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## MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED REGIONS: THE CASE OF ABKHAZIA

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*Language education in conflict and post-conflict societies is one of the main sources of inter-ethnic tension. However, non-discriminative language education is also an opening for the improvement of inter-ethnic relation and reconciliation. This paper outlines the positive effects of mother tongue education and bilingualism for conflict-affected societies. Analysing statistical data on the educational system of Abkhazia, the paper identifies significant shortcomings in the field of mother tongue education for ethnic Armenian, Georgian and Abkhazian schoolkids. The author argues in favour of a developmental approach to education towards the de facto republic, to support a non-discriminative mother tongue-based multilingual approach to education for all ethnic groups. This approach could increase the quality of education and linguistic tolerance in the region.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Mother tongue education, bilingualism, ethnic conflict, Abkhazia, Georgia*

### INTRODUCTION

Language education in conflicted societies is an essential topic of discussion. Researchers have attempted to establish the role of education in bridging and integrating divided societies and have defined several important practices of school and education management in conflicted regions. According to Zymbalas and Bekerman (2013), integrated bilingual schools and multilingual education are one of the widely spread language policies in conflicted regions, and they proposed three theoretical frameworks for justifying integrated bilingual schooling. The first framework is social cohesion theory, which implies the integration of society as the cornerstone for overcoming social, ethnic or political tensions. However, the approach is questioned because “*the full complexity of heterogeneity remains unacknowledged and the emergence of a majorities view of integration is infused into the societal and educational practices of every day*” (Zymbalas/Bekerman 2013, 406). As the second main base of educational programmes in divided societies, contact hypothesis, proposed by Allport (1954), implies that interaction between divided societies can relieve the conflict. The third important theory for designing integrated bilingual schools in conflicted regions is Berry’s (1997)

acculturation theory, which implies the promotion of biculturalism, “where people maintain values and customs of their native culture” (Zymbalas/Bekerman 2013, 407). The objectives of educational policies are frequently justified by a theoretical framework. A bilingual educational programme implemented in an additive context can benefit from social, cultural and educational benefits of bilingualism (Baker 2006). As additive bilingualism falls under the acculturation theoretical framework, it can become the basis for designing bilingual integrated programmes in conflict-affected regions.

Georgia, which is located on the east coast of the Black Sea at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe, borders Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey. Georgia has a population of approximately 3,700,000 (National Office of Statistics of Georgia 2014) and is a multi-ethnic country, in which ethnic minorities constitute 13.2 percent of the total population (2014 state census). The two largest ethnic groups, the Armenians and Azerbaijanis, reside in two regions of Georgia and together constitute 10.8% of the total population (Tabatadze 2017; Tabatadze/Gorgadze 2017). Two regions in Georgia, Tskhinvali and Abkhazia, have not been under control of the Georgian government since the conflict in 1990. Language issues were essential in the dynamics that led to conflict in Abkhazia (Comai/Venturi 2015).

The de facto Government of Abkhazia is striving to build its educational system and develop language policy in the multi-ethnic context of Abkhazia. The de facto Constitution of Abkhazia and law on State Language regulates the language issues in education. The language educational policy in Abkhazia does not entirely fall into any of the abovementioned theoretical frameworks; however, these frameworks can be used for developing future educational and language policies in Abkhazia.

Using content and statistical data analyses research methods, this study (1) discusses the importance of mother tongue education and the positive effects of bilingualism, (2) analyses and describes the development of mother tongue education in the de facto Republic of Abkhazia and (3) provides recommendations on how to address the current situation. The following sources were used for the content analysis: (a) legal acts; (b) scholarly articles and books; (c) reports of non-governmental and international organizations; and (d) articles from newspapers, magazines and online agencies. Statistical data were obtained from official sites of the Department of Statistics of the de facto Republic of Abkhazia, the de facto Ministry of Education of Abkhazia and Educational Department of Sukhumi, and from the Department of Statistics of Georgia and Gali Educational Resource Centre of Georgia. Statistical data were also obtained from news agencies working in the territory of Abkhazia. The primary statistical data obtained were elaborated and tables were developed for analysing the statistical data in accordance with the objective of the study.

## IMPORTANCE OF MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

Scholars of bilingual and language education underscore the importance of mother tongue education (Baker 2000, 2006, 2016; Cummins, 1986, 2000, 2001; Skutnab-Kangas, 2000). As Cummins (1986) pointed out, “The first language is so instrumental to the emotional and academic well-being of the child, that its development must be seen as a high, if not the highest, priority in the early years of schooling” (101). UNESCO has highlighted the importance of mother tongue education since 1953, stating the following in its monographs in the fundamental education series, *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* (1953):

*“It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is [the] mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.”* (11)

The development of the first language is crucial for bilingualism, academic success and achievement, as well as for self-confidence and emotional well-being. As Cummins (1986) noted, “Whether directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, that your language and the language of your parents, of your home and of your friends is non-functional in school is to negate your sense of self.” (101)

The second argument to justify mother tongue education is rooted in teaching academic subjects (Cummins 2001; Baker 2011). When using their native language, students will be able to understand the content of other subjects (math, science, arts, music, sports) and, accordingly, they will not fall behind. Mother tongue education in the primary grades is an essential cornerstone of students’ academic achievement in different subjects in the school curricula (Cummins 1986).

The third argument relates to the results of research on the importance of the mother tongue in developing bilingualism. Developing full proficiency in the first language will promote the same in the second language. This point assumes the existence of an underlying proficiency that is common to both languages. Once students learn to read as a skill and as a knowledge source, it becomes a relatively simple matter of transferring the skill and knowledge to the context of a second language. Similarly, once one has learned the way in which to use language as a tool to conceptualise, draw abstract inferences or express complex relations in one language, these processes or language functions apply to any language context. Several relevant studies have suggested that the implications of the role of the first language in bilingual education are profound (Cummins 1984; Cummins et al. 1984). Learning in the first

language benefits first and second language development; thus, when more time is spent developing the first language, it has significant positive effects on learning the second language.

