

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH204925-933>

Исследовательская статья

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PRESERVING ETHNIC IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT: THE CASE OF TRANSBORDER DAGESTANI LANGUAGES

Abstract. The article addresses the challenges associated with preserving ethnic identity and language among speakers of transborder Dagestani languages, who, as a result of historical circumstances, found themselves in a multilingual environment. These challenges are identified as the subject of the research. The research specifically focuses on speakers of the Avar, Akhvakh, Bezhtin, Gunzib, Lezgin, Rutul, and Tsakhur languages, examining how their transborder status influences their ethnic identity. The aim of the article is to examine the specific characteristics of the ethnolinguistic profile of speakers of transborder Dagestani languages and to scientifically predict their pathways of linguacultural adaptation. This analysis is based on the current situation, which reflects the conditions necessary for preserving the ethnic identity and languages of divided peoples. The variations in the social, cultural, linguistic, religious, and psychological environments of these divided groups lead to dissonant phenomena in the formation of ethnic identity among their members. The methodological foundation of the study comprises general scientific, ethnographic, and sociolinguistic methods and techniques, as dictated by the nature of the research. These include the method of statistical analysis, which enabled the identification of trends in the changes in the number of individuals speaking native languages on both sides of the border; the method of comparing data from population censuses was employed to trace the dynamics of changes in the ratio between the number of individuals speaking native languages and those identifying with a particular transborder nationality. These methods and techniques can be applied to analyze the situation of other divided peoples in multicultural regions, serving as a basis for forecasting scenarios related to preserving their ethnic identity. The ethnic identity phenomena of representatives of divided Dagestani peoples are examined within the context of their adaptation to conditions in different states, which differ in terms of culture, language of communication, mentality, religion, and various other spheres. The study identifies tendencies toward the hybridization of cultures, which lead to the gradual unification of languages and the adoption of universal values. These shifts are adjusted to account for the religious beliefs of residents in bordering states. It is anticipated that there will be an increase in the number of speakers of transborder Dagestani languages who are also fluent in Russian in Russia and Azerbaijani in Azerbaijan with a general decrease in the number of those who speak their native languages will lead to the conclusion about the paradoxical nature of the issues of their national self-identification and preservation of languages. The analysis concludes that the vitality of transborder languages will depend on the language policies of the states where these languages exist, as well as international documents designed to support minority languages. These measures are intended to counteract the influence of linguistic imperialism exerted by dominant international languages.

Keywords: ethnic identity; transborder languages; multilingual regions; polymental environment; linguacultural adaptation

For citation: Ataev B.M., Ibragimova M.O., Magomedkhanov M.M. Preserving ethnic identity and language in a multicultural environment: the case of transborder Dagestani languages. History, Archeology and Ethnography of the Caucasus. 2024. Vol. 20. N. 4. P. 925-933. doi.org/10.32653/CH204925-933

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH204925-933>

Research paper

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ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ СОХРАНЕНИЯ ЭТНИЧЕСКОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ И ЯЗЫКА В ПОЛИМЕНТАЛЬНОЙ СРЕДЕ (НА ПРИМЕРЕ ТРАНСГРАНИЧНЫХ ДАГЕСТАНСКИХ ЯЗЫКОВ)

