Official State Language Acquisition as a Boundary Crossing – Experiences of Young Georgian Azerbaijanis

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Abstract

The thesis explores the experiences undergone through the state language acquisition process by young Georgian Azerbaijanis. Based on 12 semi-structured interviews, their exposure to Georgian was seen as crossing a symbolic and social boundary of belonging accompanied with identity negotiation struggles. The research addresses the gap in academic literature regarding the individual experiences of Georgian Azerbaijanis' first generation who acquired the language after the 2010 education reforms aimed at civic integration. It is argued that language boundary crossing is related to complex identification struggles. On one hand, state language learning makes young individuals better integrated and gives them a tool to claim political identification with Georgian citizenship. On the other hand, through language boundary-crossing, individuals perceive discrimination, ethnic prejudice and relative deprivation, leading to the feeling of otherness. The Georgian Azerbaijanis' perception that they are not accepted through the state language acquisition in the same way they expected and the new perspective on ethnic issues make their distinct ethnicity a salient part of everyday life. The research discusses the daily identity struggles, feelings of in-betweenness, and identity negotiation strategies such as producing bottom-up narratives of multiethnicity, civic integration and challenging the exclusive understanding of what it means to be a citizen of Georgia. The analysis indicates that the way individuals relate to and perceive language through boundary-crossing can affect the salience and relevance of their categories of identification and lead to complex negotiation processes. It challenges theoretical assumptions about one-sided theories of assimilation or ethnic retention.

Keywords: language boundary, boundaries, ethnic minority integration, categories of identification

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Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, ethnic minority groups found themselves in the post-Soviet nationalizing states. In some cases, lack of knowledge of the majority language, which enjoyed state language status, entirely excluded them from the newly independent state's political and social life. In Georgia, even after 30 years of the Soviet Union dissolution, the ethnic minority population struggles to be integrated into the state's broader society and not to be perceived as second-class citizens. Linguistic isolation in the densely populated ethnic minority settlements is additionally related to social, economic, and political isolation. The state language represents a symbolic and social boundary functioning simultaneously as a boundary against accessing the state resources monopolized by the dominant ethnic group and boundary against belonging to the Georgian political nation.

In the Soviet Union, language was politicized and understood as a main determinant of ethnonationality. Accordingly, the Georgian language was regarded as one of the exclusionary characteristics of the Georgian ethnic group. At the same time, ethnic Georgians were considered the Georgian nation-state's core, representing only authentic members of the nation. Ethnonationalism became the most visible part of political language in the early years of the independence after the Soviet Union dissolution – in the political rhetoric of nationalist leaders, Georgia was invoked as only ethnic Georgian's state, and ethnic minorities were described as "guests." After the Rose Revolution of 2003, the new government's rhetoric implied building an inclusive nation based on citizenship, emphasizing the Georgian nation's multiethnic character, and representing the state language as a tool for civic integration. Still, ethnic and religious elements of nationalism have not disappeared from the political discourse.

Following the 2003 Rose revolution, the Georgian government began developing a civic integration plan based on bilingual language education. As a result, the most important language education reforms were implemented in 2010. The reforms included increased teaching hours of Georgian as a second language in the ethnic minority language schools and a "4+1" quota program that provided a one-year state language course to prepare students for the university undergraduate programs. After the 2010 reforms, the first generations of ethnic minority youth acquired Georgian language skills and enrolled in Georgian higher education institutions.

The reforms made it possible for ethnic minority group members to learn the state language, get a higher education and be involved in the state's socioeconomic and political processes. However, the language teaching programs still have deficiencies, and the teaching quality remains low, which creates difficulties in the language learning process. The civic integration discourse in Georgia on a top-down level discursively awakens the state language as a marker of a "proper" citizen. The political leaders often narrate the lack of state language knowledge as the main and only obstacle for integration. However, they ignore the low quality of the language teaching programs and other socioeconomic issues, putting a burden of integration mainly on ethnic minorities.

This thesis is about ethnic minority youth integration in the context where majority ethnic group language is politicized, represents a boundary of belonging and participates in the shaping of inequality. It is about young Georgian Azerbaijanis, the largest ethnic minority group members in Georgia, and their personal experiences of crossing the language boundary. The social and political relevance of the state language education reform and civic integration discourse is mainly addressed in the scholarly literature that focuses on the top-down processes. There is a lack of

scholarship zooming in on ordinary young Georgian Azerbaijanis' language acquisition experiences. My research addresses this gap.

I aim to investigate young Georgian Azerbaijanis' reflections and narratives of the state language acquisition experiences through a scholarly lens. Precisely, the effects of personal experiences of language boundary-crossing on young Georgian Azerbaijanis' self-perception, sense of belonging, categories of identification and identity negotiation. The research relies on 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews with young Georgian Azerbaijanis who acquired the Georgian language and entered higher education institutions through the "4+1" program. All interviewees are from the three districts of the Kvemo Kartli region, where Georgian Azerbaijanis reside in high concentration. I utilized the boundary approach as the main theoretical framework. The research incorporates, links, critically engages and extends the literature on boundaries, ethnic minority integration, identification processes, and language acquisition.

The research emphasizes the significance of studying the whole network of boundaries and individuals' identifications in line with each other through the language boundary-crossing narratives. The way individuals relate to language through language boundary-crossing can have implications for an individual's perception of ethnic, linguistic or political boundaries, affecting their identification categories' salience and relevance. It is argued that young Georgian Azerbaijanis' state language acquisition as a boundary-crossing is related to the complex identification struggles that challenges single-way theoretical assumptions of assimilation and ethnic retention.

On one hand, crossing the language boundary enables young Georgian Azerbaijanis to be more involved in the socio-political and economic life of the state, making their Georgian citizenship a meaningful identification category. On the other hand, they experience discrimination in interethnic communication, ethnic prejudice on social and traditional media, relative deprivation and unequal treatment, causing feelings of otherness and struggles against alienation. Through the boundary-crossing, young Georgian Azerbaijanis relate to language in a newer way and rethink it in line with categories of identification. The perception that they are not accepted after language learning in the same way they expected to and the new perspective on ethnic issues makes their distinct ethnicity a salient part of everyday life. The research discusses Georgian Azerbaijanis' everyday identity struggles, dynamic process of identity negotiation and feelings of in-betweenness through boundary-crossing.

Georgian Azerbaijanis not merely accept state language learning as a tool for integrating into broader society but also engage in producing the bottom-up discourse of civic integration. Georgian Azerbaijanis try to negotiate salient ethnic boundaries with political identification by focusing on the minority and citizen rights or/and engaging in narrative making about Georgia's multiethnic legacy. In this way, they challenge the exclusive understanding of the Georgian political nation. It indicates that ethnic minority group members after having crossed the language boundary may recognize highlighted ethnocultural boundaries and incorporate ethnic culture in the state's multiethnic legacy to support their political identification. Due to language as a social boundary having inequality implications, individuals who crossed the language boundary became more aware and empowered to claim their rights and even criticize the state policy aspects that complicate civic integration.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter, which includes two sections, presents the theoretical framework and critically engages with scholarly literature. The first section discusses the literature on boundary-making and language as a boundary. The second section links the boundary approach with the ethnic minority integration and also incorporates literature on the language socialization aspect. The second chapter provides general, historical and political context. It sketches the top-down boundary-making processes having special emphasis on the implications for Georgian Azerbaijanis. After overviewing the historical context, the chapter discusses modern political debates in post-2003 Revolution Georgia and education reforms, which were intended as a civic integrationist language policy divergent from earlier more ethnonationalist approaches. At the end of the chapter, the questions for the empirical research of the young Georgian Azerbaijani's experiences are presented. The third chapter includes research methods and analysis of interviews. The discussion section reviews findings and broader implications.

1. Chapter: Theoretical Framework

In pursuance of studying the role of state language acquisition in the integration process of young Georgian Azerbaijanis and its connection to their sense of belonging and categories of identification, I apply the boundary approach as a primary theoretical framework. The research establishes the interrelation between the works regarding language, boundaries, ethnic minority identifications, and integration, further extending the literature and recognizing that the process of ethnic minority identification negotiation is a complex issue.

1.1. Language as a Boundary

Boundaries are implied in the wide range of social science literature as a conceptual toolkit to understand the function of symbolic resources in the creation, maintenance, dissolution, and contestation of categorical or institutionalized social differences.[1] Besides, Jean Terrier notes that the notion of "boundary" cannot be studied without reference to "identity" because these two notions are "mutually implicative"[2] – when there is a criterion for identification, it is also possible to draw a boundary as a sign of classification.[3] The research on boundaries conducted in nationalism and ethnicity studies further accentuate the fundamental role of a boundary in classification and identification - group boundaries exist in the knowledge of individuals; they are being drawn in interaction, and at the same time, encoded in institutions.[4]

[1] Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28, no. 1 (August 2002): 147, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141107.
[2] Jean Terrier, "Aspects of Boundary Research from the Perspective of Longue Durée," in *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries* (Routledge, 2015), 47, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315746999-11.
[3] Terrier, 47. it
[4] Jennifer Jackson and Lina Molokotos-Liederman, eds., *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries: Conceptualising and Understanding Identity through Boundary Approaches*, Routledge Studies in Nationalism and Ethnicity (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 14–15.

The prominent research literature of the previous years concerning boundaries follows the Barthian tradition that calls not to understand "cultural stuff" as a definitional character of groups but boundaries that enclose "cultural stuff" and matter for individuals' identification.[5] Group boundaries depend on the external ascription and the self-ascription of individuals.[6] Following Barthian tradition, language can be understood as a "cultural stuff"; however, it can also represent an institutionalized, politically relevant boundary of belonging that matters for individuals' identification and is awoken and invoked in everyday life interaction.

The central issue addressed by this research is language as a boundary. However, much of the research up to now has not focused on thoroughly studying this path. Having said that, investigating that theme could be helpful as various boundaries of belonging may not function in the same way. The importance of language for the perception of membership in a nation has been recognized in Anderson's influential book "imagined communities."[7] Anderson argued that nations are "imagined communities" "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[8] The author claimed that national groupness is grounded in the common vernacular that makes the imagination of a "community" possible; for instance, imagination becomes possible through reading the same newspapers in the same language.[9] According to Brubaker, language is one of the most important cultural resources for constructing

[5] Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Waveland Press, 1998), 15.
[6] Barth, 16.
[7] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso books, 2006).
[8] Anderson, 6.
[9] Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.*

ethnic and national identities and producing "the politics of difference,"[10] making it an analytically and theoretically powerful category worth discussing distinctively.[11] Because language can be "a key medium of identification"[12] and a "potent symbol of belonging,"[13] it could be assumed that the way linguistic boundaries are constructed, experienced, and reflected by individuals may also impact the salience and relevance of categories of identifications in everyday life.

The research neglects to study identification categories as fixed and essential entities. In contrast, it adopts a critical constructivist approach focusing on the "process" and "practices" through which boundaries can emerge, move, and identifications can modify.[14] Moreover, the research emphasizes that the salience of individuals' identification categories can be variable. The boundary approach calls for the study of salience, visibility, and permeability of boundaries.[15] Personal experiences of crossing language-boundary may show that the perceptions of boundaries in line with categories of identifications can change through the crossing process. That may also affect the salience of ethnic or national boundaries, individuals' sense of belonging and identification categories. The research on young Georgian Azerbaijanis' state language learning experiences as boundary-crossing reveals these complexities.

Language can be conceptualized as a symbolic boundary of belonging when belonging to a particular group is marked by language. For instance, that applies to cases where categories of identification like ethnicity, nationality, or citizenship are symbolically defined by language and

[10] Rogers Brubaker, "The Social Organization and Political Contestation of Cultural Difference," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries Today: A Legacy of Fifty Years* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 158.
[11] Brubaker, 158.
[12] Brubaker, 160.
[13] Brubaker, 160.
[14] Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Harvard University Press, 2004); Joane Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture," *Social Problems* 41, no. 1 (February 1, 1994): 152–76, https://doi.org/10.2307/3096847; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford University Press, 1990).
[15] Lamont and Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," 186; Jackson and Molokotos-Liederman, *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries*, 2.

language also has political significance as a marker of belonging. Relaying on Lamont and Molnar's definition, "Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality".[16] In Georgia, the Georgian language is regarded as a marker of Georgian ethnicity and nation;[17] Moreover, lack of state language knowledge for ethnic minorities is related to being perceived as second-class citizens, discussed in the second chapter.

Besides being constructed as a symbolic boundary, language can represent a social boundary when it is a means of unequal distribution of resources – "Social boundaries are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources."[18] It should be noted that language knowledge is, first of all, factual difference; however, this difference can translate into a symbolic and social boundary in the context when it becomes a politicized mark of group belonging and at the same time acquires "systematic bearing of inequality."[19] In Georgia's case, without Georgian language knowledge, ethnic minorities are linguistically, socially and economically isolated in their region because the state resources (official documents, higher education, employment outside the region) can only be accessed in the official language. Even though the Georgian government implemented the state language teaching reforms, they have serious shortcomings. Besides, even though there is some door for young people to acquire the Georgian language on a communication level, the same cannot be said for the older generation.

[16] Lamont and Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," 168.
[17] Ghia Nodia, "Components of the Georgian National Idea: An Outline," *Identity Studies in the Caucasus and the Black Sea Region* 1 (2009).
[18] Lamont and Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," 168.
[19] Rogers Brubaker, *Grounds for Difference* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 11.

According to Wimmer, the notion of boundary also implies power and prestige struggles[20] – this is prevalent in the state's approach to the majority and minority languages. While discussing symbolic and social boundaries of belonging to a specific ethnic group or nation, it should be recognized that the "identity," "ideals," or "material interests" are not easily distinguishable; through boundary-approach, they can be analyzed as intertwined.[21] A similar discussion can be applied to ethnic minorities acquiring Georgian language skills whose struggles over material needs and political identifications are intertwined.

