

Rusudan Amirejibi

International Center for Georgian Language

Presented to the Committee on Civil Integration, Parliament of Georgia

Linguistic identity and language policy

This paper originated at an interdisciplinary conference to collect specialists from different spheres to present empirically grounded recommendations for Georgian politicians in order to unify the Georgian nation and facilitate the integration of ethnic groups living in Georgia. These recommendations should help to strengthen national identity and turn representatives of all ethnic minorities into loyal citizens.

Language plays an important role in consolidating a multiethnic society into a single nation. That's why for this conference I chose an issue of language identity and language policy.

From the outset, I want to emphasize that one and the same person can have different national and ethnic identities. Ethnic identity, among other factors is based on mother tongue whereas national identity, amongst other factors, is based on the state national language. In other words, for example Armenian living in Georgia will have an Armenian ethnic identity and a Georgian national identity. Proceeding from this point, it is possible to have two linguistic identities. A person can have even more linguistic identities. For instance, a child of parents of different ethnicity, for whom both parents' languages are native. S/he has not only a dual linguistic identity, but also a dual ethnic, and maybe even a dual national identity. In such cases there should not be a pressure on him/her to choose one.

Our goal should not be to undermine the ethnic identity of non-Georgians, but rather to create for them a Georgian national identity. As I mentioned above national identity is defined by language, together with other factors. Thus, to establish a Georgian national identity it is very important to optimize the functioning of the Georgian language, i.e. to enlarge the spheres of its use, its development in all directions, to normalize the literary language, and the Georgian educational system and mass media etc. This is language planning - one aspect of language policy. Another aspect of language policy is taking care of minority languages and defending minority language rights. Together these two aspects of language policy constitute a series of theoretical principles and practical measures, which are aimed at solving language problems in a state. Part of language policy is language law, which regulates usage of languages in different social situations.

There are several types of language policy and choosing an appropriate one must become a priority for our government in the process of building a modern Georgian state. I will present below recommendations for choosing and realizing an effective language policy below. Before that, however I want to touch briefly on the decisive importance of an

appropriate language policy, the democratic principles of such a policy and linguistic situation in Georgia.

In Soviet Union language (together with repressions) was a powerful instrument for constructing the Soviet people. Together with an ideological strategy of building a united identity and neutralizing the expression of national feeling, the Soviet Union was also implementing politics of supporting ethno-national minorities, as potential territorial allies. The transformation of the Soviet space into the post-Soviet space caused a dislocation of socio-psychological self-identification and activated hidden dimensions of identity. Soviet identity was forgotten, in socio-political relationships ethnic resources assumed greater importance. National movements, fighting for political rights, were established and became influential. In such movements one of determining factors was language, due to its huge psychological role in collective and individual feelings of pride and dignity. This is especially true with small nations. The status of aboriginal languages of oppressed nations is understood as a function of group worth.

Language is a central issue of ethno-politics, because in multilingual states there is a danger of potential contradictions between loyalty to a given ethnic group and to a wider national identity. If ethnic groups do not have appropriate conditions to keep and develop their cultural and linguistic originality, ethnicity and language will be politicized. An extreme expression of this is separatism and the search for alternative loyalties to other states. And conversely, if ethnic minorities have conditions to safeguard and develop their ethno-cultural originality, the political salience of ethnicity reduces.

The vast majority of modern world states are multi-ethnic and multilingual. Which language policy is the best and most democratic? One that helps assimilation or one which promotes linguistic pluralism? What political consequences ensue from different policies? The answers to these questions can be found, firstly, in international experience, secondly, by analyzing the context of each specific case. As a rule, ethnic harmony is possible in states, which recognize the language rights of minorities, but at the same time establish a unified, civic and cultural identity. Concrete measures must be generated and implemented in accordance with specific context. Nevertheless, in all cases social integration, based on an appropriate educational policy, is fundamental. In order to keep his or her identity a person has to receive education in their native language; however for successful integration s/he must also master the state language. An advantage of a pluralistic language policy is that by offering minorities a cultural space within wider society it represents a policy of both practical and symbolic involvement. Citizens require a subjective sense, and it is precisely this sense, which at the collective level, constitutes them as a nation.

In today's Georgia interethnic relations is a very salient issue, because of its role in the context of building a national state. A serious problem between Georgian speaking and non-Georgian speaking populations a serious problem is the so-called "language barrier", which is one of fundamental reasons of the low participation of ethnic minorities in socio-political life. For full participation in the body politic (which, by the way, is a basic human right) access to information is essential. This can be provided by a suitable

language policy. The theory of language policy suggests that successful influence on language functioning in society is enhanced by the consideration of social factors and the tendencies of language development. Therefore developing an appropriate language policy and its phased implementation is very important.

In 2000 in Strasbourg a conference was held on European language policy as a result of a document prepared entitled “Linguistic politics of multilingual and multicultural Europe.” This document notes that a rational language policy can only be based on systemic knowledge of the linguistic situation in a given area. Therefore several significant principles must be considered:

1. The preservation of a multiplicity of languages and cultures.
2. Linguistic and political human rights
3. Implementation of directions developed by European Union in this connection.

In order to better understand linguistic-ethnic processes in Georgia we should recall essential developments in Soviet language policy.