Аннотация. Статья посвящена проблемам сохранения этнической идентичности и языка носителями трансграничных дагестанских языков, оказавшимися в силу исторических обстоятельств в полиментальной среде. Эти проблемы квалифицируются нами в качестве предмета исследования. Объектом исследования являются носители аварского, ахвахского, бейтинского, гунзибского, лезгинского, рутульского и цахурского языков в фокусе их трансграничного статуса, влияющего на этническую идентичность. Целью статьи является исследование специфики этнолингвистического портрета носителей трансграничных дагестанских языков и научное прогнозирование путей их лингвокультурной адаптации на основе анализа современной ситуации, отражающей условия сохранения этнической идентичности и языков разделенных народов. Разница в социальном, культурном, языковом, религиозном, ментальном окружении разделенных народов обуславливает диссонансные явления в формировании этнической идентичности у представителей разделенных народов. Методологической основой исследования являются общенаучные, этнографические и социолингвистические методы и приемы, обусловленные характером работы, в том числе: метод статистического анализа, позволивший определить тенденции в изменении численности владеющих родными языками по обе стороны границы; метод сравнения сведений из переписей населения, позволивший проследить динамику изменения соотношения между количеством владеющих родными языками и идентифицирующих себя с определенной трансграничной народностью. Эти методы и приемы могут быть спроецированы и на анализ ситуации с другими разделенными народами, локализованными в мультикультурных регионах при прогнозировании сценариев сохранения их этнической идентичности. Феномены этнической идентичности представителей разделенных дагестанских народов охарактеризованы в контексте адаптации к условиям государств с различиями в культуре, языке общения, ментальности, религии и других сферах. Определены тенденции к гибридизации культур, приводящей к постепенной унификации языков, общечеловеческих ценностей при определенной их корректировке с учетом религиозных воззрений жителей граничащих государств. Прогнозируется, что рост числа носителей трансграничных дагестанских языков, владеющих русским языком в России и азербайджанским языком в Азербайджане, при общем уменьшении количества владеющих родными языками приведет к выводу о парадоксальности вопросов их национальной самоидентификации и сохранении языков. Анализ материала позволил сделать вывод, что в сложившейся ситуации витальность трансграничных языков будет определяться языковой политикой государств, в которых они представлены, и международными документами, созданными для поддержки языков меньшинств в целях противостояния лингвистическому империализму международных языков.

Ключевые слова: этническая идентичность; трансграничные языки; мультиязыковые регионы; полиментальная среда; лингвокультурная адаптация

Для цитирования: Атаев Б.М., Ибрагимова М.О., Магомедханов М.М. Перспективы сохранения этнической идентичности и языка в полиментальной среде (на примере трансграничных дагестанских языков) // История, археология и этнография Кавказа. 2024. Т. 20. № 4. С. 925-933. doi.org/10.32653/CH204925-933

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Introduction

Following the collapse of the USSR, several Dagestani ethnic groups received the status of “divided,” resulting in their languages becoming transborder – spoken across two states with a common border. Speakers of transborder languages such as Avar, Akhvakh, Lezgin, Rutul, and Tsakhur reside in multicultural countries like Russia and Azerbaijan, where they encounter different ethnolinguistic and cultural conditions. The Bezhtin and Gunzib languages are also considered transborder, with some speakers still living in Georgia after the collapse of the USSR.

Discrepancies between borders and the territories where certain ethnic groups reside can lead to conflicts when viewed politically, as they create challenges in interactions among members of divided ethnic groups.

From a sociolinguistic and linguacultural perspective, these divisions raise issues related to preserving language and ethnic identity, further exacerbated in multicultural environments, where diverse cultural influences can dilute traditional linguistic and cultural practices.

The issue of divided peoples is relevant for sociolinguistic research in the Russian Federation. Beyond the Dagestani languages mentioned, languages such as Azerbaijani, Ossetian, Tat, and Tuvan are also transborder [1]. Analyzing these languages provides linguists with valuable insights and methodologies that can be applied to other languages experiencing similar linguistic situations. In the article by O.A. Kazakevich and A.E. Kibrik, the transborder Tat language is classified as “unstable” by the authors. They cite several reasons for this classification: “In Azerbaijan, a significant number of Tats are transitioning to the Azerbaijani language (with over half of the Azerbaijani Tat population no longer speaking Tat) ... Although the language maintains a presence in Dagestan, where it is taught in schools, broadcast on radio and television, and featured in a weekly newspaper, its use in traditional domains, such as family and everyday communication, is diminishing. Consequently, within the classification scale used by the authors, the Tat language is deemed unstable [2, pp. 32–33].