As mother tongue education provides students with a suitable social-emotional environment for learning and opportunities for linguistic and cognitive development, the knowledge and skills acquired in the first language transfer to the second language. Acquisition of two languages enables students to benefit from the cognitive, academic and socio-cultural advantages of bilingualism.

### POSITIVE EFFECTS OF BILINGUALISM: ADDITIVE AND DYNAMIC BILINGUALISM

Lambert (1974) distinguished between *subtractive* and *additive* bilingualism. Subtractive bilingualism is a form of bilingualism in which the state or official language is learnt, and the mother tongue is lost. Typically, children from minority communities who speak their native language substitute it with the majority language. The bilingual education programmes for minority students are mainly characterised by this subtractive approach. Additive bilingualism, on the other hand, focuses on the mother tongue and the educational programme is built to learn two languages. In addition to the mother tongue, the student learns the official, state or other foreign language (Garcia 2014). As Garcia and Lin (2016) stated,

*“Throughout history, bilingual programmes had usually encouraged additive bilingualism for language majorities where an additional second language was simply separately added to a first. However, for language-minoritised people, schools had tended to pursue subtractive bilingualism, taking away the child’s home language.”* (3)

Garcia (2009) challenged the additive and subtractive models of bilingualism and indicated that while these models might have been sufficient during the twentieth century, they do not reflect the full nature of bilingualism and bilingual education in the twenty-first century. Garcia elaborated further that bilingual education cannot merely be subtractive or additive, and she proposed two other types of bilingualism for schools recursive and dynamic bilingualism.

*Recursive bilingualism* refers to the bilingualism of ethnolinguistic groups and is designed to revitalise their native languages. Garcia (2009) suggested using immersion and developmental bilingual education programmes for these groups. *Dynamic bilingualism* is the situation in which multilingual speakers use multiple languages for interactions in different settings and spaces, and at different times. Students from

dominant and non-dominant cultural groups are enrolled in programmes and interact with each other in different languages and therefore develop multilingual skills. Bilingual education programmes, such as *dual-language*, *two-way bilingual education*, *two-way immersion*, *poly-directional bilingual education* and *bilingual immersion* are recommended to achieve dynamic bilingualism (Garcia 2009). In these settings, three or more languages can be used as the language of instruction when the student population is not homogenous.

Research findings have mostly demonstrated positive effects of bilingual education on children’s language awareness and cognitive functioning (Bialistok, 2001, 2007, Bialistok/Craik/Klein/Viswanathan, 2004). However, despite these positive findings and the benefits of bilingual education, it remains a controversial field in educational policy (Bekerman 2005). Recent studies, which have compared the results of cognition among bilinguals and monolinguals, have found mostly positive results for bilinguals (Bialistok, 2001, 2007, Bialistok/Craik/Klein/Viswanathan, 2004). Baker (2011) compared language acquisition, information processing and memorisation on the part of bilinguals and monolinguals. According to the results, bilinguals achieved better results in problem-solving and solving mathematical problems correctly (Baker 2006). In 2003, McLeay (cited in Baker 2006) showed that “balanced bilingual” adults can cope better with complex mathematical and spatial problems. Similarly, Kessler and Quinn’s (1982) research indicated that bilinguals demonstrate superior ability in solving scientific problems compared with their monolingual counterparts (cited in Baker 2006).

Positive effects of bilingualism have also been observed in studies of bilingualism and metacognitive awareness. Several studies conducted by Bialystok (2007) investigated the development of stable executive processing and the protection from the decline of executive processes among bilingual and monolingual children. The author found that bilingual children outperformed monolinguals in understanding word meanings and could determine the number of words in a sentence better. Bilingualism also facilitates memorisation (Tabatadze 2014). This positive effect of bilingualism relate to balanced bilinguals, whose competences in both languages are developed well, such that they are “[...] *approximately equally fluent in two languages across various contexts*” (Baker 2006, 9). Accordingly, it is essential to focus on the development of bilingual education programmes designed to raise balanced bilinguals. Programmes that promote additive bilingualism are essential for raising balanced bilinguals and are therefore necessary for acquiring the positive cognitive and socio-cultural effects of bilingualism.

## THE ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF ABKHAZIA

Abkhazia is the Autonomous Republic of Georgia. Abkhazia's ethnic composition has long been a topic of debate and manipulation. The first data on the Abkhazian population were available in 1886 (Trier/Lohm/Szakonyi 2010); however, Abkhazians and Georgians fiercely debate the first population census because they consider the data inaccurate and open to interpretation (Trier/Lohm/Szakonyi 2010; Muller 1999). The first of six censuses conducted during the Soviet Union era was conducted in 1926. Table 1 shows the ethnic composition of Abkhazia's population during the Soviet times.

**Table 1**  
Ethnic Composition of Abkhazian during the Soviet Union

Year	Total Population	Georgians	Abkhazians	Armenians	Russians
1926	212,033	33.6 %	27.8 %	12.8 %	6.1 %
1939	311,900	29.5 %	18,0 %	15.9 %	19.3 %
1959	404,700	39.1 %	15.1 %	15.9 %	21.4 %
1970	487,040	40.0 %	15.9 %	11.4 %	19.1 %
1979	486,082	43.9 %	17.1 %	15.1 %	16.4 %
1989	524,161	45.7 %	17.7 %	14.6 %	14.3 %

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the de facto Government of Abkhazia conducted population censuses in 2003 and 2011, which also evaluated the population's ethnic composition. The censuses showed an increase in the Abkhazian ethnic population and a decrease in the Georgian population because of their displacement from Abkhazia after the war in 1992-1993. Most Georgians left Abkhazia, and only approximately 55,000 returned to the Gali district (Chirikba 2009).