Until 1930 the communist party-state set supported the development of non-Russians in the Soviet Union. In this period many national schools appeared and studying Russian was voluntary. We could call this phase one characterized by pluralism and linguistic federalism.

After 1930 till the end of 1950s the number of Russian schools increased. Parents had the right to select either a national or Russian school for their children.

Many parents chose Russian schools in order to provide their children with a better future, since Russian was considered to be a language of science and culture and the *sine qua non* of social and political mobility through the Soviet *hierarchical* system.

From 1960 in many autonomous republics national schools were closed. This was a policy based on monolingualism and linguistic russification.

From 1985, after Gorbachev’s rise to power, shortest phase in Soviet language policy began – linguistic democratization. The declaration of democratization, glasnost and perestroika by the communist party, which regarded a necessary to preserve its power, helped all ethnic groups to revive their identity. In this regard, at the end of the 1980s in all republics movements appeared aimed at raising the status of national territories and languages. In the post-Soviet space the usage and study of Russian language decreased and Russian media was limited. But one former sphere of the usage of Russian in post-Soviet states, including Georgia, was and still is its role as a predominant interethnic Lingua Franca.

Granting the Georgian language the status of state language was not enough for resolving the problem of its real status. It does not represent the language of interethnic relations. In Georgia today this function is fulfilled still by Russian and increasingly English. The fair

and effective conducting of language policy is a way of resolving this and other language problems with civilized methods.

Before realizing an effective language policy in Georgia:

- 1) The linguistic situation in the country must be studied. This is determined by the series of factors: linguistic, demographic, socio-economic, geopolitical and historical.
- 2) Internationally recognized linguistic human rights must be analyzed.
- 3) The rights of aboriginal populations and ethnic minorities must be considered and international experience of implementing these rights must be analyzed.
- 4) The role of autochthonous languages and of their native speakers in socio-political processes, economics and culture must be analyzed. The bases for the ethnical and linguistic rights of autochthonous nations must be clearly defined, as well as the ways within these rights differ from those of ethnic groups.
- 5) During analyses attention must be paid to the linguistic claims of each ethnic group. Ethno-linguistic claims depend on the form of involvement of this group in the state.
- 6) Factors causing language conflicts and the ways to avoid them must be investigated.

Based on such analyses a systemic plan for realizing language policy must be elaborated, which, together with other aspects (confessional-religious and socio-economic) will become a bases for the integration of poly-ethnic society. Creating a united nation out of ethnic variety must become one of the most important priorities of Georgia. This nation must unify different ethnic and social groups around mutually profitable, common interests, goals and values. In this process one of the most significant roles is given to language policy. The guarantee of its success, however, is retaining a balance between the usage of the state language and minority languages.

Language policy must become a part of state nationalities policy, during the elaborating of which each ethnic group must have opportunities to preserve their identity, develop it, preserve their culture, traditions, language and soon they will contribute to the integration of Georgian society, the development of civic society, social stability and deepening democracy. Instead of forbidding ethnic minorities to use their language on an official level, we first of all have to create appropriate conditions for learning Georgian. Teaching Georgian to ethnic minorities must be improved, special methodology must be worked out, handbooks, self-teaching books, phrase-books must be created and qualified teachers must be prepared.

In Georgia's language policy:

- 1) Our European orientation and international obligations in the sphere of language functioning must be considered.
- 2) It must be considered mandatory to keep cultural and linguistic variety, as one of the basic conditions for the optimization of interethnic relationships.
- 3) Multi-ethnicity of Georgian society must be emphasized and this fact must be considered valuable and esteemed as a positive fact.

- 4) An optimal language law must be elaborated which will preserve a multilingual culture;
- 5) Because one of the significant ways through which a state realizes its language policy, is the educational system, it should be decided which languages must be taught in schools and for how long;
- 6) Educational programs must be designed taking into consideration the interests of different groups and generating in children tolerance towards other cultures. Language policy carried out in an appropriate way offers each ethnic group the ability actively and without limitation, to be involved in state life, without losing identity.
- 7) Concrete recommendations must be elaborated for supporting ethnic minorities and developing the state language.
- 8) Ethnic minorities must be given the right to study in their native language. However, taking care of those languages, no matter how small, which exist only within Georgia, must become a special duty of the state.

The alleged view that giving to ethnic minorities the right to cultural and linguistic development is dangerous for state unification has been discredited long time ago in modern science.

Elaborating language policy is not only the business of politicians. The study of many language problems in the world shows that they are only an expression of socioeconomic and political conflicts. Results of analyzes of language problems makes clear the necessity of having multiple sources of information. To understand the linguistic situation in a given area it is not enough to ask a simple question: "What languages do you speak?" In gathering such information specialists from many disciplines must participate: linguists, political economists, sociologists and socio-anthropologists. Besides, since one of the goals of language policy is the inclusion of all groups in state political life, it is necessary to include them also in the discussion of this policy. The elaborated in this way language policy must become a subject of public discussion and secure the support of the population. The government must assure the population of the *bona fide* intentions of proposed changes. The population may recognize, partly recognize or not recognize at all these changes. According to the extent or popular support we can judge the results of the appropriateness of this policy.

Preparation and implementation of language policy can not be a short term process, because language plays a significant role in the genesis of ethnic conflicts, as well as in keeping concord and ethnic piece.