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## MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN ABKHAZIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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*Language education in conflict-affected regions can become a tool not only of segregation but also for positive changes, especially in ethnically and linguistically diverse societies such as Abkhazia. Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE) has proven itself a very effective education model that can preserve linguistic diversity, as a cornerstone of identity formation of respective ethnic groups, and promote social inclusion. This paper analyses the current challenges of the education system, which is not fully addressing the linguistic diversity of Abkhazia. Based on own work experience of the author in the field of MTB MLE, this research explores challenges and opportunities in relation to how to improve the existing model of multilingual education in order to ensure a high level of academic and linguistic results throughout all of the ethnic groups. The author argues that MTB MLE in Abkhazia has a great deal of potential and can contribute to overcoming many existing challenges and linguistic and ethnic tensions within society.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Language education, mother tongue based multilingual education, Abkhazia*

### BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Depending on to whom one talks, one can obtain a very different description of what Abkhazia is: from an independent and recognised state to an “occupied territory”. If one removes the political context, Abkhazia is a partially recognised state located in the South Caucasus on the coast of the Black Sea. The status of Abkhazia is the result of the unresolved protracted conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict broke out in the months following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The bloody war started by the leadership in Tbilisi lasted for 13 months and resulted in the victory of the Abkhaz. The war has reduced immensely the overall socio-economic conditions of a once booming tourist heaven of the Soviet elite. The war has also led to massive shifts in the once diverse composition of Abkhazia: Georgians, Greeks, Armenians, Germans, Estonians and Ukrainians fled Abkhazia.

Today, even after a quarter of a century following the described events, Abkhazia has not yet recovered from the hardships and aftermath of the war. The war and the economic blockade that followed had immense and dramatic results for Abkhazia and its population. The unresolved ethnopolitical conflict with Georgia, international isolation, and economic instability have had a significant effect on the situation in Abkhazia; however, slow and visible progress and development have attracted a number of those who had to leave Abkhazia during the outbreak of the war. Even though Abkhazia has not yet managed to re-establish its pre-war diverse composition, today it is a multiethnic society with four primary ethnic groups: the Abkhaz constituting the majority (51%), Georgians (18%), Armenians (17%), and Russians (9%) (Управление Государственной Статистики Республики Абхазия 2016).

The education sector suffered immensely during the war and the isolation that followed. A great number of schools were heavily damaged by warfare and the aftermath. In recent years, the situation has been steadily improving, with many schools being refurbished or even built from scratch. However, even though the physical conditions of schools have been slowly improving, academic isolation has had a much longer-lasting effect: being part of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia has developed an education system very much focused on factual materials, with all of the “rights and wrongs” provided by the teacher and very little space for “maybes”; the contemporary education system of Abkhazia is representing a model based on the main pillars of Soviet education with minor localisation additions. Many experts in Abkhazia agree that the contemporary education system of Abkhazia is lacking ability to address the issues that current society of Abkhazia is facing; it does not take into consideration the existing strong and weak sides of society, and allows for a very little individual approach. A great deal of these issues are linked to the limited financial and human resources or a lack of incentives to introduce any changes.

Among the challenges that Abkhaz society is facing today, and which the education system is not fully addressing, is the linguistic diversity of the Abkhaz population. The education system does have a form of multilingual education, with almost all of the local languages being used in one way or another in schooling; however, the existing multilingual education system does not produce good student achievements and results in languages and knowledge at the same time. This paper examines not only ways in which to improve the existing model of multilingual education in order to ensure a high level of academic and linguistic results throughout all of the ethnic groups residing in the territory of Abkhazia, but also the possibilities that such a system creates for society in general. In order to do so properly, one has to take a detour into the linguistic situation of the three major ethnic groups of Abkhazia: Abkhaz, Armenians and Georgians.