Post-Barthian research acknowledges different levels of boundary construction both on macro and micro levels. Barth mainly studied individual interaction level; however, he also emphasized the role of macro-level factors. For instance, according to Barth, through state policy, "valued resources are arbitrarily allocated, or denied, by bureaucratic action, thereby creating communities of fate – which will next tend to emerge as social, self-aware groups – from legal categories."[22] Verdery utilized a top-down approach for analyzing boundary construction through the nation-state ideology, presenting the Romanian nation as "strategically deployed for tactical advantage."[23] Herzfeld notes that nation-states usually do not tolerate complete irrelevance of "cultural stuff"; oppositely, the political leaders attempt to promote and mobilize the virtues of "national culture."[24] In his book on ethnic boundaries, Wimmer discusses three levels of boundary work – state

[20] Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks*, Oxford Studies in Culture and Politics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.
[21] Wimmer, 5.
[22] Frederik Barth, "Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity," *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond" Ethnic Group and Boundaries*, (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994), 19.
[23] C. Verdery, "The Dangerous Shoals of Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: A Personal Account," *Ethnic Groups Boundaries Today: A Legacy of Fifty Years (Research in Migration and Ethnic Relations Series)/Ed. By Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Marek Jakoubek. London: Routledge*, 2018, 40.
[24] Michael Herzfeld,"Boundaries, Embarassments, and Social Justice,"*Ethnic Groups Boundaries Today: A Legacy of Fifty Years (Research in Migration and Ethnic Relations Series)/Ed. By Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Marek Jakoubek. London: Routledge*, 2019, 68.

institutions' role, power hierarchies, and personal networks.[25] Macro-level boundary-making processes are crucial because the institutional framework can determine types of boundaries, and accordingly, power hierarchies define different levels of differentiation.[26]

Observing the top-down boundary-making process regarding language is valuable because "state institutions" and "power hierarchies" can determine language as a boundary for belonging and make it an integral aspect for individuals' identification with ethnicity, nationhood, or citizenship. Kamusella in "Language as an Instrument of Nationalism in Central Europe" shows how beyond being "cultural stuff," politicization of language became a central mechanism of nation-building in Central Europe.[27] Amirejibi-Mullen emphasizes that since the XIX century, nation-building in Georgia was heavily based on linguistic policy.[28]

A good example of top-down boundary-making in the post-Soviet context is Rogers Brubaker's study on post-Soviet nationalizing states.[29] The author shows how newly independent post-Soviet states such as Latvia and Estonia used language policy to establish congruence between titular language and nationality.[30] Similarly, language-centred nationalism is a part of political discourse in post-Soviet Georgia.[31] Linguistic nationalism in modern Georgia draws boundaries of belonging and separates the majority and minority populations, even though state language education reform makes some space for inclusion. In this context, language is not merely a "categorical difference"

[25] Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*.
[26] Wimmer, 80.
[27] Tomasz D. I. Kamusella, "Language as an Instrument of Nationalism in Central Europe," *Nations and Nationalism* 7, no. 2 (2001): 235–51, https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8219.00014.
[28] Rusudan Amirejibi-Mullen, "Language Policy and National Identity in Georgia" (2012), https://core.ac.uk/display/30696140.
[29] Rogers Brubaker, "Nationalizing States Revisited: Projects and Processes of Nationalization in Post-Soviet States," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 11 (November 1, 2011): 1785–1814, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.579137.
[30] Brubaker.
[31] Christofer Berglund, "'Forward to David the Builder!' Georgia's (Re)Turn to Language-Centered Nationalism," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 4 (July 3, 2016): 522–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2016.1142519.

but represents a symbolic and social boundary on a macro level and is "implicated in the production and reproduction of inequality."[32]

It should also be emphasized that macro-level boundary-making processes are not always accepted or internalized by ordinary individuals. Individuals sometimes ignore or even contest the symbolic boundaries created on the macro-level through categorization. For instance, Judson[33] and Zahra[34] conceptualize "indifference" to show the limits of top-down nationalization. Judson discusses indifference in the context of linguistic boundary-making - he explains that the nationalist activists in imperial Austria failed to produce politicized linguistic boundaries among the linguistically mixed population of the rural regions.[35] The research of young Georgian Azerbaijanis' experiences does not take ordinary individuals' relation to the top-down boundary-making processes for granted – it critically analyzes individual's motivations, interests and uncovers bottom-up meaning-making aspects.

Even though the macro-level process of boundary-making, such as a study of institutional frameworks, enriches boundary research, researching ordinary individual experiences is crucial, as "boundaries do not operate without human action."[36] Humans are boundary-makers, and even "natural boundaries" matter only when individuals regard them as significant and reflect on them.[37] Because people experience actual "discontinuities in their action and interaction"[38] through

[32] Brubaker, *Grounds for Difference*, 11.
[33] Pieter M. Judson, "Nationalism and Indifference," in *Habsburg Neu Denken*, 0 vols. (Böhlau Verlag, 2016), 148–55, https://doi.org/10.7767/9783205204398-019.
[34] Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 93–119.
[35] Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Harvard University Press, 2006).
[36] Terrier, "Aspects of Boundary Research from the Perspective of Longue Durée," 47.
[37] Terrier, 47.
[38] Sanne F. Akkerman and Arthur Bakker, "Boundary Crossing and Boundary Objects," *Review of Educational Research* 81, no. 2 (June 2011): 139, https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311404435.

boundaries, their experiences can be the most valuable source to understand the nature of boundaries.[39] Moreover, considering this, Akkerman and Bakker suggest that the nature of boundaries can be observed in the best way by researching the boundary-crossing process and experiences of boundary-crossers.[40]

When language is a symbolic and social boundary of belonging, an individual attempt to acquire a majority language can be studied as a boundary-crossing practice leading to identification negotiations. Additionally, the symbolic and social boundary is important not only from the perspective of symbolic membership in a nation but also due to the inequality implications. In this way, language boundary crossing can be related to complex processes. Boundary-crossing leads to the emergence of a new realm – it may open up a door for various experiences, both positively and negatively perceived by boundary-crossers depending on the socio-political context. This process may affect an individual's self-perception. Young Georgian Azerbaijanis' experiences show such complex implications of language boundary-crossing.

In the review of boundary-crossing practices in learning theory, Akkerman and Bakker note, "the accounts of single groups and individuals crossing boundaries show how they not only act as a bridge between worlds but simultaneously represent the very division of related worlds."[41] A similar discussion can be relevant for language acquisition as a boundary-crossing experience. The identification struggles associated with the language-boundary crossing can be related to feelings of own liminal, ambiguous, or middle-ground positions having personal experience of crossing a boundary into a new realm and moving between different and unequal worlds. The young Georgian

[39] Akkerman and Bakker, 138.
[40] Akkerman and Bakker, 138–39.
[41] Akkerman and Bakker, 140.

Azerbaijanis' state language learning-related experiences reveal these complex identity struggles that emerged through the boundary-crossing process.

1.2. Boundary-Crossing and Minority Integration

Language acquisition is mainly the central point in integration and assimilation theories. The classic assimilation theory indicates a straight-line assimilation model assuming that learning the majority language and afterwards educational and occupational mobility finally leads to identificational assimilation.[42] Segmented assimilation theory moves apart from a straight-line model and acknowledges additional paths like assimilation into the impoverished class of majority or upward mobility while preserving ethnic culture.[43] The theory's relatively new developments suggest "lessons for segmented-assimilation theory"[44] - Zhou and Xiong underlie that even linguistic assimilation is related to a more complex identification process than linear de-ethnicization.[45] Laitin linked state language acquisition with ethnic identity choice and step towards assimilation in Latvia and Estonia in the post-Soviet context.[46] Above mentioned theoretical assumptions are primarily based on quantitative studies, focusing on intergenerational

[42] W. L. Warner and L. Srole, *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*, The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups (New Haven, CT, US: Yale University Press, 1945); Robert Ezra Park, *Race and Culture*, Race and Culture (New York, NY, US: Free Press, 1950); Milton Myron Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (Oxford University Press on Demand, 1964).
[43] Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants," 1993, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716293530001006.
[44] Min Zhou and Yang Sao Xiong, "The Multifaceted American Experiences of the Children of Asian Immigrants: Lessons for Segmented Assimilation," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 6 (November 1, 2005): 1119–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870500224455.
[45] Zhou and Xiong, 1139.
[46] Laitin, Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the near Abroad (Cornell University Press, 1998).

patterns; they do not zoom in on individuals' experiences like reflections on majority language, related identity negotiation process, sense of belonging and salience of identification categories.

Another direction of scholarship that considers language issues a crucial aspect of minority integration is pluralism or ethnic retention. The researchers, who favour the ethnic retention path, oppose assumptions about assimilation – culture and identification pattern is understood as generally unchanged despite social mobility or increased communication with the state's majority population.[47] Gans, in his article, reflects on the scholarship of assimilation and pluralist theorists in seeking reconciliation of two approaches and calls for avoiding simplified single way assumptions.[48] By studying Georgian Azerbaijanis' personal experiences of language-boundary crossing in-depth, it is possible to notice more complex identification struggles than one-way assimilation or ethnic retention. Moreover, it is possible to observe that identification categories can be salient or irrelevant throughout an individuals' lifetime, depending on how the individual relates and perceives boundaries.

I utilize studying language-learning experiences in the integration process of ethnic minority youth as boundary-crossing, primarily assuming how people perceive language as a boundary of belonging can affect their sense of belonging and identification negotiation strategies in complex ways. For instance, Cara studied Russian-speaking adolescents' preferred identification patterns in Latvia after implementing state language reforms.[49] According to the study, adolescents prefer to integrate by identifying themselves with their ethnic culture and perceiving Latvia as their

[47] Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*, 19.
[48] Herbert J. Gans, "Toward a Reconciliation of 'Assimilation' and 'Pluralism': The Interplay of Acculturation and Ethnic Retention," *International Migration Review* 31, no. 4 (December 1, 1997): 875–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/019791839703100404.
[49] Olga Cara, "The Acculturation of Russian-Speaking Adolescents in Latvia," *European Education* 42, no. 1 (April 1, 2010): 8–36, https://doi.org/10.2753/EUE1056-4934420101.

homeland.[50] However, an in-depth study of individuals' language learning-related experiences and approaching it as boundary-crossing would make it possible to observe whether individuals regard language's role as important for their belonging and identification and in what way. That could reveal a complex identity negotiation process.

The relevance of studying language as a boundary in the integration context is scholarly recognized. Recently, Onasch showed that teachers draw language as a boundary of belonging in the French Civic Integration Program.[51] The author questions the possibility for Chinese participants to feel integrated and accepted because even when they speak French, teachers make them aware that boundaries can be essentialized.[52] The researcher takes teachers' boundary-work as a central aspect of research; however, she notes that it can affect students' sense of belonging. The above mentioned suggests that the sense of belonging of ethnic minorities can be affected by the socialization aspect of the integration process and language acquisition.

Considering the socialization aspect, Harell, Banting, Kymlicka and Wallace conducted the survey in Canada on perceptions of integration and sources of solidarity in the diverse communities.[53] The survey suggests that majority ethnic group members regard learning a language as one of the major efforts from minorities to integrate. In recognition of such efforts, they become less hostile to the immigrant or indigenous ethnic minority groups.[54] Notably, some authors argue that state language proficiency and relatively advanced economic conditions among immigrants are related to

[50] Cara.
[51] Elizabeth A. Onasch, "Lessons on the Boundaries of Belonging: Racialization and Symbolic Boundary Drawing in the French Civic Integration Program," *Social Problems* 64, no. 4 (November 2017): 577–93, https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spw037.
[52] Onasch, 589.
[53] Allison Harell et al., "Shared Membership Beyond National Identity: Deservingness and Solidarity in Diverse Societies," *Political Studies*, May 8, 2021, 0032321721996939, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321721996939.
[54] Harell et al.

increased consciousness of discrimination.[55] Language boundary-crossing related language socialization experience may affect how ethnic minority group members perceive and rethink linguistic or even ethnic boundaries. Such experience can be interconnected to identification processes and identity negotiation strategies; this is also crucial for my research.

It should also be noted that most studies on integration and boundaries focus on new immigration in the US and Western Europe. The context of the post-Soviet states and ethnic minority group members who perceive themselves as indigenous to the state territory is different. For instance, in the post-Soviet space, ethnic minorities demand minority rights as opposed to many of the immigrant groups. Ethnic minorities often seek to maintain ethnic boundaries, and linguistic struggles are crucial in the minority rights efforts as a tool of claiming distinct ethnonational membership. Csergo observes that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, debates or conflicting situations over minority language use emerged in all successor states; according to the author, "language contestations were debates about the right to pursue cultural reproduction and sovereignty."[56] Additionally, some ethnic minority group activists in the post-Soviet states actively use a minority rights agenda to promote their distinct ethnic culture in the context of Europeanization.[57]

It is also an important contextual factor that ethnic minorities in the post-Soviet states often pursue to maintain language through a minority language school system as a "guarantee for the reproduction of a complex minority culture."[58] The minority language schools can have

[55] Alejandro Portes, Robert Nash Parker, and José A. Cobas, "Assimilation or Consciousness: Perceptions of U.S. Society Among Recent Latin American Immigrants to the United States*," *Social Forces* 59, no. 1 (September 1, 1980): 200–224, https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/59.1.200.
[56] Zsuzsa Csergo, *Talk of the Nation: Language and Conflict in Romania and Slovakia* (Cornell University Press, 2007), 18.
[57] Licia Cianetti and Ryo Nakai, "Critical Trust in European Institutions: The Case of the Russian-Speaking Minorities in Estonia and Latvia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 64, no. 5 (2017): 276–90.
[58] Csergo, *Talk of the Nation: Language and Conflict in Romania and Slovakia*, 162.

implications for the ethnic minority integration process and should be considered while studying minority group members' language boundary-crossing experiences. For instance, Janusauskiene discusses the two-fold effect of the polish language schools in Lithuania: on the one hand, the Polish-language schools participate in the reproduction of polish national culture and, on the other hand, complicate the formation of Lithuanian civic identity because of producing social and ethnonational cleavages.[59]

Other factors that deserve attention to study ethnic minority identification and language boundary-crossing in the integration process are various identification levels, such as potential regional identification, especially in the regions where ethnic minorities are highly concentrated. According to Gary S. Elbow, a sense of belonging and identification can be determined by the regional affiliation that neither requires nor excludes the possibility of national identification.[60] Moreover, ethnic minorities in the post-Soviet states and the border regions sometimes are addressed not only by the top-down boundary-making strategies of the state of residence but also by the kin states' policy. Storm describes Georgian Azerbaijanis as people "in-between" - between nation-building narratives of Georgia and Azerbaijan.[61] As already discussed, macro-level factors of boundary-making can also affect an individual dimension. Each case of minority integration and language boundary-crossing for in-depth study requires close study to the local historical and socio-political context.

[59] Diana Janušauskienė, "Identities of and Policies Towards the Polish National Minority in Lithuania," *Ethnopolitics* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 136–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2020.1808331.
[60] Gary S. Elbow, "Scale and Regional Identity in the Caribbean," *Nested Identities: Nationalism, Territory, and Scale, Eds. GH Herb and DH Kaplan*, 1999, 59.
[61] Karli-Jo T. Storm, "WHITHER THE VƏTƏN? THE FRAMING OF HOMELAND IN OFFICIAL DISCOURSE VIS-À-VIS GEORGIA'S AZERI-TURK POPULATION," *Ideology and Politics Journal* 16, no. 2 (October 2020): 129–65, https://doi.org/10.36169/2227-6068.2020.01.00016; Karli-Jo T. Storm, "A People *In-Between* : Examining Indicators of Collective Identity among Georgian Azeri-Turks," *Ethnopolitics* 19, no. 5 (October 19, 2020): 501–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2019.1608075.

One additional important aspect that can complement our understanding of language as a boundary of belonging and individuals' experiences of boundary-crossing in the integration process is to imply theories that link language acquisition with "imagined communities."[62] Norton combines Anderson's "imagined communities"[63] with Wenger's understanding of "imagination" as an extension of self in time and space[64] and Vigotsky's "sociality of learning"[65] better to understand the connection between second language learning and identity.[66] According to this approach, an individuals' desire and imagination to be a member of a particular "imagined community" mediates their learning process and trajectories.[67]

The concept "imagined communities" implied in language acquisition theory makes it possible to understand language learning on spatial and temporal levels.[68] The temporal dimension includes individuals' imaginations and reflections about their future and their learning motivations.[69] The spatial dimension enables examining the national ideologies' influence on language learning and the construction of identity.[70] Kanno explores the language learning experiences of Japanese teenager Rui, who spent most of his life in the English-speaking world.[71] Rui's motivation and

[62] Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.
[63] Anderson.
[64] Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 176.
[65] Lev Vygotsky, "Interaction between Learning and Development," *Readings on the Development of Children* 23, no. 3 (1978): 34–41.
[66] Bonny Norton, "Identity and Second Language Acquisition," in *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, ed. Carol Chapelle (Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012), wbeal0521, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal0521; Norton.
[67] Bonny Norton, "Non-Participation, Imagined Communities and the Language Classroom," *Learner Contributions to Language Learning: New Directions in Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 159–71; Yasuko Kanno and Bonny Norton, "Imagined Communities and Educational Possibilities: Introduction," *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 2, no. 4 (2003): 241–49, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327701JLIE0204_1; Aneta Pavlenko and Bonny Norton, "Imagined Communities, Identity, and English Language Learning," in *International Handbook of English Language Teaching*, ed. Jim Cummins and Chris Davison, Springer International Handbooks of Education (Boston, MA: Springer US, 2007), 669–80, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-46301-8_43.
[68] Kanno and Norton, "Imagined Communities and Educational Possibilities: Introduction," 248.
[69] Kanno and Norton, 248.
[70] Kanno and Norton, 248.
[71] Kanno and Norton, 244.

investment in learning Japanese were determined by his imagined membership in the Japanese nation.[72] However, after visiting Japan, he discovered different Japan than he would imagine, leading to frustration and affecting his language learning motivation.[73]

Considering the importance of how individuals reflect their language learning motivations, imagined communities and integration can be helpful to better understand language as a boundary of belonging and its relation to categories of identifications and their salience. Moreover, it is vital to consider how individuals narrate their experience of acquiring language skills and reflections on language in line with boundaries, belonging, and imagined communities before, through, and after boundary-crossing processes.