The article by B. M. Alimova and R. I. Seferbekov [3] explores the cultural interactions between Dagestani Azerbaijanis and the peoples of Southern Dagestan, highlighting the influence of these contacts on local traditions. T. T. Kambolov [4] addresses the linguistic situation of the Ossetian language, focusing on its dialects across divided regions. M. V. Bavuu-Syuryun [5], Zhanna M. Yusha [6], and others examine the linguistic landscape for Tuvans who navigate a multilingual environment in China and Mongolia. Works by T. M. Aitberov [7], M. R. Kurbanov and G. I. Yusupova [8], M. M. Magomedkhanov [9; 10], D. Sh. Ramazonova [11], J. Authier [12], among others, delve into the issues of ethnic identification, the language situation, and national policy affecting the divided peoples of Dagestan.

The relevance of this type of research is determined by scientific necessity: to understand and describe the general linguistic landscape of the world of an ethnic group, information is needed about all of the sub-ethnic groups that make it up.

Transborder communities

The transborder languages discussed in the article belong to the Dagestani branch of the East Caucasian language family. The Avar, Lezgin, Rutul, and Tsakhur languages are recognized as state languages of the Republic of Dagestan and possess both a written form and a literary tradition. In contrast, Akhvakh, Bezhta, and Gunzib are oral languages of the Ando-Tsez subgroup.

The Avars are an ethnic group of Dagestan who predominantly inhabit the southwestern regions of the republic. In the Russian Federation, their current area of residence extends across 22 districts of Dagestan. Beyond the republic, ethnic Avars are found in 46 villages within the Zakatala and Belokan districts in the northwest of what is now Azerbaijan; a smaller number reside in the Kakh district of the Republic of Azerbaijan [13, p. 4]. According to researcher B.M. Guseynova, Avar settlements in Azerbaijan include both medium-sized communities, with several hundred inhabitants, and larger ones, such as the village of Kabahchel, which has a population of 20,000 residents [14, pp. 3–4].

According to the All-Russian Population Census of 2010, the Avar population in the Russian Federation was 912,258, with 715,000 individuals speaking the Avar language. This figure includes many speakers of

Ando-Tsez languages, who use Avar as a secondary native language.¹ According to the All-Russian Population Census of 2020, the Avar population increased to 1,012,074, yet only 654,363 individuals reported speaking the Avar language.²

According to the 2019 census in the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Avar population was 46,436, which is a decrease of 3,364 people compared to the 2009 census. Of this population, 45,790 individuals identify the Avar language as their native tongue.³ Avar speakers in Azerbaijan often interact with speakers of Azerbaijani, Tsakhur, and Georgian languages, leading to a high degree of multilingualism. Many Avars are trilingual or polylingual, speaking Avar, Russian, Azerbaijani, and in certain villages such as Mazymkara and Khalatala, also Georgian. Azerbaijani and Russian serve as the primary languages of interethnic communication among Avar speakers.

The Akhvakh people live in the Republic of Dagestan, specifically in the Akhvakh district (Kudiyabroso, Tadmagitli, Lologonitl, Kvankero, and Izani) and the Shamil district (Ratlub, Tsekob, and Tlyanub). They also reside in the village of Akhakhdere/Okhokhdere in the Zakatala district of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Notably, the language of the Akhvakh people living in Azerbaijan remains unstudied.

According to the 2020 All-Russian Population Census, there are 5,282 Akhvakh people in the Russian Federation, with 5,015 of them speaking the Akhvakh language. Historically, since the 1930s, primary education for the Akhvakh people was conducted in the Avar language. However, in recent times, Russian has become the primary language of teaching in Dagestan, while Avar is taught only as a subject. In Azerbaijan, the exact number of Akhvakh people is difficult to determine in official statistics because they are often recorded as Avars or Azerbaijanis and included in the “other peoples” category in population censuses.

The Lezgins live compactly in the southern part of the region, particularly in the Kurakhsky, Suleiman-Stalsky, Magaramkentsky, Akhtynsky, and Dokuzparinsky districts. Additionally, there are smaller populations of Lezgins in the Derbentsky, Rutulsky, Khivsky, Khasavyurtsky, and Kizlyarsky districts. Beyond rural areas, Lezgins also reside in cities across Dagestan, including Makhachkala, Derbent, and Kaspiysk.