Many researchers have questioned the validity of the census data and the magnitude of the population increase (e.g. Trier et al. 2010; Clogg 2008). The European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI 2009) estimated Abkhazia's population distribution by ethnic background based on data available to the organisation, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
ECMI Estimation of Population of Abkhazia by Ethnic Background (2009)

Ethnicity	Population
Abkhazians	65,000 – 80,000
Georgians	45,000 – 65,000
Armenians	60,000 – 70,000
Russians	10,000 – 15,000
Greeks	1,500
Others	5,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>186,500 – 236,500</b>

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### LANGUAGE EDUCATION LEGISLATURE IN GEORGIA AND IN THE DE FACTO REPUBLIC OF ABKHAZIA

According to Article 8 of the Constitution of Georgia, Georgia's state language is Georgian, and Abkhazian is the language used in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia. The laws on General and Higher Education of Georgia also stipulate the usage of Georgian and Abkhazian languages in the educational system of Georgia. As Georgian legislature does not function in the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, this article briefly reviews the latter's language education legislature. Abkhazia's Constitution was adopted in 1994; Abkhaz is the state and, while Russian is an official language of the de facto Abkhazia, Article 6 of the Constitution guarantees the right to use the native language freely. The language of instruction in schools is regulated by the law on state language adopted in 2007. Article 7 of the law stipulates the following: *"The language of instruction in the Republic of Abkhazia is [the] State Language as well as Russian"*. The same law indicates that citizens of Abkhazia *"[...] have the right to obtain education in their mother tongue within the limits of possibilities offered by the system of education"*. Learning Abkhaz is mandatory in all schools, and the final exam system was introduced to assess students' proficiency in the Abkhazian language in Abkhazian public and private schools.

### EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF DE FACTO ABKHAZIA

The process of building Abkhazia's educational system did not begin until the Soviet

era. The first attempts to establish education in Abkhazian emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Gvantseladze 2010). On 30 May 1851, the first four-year school was established in the village of Likhni, and the study of the Abkhazian language was introduced in this school (Gvantseladze 2010).

During the Soviet era, the educational system and language instruction in Abkhazian schools largely reflected the Republic's multi-ethnic composition, and its principal ethnic groups had opportunities to be educated in their mother tongue. Georgian, Russian, Abkhazian, Armenian and even Greek schools functioned in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia until 1938 (Comai/Venturi 2015). Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 313 schools in Abkhazia provided instruction in Abkhazian, Georgian, Russian, Russian-Georgian, Georgian–Abkhazian, Russian-Georgian-Abkhazian and Russian-Abkhazian. Table 3 shows the breakdown of languages used in Abkhazian schools at the end of 1980.

**Table 3**  
Schools by Language of Instruction in 1980

Language of Instruction	Number of Schools	% of Schools
Georgian	165	53 %
Abkhazian	52	17 %
Armenian	43	14 %
Russian	21	6 %
Georgian-Abkhazian	3	1 %
Georgian-Russian	19	6 %
Russian-Abkhazian	7	2 %
Russian-Georgian-Abkhazian	3	1 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>100 %</b>

As Table 3 shows, 53 percent of the schools used Georgian as the language of instruction and 17 percent used Abkhazian as the language of instruction. These figures are comparative with the Georgian and Abkhazian populations of Abkhazia, which were 45.7 percent and 17.7 percent, respectively. The same pattern was observed among the Armenian schools, which constituted 14 percent of the schools, while the ethnic Armenian population in Abkhazia was 14.8 percent in 1989.

Detailed statistical data on schools in Abkhazia after the war became available in 2008 (Department of Statistics of Abkhazia 2016). As shown in Table 4, although the number of schools dropped from 169 in 2008 to 156 in 2017 (Department of Statistics of Abkhazia 2017), the number of students increased by just under 3 percent, from 26,220 in 2008 to 27,000 in 2017.

**Table 4**  
Number of Schools and Students in Abkhazia in 2008 – 2017

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Number of Students</b>	26,220	25,558	26,282	26,315	26,138	25,969	25,577	26,696	26,611	27,000
<b>Number of Public Schools</b>	169	169	169	168	165	166	165	159	159	156

Officially, the schools in Abkhazia are differentiated by the language of instruction used, which includes Abkhazian, Russian, Abkhazian-Russian, Armenian and Georgian. Table 5 lists the number of schools in Abkhazia by their current language of instruction.

**Table 5**  
Number of Schools by Language of Instruction in Abkhazia

Language of Instruction	Number of Schools	% of Schools
Abkhazian	59	36.5 %
Abkhazian-Russian	15	9.6 %
Russian	46	30.2 %
Armenian	25	16.7 %
Georgian	11	7 %
Russian-Abkhazian	7	2 %
Russian-Georgian-Abkhazian	3	1 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>100 %</b>

It is also worth noting the number of students by their ethnic background in Abkhazia and analysing the possibility of each ethnic group receiving instruction in their mother tongue. As Table 6 shows, of the 26,611 students in 2016, 53.5 percent are ethnic Abkhazians, 17.8 percent are Georgians, 17.1 percent are Armenians and 7.9 percent are Russians. Other ethnic minority students are also represented in Abkhazia's schools.

**Table 6**  
Ethnic Composition of Students in Schools of Abkhazia

Ethnicity	Number of Students	% of Students
Abkhazian	14,234	53.5 %
Armenians	4,548	17.1 %
Georgians	4,743	17.8 %
Russians	2,097	7.9 %
Others	989	3.7 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>26,611</b>	<b>100 %</b>

(based on Sputnik-Abkhazia, 2016)

However, the ethnic composition of the student population does not match the distribution in schools with instruction in their mother tongue. For example, while Abkhazian students constitute 53.3 percent of the student population, only 31.5 percent is enrolled in Abkhazian schools, and even though only 7.90 percent of students with a Russian ethnic background study in Abkhazia, 40.5 percent of the student population is enrolled in Russian schools. Similar disproportionate rates of student ethnic composition are evident in the Armenian and Georgian schools. Table 7 presents the distribution of schools and students in Abkhazia by language of instruction and by districts.