[72] Kanno and Norton, 244.
[73] Kanno and Norton, 244.

2. Chapter: General, Historical and Political Context

This chapter overviews general, historical, and political context to contextualize young Georgian Azerbaijanis' experiences. As already mentioned, the integration process and boundary research require close study with the specific local context and top-down processes. Most of the Georgian Azerbaijani interviewees are born in the second half of the 90s. Their parents underwent the Soviet collapse. They grew up in the period of post-Soviet Georgian nation-building, experienced the transition into nation-building strategies, and crossed the language boundary. The discussion is provided about top-down boundary-making processes, having particular emphasis on language and relation between the State and Georgian Azerbaijanis under the Soviet Union, early post-Soviet Georgia and contemporary political debates. It is argued that the language education reforms following Rose Revolution intended civic integration and differed from the earlier ethnonationalist approach. The implications and shortcomings in the implementation of the reforms are reviewed. At the end of the chapter, research questions are presented.

2.1. Historical Overview

The Azerbaijani-speaking population is the largest ethnic minority group in Georgia. According to the latest general population census of 2014, Azerbaijanis represent 6.3% of the whole population of Georgia, of 3,713,804 people.[74] Most of them, about 76% of Georgian Azerbaijanis, live in the Kvemo Kartli region (41%) that borders the states of Azerbaijan and Armenia. The

[74] "Main Results of 2014 General Population Census," National Statistics Office of Georgia (GEOSTAT), accessed May 5, 2021, https://www.geostat.ge/en/single-archive/3319.

highest concentrations of Georgian Azerbaijanis reside in the following districts of Kvemo Kartli: Marneuli (83.8%), Dmanisi (65.5%), Blonisi (63.4%), and Gardabani (43,5%). Apart from the Kvemo Kartli, Georgian Azerbaijanis also live in the Kakheti region (6.3%) and Tbilisi (1.4%).

To determine precisely the roots of Georgian Azerbaijanis in the territory of modern Georgia is not an easy task because of the contested and politicized historiography of the South Caucasus and also the complex history of the region as a warfare territory during the centuries between local kingdoms and Imperial forces like Romans, Mongols, Persians, Ottomans, Russians, and others.[75] Some authors suggest tracing Georgian Azerbaijani populations' roots back to the eleventh century when Turkic-speaking Muslim nomadic tribes settled in the territories of the kingdom of Georgia for the first time, before the formation of modern nation-states.[76] The subsequent number of migration is emphasized in the 16th and 17th centuries by authors,[77] primarily when Safavid Persian shah Abbas I settled the contemporary territory of Kvemo Kartli with tribes called Borchalou.[78]

The first Census under the Russian imperial rule in 1897 describes the descendants of Georgian Azerbaijanis in the Borchalo district of the Caucasus Viceroyalty's Tiflis Governorate that partially overlaps with the modern Kvemo Kartli's territories.[79] Since 1936, the South Caucasian Turkic-speaking Muslim people that were depicted in the earlier censuses (including Soviet Census 1926)

[75] Karli-Jo Storm, "The Dynamics of Identity Negotiation in a Border Region: The Case of the Georgian Azeri-Turks of Kvemo Kartli" (Itä-Suomen yliopisto, 2019), 15–16.
[76] George Sanikidze and Edward W. Walker, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia," August 1, 2004, 21, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7149d486.
[77] Sanikidze and Walker, 22; Bayram Balci and Raoul Motika, "Islam in Post-Soviet Georgia," *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 3 (September 1, 2007): 340, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930701702399.
[78] Aleksandre Boshishvili, *Southern Border of the Georgian Kingdom and Southern Provinces (XV to XVIII Centuries)* (Tbilisi, 215AD), 127.
[79] Storm, "A People *In-Between*," 6.

as "Tiurks" or "Tatars" were officially given a newer name - "Azerbaijanis" by the Soviet Union leadership.[80]

To contextualize language as a boundary and experiences of Georgian Azerbaijanis in post-Soviet Georgia, it is essential to briefly overview the historical context of the Soviet Union's top-down boundary-making and nationality policy. Even though the Soviet Union was considered an international unity, its policies paradoxically shaped local nationalisms based on a primordial understanding of ethnicity determined by language as a central marker of common origin. Martin,[81] Hirsh,[82] Slezkine,[83] Brubaker,[84] Beissinger,[85] Suny,[86] and Smith[87] explain how the Soviet Union listed the population into nationalities primarily based on language, institutionalized ethnonational hierarchy, and promoted distinct national narratives. In the early years of the Soviet Union, primarily in the 20s, the politics of indigenization required local political elites to have been promoted according to ethnic marks. Scientists, intellectuals, and local elites should have promoted native languages, produced distinct national histories and collective memories about primordial ethnic roots.

The titular groups in the republics were the most privileged because the republic was regarded as their exclusive homeland. Minority groups either had their autonomous territory with distinct

[80] Sopo Zviadadze and Davit Jishkariani, *Identity Issues among Azerbaijani Population of Kvemo Kartli and Its Political and Social Dimensions* (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), 2018), 8.
[81] Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Cornell University Press, 2001).
[82] Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations* (Cornell University Press, 2014).
[83] Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–52, https://doi.org/10.2307/2501300.
[84] Rogers Brubaker, "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutionalist Account," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 1 (February 1994): 47–78, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00993673.
[85] Mark R. Beissinger, "Nationalism and the Collapse of Soviet Communism," *Contemporary European History*, 2009, 331–47.
[86] Ronald Grigor Suny, "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations," *The Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 4 (2001): 862–96.
[87] Jeremy Smith, *Red Nations* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

institutions or were considered as non-autochthonous having a homeland in another republic. The central government of the Soviet Union was involved in the segregation of titular groups and ethnic minorities, discussed by some scholars as the policy of "divide and rule."[88] Moreover, the Soviet Government introduced national passports that encoded "a fixed, biologically defined, single, formally unchangeable ethnicity"[89] as legal nationality. According to Brubaker, "ethnic nationality" was institutionalized as a "fundamental social category."[90]

Georgian Azerbaijanis had the status of the non-autochthonous minority group and did not enjoy autonomous status or as many privileges and institutional arrangements as titular Georgians and the titular population of the autonomous republics in Adjara, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. After adopting the label "Azerbaijani" in the passports of the Turkic-speaking ethnic minority living in southern Georgia, Georgian Azerbaijanis were the subject of the policy directed towards them as Azerbaijani SSR's titular groups' co-nationals regarding national myths.[91] Azerbaijani language schools in Georgia at the same time represented Azerbaijani national schools. The Soviet Language and ethno-nationality policy produced linguistic and ethnonational boundaries that prevented ethnic minorities and the titular group from developing common overlapping identification other than the Soviet identity that became problematic after the Soviet Union collapsed.

Since 1933, the Soviet policy gradually shifted into russification, even though indigenization has never entirely lost its importance. In Georgia, Russian language education strengthened and was

[88] Rusudan Amirejibi-Mullen, "Language Policy and National Identity in Georgia" (Queen Mary University of London, 2012), 252.
[89] Amirejibi-Mullen, 224.
[90] Rogers Brubaker, "Myths and Misconceptions in the Study of Nationalism," in *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*, ed. John A. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 286, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511897559.013.
[91] Storm, "The Dynamics of Identity Negotiation in a Border Region: The Case of the Georgian Azeri-Turks of Kvemo Kartli," 18.

mandatory both in titular and non-titular nationality schools. At the same time, Georgian language teaching was not obligatory in minority language schools. Georgian Azerbaijanis chose either Azerbaijani or Russian schools that mostly did not give Georgian language instructions.[92] In this way, the Russian language became an interethnic communication language in Georgia. However, despite the pressure of russification throughout the Soviet Union, and Russian being a communication medium, the Georgian Language remained hegemonic. Georgians occupied more privileged positions than ethnic minorities.[93] Martin notes that Russian became the dominant language in all republics except Georgia and Armenia.[94] The language also became an integral part of nationalist mobilization for independence.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Soviet legacy of the nationality policy conditioned ethnicity and language as its central attribute to become the leitmotif of the political rhetoric in Georgia as the primary tool of self-determination. Along with language and ethnicity, religion was awoken as a marker of "Georgiannes". The influence of the orthodox church on the national rhetoric strengthened. Especially after April 9, 1989, when Soviet troops dispersed a peaceful demonstration in Tbilisi, the national movement radicalized.[95] The early years of Georgia's Independence can be characterized by mutual distrust, alienation, conflicting memory narratives, and ethnic conflicts between the titular population and ethnic minorities that sometimes still echo in the political rhetoric, dynamics of majority-minority relationships, and perceptions of boundaries.

[92] Amirejibi-Mullen, "Language Policy and National Identity in Georgia," 2012, 252.
[93] Suny, "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations."
[94] Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 393.
[95] Salvatore Freni, "Georgia as an Ethnic Democracy: A Study on the Azerbaijani and Armenian Minorities Under Mikheil Saakashvili" (2011), 19.

In 1991, Georgia declared independence, and Zviad Gamsakhrdia, the dissident and leader of the national liberation movement, became the first elected President (Georgian Azerbaijanis and Armenians supported the communist party). The vital aspect of Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric was the justification of Georgian ethnic culture's uniqueness. For instance, in his public lecture "Georgian Spiritual Mission," the ancientness of Georgian culture is explained; additionally, the Georgian language is attributed to the messianic character - it is a language of the Second Advent, and the mystery of the world is declared in it.[96] Such "sacralization" of Georgian ethnic culture and language left less space for ethnic minorities, represented as historical "others."

Ethnic minorities were often considered a threat, labelled as "guests," "newcomers," "separatists," and "Kremlin agents."[97] Georgian Azerbaijanis were easily marked as "others" in Georgian nationalist discourse because of their distinct ethnicity, religion, and lack of Georgian language knowledge;[98] Demographic fears of growing Azerbaijani population leading to "Islamization" and "Tatarization" of Georgia became widespread.[99] Additionally, Georgian Azerbaijanis were often considered as an "underdeveloped" and "backward" population.[100] Even though the large-scale conflicts like those in Abkhazia and Ossetia never escalated, the situation was tense in the Kvemo Kartli region.

[96] Zviad Gamsakhurdia, *Georgian spiritual mission* (Tbilisi: Ganatleba, 1990).
[97] Christofer Berglund and Timothy Blauvelt, "Redefining the Nation: From Ethnic Fragmentation to Civic Integration," *G. Nodia (Hrsg.)* 25 (2016): 16; Ronald Grigor Suny, "Provisional Stabilities: The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *International Security* 24, no. 3 (1999): 163.
[98] Zviadadze and Jishkariani, *Identity Issues among Azerbaijani Population of Kvemo Kartli and Its Political and Social Dimensions*, 3.
[99] Svante E. Cornell, "Autonomy and Conflict," *Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus. Cases in Georgia. Uppsala Universitet Department of Peace and Conflict Research Report*, no. 61 (2002): 159.
[100] Zviadadze and Jishkariani, *Identity Issues among Azerbaijani Population of Kvemo Kartli and Its Political and Social Dimensions*, 3.

In 1989, the Soviet Supreme of Georgia adopted a "language law" that required obligatory use of Georgian language throughout the state.[101] Ethnic, regional parties have been banned.[102] In the 1990s, there was an attempt of "Georgianization" in the Kvemo Kartli region by replacing Soviet names and pre-Soviet Azerbaijani village names with Georgian versions.[103] Gamsakhurdia tried to centralize power and created "centrally appointed prefects" in the Georgian Azerbaijani and Armenian settlements, resulting in minority resistance.[104]

There were also physical abuse incidents by the Georgian nationalist gangs, and about 800 Georgian Azerbaijanis families in Bolnisi were forced to move to Azerbaijan. Local Georgian Azerbaijani intelligentsia created the organization Geyrat (Honour) in 1989. Some movement members advocated the autonomous status of "Borchali"; however, it did not transform into robust demand. The organization's main goal was to have local Azerbaijani representation in the government, defend the existence of Azerbaijani-language schools, stop the Azerbaijanis growing emigration from Georgia, and reach a dialogue with the national liberation movement.[105]

In August of 1991, the opponents of Gamsakhurdia organized a military coup, and the state drowned in the civil war. The junta overthrew Gamsakhurdia and invited the former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze from Moscow to rule the state, who later became the second President of Georgia. In his presidency, Shevardnadze aimed to reach a minimum degree of

[101] Christoph Zurcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus* (NYU Press, 2007), 90.
[102] Freni, "Georgia as an Ethnic Democracy: A Study on the Azerbaijani and Armenian Minorities Under Mikheil Saakashvili," 20.
[103] Zviadadze and Jishkariani, *Identity Issues among Azerbaijani Population of Kvemo Kartli and Its Political and Social Dimensions*, 4.
[104] Berglund and Blauvelt, "Redefining the Nation: From Ethnic Fragmentation to Civic Integration," 20.
[105] Freni, "Georgia as an Ethnic Democracy: A Study on the Azerbaijani and Armenian Minorities Under Mikheil Saakashvili," 19; Jonathan Wheatley, "Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Kvemo Kartli Region of Georgia" (Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), 2005), 13, https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168- ssoar-63120.

stability by avoiding protest from ethnic Georgians or ethnic minorities.[106] The constitution of 1995 formally included the clauses about minority protection. In 1999, nationality indication according to ethnic and linguistic marks was removed from identity cards and included only the "citizen of Georgia."[107] Despite these steps, Shevardnadze did not put practical effort into overcoming inclusion barriers. He relieved pressure on ethnic minorities; however, he ignored their needs, adopting the "don't ask, don't tell" strategy.[108] Shevardnadze's policy was also related to corruption and economic stagnation without active nation-building strategy, evaluated by some authors as "politics of omission."[109]

In this period, Georgian Azerbaijanis lived linguistically isolated and marginalized from the centre because the state did not invest in integrating them, and ethnic Georgians' privilege was still secured.[110] They were getting some support, like school textbooks from Azerbaijani State, which had a good relationship with Georgia and urged Georgian Azerbaijanis to stay loyal to the Georgian government.[111] After the wave of ethnonationalism, civil war, and economic stagnation, the Georgian Azerbaijanis were alienated and struggled economically. In this context, a language as a symbolic boundary of belonging and exclusion mechanism also represented a firm social boundary that produced inequality as the communication between the centre and the population in the region was minimal.

[106] Berglund and Blauvelt, "Redefining the Nation: From Ethnic Fragmentation to Civic Integration," 24.
[107] Amirejibi-Mullen, "Language Policy and National Identity in Georgia," 2012, 308.
[108] Berglund and Blauvelt, "Redefining the Nation: From Ethnic Fragmentation to Civic Integration," 25.
[109] Laurence Broers, "Filling the Void: Ethnic Politics and Nationalities Policy in Post-Conflict Georgia," *Nationalities Papers* 36, no. 2 (May 1, 2008): 282, https://doi.org/10.1080/00905990801934363.
[110] Berglund and Blauvelt, "Redefining the Nation: From Ethnic Fragmentation to Civic Integration," 24.
[111] Freni, "Georgia as an Ethnic Democracy: A Study on the Azerbaijani and Armenian Minorities Under Mikheil Saakashvili," 20.