## THE LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY OF ABKHAZIA

The territory and the size of the population of Abkhazia can be compared to those of a medium-sized city somewhere in Europe or elsewhere in the world; nonetheless, Abkhazia is very diverse ethnically and rich linguistically. On a Saturday morning, local farmers' markets represent a moving beehive with the nonstop flow of faces and languages from a number of very distant locations. Abkhaz is the only state and official language of Abkhazia; Russian is recognised as being equal to Abkhaz (though does not have the status of an official language) by official institutions and, in practice, is the language of inter-ethnic communication; Armenian and Georgian are widely used by the representatives of their respective ethnic communities. However, if one takes a closer look, the linguistic situation is much more complex, with further gradation within the groups.

### ABKHAZ LANGUAGE

Abkhaz is a language that belongs to the small North Caucasian family of languages. Abkhaz is spoken in Abkhazia and by the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey and neighbouring countries. In accordance with the constitution, Abkhaz enjoys the highest level of state support and is the only official language; however, the situation on the ground is very much different from the one outlined on paper. The majority of the population of Abkhazia possess only a passive knowledge of Abkhaz. Some understand but never use it, and state institutions rarely use the official language and prefer to subsidise it with Russian.

The present-day situation with the Abkhaz language has deep roots in the history of the population of Abkhazia: being a meeting point of many ancient trade roads, the Abkhaz were never strangers to other languages and cultures; the Abkhaz easily picked up foreign languages and spoke them like their mother tongue. The 19<sup>th</sup> century brought upon the Abkhaz the most devastating tragedy: the forced exile, where most of the population of Abkhazia at that time were put on ships and sent off to what is modern Turkey. The language has suffered tremendously, since most of its speakers were scattered throughout the former Ottoman Empire. The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought about development and modernisation; however, a number of repressive policies were introduced against the usage of Abkhaz; overnight, Abkhaz schools were converted into Georgian. The deliberate repressive policies were only lifted following the death of Stalin; however, the damage was already done, that which the Abkhaz language has not been able to recover even today. The Abkhaz language was diminished to the level of a cultural language, where the exactly sufficient amount of literature was produced so as to keep the language alive, but not enough to develop it into a fully functioning modern language. The language policies and resentment

fuelled by the growth of national self-awareness in all corners of the former Soviet Union led to the beginning of the Georgian-Abkhaz war.

In the last quarter of a century, modern Abkhazia has done a lot to preserve and develop the Abkhaz language to a level where it can be used in all domains of life. However, little progress has been made in that regard; even the introduction of the law “*on the state language of the Republic of Abkhazia*” in 2007 did not achieve its goal of making Abkhaz a language of official communication by 2015 (Gogorian 2007).

Little progress has been made in the education sphere as well. There are a number of schools that are considered to be Abkhaz; however, education in Abkhaz is only developed for the first four years of primary school. Russian becomes the language of instruction in middle and high school (from grade 5) and Abkhaz is only taught in the form of two subjects: Abkhaz Language and Literature. Graduates of these schools are fluent in Abkhaz; however, very few are experienced enough to use and apply the language to higher-level discussions in the workplace or elsewhere.

In all other schools in Abkhazia, Abkhaz is a mandatory second language, starting from the second grade; upon graduation, very few are fluent in the language. In the cities, in the majority of families, Abkhaz is rarely used outside of the classroom; the situation is different in rural areas, where the population uses Abkhaz for communication. Due to the complexity of the language, very few children manage to master the language without outside-of-the-classroom exposure, which is rarely found in the cities.

Being a language spoken by very few, Abkhaz does not enjoy the pleasure of having mass media in respect of the language. Abkhaz TV airs in two languages: Abkhaz and Russian. Apart from that and occasional film translations, there are few media outlets in respect of the language that attract children and help them to master the language. Many Abkhaz parents opt for Russian when they choose the language of instruction in the schools to which they send their children. This is related to the fact that Russian is a language that provides access to the greater world, providing better chances in higher education and job opportunities, not only in Abkhazia but also in Russia. Other groups of parents who were themselves victims of the deliberate language policies of the last century, and who chose Russian in order not to learn Georgian, today do not have the command of the Abkhaz language in order to support their children’s education in Abkhaz schools.