In the Republic of Azerbaijan, ethnic Lezgins are concentrated in several districts such as Kusar, Quba, Khachmaz, Ismailli, Kutkashen, and Kunakhkent, as well as in large cities. According to the 2010 All-Russian Population Census, there were 473,722 Lezgins in the Russian Federation. This number increased to 488,608 by the 2020 census. However, there is a concerning trend regarding the loss of native language proficiency among Lezgins in Dagestan. In 2010, 357,185 Lezgins reported speaking their native language, but this number had dropped to 255,783 by 2020.

Lezgins are the second largest ethnic group in Azerbaijan. According to the 2009 census of the Republic of Azerbaijan, their number was 180,300 people; ten years later, the number decreased to 167,570 people, of whom 125,776 people named Lezgin as their native language.

Descendants of Lezgins and Avars are also present in some regions of Turkey, although this is not detailed in the article due to the languages not being classified as “transborder,” owing to the absence of a common border between the Russian Federation and Turkey.

In 1928, a Latin-based Lezgin alphabet was introduced, but it was replaced by the Cyrillic script ten years later. Primary education in the Lezgin language began in the 1930s. However, in the 21st century, Russian has become the primary language of instruction, with the Lezgin language taught as a subject.

The Rutuls reside in the Rutul and Akhtynsky districts of the Republic of Dagestan within the Russian Federation, as well as in six villages in the Republic of Azerbaijan. A substantial portion of the Rutul population has settled in the Dagestani cities of Makhachkala and Derbent, as well as in the Azerbaijani cities of Sheki, Mingechevir, and Baku.

According to the All-Russian Population Census of 2010, the Rutul population comprised 35,240 individuals. After ten years, this number decreased to 34,259 individuals in Russia. It is virtually impossible to accurately account for the number of Rutuls, as well as other small Dagestani ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan, because they are often recorded as Lezgins or Azerbaijanis. Furthermore, in the censuses conducted in different years (1999, 2009, 2019), they are included in the category of “other peoples.”

In Russia, **the Tsakhurs** reside in 12 villages within the Rutul district of the Republic of Dagestan. In the

1. All-Russian Population Census of 2010. Official results by national and linguistic composition of the population and by region. Available at: http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/results2.html Date of access 02.02.2024.

2. All-Russian Population Census of 2020. Vol. 5. Ethnic composition and language proficiency. Available at: https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn_popul Date of access 02.02.2024.

3. Population census in the Republic of Azerbaijan 2019. Statistical yearbook. Volume B. Baku, 2022. c. 419.

Republic of Azerbaijan, they inhabit 18 villages in the Zakatala and Kakh districts, six of which have a mixed Avar-Azerbaijani-Tsakhur population. Additionally, a significant number of representatives of this ethnic group live in the Dagestani cities of Makhachkala and Derbent, as well as in the Azerbaijani cities of Zakatala, Qakh, Sheki, Mingechevir, Ganja, Sumgait, and Baku.

Based on the data from the last two all-Russian population censuses, the number of Tsakhurs in Russia remained relatively stable, with 12,769 people recorded in 2010, and 12,541 people in 2020. Accurately counting the Tsakhur population in Azerbaijan is challenging because some individuals are recorded as Lezgins or Azerbaijanis in the census. According to the 2009 census, there were 12,289 Tsakhurs in Azerbaijan. By 2019, statistics indicated that the total number of Tsakhurs was 13,361, with 12,873 individuals identifying Tsakhur as their nationality.

The Rutuls and Tsakhurs have been experiencing a significant decline in the use of their native languages. According to the 2010 All-Russian Population Census, 30,360 people spoke the Rutul language, while 10,596 people spoke the Tsakhur language. Over the subsequent decade, the number of Tsakhur language speakers decreased by 40%, dropping to 6,340 people. Similarly, the number of Rutul language speakers more than halved, decreasing to 13,591 people.

