everyone, even EFL teachers, have a strong opinion, a story, or are somehow linked to Russian. This is also further confirmed by the fact that, as previously shown, 39% of the interviewed Georgian students have refused to take part in the survey, have not completed it or have written commentaries like "I am from Georgia and 20% of my country is occupied by Russia". For all these reasons, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Georgians are still patently emotionally bound to Russian, for better or worse.

It is evident that, given their long, shared history, there are contrasting thoughts on Russian: does it belong to their identity or is it just an enrichment of their linguistic repertoire? This is a question that can be answered over the next decades, by observing attitudes

towards language in public and private contexts, i.e. in education or in everyday life. All this goes to show that, as of today, the attitude towards Russian remains ambivalent. On the one hand, although it is difficult to speculate on such a sensible subject, it is equally difficult to imagine Georgia's linguistic future in the hands of the Russian language. On the other hand, despite the massive presence of English, the language policies of the last decades, the pro-Western political orientation and Georgia's repeated attempt to break away from the Soviet legacy, Russian is still resisting within Georgian society.

Likewise, Pavlenko (2013) claims that the population in Georgia still seems to use Russian actively regardless of their competence. This confirms the commodification of Russian, especially in the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in Georgia.

### **3 Conclusion**

The study we have conducted has shown how the language policy promoted by Georgia up to present days has definitely affected the younger generation and their relationship with the Russian language. However, despite the strong policy of derussification and the investment in the promotion of the English language, Russian still plays a relevant role within the Georgian society, even among the younger generations. Data analysis shows that Russian is considered by almost half of the informants a useful language in a variety of fields, especially those connected to science and the world of work, and that most of the respondents like Russian language and culture, despite their hostile attitude towards Russian politics. With regards to the educational system, the analysis of the language proficiency test suggests that students somehow lack formal instruction, as they are more capable in mastering structures pertaining to oral competences than to written ones.

Needless to say, the results of our study have strong limitations, like the scarce number of respondents and the fact that the survey was conducted in the two main cities of Georgia (namely, Tbilisi and Kutaisi) - thus without considering other regions and rural areas - and only among university students. Nonetheless, we are convinced that this population of young educated Georgians is the most suitable to investigate the effects of language policy in the educational system they were grown in.

The evidence from this study points towards the idea that, according to the interviewed teachers, the motivation that drives Georgian students in learning English and Russian as foreign languages is predominantly extrinsic: increasing their job opportunities, getting high marks, and better education in English-speaking universities in Georgia or in other countries. However, being English com-

pulsory and Russian a subject of choice, intrinsic motivation shall not be underestimated in the case of Russian. Intrinsic motivation in English seems scarce, thereby confirming the theory developed by Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie (2017), according to which intrinsic motivation decreases in students of English as a compulsory foreign language, in that studying the language has become a routine. As for Russian, intrinsic motivation becomes extrinsic when parents require or force their children to learn this language. Furthermore, the data comparison would appear to indicate that there is no competition between the two languages. Taken together, the results suggest that there is a part of the Georgian population who still has Russian at heart - without any significant distinction between RFL or EFL teachers. The subjects claim their country is occupied and it is evident that they are aware of the complicated political relations with Moscow; yet both students and teachers are usually able to separate language from politics. In Georgia, the considerable presence of the *staraja gvardija* cannot be unnoticed. They or their parents grew up and received their education in the Soviet Union, and it occurs that their children and grandchildren “continue the dynasty” - to quote Teacher RFL 3 - of learning (and sometimes also teaching) Russian. The investigation also confirms the assumption arisen from scholarship according to which Russian is considered by many a language spoken by the intelligentsia, whose culture and literature are “among the richest”, as stated by Teacher EFL 2.

## Bibliography

- Artoni, D. (2019). “Predstavlenie o russkom jazyke sredi južno-kavkazskoj moloděži” Представление о русском языке среди южно-кавказской молодежи (The Perception of the Russian Language Among the Southern Caucasian Youth). *Mundo Eslavo*, 18, 59-73.
- Aspaturian, V.V. (1968). “The Non-Russian Nationalities”. Kassof, A. (ed.), *Prospects for Soviet Societies*. London: Pall Mall Press, 143-98.
- Batiašvili, N. (2012). “The ‘Myth’ of the Self. The Georgian National Narrative and Quest for ‘Georgianness’”. Assmann, A.; Shortt, L. (eds), *Memory and Political Change*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 186-200.
- Blauvelt, T.K. (2013). “Endurance of the Soviet Imperial Tongue. The Russian Language in Contemporary Georgia”. *Central Asian Survey*, 32(2), 189-209.
- Brel, Y. (2017). “The Failure of the Language Policy in Belarus”. *New Visions for Public Affairs*, 9, 59-74.
- Demoscope (2013). “Vsesojuznaja perepis' naselenija 1989 goda” Всесоюзная перепись населения 1989 года (Soviet Census of Population in 1989 Year). *Demoscope Weekly*. <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/census.php?cy=6>.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Teaching and Researching Motivation*. Harlow: Pearson Education.