There is a certain frustration among the general population with regard to the wasted years and the failed attempt of the revitalisation of the Abkhaz language. In this

situation, not all Abkhaz are very sympathetic towards and understanding of the concerns of the other linguistic groups residing in Abkhazia. Therefore, addressing the legitimate worries of Abkhaz and helping to revive and develop the language can lay a very solid foundation for voicing and addressing concerns of all of the other linguistic groups of Abkhazia.

## ARMENIAN LANGUAGE

Armenian is an Indo-European language, a language with its own script and many dialects. The Armenian used in Abkhazia by the representatives of the Armenian community is very different from the Armenian spoken in Yerevan. Hamshen Armenian is a very distinct dialect of Armenian, spoken by the Armenians who fled the territory of what used to be the Ottoman Empire in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, the Armenian spoken at home and that which is taught in schools are very different forms of the same language.

Armenians are very much integrated into society and are the only ethnic community of Abkhazia that enjoys all schooling in the mother tongue. Armenian schools in Abkhazia teach 11 years with Armenian as a language of instruction. This is linked with a number of challenges, one of which is the fact that literary Armenian is very different from Armenian spoken at home in Abkhazia; therefore, a lot of children struggle with the simultaneous grasping of the language and the concepts when they start primary school. The lack of modern textbooks is also a major issue that all Armenian schools in Abkhazia are facing today; it used to be the Ministry of Diaspora of Armenia that supplied the Armenian schools of Abkhazia with textbooks; however, this initiative also fell victim to the unresolved conflict.

These factors drive a large proportion of Armenian children out of Armenian schools and into Russian ones, as the level of education there is considered to be higher and ensures good command of Russian, which can be helpful in the future. In order to prevent the desolation of Armenian schools, a number of parents and local Armenian officials made proposals to move from schools with all 11 years being in Armenian to only primary school being in Armenian, switching to Russian in secondary school (similar to Abkhaz schools)<sup>1</sup>. Such initiative shows the need for reform, as the existing model does not provide for the needs of society. However, it requires proper planning; if implemented incorrectly, it will lead to devastating outcomes.

1 Interview with a member of the Parliament of Abkhazia.

## GEORGIAN LANGUAGE

The southernmost part of Abkhazia is populated by ethnic Georgians; Georgian is a Kartvelian language which uses its own script. However, most of the Georgian population of Abkhazia belong to the group called Mingrelians (Megrels); they also have a distinct language, which belongs to the same Kartvelian language family as Georgian, but they are not mutually understanding languages. Almost all of the Mingrelians are bilingual and speak Georgian as well; however, Mingrelian remains the language of daily communication within the community. There are no sound data available on the actual figures and distribution of the languages, but from discussions held with parents and teachers, it became apparent that a lot of children struggle with schooling even in Georgian once they enrol in primary school.

Until 2015, 11 schools in Abkhazia used Georgian as the language of instruction; in 2015, these schools moved into Russian as a medium of instruction. The move was explained as an attempt to help the population of the district to be better integrated into the rest of the population of Abkhazia. Most of the Georgian population of Abkhazia do not speak either Abkhaz or Russian; therefore, it all significantly reduces the chances for continuing education in Abkhazia (university primarily uses Russian and Abkhaz as the languages of instruction) and further job placement. However, such an abrupt policy of language changes will lead to poor results in their academic achievements and their language acquisition. Georgian is taught in schools as a language and literature subject.

Such an extensive detour into the historical background is necessary so as to understand how much the language is tied to the identity of each of the ethnic groups. One thing that is widely acknowledged and shared by the three main ethnic groups of Abkhazia is the fact that language goes beyond linguistic knowledge and skills, playing a major part in self-identification and the sense of belonging. The language that most of the ethnic groups have in common is Russian, which, in practice, is a language of daily communication among all of the communities.