2.2. The New Rhetoric: Civic Integration, Multiethnic Georgia, One State Language

The new, more inclusive variant of the national discourse and the emergence of the first practical state integration strategy are related to the new President Mikheil Saakashvili and the Government composed mainly of young, liberal, western-educated individuals after the Rose Revolution 2003. These intellectuals desired Georgia's membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The new government's attempt at civic nation-building was expressed by campaigning nationalism based on citizenship and common language and emphasizing the Georgian nation's multiethnic character. However, despite Saakashvili's attempt to establish a more inclusive understanding of the nation, his political discourse can also be described as hybrid and inconsistent, including civic and ethnic elements.[112] Inconsistency between policy and rhetoric and competing national narratives are part of the modern Georgian nation-building process that is easier to understand considering the historical context of transition.

Saakashvili, after his election, accentuated ethnic minorities' belonging to Georgia and equal citizenship regardless of their origin. For instance, in his inaugural speech, he noted, "Georgia must become a model where every citizen will be equal before the law, where every citizen has equal opportunity to achieve success"[113] and that "all of Georgia's citizens: whether Russian, Abkhaz, Ossetian, Azeri, Armenian, Jewish, Greek, Ukrainian, Kurdish for whom Georgia is their own homeland, are our nation's greatest treasure and wealth."[114] In this context, the state language

[112] Tornike Metreveli, "An Undisclosed Story of Roses: Church, State, and Nation in Contemporary Georgia," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 708.
[113] "President Saakashvili's Inauguration Speech," *Civil.Ge* (blog), January 25, 2004, https://civil.ge/archives/186853.
[114] "President Saakashvili's Inauguration Speech."

knowledge was narrated as the main way to be an equal citizen of Georgia and ethnic minorities were encouraged to learn the state language.

The Georgian government wanted to facilitate the learning of the Georgian language to strengthen national unity. Language integration was solid as a tool of multicultural and civic integration rather than ethnic assimilation. The new paradigm required discussing the language as separate from ethnicity and emphasizing citizenship and multiculturalism to avoid contestation of the policy from the ethnolinguistic minorities. On the independence day in 2007, Saakashvili highlighted the importance "to maintain multiethnic and multiconfessional Georgia, which has been left to us by our ancestors,"[115] and tried to differentiate between ethnicity and nationality -"the nation and the nationality are only one – Georgian, and it consists of Georgians, Azeri-Georgians, Abkhaz-Georgians, Ossetian-Georgians, Armenian-Georgians, and so on."[116] He awoke the symbol of medieval King David Builder and historical narratives about the tolerance of Georgia; at the same time, Russia and the Soviet Union have been blamed for creating tensions between titulars and ethnic minorities.[117]

Mikheil Saakashvili's Government created various civic integration agencies to develop an integration plan; besides, the Council of National Minorities has been established within the Public Defender's office.[118] According to Berglund, the primary way to reach integration for the government was to increase communication between the centre and regions populated by ethnic minorities and strengthen the Georgian language as an interethnic communication and official

[115] "Saakashvili Speaks of Unity in Independence Day Speech," *Civil.Ge* (blog), May 26, 2007, https://civil.ge/archives/112446.
[116] "Saakashvili Speaks of Unity in Independence Day Speech."
[117] Berglund and Blauvelt, "Redefining the Nation: From Ethnic Fragmentation to Civic Integration," 36.
[118] Christofer Berglund, "Weber's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: Saakashvili and the Nationalisation of Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Borderlands: Weber's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus," *Nations and Nationalism* 24, no. 4 (October 2018): 4–5, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12369.

language.[119] The reforms included rehabilitation of the infrastructure in the ethnic minority settlements and roads connecting the capital city and regions; elimination of corruption, crime, and clientelism; and implementing Georgian language education reforms.[120] Besides, the knowledge of the Georgian language was becoming increasingly mandatory for civil servants. Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration has been opened in Kutaisi to provide Georgian Azerbaijani and Georgian Armenian public servants training.

The government produced the Georgian language campaign. Usually, when politicians promoted civic integration and the state language, they emphasized that the state did not aim for assimilation.[121] The politicians who visited ethnic minority group settlements stressed that ethnic minority group members needed to learn the state language to be functioning citizens, to have equal rights, and possibilities to be involved in Georgia's state structures.[122] In the political rhetoric, the notion of a "proper" and "functioning" citizen was connected to the Georgian language and discursively defined what it means to be a full citizen. In order to fully belong to the Georgian political nation, the state language knowledge was considered as the only way and duty of a citizen. During the meeting with Georgian language teachers shortly after implementing 2010 education reforms, Mikheil Saakashvili noted: "Every citizen of Georgia is hard-working, sympathetic and knows the value of his own work as well as the work of others and wants to be an indivisible part of the Georgian state. The only road leading to this goes through the Georgian language."[123]

[119] Berglund, 3.
[120] Berglund, 6–14.
[121] Amirejibi-Mullen, "Language Policy and National Identity in Georgia," 2012, 292.
[122] Amirejibi-Mullen, 278.
[123] "The Administration of the President of Georgia," accessed June 10, 2021, http://www.saakashviliarchive.info/en/PressOffice/News/?p=6846&i=1.

The state reforms became for Georgian Azerbaijanis a chance to overcome linguistic, socio-economic and political isolation and make their citizenship a relatively meaningful concept. However, at the same time, the shutting down of The Red Bridge and Sadakhlo markets, which were regarded as corruption and smuggling sights, affected the local economy.[124] Additionally, requiring Georgian language knowledge for employment in the civil service and policy of uprooting Russian as a second language (gradually changing it with English) made Georgian Azerbaijanis more dependent on the state.[125] Lack of Georgian language knowledge could easily lead to economic disparity and perception from the majority group as non-proper citizens. As political rhetoric also suggested language as the only way to be part of the Georgian political state, a lack of state language knowledge could justify social-political and economic marginalization. In such a context, the state language functions as a symbolic and social boundary.

Alternatively, learning the language seemed promising for some ethnic minority group members to gain acceptance as equal citizens, avoid discrimination, and move on the socio-economic ladder. The reforms, in general, accompanied scepticism and even protest; for example, some activists were protesting against closing the Red Bridge market;[126] nonetheless, many Georgian Azerbaijanis decided that learning Georgian could be a way to escape linguistic isolation. According to CIDA, in 2011, 82% of Georgian Azerbaijanis identified the need for Georgian language courses.[127]

[124] Jonathan Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli Provinces of Georgia Five Years into the Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili," January 1, 2009, 52, https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-98581.
[125] Berglund, "Weber's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus," 7–10.
[126] Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli Provinces of Georgia Five Years into the Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili," 52.
[127] "Multi-Ethnic Society in Georgia" (To the UN Comittee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination for the 79th Session: Civil Development Agency (CIDA), 2011), 10.

In 2012, The Georgian Dream, a new alliance around billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, won the parliamentary elections and currently represents the ruling party. The Georgian Dream government maintained the integration structures and policy; for instance, after the expiration of the integration plan 2008-2013, they extended the plan by developing the "Civic Equality and Integration Strategy 2015-2020."[128] However, newly elected President Salome Zurabishvili's comments (independent candidate, supported by Georgian Dream ruling party) includes xenophobic elements directed towards various ethnic minority group members that worsen the civic integration process.[129]

It should be emphasized that there is a tendency to focus more on the lack of Georgian language knowledge of ethnic minorities than providing effective practical solutions and practical political accommodation. Additionally, according to newly elected President Salome Zurabishvili, minority culture is well-preserved in Georgia, and the obstacle to integration is mainly a lack of state language knowledge.[130] This rhetoric makes an impression that a lack of state language knowledge is ethnic minority group members' choice instead of recognizing insufficient resources for language acquisition, economic inequality and the need for accommodating minority culture. Such rhetoric puts all the burden of integration on ethnic minority group members. For instance, Salome Zurabishvili, at the meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe, noted:

> There are our regions in Tbilisi and Kutaisi where orthodox, catholic, Armenian, Gregorian churches, synagogue and mosques are located side by side. Shiites and Sunnis pray together in the mosque located in Tbilisi. This tradition of tolerance and coexistence continues to date. We have lived together for centuries, and this diversity is the main part of the social and economic development of our country. Ethnic minorities are so free to implement their culture, mother tongue, and traditions that the

[128] Berglund and Blauvelt, "Redefining the Nation: From Ethnic Fragmentation to Civic Integration," 41.
[129] Broers, "Filling the Void."
[130] "Georgia's President: "Not Knowing Official Language Impedes Ethnic Minorities," Apa.az, accessed May 13, 2021, https://apa.az/en/xeber/europe/Georgia%27s-President:-%22Not-knowing-official-language-impedes-ethnic-minorities%27-integration%22-309891.

> citizens from different nationalities living in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions do not know the official language, and this impedes their integration.[131]

There is also confusion over terms - even though there is some attempt to emphasize the multiethnic character of the Georgian nation, governmental leaders avoid using the term *Kartveli* (Georgian) while speaking about ethnic minorities because the term is still widely understood by ethnic Georgians and minority group members as having a connotation of ethnicity instead of overarching national identity. "Citizen of Georgia" is used to balance this issue. Especially in the last years, citizenship has awakened as the main part of integration discourse, but the notion of multiethnic nation does not enjoy such attention. Ethnicity and nationality are still often used interchangeably in the way it was used in the Soviet Union.[132] Moreover, Georgian Azerbaijanis are marked by the current governmental elites as the diaspora of Azerbaijani that causes some young Georgian Azerbaijani activists' dissatisfaction and protest.[133]

Ethnic minorities are also often seen through the security lenses, and there is a fear that they will demand autonomy status that will result in the partition of Georgian territories. These fears are fed by the memory of ethnic conflicts in the autonomous regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the Russian-Georgian war 2008.[134] Controversy exists regarding definitions of ethnic minorities' political, cultural, and linguistic rights. The language issue is approached more through education reforms than developing language law.[135] Georgia has been a member of the Council of Europe since 1999; however, after more than 20 years, Georgia has not ratified the Charter for Regional

[131] "Georgia's President: "Not Knowing Official Language Impedes Ethnic Minorities," Apa.az, accessed May 11, 2021, https://apa.az/en/xeber/europe/Georgia%27s-President:-%22Not-knowing-official-language-impedes-ethnic-minorities%27-integration%22-309891.
[132] Amirejibi-Mullen, "Language Policy and National Identity in Georgia," 2012, 264–65.
[133] "Georgian Azerbaijanis Decry Government 'Incompetence' over Novruz Religious Designation," *OC Media* (blog), March 18, 2021, https://oc-media.org/georgian-azerbaijanis-decry-government-incompetence-over-novruz-religious-designation/.
[134] Storm, "The Dynamics of Identity Negotiation in a Border Region: The Case of the Georgian Azeri-Turks of Kvemo Kartli," 20.
[135] Broers, "Filling the Void," 295.

or Minority Languages because of high controversy around the issue and fear of greater linguistic autonomy.[136]

It should also be emphasized that even though Georgian governmental leaders started adopting civic nationalism rhetoric since Saakashvili's presidency, there is inconsistency in their rhetoric. Regarding ethnic minority issues and while talking with minority group members, governmental leaders try to use rhetoric based on civic membership. However, at the same time, their nation-building agenda has to be framed "in terms consistent and resonant with the Georgian majority's expectation of the promotion of ethnic Georgian symbols and interests."[137] Georgian leaders search for a balance between promoting majority symbols, integrating ethnic minorities, and showing Western donors the development of an inclusive, more civic concept of national membership[138] that often causes controversies and inconsistencies in rhetoric.

2.3. Civic Integration through Language Education Reforms

The state language issue represents the main obstacle for Georgian Azerbaijanis after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and one of the main generators of inequality between the majority and minority groups. There is no official state survey or statistical information about the Georgian language skills of Georgian Azerbaijanis; however, it is possible to find few studies conducted by non-governmental organizations and scholars. For instance, Wheatley shows that in 2009, only

[136] Jonathan Wheatley, "Georgia and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages," ECMI Working Paper, 42 (Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), 2009), https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-106961.
[137] Broers, "Filling the Void," 282.
[138] Broers, "Filling the Void."

3.5% of Georgian Azerbaijanis knew Georgian fluently in the Marneuli district.[139] The Institute of Social Studies and Analysis (ISSA) shows that in 2011, 78.3% of Georgian Azerbaijanis above six years old in the Kvemo Kartli region could not speak the Georgian Language.[140]

The economic opportunities and chances of economic mobility are low in the region as the higher education process is conducted in Georgian, and employment, especially outside the region, requires state language skills. The majority of the population is engaged in livestock or agricultural production.[141] According to the ISSA's study of material deprivation, the poverty level is 34.5% in Kvemo Kartli, and the highest rate is 62.1% in the Bolnisi district.[142] Georgian Azerbaijani individuals also have a problem accessing public services both locally and outside the region, as official documents are provided and should be submitted in the Georgian language.[143] Lack of state language knowledge and insufficient amount of information in the Azerbaijani Language about political events in Georgia leaves the population in an informational vacuum and excludes them from political participation. Most of the population watches Azerbaijani and Turkish TV channels; for instance, 71% of the population daily receives information about social and political developments in Azerbaijan.[144]. Georgian Azerbaijanis are underrepresented in the political parties in Georgia.[145]

[139] Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli Provinces of Georgia Five Years into the Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili," 8.
[140] "Study of Social and Economic Conditions and Attitudes of Kvemo Kartli Population" (The Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, 2011), 25, https://www.issa-georgia.com/en/resources/presentations/qvemo-qartlis-mosakhleobis-sotsialur-/325.
[141] Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli Provinces of Georgia Five Years into the Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili," 9.
[142] "Study of Social and Economic Conditions and Attitudes of Kvemo Kartli Population," 33.
[143] Ramil Huseinov, "Integration of Ethnic Azeris Starts with Language," *Democracy & Freedom Watch* (blog), March 23, 2018, https://dfwatch.net/integration-ethnic-azeris-starts-language-challenges-economic-integration-access-public-services-media-political-participation-50142.
[144] "Study of The Participation of Ethnic Minority Representatives" (Institute of Social Studies and Analysis (ISSA), 2019), 39, https://www.scribd.com/document/412553144/Study-of-the-Participation-of-Ethnic-Minority-Representatives-in-Political-Life.
[145] "Study of The Participation of Ethnic Minority Representatives."

Boundaries of belonging and social attitudes require a particular emphasis. According to the CRRC's nationally representative survey of 2021, 92% of the population thinks that the citizens of Georgia should speak Georgian; 50% believes that citizens of Georgia should be orthodox Christian, and 30% - ethnic Georgian.[146] The researchers note that younger ethnic Georgians have relatively lower support of the statement that citizens of Georgia should be ethnically Georgian.[147] In General, this survey shows that language is the most important marker of a Georgian citizen and can be a mechanism of exclusion and inclusion. Additionally, it shows that ethnonationalism is still prevalent, and ethnic minority groups are easily marked as "others" or non-proper citizens.

The primary step in the government's plan to integrate ethnic minority groups after the Rose Revolution was education reform that aimed to teach the young generation the state language. The 2018-2024 national curriculum of the program "Georgian as a second language" not only aims to teach the Georgian language but also depicts language as a tool for acquiring "ability to understand the different culture," and "develop a sense of state citizenship."[148] Language and education's role for civic integration has also been emphasized in politician's rhetoric as discussed; however, the language teaching programs still fail to offer a high standard of education. Moreover, the general education level in ethnic minority schools is low, and ethnic minority group members do not have equal access to quality education.