**Table 7**  
Distribution of Schools by Language of Instruction and District of Abkhazia

District / City	Number of Schools	Number of Students	Number of Students in ...				
			Abkhazian schools	Russian schools	Russian-Abkhazian schools	Georgian schools	Armenian schools
Sokhumi	16	7,407	2,696	3,224	1,278	0	209
Sukhumi district	11	488	111	116	0	0	261
Gudauta	29	3,614	1,902	298	1,187	0	227
Gagra	18	4,412	954	2,456	330	0	672
Tkvarcheli	29	1,904	459	1,259	186	0	0
Ochamchire	17	2,177	1,417	510	132	0	118
Gali	20	3,255	0	2,128	0	1,127	0
Gulrihshi	14	1,597	187	67	856	0	487
<b>Total</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>24,854</b>	<b>7,726</b>	<b>10,058</b>	<b>3,969</b>	<b>1,127</b>	<b>1,974</b>
<b>Percentage</b>		<b>100 %</b>	<b>31.1 %</b>	<b>40.5 %</b>	<b>16 %</b>	<b>4.5 %</b>	<b>7.9 %</b>

(based on Sputnik-Abkhazia, 2016)

The statistical data are used to calculate how many students receive education in their mother tongue. Table 8 presents the data for Abkhazian, Armenian and Georgian students.

**Table 8**  
Ethnic Background of Students and Mother Tongue Instruction

Ethnicity	Number of Students	Number of Students at schools with mother tongue instruction	% of Students with mother tongue education
Abkhazian	14,234	7,726	54 %
Armenians	4,548	1,974	43.4 %
Georgians	4,743	1,127	23.7 %

(based on Sputnik-Abkhazia, 2016)

As Table 8 shows, the education system is unable to provide mother tongue education for the different majority or minority ethnic groups; however, the reasons for this failure differ depending on the ethnic group and can be divided into three categories: (1) voluntary refusal, (2) semi-voluntary refusal and (3) involuntary inability to receive mother tongue education. Further analysis will be made in subsequent sections that address each specific ethnic group of students.

### ARMENIANS AND ARMENIAN SCHOOLS IN ABKHAZIA

The Soviet Union's 1989 census showed that 76,541 Armenians were living in Abkhazia; however, this amount decreased to 44,860 by 2004 and to 41,867 by 2011 (Census of Abkhazia 2003; 2011). Despite this decrease, the proportion of Armenians among the total Abkhazian population has increased since 1989 (Matsuzato 2011). Armenians live primarily in the Gagra, Gulripshi and Sukhumi districts of Abkhazia.

Official data indicates that there are currently 26 Armenian language schools in Abkhazia with 1,974 students (Sputnik-Abkhazia, 2016). According to UNICEF survey data, the number of Armenian schools has decreased from 34 with 2,312 students in 2006 (cited in Trier/Lohm/Szakonyi, 2010) and from 32 in 2011 with approximately 2,000 students (Comai 2011). Additionally, only 43.4 percent of Armenian students receive their education in their mother tongue. Unofficially, that number is much lower, and it is likely that only 25 percent of Armenian students are educated in their mother tongue (Comai/Venturi 2015; Comai 2011). According to a survey conducted by Goncharova et al. (2007), slightly less than half (44.9%) of young Armenians included in the survey stated that they had a good oral and written command of Armenian, and approximately 10 percent admitted that they do not know it at all. A significant proportion of the Armenian population in Abkhazia speaks Russian in the home (Comai 2011).

Existing literature provides four main reasons why Armenians prefer to be educated in Russian rather than in their mother tongue. First, the Armenians living in Abkhazia today migrated from the Ottoman Empire in 1915 (Matsuzato 2011; Trier et al. 2010). The native language of this group is Western (Anatolian) Armenian, which is quite different from the Eastern Armenian used in the Armenian educational system (Matsuzato 2011; Trier et al. 2010). Moreover, there are three different "Hamshen" groups in Abkhazia (Chirikba 2008). Although these groups are culturally and linguistically close, their language differs significantly from Eastern Armenian, and their vocabularies include many Turkish and Russian loanwords (Chirikba 2008). Accordingly, the language taught in school is unlike the one Armenians in Abkhazia speak at home (Vaux 2007; Vaux/Bert, 2007). *"When they go to school, they basically learn a foreign language. They do not use their native tongue, but literary Eastern Armenian"* (Karslian, cited in Comai 2011).

Second, Armenian language instruction is conducted only in grades 1–4, and the students must switch to Russian in grade 5 despite their insufficient academic language proficiency. *"There are concerns about the difficulty of switching to what is mostly a Russian language education after four years, and there is a widespread understanding that Russian language education will offer considerably more opportunities later in life"* (Comai/Venturi 2015, 897).

Third, the Armenians in Abkhazia are increasingly inclined to send their children to Russian schools because they believe their prospects in Russia are ultimately better than in Armenia. As former chairman of the Armenian diaspora in Abkhazia, Suren Karslian stated: *"Russia is a big, solid and neighbouring country with many study and work opportunities. Parents believe Russian-schooled children will be better off in furthering their education or finding employment"* (cited in Comai 2011). This belief likely relates to the fact that most Armenians living in Abkhazia are Hamshen Armenians, with closer links to the Armenian communities in southern Russia than to those in Armenia. At the same time, the Russian government provides quotas for Abkhazian school students at institutions of higher education in Russia, while the Armenian government policy offers no reserved higher education places or grants for students from Abkhazia (Comai/Venturi 2015).

Finally, scholars have highlighted the lack of teaching and learning materials and the lack of opportunities for teacher education and professional development in Armenian schools (Trier et al. 2010, Comai 2011). The Chairman of the Union of Armenians, Galust Trapizanian, pointed out, *"The main problem is lack of pedagogical cadres. Mostly teachers are in the age close to pension age or they are pensioners"* (Yerkramas.org 2016). The lack of teachers of different subjects in Armenian schools or their ages

were highlighted in an interview with Suren Karslian: “The teachers’ average age is becoming higher and higher, so we have to hire Russian teachers for some subjects” (Comai 2011). To solve the problem of human resources, the Armenian language division was opened at Abkhazian State University; however, it is difficult to attract students to this programme (Yerkramas.org 2016); in 2016, only 13 Armenian students were enrolled in the university’s teacher education programme (Armeniasputnik.am 2016). Armenia provides the teaching materials for Armenian schools; however, even this is problematic: *“We receive school textbooks from Armenia. We have the textbooks, published in 2005–2007, in all grades. I’ve heard there are problems with textbooks in the districts. It would be nice if we were provided curriculums from Armenia”* (Armenian language teacher, Jam-news.net 2016). The Armenian diaspora in Abkhazia largely blames the Georgian government for the problems in providing Armenian textbooks from Armenia and challenges the implementation of different programmes with Armenia in general: *“Each time, we try to initiate the programmes with Armenia, [the] Georgian Government destroys these plans pressuring on Armenia”* (Member of de facto Parliament of Abkhazia, Levon Galustian, Armeniasputnik.am 2016).