In 1990, the Russian Federation approved the use of a Cyrillic-based script for the Rutul and Tsakhur languages. Following this, in 1991, there was an initiative to begin primary education in these languages in areas of Dagestan where Rutul and Tsakhur communities reside compactly. However, this innovation was discontinued, and the language of instruction in primary school in the Rutul district is currently Russian.

Until 1952, the language of instruction in schools with Rutul and Tsakhur students was Azerbaijani. Since the mid-20th century, Russian has taken over this role in schools within the Rutul district. In 1996, a Tsakhur alphabet based on the Latin script was introduced in Azerbaijan, and by 2003, curricula for grades 1–4 of secondary school were officially approved.

Research conducted by scientists from the Summer Institute of Linguistics examined the proficiency levels in the native language, Azerbaijani, and Russian across various Lezgin-speaking regions of Azerbaijan [15]. M.E. Alekseev, K.I. Kazenin, and M. Suleimanov concur with J. Clifton and his colleagues, who highlight the “diversity of sociolinguistic situations among Lezgin-speaking language communities of Azerbaijan” [16].

The majority of **Bezhtins** reside in the Bezhtinsky section of the Tsuntinsky district of the Republic of Dagestan, particularly in the villages of Bezhta, Tlyadal, and Khasharkhota. Some Bezhtins have also settled in the lowland areas of Dagestan. Additionally, Bezhtins can be found in the villages of Chantliskuri and Saruso in the Kvareli district of Georgia.

According to the 2010 All-Russian Population Census, there were 5,956 Bezhta residents in Dagestan, with around 10,000 in the entire Russian Federation. Of these, 6,038 people reported proficiency in the Bezhtin language. By the time of the 2020 census, the number of people identifying as Bezhtins had increased to 6,890, with 6,858 residing in Dagestan. Additionally, 8,138 people considered the Bezhtin language their native language, of which 6,497 were located in the Russian Federation.

The Gunzibs reside in the villages of the Tsuntinsky district and in two villages of the Kizilyurtsky district. According to the 2020 All-Russian Population Census, 2,363 individuals in the Russian Federation identified as Gunzib. Additionally, 3,466 people consider the Gunzib language as their native tongue, with 3,046 of these speakers residing in the Russian Federation.

According to the 1989 All-Union Population Census, there were approximately 4,320 speakers of the Bezhtin and Gunzib languages in the Georgian SSR, residing predominantly in four villages of the Kvareli district: Tivi, Saruso (home to both Bezhtins and Gunzibs), Chantliskure (primarily inhabited by Bezhtins), and Tkhilistskaro (primarily inhabited by Gunzibs). Following the dissolution of the USSR in the early 1990s, the majority of this population relocated to the Kizilyurtsky district in the Republic of Dagestan, specifically to the villages of Novostalsk and Shushanovka. As reported by the 2014 census, 1,060 Bezhtins and Gunzibs remained in Georgia, with 973 residing in the Kvareli district.

The Bezhtins and Gunzibs in Georgia preserve their cultural heritage and traditions, including their native language, cuisine, wedding and funeral rites, and religious customs. They typically marry within their own community. Currently, the language of instruction in schools is Georgian.

In the Republic of Dagestan, the Avar and Lezgin languages are integral to many aspects of social and cultural life. They are used in various forms of media, including original and translated literature, newspapers, and magazines, radio and television programs. National theaters also perform plays in Avar and Lezgin.

Furthermore, Dagestan State University and Dagestan State Pedagogical University teach specialists in these languages. The Rutul and Tsakhur languages, recognized as newly written languages, have a more limited scope of use. Since the 1990s, literature has been published in these languages, and newspapers are available, but no theaters produce performances in Rutul or Tsakhur. There are no magazines in the Tsakhur language, except the children's magazine "Sokolyonok." The training of teachers-specialist for these languages at universities is sporadic, assembling groups of at least five students.