The Law on General Education of 2005 protected ethnic minorities' rights to receive school education in their language, which means they could continue studying in their native language

[146] CRRC Georgia, "Future of Georgia (Survey Report)," 2021, 12.
[147] CRRC Georgia, 12.
[148] "New National Curriculum for Primary School 2018-2024," The Portal of National Curriculum, accessed May 13, 2021, http://ncp.ge/ge/curriculum/satesto-seqtsia/akhali-sastsavlo-gegmebi-2018-2024/datskebiti-safekhuri-i-vi-klasebi-damtkitsda-2016-tsels.

schools.[149] The school structure established in the Soviet Union has not changed. However, the Law required non-Georgian schools to teach social science subjects like history and geography entirely in the Georgian Language since 2010. It was impossible to implement this plan because, for 2010, pupils did not have enough language skills to learn social science subjects in Georgian. As a result, in 2010, Georgian language lessons increased to five hours a week.[150]

The Ministry of Education and Science also started printing books in Georgia instead of receiving them from Azerbaijan and implemented bilingual education in 2010 after issuing books written 70% in a native language and 30% in Georgian.[151] Bilingual books prove ineffective, as most pupils do not know the Georgian language well enough to read 30% in Georgian that distracts them from understanding and learning the subject affecting their general education quality.

Moreover, there is a lack of bilingual teachers. Mostly, subject teachers do not speak the Georgian language and cannot properly use textbooks because they cannot understand 30% written in Georgian.[152] As parents also do not know the language, they cannot help pupils in the learning process.[153] Additionally, the books printed in Georgia are translated into minority languages with poor quality.[154] This situation creates conditions that the teachers often unofficially still use books printed in Azerbaijan.[155] Besides, History textbooks are especially problematic because they lack

[149] Berglund, "Weber's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus," 13.
[150] Berglund, 12.
[151] Shalva Tabatadze, "Bilingual Educational Policy in Georgia: Can It Benefit the Process of Integration of Society?," *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal* 9, no. 1 (March 25, 2019): 72, https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.660.
[152] Tabatadze, 73.
[153] Tabatadze, 73.
[154] Mariam Dalakishvili and Nino Iremashvili, *Systemic Challenges of the Education Policy towards the Ethnic Minorities in Georgia* (Human Rights Education and Monitoring (EMC), 2020), 16, https://socialjustice.org.ge/en/products/etnikuri-umtsiresobebis-mimart-ganatlebis-politikis-sistemuri-gamotsvevebi.
[155] Dalakishvili and Iremashvili, 16.

representation of ethnic minorities. Even more, they include discriminative elements towards ethnic minorities.[156]

Georgian speaking teachers sent to the regions to teach "Georgian as a second language" also mostly do not speak the Azerbaijani language to give pupils more detailed instructions. Since 2016 the situation has improved after implementing the program "Professional Development of Teachers of Non-Georgian Language Schools" that supports teacher's qualification improvement; however, consultant teachers trained through the program teach 15% of non-Georgian students; half of them spend only a year in the schools.[157] The pupils' performance in the subject Georgian as a second language remains low. 64% of the seven-grade adolescents cannot meet the minimum requirements of the national curriculum; this number increases in the case of villages up to 84%.[158] In general, adolescents evaluate the potential of Georgian language acquisition positively. According to Berglund's matched-guise test with Georgian Azerbaijani pupils, adolescents accept linguistic integration but refuse cultural assimilation.[159]

The most significant reform of 2010 is giving ethnic minority young individuals the opportunity to enrol in higher education institutions and allocated quotas for ethnic minorities as a part of the "4+1" affirmative action program. The most crucial aspect of the reform can be regarded as giving the ability to members of ethnic minority groups to write the test for Common National Examinations in their native language. Additionally, the "4+1" program provides a one-year intensive Georgian language course, and after completing the course, students can continue their

[156] Shalva Tabatadze, "Textbooks for Minority Schools of Georgia. Problems and Challenges," *International Journal of Multilingual Education* 3, no. 1 (2015): 7.
[157] Dalakishvili and Iremashvili, *Systemic Challenges of the Education Policy towards the Ethnic Minorities in Georgia*, 21.
[158] Dalakishvili and Iremashvili, 23.
[159] Christofer Berglund, "Accepting Alien Rule? State-Building Nationalism in Georgia's Azeri Borderland," *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 2 (February 7, 2020): 279, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1679091.

studies in their chosen undergraduate program. The program enjoys increasing popularity among ethnic minorities; for example, if the number of admissions of Georgian Azerbaijanis on the "4+1" program in 2010 was 178, in 2019, it increased to 893, 5510 in total during 2010-2019.[160] However, although the exam is in the Azerbaijani language, Georgian Azerbaijanis score lower in contrast to ethnic Georgian peers that indicates general education problems in the Azerbaijani-language schools.[161] It should be added that even though the state tried, especially in the presidency of Saakashvili, to improve conditions, the poor school infrastructure remains a challenge, especially in villages.

Even though the "4+1" program helped students enter higher education institutions, one year is not enough time to fluently learn the Georgian language when a student has not acquired a certain Georgian at the school level. Students acquire fluency mainly in the undergraduate programs and through increased communication with the Georgian-speaking population. The "4+1" program is not fully funded by the state, which puts a financial burden on ethnic minority families; the state finances only 100 students according to their "general skills" exam performance.[162] Azerbaijani State provides a scholarship for some students both on one-year Georgian-language courses and undergraduate programs. Georgian language knowledge requires extra effort from Georgian Azerbaijani young individuals because of the deficiencies of the Georgian language teaching programs. Despite this fact, the reforms have positive outcomes as some young Georgian Azerbaijanis crossed the language boundary afterwards, became involved in the state's socio-political life, and left linguistic isolation behind.

[160] Shalva Tabatadze, Natia Gorgadze, and Kakha Gabunia, *Study of the Higher Education Minority Quota System Policy in Georgia, 2010-2019*, *Online Submission*, 2020, 26, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED605637.
[161] Tabatadze, Gorgadze, and Gabunia, 36.
[162] Tabatadze, Gorgadze, and Gabunia, 9.

After the 2010 reforms, Young Georgian Azerbaijanis who acquired state language became more visible in the public sphere and media. New grassroots movements of Georgian Azerbaijani activists emerged in the Kvemo Kartli region. For instance, the newly emerged grassroots movement "Salam" deals with integration issues aiming to "organize non-dominant ethnic/religious groups for justice and equality."[163] Several young Georgian Azerbaijani activists founded community centres in their villages, working on the local community's needs. For instance, they help the older generation to receive information in the Azerbaijani Language to access state resources and organize Georgian language-speaking groups for school students. There is a lack of information and in-depth research about the experiences of ordinary young Georgian Azerbaijanis even though after the education reform, the study of this issue is highly relevant.

Micro-level studies of the ordinary population's experiences, attitudes, and identities are limited. In this regard, Karli-Jo Strom's recent multiscalar study of the collective identity indicators in the Kvemo Kartli ethnic minority population, named by the author as Georgian Azeri-Turks, represents an incredible work.[164] Based on the survey, the author shows that mainly Georgian Azerbaijanis in the Kvemo Kartli region have an attachment to the territories of Georgia and see their past and future in Georgia even though they widely relate the term Azerbaijani to their language and ethno-nationality.[165] Zviadadze and Jishkariani indicate that new identity-related processes have been activated in the Georgian Azerbaijani community during the last years.[166] The in-depth study of ordinary young Georgian Azerbaijanis state language-learning-related

[163] "Salam - სალამ | Facebook," accessed May 7, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/SalamGeorgia/about/?ref=page_internal.
[164] Storm, "The Dynamics of Identity Negotiation in a Border Region: The Case of the Georgian Azeri-Turks of Kvemo Kartli"; Storm, "A People *In-Between*."
[165] Storm, "A People *In-Between*."
[166] Zviadadze and Jishkariani, *Identity Issues among Azerbaijani Population of Kvemo Kartli and Its Political and Social Dimensions*.

experiences, their way of integrating into the broader society, self-perceptions, and identification processes remains a gap in the literature on Georgian Azerbaijanis. Addressing this gap is one of the main goals of my research.

Summary

Contemporary political rhetoric of nationalism, boundary-making, and minority integration in Georgia is shaped by the turbulent political changes in the short period after the Soviet Union dissolution. Georgian language that is regarded often as a mark of Georgian ethnicity and part of ethnonationalist political discourse after the Rose Revolution 2003 also becomes a tool for conceptualizing inclusive understanding of the Georgian nation and minority accommodation. The language education reforms of 2010 aimed to be a mechanism of civic integration that indicates the emerging discourse of inclusive nation-building. Although the state provides some language education programs, the education quality remains low, and language acquisition requires extra personal effort from Georgian Azerbaijanis. Language represents a symbolic and social boundary, and lack of state language knowledge leads to marginalization and inequality. The understanding of being part of the Georgian political state and a full citizen is discursively linked with state language knowledge. In the context of the transition, clashing and interplaying conflicting national discourses, the gap between rhetoric and policy, young Georgian Azerbaijani individuals are crossing language boundaries.

Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to examine how young Georgian Azerbaijani individuals reflect on and narrate the experience of the official state (majority) language acquisition.

What are the effects of personal experiences of boundary-crossing through Georgian language learning on their self-perception, categories of identification, and sense of belonging? How do they negotiate their identification struggles after language learning?

What is the role of the state language acquisition in young Georgian Azerbaijanis' integration process? How do they relate top-down processes of boundary-making and integration through the language-boundary crossing?

What does young Azerbaijanis' experience tell us about language as a boundary of belonging and the integration process of ethnic minorities?

3. Chapter: Experiences of Young Georgian Azerbaijanis

3.1. Methods

The research of the young Georgian Azerbaijani's experiences relies on qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews. I utilized semi-structured interviews as an optimal method to gain insight into individual experiences of crossing the language-boundary of belonging through the state language acquisition.

As already noted, language acquisition, when language is politicized and represents a symbolic and social boundary, can be related to the complex experiences of the identification struggles. For the research purposes to grasp these complexities, it is crucial that the semi-structured interviews can give participants the flexibility to express themselves and provide deep insight into how interviewees perceive the world and their way of life[167]. This method also gave me flexibility as a researcher by allowing me to focus not merely on my interview guide, including specific topics and questions but also to go in-depth - to ask new questions that followed up interviewees' answers. As Bryman notes, "qualitative interviewing tends to be flexible, responding to the direction in which interviewees take the interview;"[168] I believe this approach made it possible for me to gain rich and detailed responses and, as a result, an in-depth understanding of young Georgian Azerbaijanis experiences.

[167] Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 438.

[168] Bryman, 438.

To study Georgian language acquisition as a boundary-crossing personal experience of young Georgian Azerbaijanis, I interviewed 12 ordinary Georgian Azerbaijani individuals from the Kvemo Kartli region. For research purposes, I decided to include participants from the three districts of the Kvemo Kartli region, where ethnic Azerbaijanis are densely populated, and most of the Azerbaijani-language schools are located – Marneuli, Bolnisi, and Gardabani districts. In these districts, ethnic Azerbaijanis live segregated, and the Georgian language that is the only official language in the state represents a symbolic and social boundary.

The interviewees finished Azerbaijani-language schools and represent the first generation who gained a chance to learn Georgian after the 2010 education reforms and cross language-boundary; their parents do not have state language skills. As already explained while discussing education reforms, even though Georgian speaking teachers in 2010 started teaching Georgian in Azerbaijani-language schools a few hours a week, the teaching quality is not good enough to acquire communication language on the school level. This is especially true for the generation that experienced reforms when they had already finished primary school years.

The primary way to learn a state language for young Georgian Azerbaijani individuals is a "4+1" one-year language teaching and preparatory program in the universities (implemented in 2010), and, afterwards this program, socialization process in the Georgian-language BA programs. Considering these circumstances, to study the individual reflections on acquiring the Georgian language and crossing the symbolic and social boundary, I choose the age group of 20-25 years old individuals, mainly current BA program students who already managed to learn Georgian fluently having experience of language socialization. After interviewing BA program students and analyzing their experiences and reflections, I also decided to include few interviews with "4+1" program participants who are still in the language learning process but already can communicate

in Georgian to grasp better the reflections on language-boundary, State language learning-related motivations and "imagined communities."

The sample is gender-balanced. I interviewed six male and six female participants. At the beginning of the study, I did not expect gender-specific differences; however, in the interviews, it revealed that for girls, in contrast to boys, Georgian language learning-related motivations and experiences are additionally associated with the tool of overcoming gender inequality.

The general information about interviewees is depicted in the table below. For the reasons of confidentiality, I use fake names.

#	Name	Sex	Age	District in the Region of Kvemo Kartli	Education	Length of Interview
1	Nurai	Female	24	Gardabani District	BA-Student (4th year)	58:01 minutes
2	Gurban	Male	22	Gardabani District	BA-Student (1st year)	56:02 minutes
3	Nermin	Female	20	Gardabani District	"4+1" Program Student	50:00 minutes
4	Rustam	Male	23	Bolnisi District	BA-Student (3rd year)	1:01:51minutes
5	Zaur	Male	22	Gardabani District	BA-Student (2nd year)	1:30:04 minutes
6	Farida	Female	21	Bolnisi District	"4+1" Program Student	58:53 minutes
7	Ruslan	Male	23	Gardabani District	BA-Student (3rd year)	1:21:29 minutes
8	Leyla	Female	24	Marneuli District	BA-Student (4th year)	59:09 minutes
9	Ayten	Female	23	Marneuli District	BA-Student (4th year)	1:14:42 minutes
10	Murad	Male	25	Marneuli District	BA-Student (4th year)	1:19:39 minutes
11	Omar	Male	20	Bolnisi District	"4+1" Program Student	59:05 minutes
12	Fidan	Female	22	Marneuli District	BA-Student (2nd year)	1:09:35 minutes

I utilized a purposive sampling strategy that is "essentially strategic and entails an attempt to establish a good correspondence between research questions and sampling."[169] For the participant recruitment, I used one personal contact and, afterwards, the snowball method. I contacted interviewees on Facebook with a messenger application as Facebook is the most popular social

[169] Bryman, 458.

media in Georgia.[170] According to the 2015 Caucasus Research Centers study, 79% of the regular internet users are active on Facebook at least once a week[171].

To avoid the interviews only in a similar opinion group, I asked participants not to name close friends while using the snowball method. Besides, before contacting new participants, I checked their public FB profiles. As the research links language with categories of identifications, I decided that including some interviews with individuals who were using Georgian, Azerbaijani, or Turkish flags on their profile pictures and who were avoiding depicting any ethnic symbols would increase the chance to include opinion variety. As already mentioned, for the theoretical saturation, after having interviews with BA students, I also purposefully added interviews with three "4+1" program students again using the snowball method.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, I planned online zoom interviews. I conducted the first three interviews in February of 2021, which helped me develop the research guide, including questions about language learning-related experiences, socialization process, identity, and belonging. The interviews for the empirical chapter I conducted between March 2 – April 18. At the beginning of the interview, I introduced the consent form to the participants and tape-recorded it with the respondent's permission. Special attention has been given to that the research is in accordance with CEU's Ethical Research Policy.[172]

Out of initially contacted 16 persons, all of them wished to participate in the research but finally participated 12 because of some time-related technical problems. The interview language was Georgian. All participants could communicate in Georgian without the substantial barrier that

[170] Crrc, "Internet and Social Media Usage in Georgia," *Social Science in the Caucasus* (blog), August 24, 2015, http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2015/08/internet-and-social-media-usage-in.html.
[171] Crrc.
[172] "Ethical Research Policy | Official Documents," accessed April 18, 2021, https://documents.ceu.edu/documents/p-1012-1v1805.

would affect the interview results. As my native language is Georgian and I cannot speak the Azerbaijani language, there was a chance that I would be perceived as an outsider that can be regarded as one of the research limitations. Nevertheless, the high rate of the responses and interviewees' attitudes showed me they were willing to participate in the research project - the communication and interviewing process was natural and friendly.