## SCHOOLS IN ABKHAZIA

There are four types of schools in Abkhazia today: Abkhaz, Russian, Abkhaz-Russian, and Armenian. All schools follow the same curriculum and working plans and have equal standards and exam requirements. The schools follow the same pattern: four years of primary school; five years of secondary school, and two years of high school (11 years in total). Abkhaz and Armenian schools, for the most part, only have Abkhaz and Armenian children respectively. Meanwhile, Russian and Abkhaz-Russian schools are the most diverse ones, with students coming from various ethnic backgrounds.

All schools use the textbooks developed for schools in Russia, and the Ministry of Education and Science of Abkhazia every year releases a recommended and approved list of textbooks that schools can use; all of the textbooks in Abkhaz (with all textbooks for all subjects taught in Abkhaz for native speakers and Abkhaz language and literature for non-native ones) are being developed and printed by the ministry and are distributed free of charge.

## MOTHER TONGUE BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

Languages can easily become a tool of segregation or an element of establishing a cohesive and strong society. Abkhazia is not unique in its linguistic diversity. There are many places around the world with similarities, where the strategic, well-planned and well-implemented policies of multilingual education have worked and brought about positive change. There are certain aspects that allow the Abkhaz case to stand out slightly, one of which is a protracted political conflict with Georgia. The unresolved conflict does not always allow accepting the most needed and direct decision, but rather forces choosing the easiest solution that, from the short-term perspective, might “cool down” some of the concerned ones but will bring little positive change. Another aspect that singles out Abkhazia slightly is the situation wherein there is full-fledged leadership support and legislation is in place, but the situation in respect of language development is not improving anyhow. Out of the four main languages of Abkhazia, the situation of Abkhaz is the weakest one. A number of efforts have been made to improve the situation with the language, but due to the lack of international exposure and international best practices, the measures have not brought the expected results.

Keeping in mind all of the challenges and complexities of the situation, there is a solution that can lay a foundation for the initial steps towards the improvement of the overall relations between ethnic communities of Abkhazia. Education is one of the most responsive and most rewarding areas, bringing about positive changes and shifts that affect the whole of society in the long term; education is one of the areas that requires reform and modernisation in order to address the ever-growing challenges that a contemporary young person is facing. In the modern world, knowing one language is not sufficient anymore – people should speak at least three languages in order to be able to fully benefit from the goods and opportunities that the world in which one lives offers. Abkhazia is not an exception to this. Abkhaz is a state language; therefore, to acquire an official position, one is required to have at least fluent knowledge of oral language. Russian is a language of everyday use, a language that opens opportunities beyond Abkhazia. Furthermore, as well as one’s respective mother tongue, at least one foreign language (e.g. English) is necessary.

Since Abkhazia already has experience with multilingual education, it should be easier to improve it and ensure that all graduates of all schools in Abkhazia have equal opportunities to receive high-quality education. Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE) has proven itself to be a very effective education model that allows students to construct knowledge of the new language atop the knowledge that they have in their mother tongue. A proper MTB MLE model allows students to speak three or even more languages fluently upon graduation from school. MTB MLE allows students to master and understand the world in their mother tongue; in parallel, a gradual introduction of the second language is taking place. Numerous researches carried out in a number of countries show that students of MTB MLE display higher learning achievements across all subjects than do those students who have to study in a language that they do not know when they start school (Tran Ringrose 2017).