In summary, several pressing social, political, cultural and educational problems and challenges for mother tongue education exist in the Armenian language in Abkhazia. It is essential to solve these problems to implement effective mother tongue-based multilingual educational programmes for Armenians living in Abkhazia.

### GEORGIAN SCHOOLS AND MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION FOR GEORGIANS IN ABKHAZIA

The Gali district, the southernmost district of Abkhazia, is one of the largest districts in Abkhazia encompassing approximately 1,000 square kilometres. In 1993, nearly all of Abkhazia’s pre-conflict ethnic Georgian population was forced to leave from Abkhazia, and thereafter, the Abkhaz authorities allowed Georgians to return only to the Gali district (Human Rights Watch 2011). During the pre-war period, the Gali District had 58 schools, with 13,180 students and 1,638 teachers. Of the 58 schools, 52 were Georgian language schools, two were Russian, three were Russian-Georgian and one was a Georgian-Abkhazian language school. The Gali district also had 76 kindergartens with 1,125 students and 300 teachers and other personnel (Gali District Educational Resource Centre 2017).

Today, the former Gali district has 31 schools, with 4,363 students. Of those, 4,272 are Georgians, 70 are Abkhazians, 18 are Russians, 1 is Greek and 2 are Ossetians (Gali Educational Resource Centre 2017). In 1994, de-facto Abkhaz authorities changed the borders of the Gali district, reapportioned some of its villages to the Tkvarcheli

and Ochamchire districts and divided the Gali district into “upper” and “lower zones”. Since this change, nine schools are now in the “upper zone” and 11 are in the “lower zone”. Ten schools originally located in the Gali district are now in the Tkvarcheli district and one is in the Ochamchire district (Public Defenders Office of Georgia 2015; Gali Educational Resource Centre 2017). Table 9 shows the student distribution by zones.

**Table 9**

Numbers of Students in Schools of the Former Gali District by Current Zones

	Lower Gali	Upper Gali	Ochamchire	Tkvarcheli	Other districts and cities	Total
<b>Number of Students (Georgians)</b>	1,037	2,117	75	1,043	471	<b>4,743</b>

(based on information from the Gali Educational Resource Centre)

Abkhazian authorities developed the policy of Russification of Georgian schools in Gali (Georgia’s Reformers Associates, GRASS 2015), which introduced Russian as the language of instruction in Georgian schools in three stages: (1) 1995–1996 academic years – Georgian language schools in the Tkvarcheli and Ochamchire zones switched to Russian as the language of instruction because of pressure from de facto Abkhazian authorities; (2) 2005–2006 academic years – the de facto Abkhazian authority changed the language of instruction to Russian in Georgian schools in the upper zone of Gali; and (3) 2015–2016 academic years – schools in the lower Gali zone switched to Russian as the language of instruction in grades 1–4. Today, in 11 so-called Georgian Schools in lower Gali, only 513 of 1,127 students in grades 7–11 are instructed in the Georgian language, and there will be no instruction in Georgian in Abkhazia in the 2022–2023 academic years (GRASS 2015, Ombudsman Office of Georgia 2015). In grades 7–11, of 11 so-called Georgian schools in the lower Gali zone, there is limited teaching of the Georgian language and literature as a separate subject, and only two hours per week are allocated to teaching Georgian as a mother tongue in these schools (Gali Educational Resource Centre 2017). The same pattern is observed in schools in the upper Gali zone, and the Georgian language is not taught as a subject at all in the Tkvarcheli and Ochamchire zones. Table 10 illustrates the staging of the Russification policy. Today, Georgian students in the Tkvarcheli, Ochamchire and upper Gali zones do not receive education in their mother tongue, and only a small number of Georgian students in the lower zones are taught in their

native language. Therefore, Georgians' access to mother tongue education is restricted offensively and discriminatively by the de facto Abkhazian authorities (Abkhazia Human Rights Watch 2011; GRASS 2015; Public Defenders Office of Georgia 2015; Sinergy Network 2015; Comai/Venturi 2015).

**Table 10**  
Mother Tongue Education of Georgians in Abkhazia

	Lower Gali	Upper Gali	Ochamchire	Tkvarcheli	Other districts and cities	Total
<b>Number of Students (Georgians)</b>	1,037	2,117	75	1,043	471	<b>4,743</b>
<b>Number of Students in classes with Georgian language of instruction</b>	513	0	0	0	0	<b>513</b>
<b>Number of Students in classes with Russian language of instruction</b>	524	2,117	75	1,043	471	<b>4,230</b>

The introduction of Russian language instruction in Georgian language schools has created significant problems for several reasons: (1) teachers in these Georgian language schools have insufficient knowledge of the Russian language; (2) students are unable to speak and understand either conversational or academic Russian language skills; and (3) as parents are not fluent in Russian, they are unable to assist their children and become involved in their children's school life (Human Rights Watch 2011; GRASS 2015; Public Defenders Office of Georgia 2015; Sinergy Network 2015; Comai/Venturi 2015).

Access to education in the Zugdidi district on the other side of the de facto border is also restricted for Georgian students of the Gali district because of the changes and complications involved in moving across the de facto border. Although some parents prefer to send their children to schools in Zugdidi, the number of students

crossing the border has decreased considerably during the past several years because they were unable to move smoothly and thus missed their classes (GRASS 2015; Gali Educational Resource Centre 2017). Table 11 shows the decrease in the number of students attending Zugdidi schools from the Gali district.