All interviews were transcribed, and quotes depicted in the text translated by me. As an analysis method, I used qualitative content analysis - to interpret data by organizing it through various thematic categories and subcategories and pattern observing. First, I grouped information into three categories: living without state language knowledge, state language acquisition experiences and motivations, after state language acquisition; including sub thematic clusters, for instance: socialization, education, minority/own rights, identification- ethnicity/nationality/citizenship, sense of belonging, state policy.

3.2. Living in the Linguistic Isolation

Young Georgian Azerbaijanis describe lack of state language knowledge and remember their life period before starting the language learning as living in isolation from the Georgian socio-political space caused mainly by being in an informational vacuum about the developments in the state, having only Georgian Azerbaijanis around, lack of communication with ethnic Georgians and inability to express their views in Georgian. The lack of Georgian language knowledge represented the symbolic and social boundary for them in the process of accessing the state resources as citizens of Georgia; additionally, it acted as an impediment on the way of fully imagining themselves as citizens and part of the Georgian political nation.

Some participants shared with me their childhood memories and the way they discovered being members of a minority group in Georgia. Ayten told me that she was five years old when she first met Georgian-speaking individuals who came to her village to buy vegetables. Until then, she knew nothing about the rest of Georgia outside her village, and she believed that everyone in the state spoke the Azerbaijani language. Nurai was nine years old when she discovered that she was an ethnic minority group member and did not belong to the Georgian nation. She heard that the first president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, had said - Georgia is the state of only Georgians. That remained for her a painful experience. At this time, Nurai still did not know that she needed to learn the Georgian language because everyone around her spoke Azerbaijani. For her, this experience caused identity struggles and thoughts, "If I do not belong to this state, what am I doing here?" In this way, Nurai's perception of her homeland has connected to the Azerbaijani state, where she thought she should move one day.

The interviewees explained that in adolescence, even before starting learning Georgian, they had already encountered ethnic Georgians and also their ethnic minority status. However, communication with ethnic Georgians remained limited because of living in ethnically homogenous settlements and lack of state language knowledge. All participants noted the role of the homogenous Azerbaijani speaking environment as an obstruction on the way to imagine themselves as part of the Georgian political state. According to Zaur, "there was not even one Georgian village around, Azerbaijani people worked even in the market or Apotheke, the school teachers did not know Georgian, how could we learn Georgian or feel like citizens?" Leyla, who started learning Georgian when she was 17, notes that she thought she was an "alien" and "foreigner" for the state before learning the official state language. Zaur additionally mentioned,

"because of the cultural similarity and lack of communication with ethnic Georgians, I thought Baku was closer to me than Tbilisi".

The interviewees also emphasized the role of the Azerbaijani language schools that did not provide them with enough Georgian language instruction, especially before 2010, making it difficult for them to perceive themselves as part of the Georgian socio-political space. Four of the interviewees while reflecting on their past experiences also noted that there was almost nothing depicted in the history textbooks that would indicate Georgian Azerbaijanis' role in the state-building process, which would help them perceive themselves as part of the Georgian state.

One of the critical factors accentuated by all interviewees was their inability to be involved in the broader community and express their views. Rustam, who started learning Georgian only in the "4+1" Georgian language course when he was already 18, explained that he always had a sense of belonging to Georgia. However, he had no chance to be involved in the state's political life or education and could not express his views that hindered him from perceiving himself as a full citizen. He also added, "To feel fully belonged to this state, the most important is the language knowledge. If you do not know the language, citizenship is not regarded as citizenship."

Even though all interviewees noted lack of language knowledge as a hindrance to making Georgian citizenship a meaningful identification category in their life or imagining themselves part of Georgian political nation, most of them told me that they and their parents had attachments to the territories where they were born. The Kvemo Kartli region, described by them as historical "Borchali", is imagined by my interviewees as a historically Georgian territory that mediates their perception of territories of Georgia as homeland and place where "ancestors lived." Nine of the interviewees explained to me that their families never wanted to move to Azerbaijan; according to Nermin, "my mother and grandmother have difficulties because of language, but they never wanted

to move to Azerbaijan. In my village, almost everyone thinks we still live here better." Four interviewees, Nurai, Zaur, Fidan and Leyla, told me that they wished to continue education in Azerbaijan before learning the Georgian language. They thought their life would be easier in Baku and felt they belonged to Azerbaijan because of the shared language and ethno nationality with Azerbaijanis in the Azerbaijani State. Four participants also mentioned complicated citizenship procedures in Azerbaijan for Georgian Azerbaijanis.

All participants made an example of their parents to show me how it feels living in linguistic isolation when one does not know the state language. Mainly, they emphasized that their parent's do not have information about political and economic developments in Georgia, and they get information even about Georgia through Azerbaijani and Turkish TV channels. Additionally, they are involved in agriculture and are not connected to Georgia's political developments because of linguistic isolation and everyday domestic work. Speaking about the older generation, Rustam notes, "If you ask them, some do not know who is the prime minister; most of them have no information about what is happening in Georgian education; which university is better." All interviewees also emphasized difficulties their parents are facing with bureaucracy or when they want to visit a doctor because of a lack of language knowledge. The interviewees interpreted these difficulties and linguistic isolation of their parents and their past experiences as feelings of abandonment from the state and difficulties perceiving themselves as citizens of Georgia.

All participants emphasized that their parents wish to teach their children the Georgian language as they see their future in Georgia and language as a tool to make their children linguistically, politically and economically less isolated. Interviewees commonly explain the parent's lack of language knowledge by a lack of opportunities in the Soviet and early post-Soviet years. Ruslan notes, "my father struggles now to learn the language; he was 42 years old when he learned the

Georgian alphabet." Narratives about parents' marginalization because of the language are quite common. They often say that they lost the chance to be successful, and now try to make their children's way of future easier by encouraging them to learn Georgian: "my parents are in agriculture, and they know how difficult it is. They wanted to get an education but were not able to. They work every day to finance us, help us to learn Georgian, to study in the university for our better future."(Ayten, 23)

It should be emphasized that Georgian Azerbaijanis describe their own and their parents' life experiences without the state language knowledge as social and economic marginalization. In addition, linguistic isolation is also commonly explained as having difficulties regarding political identification with the Georgian political state. Even though most of the interviewees noted the sense of belonging to the Georgian territories as a homeland where they were born, in the context of the full linguistic isolation, it was narrated more as regional identification than one's strong self-association with Georgian citizenship and political nation.

The acquisition of the state language was related to the chances of seeking socioeconomic opportunities; this was especially visible when young Georgian Azerbaijanis referred to their parent's experiences. For interviewees, speaking about their personal experiences, the state language acquisition also implied escaping the status of the second-class citizen, desire to identify themselves and be accepted as politically full citizens of Georgia without assimilation. This section sketched the interviewees' experiences and narratives of living in full linguistic isolation before starting language learning; the language learning process and motivations are further discussed in the next section.

3.3. Boundary Crossing: Language Learning Process and Motivations

Young Georgian Azerbaijanis evaluate the Georgian language teaching reforms positively and emphasize its role in discovering the importance of state language acquisition for civic integration. However, the interviewees note that the quality of language teaching in the school or the "4+1" program was not enough and required their extra motivation, effort and engagement to learn the language. All interviewees have internalized the top-down rhetorical element of boundary making that Georgian language knowledge is necessary for a citizen of Georgia. It operates like an axiom they do not question. Their motivation to learn the Georgian language can be described as a wish to overcome inequality, imagine themselves and be accepted as full citizens of Georgia.

All interviewees mentioned that their language learning motivation was the wish of recognition of their equal citizenship. Here, language learning is related to civic integration, identification processes and future membership in the imagined community[173] where young Georgian Azerbaijanis would be accepted as equal citizens despite their distinct ethnicity. In this case, the sense of belonging depends on both internal and external ascription. According to Leyla: "At the beginning, when I did not know the Georgian language, I always had this feeling - if I do not know the state language, how can I say at all that I am a citizen of Georgia. So, I thought they were right in saying that all Georgian citizens should know the language".

Leyla's attitude towards language was typical in all interviewees' answers; for instance, according to Gurban, "If I live in Georgia, I should necessarily learn the state language. Without the language, people call you a foreigner and tell you that this is not your homeland. I promised myself to do everything to learn the language". I additionally interviewed three "4+1" program participants who

[173] Kanno and Norton, "Imagined Communities and Educational Possibilities: Introduction"; Pavlenko and Norton, "Imagined Communities, Identity, and English Language Learning."

are still in the language learning process. Nermin called speaking without mistakes in Georgian "a dream," and all of them emphasized that as citizens of Georgia, language knowledge is essential to be accepted, feel like full citizens, get an education, and find a job.

It should be noted that all of the interviewees, along with their wish to freely identify themselves with Georgian citizenship, also recognized their wish to get an education, experience economic mobility, be politically active and leave linguistic isolation. Language operates for young Georgian Azerbaijanis as both a "symbolic and social boundary"[174] of belonging and shapes inequality. In this context, the wish and need to access "material" resources and "identification" processes are intertwined[175], as discussed in the Theoretical Framework. For Georgian Azerbaijanis, language knowledge is related to accessing “material” resources, social status, and economic implications. At the same time, the intertwined identification processes mean the aspiration for the political identity of the Georgian citizen but not ethnocultural assimilation. For instance, Gurban noted: "it is a state language, you are marginalized, not accepted as a proper citizen, and at the same time, you cannot get an education in Georgia, you cannot do anything without it, and you do not even know and cannot defend your rights."

In this regard, gender-based differences also can be observed. Four out of six interviewed girls mentioned that Georgian language learning was vital for getting a higher education and having a profession, which also required additional effort because of the stereotypes that "girl does not need education". For instance, Farida told me, "I aim to get an education. There were nine girls and nine boys in my class, but only two girls continued studying. All other girls are married and do not

[174] Lamont and Molnár, “The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences.”
[175] Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*, 4.

speak Georgian. My parents are on my side, but some parents say girls do not need the language or education".

The interview participants also told me about the role of Georgian speaking teachers in their schools and the program "Georgian as a second language" that motivated them to learn the language and identify themselves with broader Georgian society. Ayten called teachers "missioners" and "agents of the change," who showed pupils the importance of the Georgian language: "the teacher told us that we were full citizens of Georgia, Georgia was a homeland of people with diverse ethnicities and nationalities, and when I learned the state language, I could even become president of Georgia. I had such a positive attitude towards the future in Georgia." According to Nurai, she started identifying herself to "the Georgian society" and seeing her "future in Georgia" when the ethnic Georgian language teacher visited her school and started teaching the state language. Omar additionally mentioned the role of the first students who entered the "4+1" program soon after the 2010 reforms –"Every time they were back in the village, I asked them - how is it in Tbilisi? How do you like learning the Georgian language? As a result, I have got motivation from them to learn the language."

However, even though all interviewees emphasized the importance of the Georgian-speaking teachers and increased Georgian language hours after 2010 in schools, eleven noted that teaching quality was insufficient to acquire language on the school level. Six interviewees explained that their schools lacked qualified Georgian-speaking teachers even after the 2010 reforms. All students, except Nurai, acquired fluency in the university through the "4+1" language course and mainly on their BA programs. During a few years, one of the interviewees, Ruslan, even had a private teacher who helped him to learn the language: "You cannot learn the language without

motivation and hard work in the school. I tried it so much; I was trying to participate in all kinds of programs, I even had a private teacher, but many parents cannot afford this."

It should be noted that all interviewees were motivated for linguistic integration and bilingualism but not assimilation; the new education policy was accepted and perceived as an opportunity and tool for civic integration. All interviewees, emphasized that for them it is important to maintain the Azerbaijani language because of various reasons: that they speak in Azerbaijani language with their parents and relatives, they will lose part of their identity, it is "mother tongue", "one cannot learn another language without a good command of the mother tongue." At the same time, all interviewees think that Georgian teaching quality should be improved in the Azerbaijani language schools as they consider the state language essential for involvement in the broader society of the state. Two interviewees even mentioned that it would be better to teach in the future at schools all subjects in Georgian because the children can learn the Azerbaijani language at home, and fully Azerbaijani language schools complicate the state language learning process.

It should also be pointed out that most interviewees used citizenship as an identification category and invoked as part of civic integration when speaking about state language learning, describing their belonging to Georgia, refusing any connection to the Azerbaijan state. Thus, the young Georgian Azerbaijanis' identification processes should be distinguished between non-political Azerbaijani identification and aspirations of the Georgian political identity based on citizenship. The rejection of identification with the state of Azerbaijan suggests that Georgian Azerbaijani interviewees aspired to become Georgian in terms of political identity. However, in terms of the ethnocultural identity, they wanted to maintain their ethnocultural "Azerbaijaniness".

Even though Georgian Azerbaijanis were born as citizens of Georgia, the notion of "citizenship" means more than a legal category for them. As already discussed, the political rhetoric also creates

a symbolic boundary linking an understanding of a proper citizen with the state language knowledge. That is one of the crucial reasons why the interviewees often narrate the acquisition of the state language as a necessity for having political identification based on citizenship with the Georgian nation, self-ascribed and, even more importantly, externally ascribed and accepted identification. In the language learning process for interviewees, Georgian language acquisition and language boundary-crossing meant integration, acceptance as equal citizens by the ethnic Georgian community, also blurring the social-economic importance of ethnic identification without erasure of the ethnic boundaries and ethnocultural identities.

"Ethnicity" and "nationality" are used by some interviewees interchangeably; the confusion over these terms is remarkable. Even though Saakashvili, in his rhetoric, especially at the beginning of his presidency, tried to separate ethnicity and nationality, this rhetorical element was not consistent and less actively used later. Other reasons for confusion can be that due to the Soviet legacy, ethnic Georgians also often use these terms interchangeably. The soviet-style segregated school systems can also play a role in intermixing categories. The identification issues' relevance and discussions over the terms among young Georgian Azerbaijanis through crossing language boundaries will be further reviewed in the following sections.

3.4. Boundary Crossed

This subchapter shows that through state language learning, young Georgian Azerbaijanis leave the linguistic isolation and get involved in the state's social and political life, making their citizenship a meaningful identification category. In the context where state language knowledge is regarded as a boundary of belonging, state language acquisition gives young people tools to claim

their Georgian citizenship, political identification and a sense of belonging more confidently. Simultaneously, by crossing process, young Georgian Azerbaijanis perceive a language boundary and its relation to "us" and "them" boundaries differently, affecting the salience of their identification categories and making ethnicity a salient part of everyday life. In this process, the role of some discrepancies between, on the one hand, their past perceptions of boundaries, motivations and expectations about civic integration and, on the other hand - afterword boundary-crossing experiences and perceptions are significant. This subchapter thoroughly grasps individuals' complex experiences regarding the identification negotiation dynamics instead of seeing it as a one-way process of assimilation and de-ethnicization or even ethnic retention.

3.4.1. **Feeling as “a Citizen” and as “a Good Citizen”**

Georgian Azerbaijanis who acquired the Georgian language speak about their feelings of more like "a citizen", "better citizen", and "a good citizen." They explain that they can claim to belong to the state and their political identification more confidently after learning the language, making citizenship a meaningful identification category. Besides, young Georgian Azerbaijanis are structurally better integrated than in linguistic isolation regarding education, employment, and non-governmental activities. They are also aware of their rights both as citizens or representatives of the minority group.

Georgian Azerbaijanis commonly narrate the ability to read and speak in the Georgian language, leaving an informational vacuum and moving to the capital city for higher education as increased self-identification with Georgian socio-political space. For instance, Fidan notes, "I just knew that I lived in Georgia, but I did not have a sense of my citizenship in the way I have it now. There was a wall between my world, ethnic Georgians and social or political life in Georgia. Something

changed when I moved to Tbilisi and learned the language." In Andersonian terms,[176] Georgian language as a common language of citizens became a medium for the imagination of a shared political community and a way for Georgian Azerbaijanis to define their political identities and attachment to the state.