The oral transborder languages, such as Akhvakh, Bezhtin, and Gunzib, are primarily used for family and everyday communication and are mainly spoken in neighboring countries. In Azerbaijan, transborder Dagestani languages generally serve as everyday languages, with the exception of Lezgin, Avar, and Tsakhur, which are taught as a subject in some villages. According to the "Azerbaijani Multiculturalism" website, these languages are included in the educational curriculum with two hours per week dedicated to their instruction. Specifically, Lezgin is taught in grades I-IX across 98 schools, Avar – in primary grades in 22 schools, and Tsakhur – in junior grades in 5 schools.

In today's geopolitical landscape, territorial borders do not always reflect the extent of language contact or cultural interaction between ethnic groups. Physical barriers such as state borders and mountainous regions with no vehicle access can hinder direct cultural and linguistic exchanges between residents of neighboring areas. Moreover, language contact is carried out through commonly understood state languages.

The aforementioned divided peoples reside in three states characterized by distinct religious differences. Russia, a multi-confessional country, has a predominantly Orthodox Christian population. However, the ethnic groups under discussion are concentrated in the Republic of Dagestan, where Sunni Islam is the prevailing religion. In contrast, the Republic of Azerbaijan is predominantly Shiite Muslim, while Georgia has a rich Orthodox Christian heritage. Consequently, speakers of transborder languages in these diverse communities encounter either an unfamiliar religious environment or different branches of the same religion. Naturally, such confessional heterogeneity does not contribute to the preservation of a single national identity.

The inclusion of the aforementioned Dagestani transborder languages, with the exception of Avar and Lezgin, in UNESCO's "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger" [17] is significant. This classification, based on their limited speaker populations of fewer than 50,000 individuals, underscores that "these languages, at the present historical juncture, require preservation and cultivation, not only in multi-ethnic Dagestan but also in other Caucasian regions where their speakers reside in concentrated communities. Addressing these challenges necessitates governmental attention and support from leadership" [18, p. 119].

Contemporary sociolinguistic data reveal a significant shift in the language of interethnic communication in southern Dagestan, particularly in areas inhabited by the Rutuls and Tsakhurs. Over the past five decades, the Azerbaijani language has been entirely supplanted by Russian in this role [19, p. 110].

Conversely, in the Republic of Azerbaijan, where divided Dagestani peoples reside in mixed communities following the dissolution of the USSR, a different linguistic phenomenon has occurred. Of the two previously equivalent languages of interethnic communication – Russian and Azerbaijani – only the latter has maintained its status in these regions.

Thus, the spheres of interethnic communication, education, office work, and other similar domains for speakers of transborder languages in Dagestan are served by the Russian language, while in Azerbaijan, these functions are fulfilled by the Azerbaijani language. A similar situation exists with languages in Georgia, where the main spheres of activity, except for family and everyday life, are served by the Georgian language.

Speakers of transborder Dagestani languages demonstrate different levels of proficiency in their native or state language. Based on language proficiency, the following categories can be distinguished, determining the status of speakers of languages localized on both sides of the border:

Transborder language monolinguals who speak only their native language (Avar, Akhvakh, Lezgin, etc.) and live in Russia, Azerbaijan, or Georgia. The percentage of such monolinguals in the 21st century is small, which is explained by globalization processes, the influence of television, and the widespread use of the Internet.

Bilinguals who speak the official language of the country of residence and their native language. This category also includes passive bilinguals who understand their native language but do not have established communication skills. The group of active bilinguals includes the middle and older generations of speakers of transborder Dagestani languages. Passive bilinguals, as a rule, are young people and representatives of the middle generation living in cities.

The group of monolinguals who speak only the official language of the country of residence (Russian, Azerbaijani, or Georgian), but do not know their native language. This group is annually replenished by young people who do not see the value in their native language, which has limited functioning, and are isolated from their original language environment.