**Table 11**  
Comparison of 2011 and 2017 Data on the Number of Gali Students attending Zugdidi Schools

Village of Zugdidi District	Number of Students from the Gali district	
	2011	2017
Tskhoushi	68	8
Pakhulani	16	4
Ganmukhuri	36	6

(based on information provided by the Gali Educational Resource Centre)

Nevertheless, the Abkhazian de facto Government's Russification policy has not deterred Georgian students' from seeking higher education in Georgian institutions. A comparison of 2007–2012 and 2013–2017 data on school graduations shows that the number of applicants from Georgian schools in Abkhazia to Georgian institutions of higher education and the number of students admitted barely decreased from 2007 to 2017. Table 12 illustrates the comparison.

**Table 12**  
Comparison of Admission Data at HEI in Georgia between 2007–2012 and 2013–2017

	2007 – 2012	2013 – 2017
<b>Graduates</b>	1,797	1,544
<b>Applicants for HEI of Georgia</b>	1,096	926
<b>Applicants admitted</b>	562	439

(based on raw statistical data from the Gali Educational Resource Centre)

While the data confirm that graduates of Georgian schools continue to aspire to attend Georgian institutions of higher education, the policy effects differ in different zones in the former Gali district. As mentioned previously, the first stage of the Russification of Georgian schools began in 1995 in the Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli zones and continued in 2005 in the upper Gali zone and 2015 in the lower Gali zone. The differences in the percentages of applicants from different zones to Georgian institutions of higher education reflects this staging, as only 40 percent of graduates from the Tkvarcheli and Ochamchire zones applied to these institutions in 2007–2017 compared to approximately 74 percent of the graduates from the lower Gali zone.<sup>1</sup>

In attempt to justify their Russification policies in Georgian schools, Abkhazian authorities claim that (1) Georgian textbooks, especially in social sciences, are unacceptable for the Abkhazian educational system; (2) integration of Georgians from the Gali district is important, and education in Russian can promote the process of Georgians' integration in Abkhazian society; and (3) the Abkhazian legislature protects minorities' rights to education in accordance with international standards, and the law of the State language of Abkhazia is not violated (GRASS 2015; Comai/Venturi 2015). However, these arguments lack substantive justification because different approaches are applied for different ethnic groups (GRASS 2015; Comai/Venturi 2015).

Many international governmental and non-governmental organizations' reports, as well as those of many local NGOs working on conflict and human rights issues, have described the problems of Georgians' mother tongue education in de facto Abkhazia (Human Rights Watch 2011; OSCE 2016; OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities 2008; GRASS 2015; Public Defenders Office of Georgia 2015; Sinergy Network 2015). As Comai and Venturi (2015) indicated, *“Overall, it seems that the right to have education in one's own mother tongue is generally respected for non-Georgians. On the contrary, artificial obstacles to Georgian language education in Abkhazia are confirmed by various reports”* (898).

### ABKHAZIAN SCHOOLS AND MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION FOR ABKHAZIANS IN ABKHAZIA

As Abkhazians are the majority cultural group in Abkhazia today, it is worth analysing the opportunities of mother tongue education for the majority ethnic group in the de facto Republic of Abkhazia. The first real attempt to establish Abkhazian schools occurred during the first years of the Soviet era (Linguapedia.info 2011), when strong emphasis was placed on teaching minority languages (Trier et al. 2010). As a minority

language, Abkhazian was protected, and instruction in the language was introduced in Abkhazia in grades 1 and 2 until 1932, when Abkhazian instruction was expanded to grades 1–4 in Abkhazian language schools (Linguapedia.info, 2011).

The situation changed when a strong Russification campaign was rolled out across much of the Soviet Union (Comai/Venturi, 2015). The Soviet authorities decided to change the language of instruction in the Autonomous Republics to Russian or to the language of the Republic to which the autonomous Republic belonged. Based on the 12 June 1945 decree by the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party, in which the language of instruction in Abkhazian schools was changed to Georgian from the 1945–1946 academic year (Papaskiri 2010), 81 Abkhaz language schools changed the language of instruction to Georgian, and the Abkhazian alphabet was changed to the Georgian script in 1937; from 1945 to 1953, Abkhaz was taught as a separate subject in these schools (Comai/Venturi 2015).

After the political changes in the Soviet Union, Abkhazian schools re-opened for the 1953–1954 academic year, and the Abkhazian alphabet based on Cyrillic was re-introduced (Trier et al. 2010). Abkhazian schools operated in Abkhazia until the end of the Soviet era; however, the Abkhazian language was only used for instruction in grades 1–4 (Gvantseladze 2010; Papaskiri 2010; Comai/Venturi 2015). All subjects were taught in Russian in grades 5–11, except for Abkhazian language and literature, and by the end of the Soviet era, 52 Abkhazian language schools and 13 Abkhazian sectors still operated in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia.

Today, there are 59 Abkhazian language schools and 15 Abkhazian-Russian language schools in Abkhazia (Department of Statistics of Abkhazia 2017). While 7,726 Abkhazian students are enrolled in the Abkhazian language schools, the number of Abkhazian students in Abkhazian-Russian language schools in the Abkhazian sectors is extremely low. For example, in the sector of Sukhumi, of the 1,278 students attending the Abkhazian-Russian schools, only 115 are in the Abkhazian sector (Department of Education of Sukhumi 2016). Additionally, the number of Abkhazian students in the Abkhazian language schools is decreasing. As shown in Table 13, 31 percent of Abkhazian students did not attend Abkhazian language schools in 2008 (Chirikba 2009), which increased to approximately 46 percent in 2016.

<sup>1</sup> based on raw statistical data from the Gali Educational Resource Centre.