As the state language knowledge was also in the top-down rhetoric constructed as an integral part to be recognized as a proper Georgian citizen and part of the Georgian political nation, the knowledge of the language gave young Georgian Azerbaijanis a tool to claim political identification. This factor also was a motivator to learn the language, as discussed in the previous section. About this issue, Leyla told me: "Now I have proof that I know the Georgian language, I know my rights, and therefore I belong here. If I did not know the language, I would have problems because the state says, ok, you are a citizen, have a sense of belonging, but how if you do not know the state language?"

Another important finding related to this topic is that all of the young Georgian Azerbaijani interviewees who crossed boundaries of language emphasize that they know their rights as citizens better: "So many things have been changed by language learning. When there are some problems in my village related to education or social issues, I can do more now to overcome them. Earlier I could not even imagine that I could do something or I had rights". The accent on citizen rights supports the claim that Georgian identity related to language boundary-crossing is a political identity for my interviewees. All participants also mentioned the role of higher education through state language learning and participation in the various programs and activities that were not available for them before: "I think before language learning and enrollment in the university I was

[176] Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

not educated, then I involved in the society, even in some non-governmental organization's activities, I received more information and developed as a good citizen." (Rustam 23)

Georgian Azerbaijanis also narrate their acquisition of the state language as a mechanism of overcoming economic inequality. As already mentioned, while analyzing the motivations of language learning and imagined group membership in the future, the "material" factors and structural integration are intertwined with young Georgian Azerbaijanis' narratives of belonging related to political identification with Georgia. After crossing language boundaries, Georgian Azerbaijanis' increased involvement in educational institutions or diversified employment structures helps young Georgian Azerbaijanis perceive and claim that they are part of the Georgian social-political space. As Zaur told me:

> You know, how it used to be - our people, from the point of view of Georgians, were only sellers of herbs. Now we live more like citizens because we learned the state language, came from the regions to Tbilisi and are employed in various directions. For example, every second or third store has an Azerbaijani consultant. Some Young Georgian Azerbaijanis are already nurses in hospitals. Some of them even won exchange scholarships in Europe. Ethnic Georgians also are gradually changing their mind towards thinking that we are educated. I like it, and I am happy about such facts.

As one can notice even in this quote, the self-perception of Georgian Azerbaijanis largely depends on how they perceive the dominant ethnic group's attitudes towards them. Even though the knowledge of the state language makes young Georgian Azerbaijanis more confident as citizens of Georgia, the language acquisition did not overcome their identification struggles as through crossing language boundaries; they also encountered new types of negative experiences. The stories of crossing boundaries of language, integration and belonging are complex as young Georgian Azerbaijanis' narratives include simultaneously both and sometimes swing between becoming members of the broader Georgian community and feelings of "otherness".

3.4.2. **Feelings of Otherness and Salient Ethnicity in Everyday Life**

Through crossing the language boundary, young Georgian Azerbaijanis rethink "us" and "them" boundaries in a new way - they experience a different kind of "otherness" and realize that language boundary relates to some extent differently to categories of identification than they imagined. This experience makes their ethnic origin and identification salient in everyday life. Thus, after language acquisition, ethnic boundaries are not blurred but, in some way, more visible. In this process, three aspects are fundamental – through language socialization, the experience of prejudice or discrimination in everyday communication, encountering ethnic prejudice on social or traditional media, and awareness of unequal treatment by the state.

First of all, it is essential to highlight that through boundary-crossing young Georgian Azerbaijanis relate to the language in a new way. The way they reflect on boundary-crossing and afterwards crossing experience influences how they rethink the role of language in line with identification categories and belonging. That itself affects how they perceive ethnic boundaries or the salience of their identification categories in everyday life. All interviewees noted that they did not expect as many problems related to ethnic difference as they encountered after language learning. Some interviewees did not feel about ethnic difference in the language learning process as a problem before boundary-crossing. Ayten told me:

> In the process of learning the language, I thought that Georgia is a tolerant country, and we were taught that – Georgia celebrates diversity as a homeland of various national and ethnic groups. I did not know much about reality. I thought that if I learned the Georgian language, then everything would be fine in my life. When I learned the language and moved to Tbilisi, I met all kinds of people. Some ethnic Georgians, mainly the older generation… are different; for example, my university professor indirectly told me that here is not my homeland but in Azerbaijan. The reality was not exactly as I was looking through pink glasses. I had struggles; I asked myself at the beginning, "why was I born as an ethnic minority in Georgia"? Language knowledge helps me feel like a citizen of Georgia as I don't self-blame myself anymore. I am proud I managed to learn the language. Many young people are open. However, some people and some experiences also frustrate me even though I know I am right.

Even though young Georgian Azerbaijanis try to focus on civic integration through language and do not problematize ethnic lines, they periodically face feelings of alienation; also, that language knowledge is not enough to be entirely accepted. For instance, being an ethnic stranger before the boundary-crossing for Nurai was mainly related to linguistic isolation. Although language learning was a way to claim political identity, the ethnic boundaries also acquired new visibility through the language boundary-crossing. That made her reflect on her ethnic identification issue more often and experience struggles against feelings of otherness in everyday life:

> Through language learning, although I do not see myself as very different from ethnic Georgians and I see Georgia as a homeland, still I better see a narrative of "us" and "others" in ethnic Georgians. I have feelings of alienation to some degree, even though sometimes I also have positive feelings. Even though I am very confident that this ethnic difference is not a problem because diversity is good for Georgia, in my heart, I often feel that they do not accept us as we are and look at me as a stranger. Last year, for example, when I was kind of frustrated, I told my friend that no matter how much you try or what you do, you are a "stranger" and "other" to "them", the whole society is not going to fully accept you in the same and equal way as ethnic Georgians. (Nurai 24)

All participants emphasized various kinds of experiences of discrimination and ethnic prejudice in communication with ethnic Georgians both in educational institutions and employment. For example, some interviewees noted incidents such as grading unfairly by the professors or making distinct examinations for Georgian Azerbaijanis. Ruslan, who makes a practice as a nurse, mentioned an increased number of Georgian Azerbaijani students in the last period in his clinic. Some ethnic Georgian nurses are unsatisfied with this fact: "one of the nurses told me - the clinic is full of you, so, maybe is it time for us to leave the clinic? I was like - what does it mean "you" and "us", this state belongs to all of us, and you are not the owner of the clinic."

After telling me about their experiences of encountering discrimination and prejudice, some Georgian Azerbaijanis, as a part of the strategy to avoid alienation, also told me that "good" and "bad" people are everywhere, in every ethnic group, or tried to explain it by lack of interethnic

dialogue and ethnic Georgian's lack of information. Besides, to justify ethnic Georgians' prejudice, some young Georgian Azerbaijanis highlighted the stereotypical image of ethnic Azerbaijanis depicted in the traditional media.

Particular emphasis deserves social media - young Georgian Azerbaijanis who know the Georgian language can use social media in Georgian and get information through Georgian websites. On one hand, this helps young Georgian Azerbaijanis to be involved in the new developments of the state, even create networks together with ethnic Georgians and other Georgian Azerbaijanis who acquired state language and share similar ideas. However, on the other hand, they become more aware of ethnic prejudice when they read comment sections on Facebook. For instance, ten participants told me about ethnic Georgians' negative comments towards Georgian Azerbaijanis at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic when the first outbreak in Georgia happened in the Marneuli district.

Young Georgian Azerbaijanis noted that most of the negative comments were about Georgian Azerbaijanis' lack of Georgian language knowledge, including remarks “they can go back to their homeland, in Azerbaijan”. Young Georgian Azerbaijanis from the Marneuli district even started the challenge on Facebook - they shared the text on their timeline: "I am from Marneuli, ethnically Azerbaijani, I know the Georgian language. I do not violate the restrictions set by the State; I stay at home!" Farida told me that sometimes she regrets participating in this campaign because their Georgian citizenship should not need justification: "We were kind of forced to justify ourselves; to prove that we are ethnic Azerbaijanis but still good citizens of Georgia." Ruslan notes that language issue is the most salient issue that involves almost any discussion on social media about the interethnic relations: "It does not matter debate topic, ethnic Georgians always mention that

we do not want to learn the language, so, usually, I start every debate by telling - look, I know Georgian grammar better than many ethnic Georgians."

It is noticeable that Georgian language knowledge is a mechanism for young Georgian Azerbaijanis to justify their political identification with Georgian citizenship. However, at the same time, negative comments and remarks generally about the lack of Georgian language knowledge of ethnic Azerbaijanis still affect them emotionally. Through language socialization, linguistic and ethnic boundaries in young Georgian Azerbaijanis life are revealed in a newer way. Nurai told me: "Ethnic Azerbaijanis who do not know the language cannot read ethnic Georgian's comments, and it does not affect them, but us, young people who know the state language and try to be a member and involved in the building of the Georgian civic society." Some interviewees feel that individual boundary-crossing of language is not enough. Fidan's remark shows this: "If every ethnic Azerbaijani learns the state language, will we still be guests in this state?" Young Georgian Azerbaijanis often need to argue, defend and explain why their parents, relatives or friends do not have state language skills and what kind of economic problems they face. In such situations, they feel and act like the representatives of their ethnic group, making their distinct ethnic identification a salient part of everyday life.

While telling me about Georgian Azerbaijanis' problems in the Kvemo Kartli region, interviewees highlighted the role of the state policy. All interviewees positively evaluate the education reforms of 2010 as a step towards ethnic minority integration, as already discussed. However, young Georgian Azerbaijanis who acquired the language are also critical towards the government. By crossing language boundaries, getting an education, spatial mobility, and also acquiring relatively higher economic and social status, they became more aware of the inequality between the centre and Georgian Azerbaijanis' settlements in the Kvemo Kartli region. Relative deprivation theorists

suggest that the advantaged members of the underprivileged groups tend to be more involved in the intergroup comparison than relatively disadvantaged members.[177] Young Georgian Azerbaijanis have their individual experiences of boundary-crossing and moving between unequally treated worlds by the state. Besides, as once already mentioned, young Georgian Azerbaijanis commonly note that they are more aware of their citizen and minority rights after learning the language and getting a higher education; this also mediates the greater awareness of unequal treatment. Georgian Azerbaijanis' perception of unequal treatment and feelings of relative deprivation in a newer way through boundary-crossing and afterwards experience plays a role in their feelings of "otherness".

When young Georgian Azerbaijanis try to explain why it is still challenging language learning for ethnic Azerbaijanis, they emphasize that the state does not invest enough to improve the state language learning process. This argument usually follows their discussion about the issue – "ethnic Georgians believe that ethnic Azerbaijanis do not want to learn the language and do not respect the state" (Gurban 22). Some interviewees called the state language knowledge "the right", others emphasized "the state's obligation" to provide quality education. Besides, five interviewees noted that governmental structures in the region need to provide essential information in the Georgian and Azerbaijani languages as everyone cannot understand Georgian. Rustam even told me that the government does not invest more in Georgian language teaching because they prefer to have Georgian Azerbaijanis isolated – to have citizens who are not aware of their rights. Interviewees also emphasized that apart from language acquisition problems, other problems exist in the ethnic Azerbaijani community, like the lack of accessing drinking water or gas in some villages ignored

[177] Donald M. Taylor, Fathali M. Moghaddam, and Fathali M. Moghaddam, *Theories of Intergroup Relations: International Social Psychological Perspectives* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994).

by the political elites, as Leyla notes, "explained by and blamed for lack of the language knowledge".

Some Georgian Azerbaijanis told me about the discrepancy between political rhetoric and action. That language knowledge does not guarantee Georgian Azerbaijanis involvement in the governmental structures: "it is the fault of the state; we were told that we could not participate in the political processes because we did not know the Georgian language. There are young people now who know the language. Still, they do not support minorities to hold political positions" (Murad 25). This discussion shows that some young Georgian Azerbaijanis expectations related to the language and perception of political rhetoric of boundary-making differ before and after language boundary-crossing that also plays a role in feelings of "otherness".

Notably, because of the reconsidering of a connection between state language and identification categories and new visibility of ethnic issues, some interviewees identify with their ethnicity even stronger after the boundary-crossing than before and rethink it in a new way. Simultaneously, their identification with Georgian citizenship is also important. Through the language boundary-crossing, Georgian Azerbaijanis' identification struggles have not been solved easily but have gained a new relevance that also affected the salience and perceptions of their identification categories. Considering this, not only identification categories variability matter, but their variable salience can play an important role in individuals' lives that should not be ignored or taken for granted. To cope with feelings of alienation, most young Georgian Azerbaijanis try to negotiate their salient ethnic identification with their belonging to Georgia by accepting both their cultural identity and identification with the state. As a part of identity negotiation strategy, four interviewees even mentioned the term "civic nationalism" and claimed that it is negotiable with salient ethnicity:

> I had this period, I wanted ethnic Georgians to like me, and therefore I thought I needed to try to ignore the importance of ethnicity. Now I am even proud of my ethnic identity and also of my identification with the state. So, I think there is no impediment to being a voice of your ethnic group and loving this country, which is normal for civic nationalism. (Nurai 24)

I should emphasize that even though Georgian Azerbaijanis face ethnic prejudice and have a greater awareness of the unequal treatment by the state, the language boundary-crossing opened up for them also a way for some positively perceived experiences that I reviewed in the previous section. It should be added that young Georgian Azerbaijanis commonly admit that they face relatively fewer problems in communication with ethnic Georgian peers compared to an older generation. They also have some ethnic Georgian friends. Additionally, many of them emphasized their awareness that there are ethnic Georgian minority rights activists. Such positively perceived experiences empower Georgian Azerbaijanis against feelings of alienation.

Because of the complex and sometimes even contradictory experiences in everyday life, same person narratives include both and vary between stories about feelings of alienation or frustration and stories about positive attitudes and hopes about gradual changes in ethnic Georgian's perceptions on ethnic minority groups. As young Georgian Azerbaijani boundary crossers have everyday struggles against alienation, it should be highlighted that the feeling of being accepted genuinely, and that integration is a two-way process can be crucial for their well-being and sense of belonging. That is complicated by the policy and rhetoric that only concerns state language knowledge as an integration obstacle.

3.4.3. **"Who am I?" and Challenging Exclusive Notion of Georgianness**

Young Georgian Azerbaijanis note that they reflect their identification issues more after the language boundary-crossing. Sometimes young Georgian Azerbaijanis even discuss identity-related topics with each other. "We have an identity problem" narrative, and confusion over some

terms related to their identification is noticeable. As boundary crossers, the interviewees feel and experience their liminal position between ethnic Georgians and other Georgian Azerbaijanis who have never crossed language boundary. All interviewees wish to be integrated by maintaining their ethnic identification and having overlapping identification with ethnic Georgians. By various means, they try to challenge, question, or express the problematic nature of the exclusive notion of what it means to be "Georgian". Moreover, there is a tendency to rethink and mark the ethnic Azerbaijani culture of "Borchali" as part of Georgia's cultural legacy. State language knowledge that is the only way in Georgian reality to escape linguistic isolation makes the emergence of bottom-up narratives of integration discourse possible.

As mentioned in the Theoretical Framework, boundary crossers who experience "discontinuation in their action and interaction"[178] by themselves are a representation of the division between the two distinct worlds.[179] Based on young Georgian Azerbaijani's experiences, this "discontinuation" can be described as feelings of in-betweenness. Young Georgian Azerbaijanis have feelings of their middle-ground position between ethnic Georgians and Georgian Azerbaijanis who do not know the language. They are the ones who stepped into the integration process first, experienced the gap and inequality between the everyday life of the centre and their region, who lived both kinds of lives and who belong to both worlds; at the same time, their experiences are not similar to either. Fidan told me, "I feel kind of a person in-between. I see the differences between economic or social problems; I see how people live here, and in my town, I live different lives here and there".

[178] Akkerman and Bakker, "Boundary Crossing and Boundary Objects," 139.
[179] Akkerman and Bakker, 140.