The status and functions of transborder languages are typically established in accordance with the laws of the states in which they are situated. In the case of Dagestani languages, it is crucial to note that the areas of residence, linguistic functions, cultural mindset, and mobility of their speakers, which predated the establishment of state borders, have undergone significant changes over the past three decades. Some Dagestani languages have become entirely localized outside the Republic of Dagestan and Russia as a whole (Budukh, Kryz, Udin, Khinalug), others have become transborder languages and, at the same time, minority languages in neighboring states. “The legal status of the native languages of ethnic Dagestanis in Azerbaijan, as well as in Georgia, remains undetermined... This situation adversely affects the preservation of ethnocultural identity among the Dagestani diaspora, particularly the Tsakhurs, of whom approximately two-thirds of the 20,000 population hold Azerbaijani citizenship” [9, p. 126].

The dynamic nature of transborder languages stems from their continuous enrichment within the territories of two states, each surrounded by diverse ethnic groups. However, their development occurs autonomously, with linguistic innovations in one part of the community often remaining unknown to representatives of the other part. This is due to the fact that contact between the two groups may be limited by various circumstances. For instance, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there have been varying degrees of restrictions on crossing the Russian-Azerbaijani border in Dagestan. Similarly, the movement of Georgian citizens into Russia continues to be problematic.

Speakers of Dagestani languages face difficulties in preserving their linguistic and ethnic identities when confronted with diverse cultural environments. The viability of transborder languages in the present context is largely dependent on the language policies implemented by the states in which these languages are spoken. Furthermore, international initiatives have been established to safeguard minority languages. One such initiative is the “European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages,” which aims to mitigate the linguistic imperialism of dominant international languages.

The growing number of transborder language speakers, who utilize Russian in Russia and Azerbaijani in Azerbaijan while simultaneously identifying their ethnic language as their mother tongue, juxtaposed with an overall decline in language speakers, prompts consideration of the paradoxical nature of national self-identification and language preservation issues.

In multicultural nations, key elements of tolerant coexistence include the development of multilingual education and instruction in national languages, which are crucial for maintaining linguistic diversity and multilingualism. Transborder languages serve as a foundation for developing and strengthening close cultural, scientific, pedagogical, and other ties between neighboring states. This process is facilitated by a shared historical past, collective memory, and empathy among ethnic kin. Consequently, solidarity between neighboring peoples is reinforced, and the international community gains insight into the multifaceted identity of multi-ethnic states.

Conclusions

The linguistic landscape of the Caucasus is characterized by ethnic diversity and, as a result, multilingualism. The region's unique feature is the mismatch between state and ethnic boundaries. Additionally, there is genetic, functional, and structural heterogeneity among the languages. Consequently, the role of lingua franca is inevitably fulfilled by the language of the titular nationality of the state where speakers of Dagestani transborder languages are located – namely Russian, Azerbaijani, or Georgian.

A comparative analysis of the number of speakers of transborder languages on both sides of the border reveals an asymmetrical representation of Avars, Akhvakhs, Bezhtins, Gunzibs, Lezgins, and Rutuls in neighboring states. These ethnic groups form relatively small communities in the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Georgia. In contrast, their populations are larger in the Russian Federation, where they also have broader spheres of operation. The Tsakhur language stands out as a symmetrical transborder language,

with a relatively equal number of speakers on both sides of the state border. However, the spheres of operation for Tsakhur are far more extensive within the Russian Federation.

The divided Dagestani peoples find themselves in a vulnerable position regarding the vitality of their languages and mentality, particularly in states where they constitute a minority. This situation presents them with the critical challenge of preserving multiple levels of their identity: ethnic, religious, and mental.

In conclusion, to preserve the spheres of functioning of transborder Dagestani languages in neighboring countries, it is essential to develop a state national policy focused on fostering tolerant citizens, who respect the nationality, mentality, religion, and culture of representatives from all ethnic groups.

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Received 21.02.2024

Accepted 03.04.2024

Published 15.12.2024

Поступила в редакцию 21.02.2024 г.

Принята в печать 03.04.2024 г.

Опубликована 15.12.2024 г.