Once applied to the Abkhaz background, the need for adaptation becomes rather apparent; once asked to identify one's mother tongue, almost all of the respondents define a mother tongue by ethnicity (even if they do not speak it at all)<sup>2</sup>, which is not that common, since in most cases the mother tongue is considered to be the language that a person knows best. In order for the student to succeed and be able to transfer knowledge and skills from one language to the other, they first need to master their first language (Malone/Malone 2017); therefore, it means that additional explanation is needed in respect of the context of Abkhazia. Since all of the respondents cite Abkhaz, Armenian or Georgian (sometimes Mingrelian) as their mother tongue, they would be considered MTs; however, when asked about their first language (L1) the picture becomes completely different, with many Abkhaz and Armenian respondents considering Russian to be their first language. Another interesting factor that became apparent was the fact that none of the respondents of whom Russian was L1 wanted to refer to Russian as an MT, instead stressing the difference between an L1 and MT, wherein an MT is understood much more widely than are language knowledge and proficiency; it incorporates mentality and a sense of belonging.

Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education is still applicable to the context of Abkhazia, but requires additional clarification – a child will enrol in a school in which their first language is used. The first language will be used to learn all of the other languages and by the end of elementary school, a student will be able to easily shift to studying in the second language. When applied to the context of Abkhazia, this means that the L1 (the language that a child knows best) will be the language of in-

<sup>2</sup> Meetings with parents, teachers and education experts.

struction in primary school; L2, which becomes the language of instruction in secondary school, is gradually introduced into elementary school, providing a child with a chance to master an L1 and transfer such knowledge and skills to L2, L3, etc.

The MTB MLE model applied to the context of Abkhazia means that the three mother tongues – Abkhaz, Armenian and Georgian – will be taken as school language models. However, one school will have different first languages (L1), depending on the child's command of the language. Russian remains the language used in secondary education and for the time being will remain the same. The following school models are proposed to be established:

1. Abkhaz (L1), Russian (L2), English (L3);
2. Armenian (L1), Russian (L2), Abkhaz (L3), English (L4);
3. Georgian (L1), Russian (L2), Abkhaz (L3), English (L4);
4. Russian (L1 – all of those of whom Russian is an L1), Abkhaz (L2), English (L3).

This is a very simplified schematic plan for the models of the language schools and only provides for a basic language sequence and introduction in primary and early secondary school. The L2 (Russian) becomes the main language of instruction in upper secondary and high school, while subjects in the L1 are still taught in all years of schooling. This table requires further elaboration that takes into consideration the smooth transition and introduction of each of the languages, depending on the structure of each of the languages. All languages used in Abkhazia are written in four different scripts: Cyrillic with unique Abkhaz letters; Armenian; Georgian, and Latin in case you add a foreign language. When such a variety exists, it might take children longer to move from one language to the other (Malone/Malone 2017), but international experience shows very encouraging results of similar MTB MLE programmes, primarily in the countries of South East Asia (Peace and Reconciliation through Bilingual Literacy and Education 2016).

All of the mother tongues in Abkhaz have a wider and deeper meaning than language knowledge; they are the cornerstone of identity formation of respective ethnic groups. Therefore, this should be taken into consideration when any school model is developed (Malone/Malone 2017). All mother tongues, including dialects and languages without written systems, in the official education system should be made available as selective classes upon request.

The proposed model is not yet a proper model, but more of a guideline of elements that should be taken into consideration when a full-fledged model is developed; it requires further elaboration and clarification on the language transfer periods. The MTB MLE approach is a rather new one to education practices, especially in this part of the world (South Caucasus and CIS); the overall instant complexity of the MTB MLE education models might discourage a number of education policymakers and implementers from supporting this approach to education, but at the same time, it leads to very positive results that go way beyond the academic sphere. Any strategic planning requires proper identification of the challenges and issues that might be encountered during the implementation phase. The Abkhaz context has its own challenges that one should address in order to show the opportunities and positive results that MTB MLE can bring to Abkhazia.

### CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

There are many challenges that are related to the possible introduction of MTB MLE in Abkhazia: some are related to resources, others to the lack of understanding and motivation. This part of the paper will explore some of the issues and challenges and ways in which to overcome them.