**Table 13**  
Number of Abkhazian Students in Abkhazian Language Schools

Year	Number of Abkhazian Students	Number of Abkhazian Students at schools with mother tongue instruction	% of Abkhazian Students getting education in their mother tongue
2008	15,185	10,567	69 %
2016	14,234	7,726	54 %

Table 13 highlights the challenge of incorporating the Abkhazian language into Abkhazia's educational system; however, further analyses reveal a worse situation. Among the 57 Abkhazian schools and the 15 sectors of Abkhazian-Russian schools, only grades 1–4 are taught in Abkhazian, and grades 5–11 are taught only in Russian (except for Abkhazian language and literature). There are no more than 3,500 students in grades 1–5 in the 57 Abkhazian schools and 15 Abkhazian-Russian sectors. Accordingly, of the 14,234 Abkhazian students, only 3,500 – 25 % of the total Abkhazian student population of Abkhazia – receive their instruction in Abkhazian.

The decline in the student population in Abkhazian language schools is a concern for Abkhazian society (Apsnypress.info 2012), which acknowledges that the number of Abkhazian students in Russian schools is increasing dramatically. As Zakan Agrba, a member of the Council of Elders of Gagra District stated, “[A] good example is the school #2 in Gagra District. The school is Russian and 38 % of school students are Abkhazians” (Apsnypress.info 2012). The same pattern prevails in the Gudauta district. By 2012, 370 students were attending Russian schools in Gudauta, 296 of whom were Abkhazians (Apsnypress.info 2012).

The poor infrastructure and the lack of teaching and learning materials are cited as the factors on which parents place most importance. Thus, unlike Russian schools, Abkhazian schools require improved facilities and materials. As the Head of the Educational Department of Gagra district indicated, the material-technical equipment of schools is an important factor in parents' decisions: “We had only 300 students in Russian School of Gagra District #2 in 2009. After the renovation, the number of students increased and now there are 600 students enrolled [...] Parents choose the schools with better infrastructure” (Apsnypress.info 2012).

The educational models and programmes in Abkhazian schools are also causes for concern, alongside the decision to switch from Abkhazian to Russian. On the one

hand, students need to develop sufficient academic language skills that allow them to switch to Russian, and those instructed in Abkhazian may have difficulty switching to instruction in Russian. According to Baker (2006), it takes five to seven years to acquire academic language skills, and conversational language skills are insufficient for academic achievement. On the other hand, students are unable to develop academic knowledge in their mother tongue. The Abkhazian language final exam conducted annually proves this assumption. For example, in 2015, in Sukhumi school #10, 15 of 21 students failed the exam in the Abkhazian language (Sputnik-Abkhazia 2015). The school principal largely blamed the families for this result and did not question the effectiveness of the school model: “Parents want their kids to study native language only at school. If students are not able to hear native speech at home, it is difficult to work with these students. The results of Abkhazian language exam proved this assumption” (Sputnik-Abkhazia, 2015). Unlike the school principal, teachers and parents indicated that there are educational problems in teaching the Abkhazian language: “Our kids cannot speak Abkhazian. The program of Abkhazian language is developed for kids who already speak Abkhazian; therefore, our kids [are] unable to learn their mother tongue. We need the program for the kids who do not speak Abkhazian and starts learning of this language. Without such program, kids will never learn their native language” (Sputnik-Abkhazia 2015).

The prestige and power of the languages have been mentioned as important hindrances to mother tongue education in Abkhazia. As Baker (2006) indicated, “The social status of a language – its privilege value – will be closely related to the economic status of a language and will also be [a] powerful factor in language revitalization. When one language is perceived as ‘giving higher social status and more political power,’ shifting towards this language is natural” (Baker 2006, 55f.). The assumption of the status and prestige of languages applies to the case of Abkhazian in Abkhazia. The high status of Russian as an official language is established firmly: all governmental structures work in this language, higher education is provided only in Russian and these facts define society's attitudes toward the languages. As one Abkhazian language teacher stated: “Kids of high officials of Abkhazia study in Russian schools. This is an example for the society and population started to follow them and they take their kids in Russian schools. Another example is a language of communication. Even the school principals and teachers of Abkhazian schools communicate with each other in Russian. This is also [an] example for parents and students” (Apsnypress.info 2012).

During the Soviet era, 98,448 of 105,308 ethnic Abkhazians claimed that their mother tongue was Abkhazian and that they spoke in their mother tongue, 5,135 indicated that Russian was their mother tongue, and 1,725 claimed other languages as their mother tongues (Grenoble 2003). As mentioned previously, the situation changed

dramatically following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Abkhazians in urban areas speak and use Russian largely because of its economic and social status and the language's prestige, while rural populations are more inclined to use Abkhazian in daily life (Chirikba 2008). Urbanization in Abkhazia is occurring at a rapid pace, indicated by an increase in inhabitants of urban areas from 44.9 percent to 51 percent of the total population in 2016 (Department of Statistics of Abkhazia 2016). As the Abkhazian-speaking population will likely decrease with the rise of urbanization, this process has important educational implications for bilingualism and mother tongue-based multilingual education. The prestige of a language is important in language acquisition (Baker 2006), and the economic and social status of languages is important in language revitalization (Baker 2006). In the case of Abkhazia, the Russian language is ascribed an economic status and social prestige. In similar situations, *“Economic growth may be in the urban ‘core’ rather than rural periphery [and] the higher grade jobs may be in relatively affluent city areas and the lower grade, poorly paid work in remote areas”* (Baker 2006, 435). These differences in languages' economic status, and the differences in their use in urban and rural areas cause geographical separation and division, such that *“each language is identified with greater or lesser affluence, higher and lower status, more or less power”* (Baker 2006, 435). The subordinate economic and social status of Abkhazian is an important obstacle to the creation of the additive context of bilingualism at the individual and societal levels. The subtractive context of bilingualism promotes monolingualism in a prestigious language at the individual level, but at the social level, the endangered language is less likely to be revitalized. Accordingly, a shift in the economic and social status of Abkhazian is necessary to achieve the additive context of bilingualism and implement strong mother tongue-based multilingual educational programmes in the Abkhazian language.

The inability to reform the Soviet Education System and the problems of teacher education and professional development in Abkhazia can be classified among the most critical obstacles to mother tongue education in Abkhazian. As the Director of Sukhumi Youth House, Elena Kobakhia, stated in an interview: *“It is not [a] secret, that [the] current educational system of Abkhazia still has the main characteristics of [the] Soviet educational system. Only minor changes were undertaken in the field”* (Abkhazinform.com 2015). No system of teacher education and professional development has been developed in Abkhazia, and what does exist is mainly based on the Soviet experience of teacher education in institutions of higher education. Even the teacher education process is problematic, as teaching is not a prestigious profession among the young generation of Abkhazia (Kobakhia 2015, Abkhazinform.com).

