

Introduction: Protecting cultural heritage in the Caucasus

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With its diversity and complexities of cultural influences, the Caucasus, strategically located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, is attracting increased interest of both scholars and political actors. The current political situation in this border region between the powerful neighbors Russia, Turkey and Iran, makes research and engagement with the region even more important. The combination of being a politically divided region of independent states and a patchwork of sub-state entities with varying degrees of autonomy, with high religious diversity and even higher ethnolinguistic diversity (Comrie, 2008; Khalidov, 2018), the Caucasus presents a challenge in many respects. According to UNESCO estimates, a large number of the languages of the Caucasus are definitely or severely endangered (Moseley ed., 2010). For the peoples of the Caucasus the maintenance of minority cultures and protection of minority rights are highly topical issues. At the same time, these issues have a bearing as a factor in many of the conflicts in the region, being interrelated in complex ways.

Georgia holds a special position in this respect, both in relations with the EU and with respect to relations among the peoples of the Caucasus and beyond. Georgia is the only country in the Caucasus that is pursuing a line of Euro-Atlantic integration in its foreign policy, having an Association agreement with the EU since July 2016. Traditionally, Georgian academia and civil society have enjoyed close relations with the many indigenous groups of the Russian North Caucasus (though more official relations with Russia are strained in connection with the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts). Georgia has good relations with Turkey and also with neighboring (conflicting) Armenia and Azerbaijan.

A recent event in the Russian Federation that sparked much debate around minority languages and led to protest actions of different kinds was the proposal for changes in the Russian Law on Education and, more specifically, the legislation regarding mother tongue education. This was perceived by minorities in Russia, including the North

Caucasus, as a threat to the native languages and a step towards further Russification (Caucasian Knot, 2018; Tekushev, 2018). According to the amendments adopted in July 2018, it will be up to the parents to choose which language the child will study as the school subject “mother tongue” – the native language or Russian (Gosudarstvennaya Duma, 2018; Barysheva, 2018). In light of the requirements on high standards regarding a knowledge of Russian in the Russian educational system, the expectations have been that parents will choose Russian, rather than their native heritage language, as the mother tongue subject for their children, thereby depriving the younger generation of their language and culture.

The conference

Against the background and development outlined above the research platform *Russia and the Caucasus Regional Research* (RUCARR) at the Faculty of Culture and Society, Malmö University (Sweden), in collaboration with the *Circassian Culture Centre* (Tbilisi, Georgia), took the initiative to arrange a conference that would provide a platform for the discussion of these issues across the Caucasus region. Generous support was received from the Swedish Institute (SI). The themes of central interest to the conference were formulated as *the protection and study of the cultural and linguistic heritage of the peoples of the Caucasus* and *strategies and efforts to promote dialogue across the Caucasus region*. The conference embraced both the South Caucasus and the Russian North Caucasus, as well as diaspora communities outside the Caucasus. Participants at the conference represented almost the entire North Caucasus – the republics of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Adygeya. Conference participants also came from Azerbaijan and Georgia, and among them Ossetian and Abkhaz participants. Representatives of the Circassian diaspora in the US, Germany, Holland, Turkey and Sweden took part in the conference.

It was of great advantage to the conference that it was possible to include into the programme a presentation by the UN’s Special rapporteur on Cultural rights Karima Bennouna “Cultural Rights at Risk”, arranged by Malmö University and Malmö Museum of Movements. This contact with the UN’s Special rapporteur on Cultural rights was very

valuable to the conference participants, as it provided an opportunity for a face-to-face dialogue on cultural rights' issues.

Contributions in this volume¹

Interaction and dialogue among the peoples of the Caucasus and their contacts with neighboring powers in the North and the South have taken many forms and differed considerably through the course of history. This topic is addressed by *Magomedkhan Magomedkhanov* and *Saida Garunova* (Makhachkala) in their paper “Pre-Soviet and contemporary contexts of the dialogue of Caucasian cultures and identities”.

Several of the papers presented during the conference had a focus on the protection of cultural and linguistic rights of minorities in the Caucasus, which could be seen against the background of changes in the legislation on education in the Russian Federation in 2018 (making education in native languages non-mandatory and promoting a wider study of Russian). One contribution in this volume is the opening paper by *Lars Funch Hansen* (Malmö/Copenhagen): “Renewed conflicts around ethnicity and education among the Circassians”, where he discusses reduced rights and opportunities for school teaching in the cultural and linguistic heritage. Another paper (in Russian) touching upon similar topics in Dagestan is by *Magomed A. Magomedov* (Makhachkala): “Issues of functioning and protection of the Andic languages in polyethnic Dagestan”. Dagestan is the region with the highest ethnolinguistic diversity in the Caucasus and the challenges to the preservation of indigenous languages is discussed by *Magomed I. Magomedov* (Makhachkala) in his paper: “The maintenance and development of languages and cultures is a topical socio-cultural problem of the Republic of Dagestan today” (in Russian). The importance of language for identity preservation is a recurring perspective in several of the papers, as in “Circassian language: threats and consequences of the disappearance of the main cultural marker of the people”, presented (in Russian) by *Aslan Beshtoev* (Nalchik). The preservation of the cultural and linguistic heritage is discussed in a legal framework in *Mazhid Magdilov*'s paper (Makhachkala): “Legal issues of the preservation of the cultural heritage in the Caucasus” (in Russian). The maintenance of the Circassian language and culture more broadly, both in the North Caucasian homelands

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and the diaspora, were addressed in many presentations during the conference, as in the paper by *Timur Aloyev* (Nalchik): “Failed ‘places of memory’ or the removal of the cultural landscape of Kabarda” (in Russian). Another take on places of memory is the study of place names. Place names are markers of the cultural past of a region, preserving the history of earlier inhabitants and settlements. This is the approach adopted by *Vitaliy Shtybin* (Krasnodar) in his paper “Circassian toponymy of the Krasnodar Territory”.

Mythological narratives occupy a prominent place in Caucasian culture, most importantly in different versions of the Nart epos. Studies of myths of the Caucasus are presented by *Nana Machavariani* (Tbilisi) in her paper “On the origin of the names of anthropomorphic creatures in Abkhaz” and by *Naira Bepieva* (Tskhinvali/Tbilisi) in “Transformation of giant creatures in Caucasian mythology”. Ritual and ethnocultural roots of “Traditional non-verbal communication forms among the North Caucasian peoples: gestural language and etiquette” are explored in the contribution by *Nugzar Antelava* (Tbilisi).

Merab Chukhua (Tbilisi) turns to the distant historical past of the Caucasus. In his paper “Circassians, Apkhazians, Georgians, Vainakhs, Dagestanians – peoples of old civilization in the Caucasus” he discusses the remote linguistic history and relations among major groups of Caucasian peoples and languages.

The Circassian Culture Center (Tbilisi) has as one of its areas of activities to promote and publish books on Caucasian languages and more broadly on Caucasology, which is the topic of the contribution by *Larisa Tuptsokova* (Maykop/Tbilisi): “Scientific publications on Caucasology at the Circassian Culture Center”.

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