- Dörnyei, Z.; Al-Hoorie A.H. (2017). "The Motivational Foundation of Learning Languages Other than Global English. Theoretical Issues and Research Directions". *The Modern Language Journal*, 101(3), 455-68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12408>.
- Gardner, R.C.; Lambert, W.E. (1972). *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*. Rowley (MA): Newbury House Publishers.
- Garibova, J.; Asgarova, M. (2009). "Language Policy and Legislation in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan". *Language Problems & Language Planning*, 33(3), 191-21. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lplp.33.3.01gar>.
- Geostat. National Statistics Office of Georgia (2016). *2014 General Population Census*. <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/568/2014-general-population-census>.
- Grenoble, L.A. (2006). *Language Policy in the Soviet Union*. New York; Boston; Dordrecht; London; Moscow: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Jones, S.F. (2007). "The Georgian Language State Program and Its Implications". *Nationalities Papers. The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 23(3), 535-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905999508408401>.
- Juneau, J.-F. (2017a). "Post-Soviet States and Linguistic Minorities' Problems. Language Policies, and Ideologies in Education in Georgia". *Irish Slavonic Studies*, 26, 149-76.
- Juneau, J.-F. (2017b). *Ethnographie des politiques linguistiques éducationnelles en Géorgie. Le programme de géorgien langue seconde en contextes arméniens et azéris* [MA thesis]. Montréal: University of Montréal.
- Kvale, S.; Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews. Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Littig, B. (2009). "Interviewing the Elite. Interviewing Experts. Is there a Difference?". Boger, A. et al. (eds), *Interviewing Experts*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 98-113.
- Odentahl, T.; Shaw, A.M. (2002). "Interviewing Elites". Gubrium, J.; Holstein, J. (eds), *Handbook of Interview Research. Context and Methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 299-316.
- Parliament of Georgia (1995). *The Constitution of Georgia. Art. 8*. <http://www.parliament.ge/en/ajax/downloadFile/131642/constitution-ofgeorgia>.
- Pavlenko, A. (2006). "Russian as Lingua Franca". *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, 78-99. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0267190506000055>.
- Pavlenko, A. (2008). "Russian in Post-Soviet Countries". *Russian Linguistics*, 32, 59-80. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11185-007-9020-1>.
- Pavlenko, A. (2011a). "Language Rights versus Speakers' Rights. On the Applicability of Western Language Rights Approaches in Eastern European Contexts". *Language Policy*, 10, 37-58. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-011-9194-7>.
- Pavlenko, A. (2011b). "Linguistic Russification in the Russian Empire. Peasants into Russians?". *Russian Linguistics*, 35. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11185-011-9078-7>.
- Pavlenko, A. (2013). "Multilingualism in Post-Soviet Successor States". *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 7(4), 262-71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12024>.
- Pintrich, P.R.; Schunk, D.H. (2002). *Motivation in Education. Theory, Research, and Application*. Upper Saddle River (NJ): Merrill Prentice Hall.

- Rabanus, S.; Barseghyan, H. (2015). "Language Choice and Identity in Post-Soviet Armenia". Rosenberg P.; Jungbluth K.; Rhobodes D.Z. (eds), *Linguistic Construction of Ethnic Borders*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 13-32.
- Rannut, M. (2012). "Russification in the Soviet Era". Chapelle, C.A. (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics, 5034-5038*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, lxxv-lxxv. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal1031>.
- Riasanovsky, N.V. (2004). *Storia Universale*. Vol. 27, *Storia della Russia*. Milano: RCS Quotidiani.
- Robinson, M.; Ivanišvili, N. (2010). "V Gruzii Russkij jazyk zamenjajut angliskim" В Грузии русский язык заменяют английским (In Georgia the Russian Language is replaced by English). *Inosmi.ru*. <https://bit.ly/3jVfJh2>.
- Shohamy, E. (2006). *Language Policy. Hidden Agendas and New Approaches*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Smith, M.G. (2012). *Language and Power in the Creation of the USSR, 1917-1953*. Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Stefan, S. (2016). *La tutela delle minoranze nei paesi postsovietici. I casi di Ucraina e Georgia* [PhD dissertation]. Udine: Università degli Studi di Udine.
- Von Gumpfenberg, M.-C.; Steinbach, U. (2008). *Der Kaukasus. Geschichte, Kultur, Politik*. Munich: G.H. Beck.