One of the main challenges mentioned by many, once presented with the concept of MTB MLE, concerns the complexity and multiple layers of language teaching. A large number of local education experts consider that MTB MLE models are not sustainable and that learning in more than one language is very challenging for a student. Teachers and local-level education experts play a central role in the introduction of MTB MLE in schools, and should be equipped with the required knowledge and pedagogical skills so as to be more effective in teaching in the multilingual context. The majority of teachers in Abkhazia have very little exposure to international experience and contemporary student-centred teaching methodology; the introduction of MTB MLE will require all teachers to undergo extensive training in order to acquire the necessary skills and techniques.

Time and limited financial resources are other factors halting the process of the MTB MLE introduction: the results take a long time to manifest themselves and a great deal of resources are required so as to address the issues of schooling. MTB MLE in the long term is much more cost-effective than are other language education models, and allows governments to spend less on each student (Malone 2016), but in the context of Abkhazia, the pilot phase of MTB MLE will require the accumulation of additional financial resources. Pilot or model schools can be a very positive start; if they prove positive and productive, they can be further extended to include other schools.

Another major factor is the political will of the government to introduce an education system that might be initially not very popular among the general population due to the fact that many think that the introduction of MTB MLE in Abkhazia will provide support to all other languages and result in the deprivation of Abkhaz, since at this point it is the weakest language out of all four used in Abkhazia. The situation regarding the level of usage of Abkhaz is also a factor that does not support the idea of MTB MLE, as there is more or less a consensus among a large number of people that the initial support should be given to Abkhazia, and once it reaches the level of other languages used in Abkhazia, one can start talking about the challenges of other languages. The proposed MTB MLE model plays an opposite role: by providing space and opportunity for everyone to learn in their first language, it allows each language to be used and provides incentives to speak such languages more effectively. By focusing on giving those people who do not speak Abkhaz a chance to learn it, it gives a much bigger impulse for the development of the language. The unresolved conflict with Georgia is also a factor that negatively affects the overall situation, as it does not allow for pragmatic and straightforward action, even when the conditions allow for it.

Certain hesitation towards any change and reform in the education system, not only in the sphere of languages of instruction, is related to the fact that there is not yet a developed concept of the Abkhaz education model, a system that will address the challenges and needs of society. On the other hand, the existing education system, which is a sort of hybrid (with elements of the Soviet education system mixed with few touches of national and modern education), has been in place for a long time and does provide solid, factual knowledge. Any shifts and changes might undermine and weaken the existing education model; without adequate financial and human resources, such changes might drive the situation out of control. Therefore, slow-paced single and spot changes are preferred.

Multilingual and multiethnic societies benefit a great deal from proper multilingual education systems, those that address the needs of all of the languages and support the respective language domains. Multilingual education allows for higher learning outcomes throughout all school subjects and provides for higher language proficiency in two or more languages. MTB MLE can improve significantly the level of general education in Abkhazia, especially in rural areas; it can help to strengthen the Abkhaz language's position in society by providing more opportunities and incentives to learn the language.

## CONCLUSION

Abkhazia is, indeed, a very interesting case study, be that for political scientists or linguists. The linguistic and ethnic diversity of Abkhazia is a challenge and opportunity for society at the same time. Once the language becomes an instrument with which to single out certain groups, it can easily become a weapon that can be used against one or another language group. In the situation of the unresolved conflict and significant isolation from the world, it does not take more than a spark to flame the entire thing. However, once the language diversity is embraced and supported, it will give incentives for all linguistic groups to contribute to society, rendering it stronger and more resilient. Education plays a major role in achieving such unity of society. An education system that bases itself on the strengths and existing linguistic knowledge of students allows students to achieve better results in education and a better command of two or more languages.

MTB MLE in Abkhazia has much potential and can contribute to overcoming a lot of existing challenges and linguistic and ethnic tensions within society. Successfully introduced MTB MLE will ensure equal access to mother tongue education for all linguistic groups, supporting the development and usage of Abkhaz among non-speakers and allowing for equal opportunities for students upon graduation from high school. Therefore, it will contribute to the establishment of a resilient and coherent society.

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