## DISCUSSION / FINDINGS AND FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE

The study has significant findings and implications for the Abkhazian educational system. While it is clear that mother tongue education is limited in de facto Abkhazia for Georgians, Abkhazians and Armenians, the reasons for this and the educational policies are different and selective for each group. Three types of educational policies can be identified: (1) involuntary/oppressive inability to receive education in the mother tongue, (2) semi-involuntary inability to receive education in the mother tongue and (3) voluntary refusal to receive education in the mother tongue. The limitations for Georgians are based on the negative aspects of education. Discrimination and oppression are the guiding educational policies toward Georgians, who are denied mother tongue education in Abkhazia. The Abkhazian case differs and can be referred to as a semi-involuntary inability or a structural/institutional inability to receive mother tongue education; the system is not developed sufficiently to provide education in the mother tongue. The case of Armenians differs entirely. Despite some challenges and shortcomings in the process, their rights to education in the mother tongue are guaranteed, and Armenia provides structural and institutional support. Nevertheless, families refuse to receive education in their mother tongue voluntarily and prefer to be educated in Russian.

The second significant finding is that the case of the Abkhazian educational system is an excellent example of distinguishing between the majority and dominant cultural groups. The majority cultural group does not always prevail over the dominant cultural group and vice versa. If we examine the educational policies in Abkhazia, Russians are the dominant cultural group, and their rights to education are guaranteed. Abkhazians, who are the majority in Abkhazia today, are not guaranteed education in the mother tongue fully for political, institutional/structural and pedagogical reasons. The domination of the cultural group is not based on numbers, but on political and economic circumstances.

The third important finding is that the transitional model of bilingual education is used in all cases of mother tongue education in Abkhazia. Armenian and Abkhazian schools switch to Russian-only language instruction from grade 5, and Georgian schools have been switched to Russian even without a transition. The goal of transitional bilingual education programmes is assimilation: *“Students are taught briefly through their home language until they are thought to be proficient enough in the majority language to cope in mainstream education”* (Baker 2006, 221). Transitional programmes in bilingual education have their limits and problems concerning bilingualism and academic achievement and are referred to as “weak” programmes (Baker 2006). Research in the field and meta-analyses have shown the ineffectiveness of transitional bilingual educational programmes (Baker 2006). As Baker pointed out, *“Minority language children*

*taught through the second language [...] fail to develop sufficient competences in their second language and fail to benefit from 'weak' forms of bilingual education [...]. Their low level of proficiency in English, for example, limits their ability to cope with the curriculum"* (2006, 173). Four academic years are insufficient to develop native language academic skills and Abkhazians fail in mother tongue language exams (Sputnik-Abkhazia 2015). However, the introduction of Russian as the language of instruction in grade 5 is also problematic. The transition to Russian language instruction, when the student's language competence may not be developed sufficiently (the case for Georgians, Abkhazians and Armenians can be applied to this situation) can limit their ability to excel in the curriculum. A lack of specific research and data on Abkhazian schools prevents comparisons of graduates' results being made according to the language of instruction; however, based on existing research data, transitional bilingual educational programmes are open to serious question, even in the de facto Republic of Abkhazia.

The future framework for the development of de facto Abkhazia's educational system is an important issue. As Pigozzi (1999) stated, *"The education system must be rebuilt rather than merely re-instituted; it must change in profound [ways]"*. He called for the international society to view education in emergencies from a long-term perspective and, rather than taking an assistance approach, use a developmental approach to education in such circumstances. *"Education in emergency situations has frequently been viewed as a short-term response that is a stop-gap measure [...]. Any emergency education programme must be a development programme and not merely a stop-gap measure"* (Pigozzi 1999, 3). Bush and Saltarelli (2000) supported Pigozzi's views and proposed a developmental approach to education in areas of conflict with a focus on the positive aspects of education, which includes *"[...] the provision of good quality education. These include the conflict-dampening impact of educational opportunity, the promotion of linguistic tolerance, the nurturing of ethnic tolerance, and the 'disarming' of history"*. However, according to Bush and Saltarelli (2000), education in emergencies can also have negative effects, which *"[...] shows itself in the uneven distribution of education to create or preserve privilege, the use of education as a weapon of cultural repression"* (V). Seitz (2004, 11) also emphasised the developmental approach to education in conflict areas: *"Through support for education [...] development agencies have a crucial [...] role to play [...] This can range from support for the development of non-partisan curricula and textbooks, to help cultivate and disseminate shared values such as tolerance and pluralism"*. Versmesse, Derluyn, Masschelein and De Haene Versmesse (2017) developed the role of international organizations and developmental agencies further and proposed an umbrella for their activities: *"Equal rights to education are worth fighting for [...] crisis-affected people acquire little chances for their 'truths' to be heard [...] it would then not solely be about 'their' education, but could as well be about the education of all of us"* (16f.).

Georgian authorities have few instruments to influence the processes; however, the Georgian government could still implement the following tools:

- Support teaching in Abkhazian and Georgian languages through online and technological resources, and develop the technological programmes of virtual schools.
- Support non-formal educational programmes and people to people approach in project implementation.
- Create a flexible system of education recognition including distance education.
- Develop a flexible system for international cooperation for people living in Abkhazia and involved in educational and research and development sectors.

The most important instruments are under the control of the international developmental organisations. In the Abkhazian context, international organisations can play a vital role in building an educational system and using a developmental approach to education. The guiding principles in building de facto Abkhazia's educational system should include a non-discriminative mother tongue-based multilingual approach to education for all ethnic groups in Abkhazia, additive or dynamic multilingualism, quality of education and linguistic tolerance. Political, institutional/structural and pedagogical reforms are thus necessary to achieve the goal of developing a new educational system that uses these guiding principles.

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