The feelings of in-betweenness are common among interviewees; Three interviewees even mentioned the word "bridge" to describe their middle-ground position and wish to make two worlds closer. According to Ayten, "we, young people, are like a bridge between the state and people who do not know the language. I want integration; we need to live together, and I want diversity, not only words about tolerance but real tolerance". The gap between their and their parent's lifestyle and boundary-crossing experience makes young Georgian Azerbaijanis often feel like the representatives of their ethnic community in the state, as already explained in the previous section.

The identification issues are also visible in my interviewee's discussion of the terms they prefer as a label for themselves and the ethnic Azerbaijani community in Georgia. The majority of participants prefer to be labelled as Georgian Azerbaijani. However, some participants emphasized that the term "Azerbaijani" for labelling their ethnicity is problematic because the ethnic minority population of the Kvemo Kartli region is Turcik-speaking and ethnically Turk, and "Azerbaijani" is used since the Soviet Union and has a territorial connotation. The utilizing "Georgian Turk" or "Borchali Turk" over Azerbaijani was, in all cases, awoken in the context of the attempt to justify that Georgian Azerbaijanis have never lived in the Azerbaijani State and Georgia is their only historical homeland. Two interviewees, Gurban and Zaur, even mentioned their ancestor's identification cards: "you know, the Soviet Union named us as Azerbaijani according to the state's name. On my grandfather's identification card before 1933 or so, it is written that he is a Turk" (Gurban 22).

One can notice confusion regarding the term *Kartveli* (Georgian). All the interviewees noted the problematic nature of calling themselves simply Georgian. Most of the interviewees noted that the Georgian term *Kartveli* (Georgian) has an ethnic connotation: "*Kartveli* means ethnicity, it will

not be right to call ethnic Turk ethnically *Kartveli*" (Gurban 22), "If we do not mention Azerbaijani or Turk, or citizen of Georgia then who are we? *Kartveli* means someone who is ethnic Georgian and orthodox Christian." (Rustam 23) Some interviewees mentioned the problem that in Georgia, people do not have a proper common civic identity label: "For example, in Azerbaijan, every ethnic group is Azerbaijani. Here, all citizens cannot become simply *Kartveli*. In Georgia, no one has citizenship-based identity, not even ethnic Georgians."(Murad 25)[180]

Some interviewees tried to distinguish between "national" and "ethnic" categories telling me that they started thinking about this difference after learning the language and receiving more information:

> I started to think about these issues when I learned Georgian and even had discussions with Georgian Azerbaijani peers only a few years ago. I did not know it in the Azerbaijani language school; there, people were using terms differently. I even googled it and read that ethnicity and nationality are different. When I am asked about my nationality, I say - Georgian, but then when they tell me, "you do not look like it", I say that I am ethnically Turkish or Azerbaijani. However, ethnicity is a different thing, nationality is a different thing. Most people do not have any idea about this; most of them do not know. Georgians do not know this difference either. They mix ethnicity and nationality. (Ruslan 23)

> Various ethnic minority groups live in Brazil, but all citizens are Brazilian; in France, everyone is French…I sometimes ask myself… a word Kartveli…what is a name for a citizen of Georgia? What should be a name? It means we are also Georgians. This word does not need one to be ethnic Georgian or Christian. We need political changes regarding this. I am Georgian for everyone if I go abroad because it is written on my identification card. (Fidan, 22)

Even though some interviewees attempted to distinguish ethnicity and nationality, most interviewees mixed these terms while speaking about their Turkish or Azerbaijani identity and used citizenship regarding their Georgian identification. However, at the same time, all interviewees refused any kind of sense of belonging to the Azerbaijani state and even referred to

[180] It is also notable that the Azerbaijani language distinguishes identification labels *Gurcu* (ethnic Georgian, translated by some interviewees as *Kartveli*) and *Guruistanli* (it can be anyone from the territories of Georgia, translated by them as *Sakartveloeli* - non-existent term in the Georgian language). The lack of such distinction in the Georgian language causes additional confusions.

the term "civic nationalism" while speaking about their identification with Georgia. There is a noticeable terminology problem since the Soviet Union that equalizes ethnicity and nationality, as already explained. Even top-down rhetoric regarding ethnic minorities mainly focuses on citizenship as part of civic integration and nationalism. However, politicians rarely use nationality as an overlapping term between ethnic Georgians and Azerbaijanis to avoid confusion over categories.

"Georgian Azerbaijani" as a labelling term seems like a solution for all of the young Georgian Azerbaijani interviewees as it recognizes both their cultural identification and identification with their citizenship. For me, the excellent example of how young Georgian Azerbaijanis try to negotiate their identification after language boundary crossing was a zoom call when the interviewee showed me the room and flags on the wall. Zaur shares a flat in Tbilisi with three other young Georgian Azerbaijani students. They have three flags on the wall - Georgian, Azerbaijani and Turkish. Zaur explained to me that this way, young people try to express their identity. While Azerbaijani and Turkish flags express their cultural identification, the Georgian flag that is the biggest in the room shows their citizenship and Georgia as their historical homeland: "We chose the flags on the wall so that Georgian should be bigger because we are Georgian citizens, and it is our historical homeland. So, we wanted to show our identity - synthesis of Georgian, Turkish and Azerbaijani".

It is also noticeable that most interviewees are aware of citizenship-based nationalism and multiculturalism discourse even when they do not precisely know or mix the terms. The non-governmental organization's active work in this regard with young ethnic minority group members should also be recognized. As one of the interviews noted: "There are some projects only for ethnic minorities. I also know that our government has an obligation to defend minority rights to join

European Union. Multiethnic Georgia sounds good for me, and it is better for our State" (Omer 20)

It should also be noted that the interviewees not only are aware of the concept of minority rights and wish for diversity in Georgia but in some interviewees' answers, there are some bottom-up tendencies to mark the culture of "Borchali" as a part of Georgia's cultural legacy. Additionally, the attempt to seek the historical narratives that represent ethnic Georgians and Azerbaijanis shared history. For example, Murad told me: "Sometimes when my friends and I gather, we talk about culture and that Georgia should recognize Borchali culture as a part of Georgia's culture and history and not part of the Azerbaijani state." Some interviewees mentioned Borchali carpets and that Georgia should be proud of this unique knitting technique of the Georgian Azerbaijani community. Ayten referred to history: "We had the same kings, Giorgi XII or King Tamar are also my Kings even though the history textbooks do not tell Georgian Azerbaijanis' history." The mutual influences on the cultural attributes like cousins have also been mentioned.

It is also an important fact that most of my interviewees follow other young Georgian Azerbaijanis activities on Facebook; for example, they are aware of the young Georgian Azerbaijanis' grassroots movements. I emphasize it because I found a mutual influence among young Georgian Azerbaijanis who acquired the language. Six interviewees mentioned the petition about the demand to recognize Nowruz as the national holiday spread lately by the Salam movement. The respondents doubted the possibility of realizing this demand; however, they expressed the wish to appreciate their culture as a part of Georgia's legacy." I so much want Nowruz as a state holiday because this country is ours too, and we also have rights," - Farida told me and then invited me to her family to introduce me to Nowruz tradition and celebrate it together. Some interviewees even

mentioned that almost no museum represents ethnic minority cultures, which is also actively discussed by some grassroots movements.

In the early years of the Saakashvili presidency, the Georgian government led to the emergence of Georgia's civic nationalism and integration discourse; however, the rhetoric and policy enjoyed inconsistency and has not developed much during the years. Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, ethnic and religious nationalism is still a part of Georgia's political discourse. Besides, the education quality remains still low in the Azerbaijani language schools, as explained. Although the top-down boundary-making rhetoric about the importance of the Georgian language knowledge for ethnic minorities is widely accepted, young Georgian Azerbaijanis who managed to acquire language through 2010 reforms do not merely follow all kinds of top-down state-sponsored rhetoric. They also became critical voices towards some policy issues related to their ethnic group. For example, two respondents who were my latest interviewees criticized the government for marking ethnic minorities as the diaspora of Azerbaijan. I interviewed them after April 15 when the Parliament decided to create a council on ethnic minority issues under the Diaspora and Caucasus Issues Committee. Thus, among young Georgian Azerbaijani boundary-crossers, there is a capacity to criticize the top-down policy, inequality and even the potential to produce bottom-up narratives about broadening what it means to be a Georgian citizen.

3.5. The Discussion

The analysis provided in the previous sections of this chapter about Georgian Azerbaijani's experiences of state language acquisition as a boundary-crossing have broader implications for

understanding boundaries, identification processes, and integration that are discussed in more detail in this section.

3.5.1. **Boundaries and Identification Categories**

As discussed in the Theoretical Framework, it has been recognized the importance to study individual experiences of boundary-crossing in boundary research. Besides, as already noted, the prominent scholarly literature on boundaries in nationalism and ethnicity studies calls for the research of salience, visibility, and permeability of boundaries.[181] Nevertheless, there is a lack of studies grasping the complexities of the boundary-crossing experience – especially its implications on the salience, relevance and meaning-making of ethnic, national, linguistic boundaries and their interconnections with the individuals' identifications. Georgian Azerbaijani's experience of language boundary-crossing shows the importance of not taking for granted the salience, boundary or content of the linguistic category and its relation to other categories but studying the whole network of categories in line with each other.

As social and symbolic boundaries are not elsewhere but in an individual's perception and "does not operate without human action,"[182] we cannot assume their taken for granted configuration without studying their interconnection revealed in individual narratives and experiences. Georgian Azerbaijanis' experiences suggest that how individuals relate, reflect, and make meaning of language can vary through the crossing process, affecting the salience of identification categories and perception of linguistic, ethnic, or national boundaries.

[181] Lamont and Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," 186; Jackson and Molokotos-Liederman, *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries*, 2.
[182] Terrier, "Aspects of Boundary Research from the Perspective of Longue Durée," 47.

Georgian Azerbaijani interviewees' experiences show that the state language acquisition as symbolic and social boundary crossing was perceived as the main way to gain acceptance of their equal citizenship, overcome inequality, and blur the socioeconomic importance of ethnic boundaries. However, it revealed that through boundary-crossing, individuals relate to the language differently. Some interviewees realized that language has a relatively different social and political salience than originally assumed and rethought it in line with identification categories. Even though the interviewees recognize the importance of language for the political identification with Georgian citizenship and political nation, the language acquisition did not solve the civic integration problems the same way some interviewees expected it. All interviewees emphasized that they feel a new kind of otherness that is more intense after language boundary-crossing. That affects the new visibility of ethnic boundaries and makes ethnicity salience part of everyday life.

To research how individuals relate to boundaries can be crucial to study the whole picture and observe the individual's narratives – what individuals tell us about discrepancies and continuities between their experiences before, through, and after the boundary-crossing. In this regard, particular attention deserves motivations, expectations and perceptions regarding language boundary-crossing; this can be, for example, narratives about group membership emphasized in the Theoretical Framework and socioeconomic aspirations. The intertwining of the socioeconomic aspirations and aspirations for political identifications is conditioned by the perceived interdependence of these variables in young Georgian Azerbaijanis' case.

As personal narratives and experiences play a crucial role, methodologically, in-depth study and interviews can grasp all complexities mentioned above. Young Georgian Azerbaijanis boundary-crossing experiences can be an example to emphasize once again the relevance and importance of the increased number of in-depth qualitative research in boundary studies.

3.5.2. **Language Boundary-Crossing and Socialization**

In the Theoretical Framework, it has also been mentioned that crossing the language boundary also implies language socialization. The socialization aspect of language acquisition can play a role in how individuals relate to language. Language boundary-crossing related socialization experience can become a source and door for various, even controversial new experiences that the boundary crossers may perceive positively or negatively, or in both ways, having implications on their sense of belonging and identification processes.

In Georgian Azerbaijanis' case, the state language acquisition is a way to leave linguistic isolation, overcome socioeconomic inequality, be structurally more integrated and claim the political identity of Georgian citizenship. Moreover, interviewees commonly refer to becoming aware of their rights as citizens and minority group members that support their political identification. Besides, having some ethnic Georgian friends and awareness of non-governmental organizations activities play a role. However, through boundary-crossing, individuals also experience ethnic discrimination in everyday interethnic communication and prejudice while using social and traditional media. Besides, through boundary-crossing, getting a higher education, spatial mobility, and relatively socioeconomic mobility also opens up the way to feelings of relative deprivation and perception of the state's unequal treatment. This experience leads to visible ethnic boundaries and salient ethnic identification in everyday life.

It is also noticeable that identity negotiation through boundary-crossing related socialization is a dynamic process. This is observable in the individual narratives of Georgian Azerbaijanis that include both stories about feelings of having a better sense of citizenship, acquiring political identity, and feelings of alienation because of perceived prejudice and unequal treatment. The

perceptions of boundaries depend on self-ascription and external ascription[183] as emphasized in the Theoretical Framework. Thus it can be crucial for ethnic minority group members' sense of belonging and identification processes how their struggles and strategies of identity negotiations will be responded to in the long run by the state policy-makers and ethnic majority population.

3.5.3. **The Complex Process than Single-way Path of Assimilation or Ethnic Retention**

Above mentioned complexities related to individuals' reflections on boundaries through language boundary-crossing and new language socialization experiences have implications for our understanding of integration processes. I observed state language acquisition as a boundary-crossing experience in the integration process, assuming that it would make it possible to grasp nuanced experiences related to identification processes. This approach is helpful to avoid simple single-way assumptions of assimilation or ethnic retention discussed in the Theoretical Framework.

Young Georgian Azerbaijanis experiences of boundary-crossing suggest that interviewees, before the state language learning, wished to maintain ethnic boundaries while aspiring to political identification and accessing state resources. Likewise, language acquisition cannot be analyzed as a step towards de-ethnicization. In Georgian Azerbaijanis' case, even structural integration into higher education institutions and employment structures afterwards language acquisition does not suggest a step and pattern towards the erasure of ethnic identification as classical assimilation theory and its developments would suggest. Similarly, Georgian Azerbaijanis' experiences cannot be explained as simply ethnic retention. As discussed, ethnic identification is not just maintained but, in some sense, it is more salient.

[183] Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 15.

Furthermore, young Georgian Azerbaijanis emphasize minority rights to avoid alienation and justify their political identity as Georgian citizens. In this way, they try to show that visible ethnic boundaries and their political identification with Georgia can be negotiable through civic nationalism discourse. More importantly, there are some tendencies to represent their ethnic culture as a part of Georgia's diverse cultural legacy. Such complex identification negotiation processes can be observed and explained through the above-discussed methodology of in-depth study - how individuals relate boundaries in the present moment considering how they reflect language boundary-crossing experiences.

3.5.4. **Boundary Crossers and Feelings of In-betweenness**

Another aspect that could be useful for the understanding, specifically language boundary-crossing related experiences of ethnic minority group members, is the emerging feelings of in-betweenness. The feelings of in-betweenness experienced by the language boundary-crossing in the integration process of ethnic minority group members can be different from better studied diasporic in-betweenness, or in-betweenness observed in the border regions. For instance, Kali Jo-Storm describes the Georgian Azerbaijani community in the Kvemo Kartli region as "people in-between" because of the kin state's and Georgia's nation-building strategies and settlement in the border region:

> Georgian Azeri-Turks are a people in-between—in between the nation-building policies of the Georgian and Azerbaijani states, caught in the crosshairs of either state's official narratives concerning the historical boundaries of the 'homeland', and 'in between' in a much more literal sense due to their concentration in the geographic border region of Kvemo Kartli.[184]

[184] Storm, "A People *In-Between*," 19.

Young Georgian Azerbaijani boundary-crossers feel the additional and different liminal position of in-betweenness related to the experience that they are the first from their families and ethnic community who crossed the language boundary and experienced "discontinuities in their actions and interactions."[185] That is why some interviewees narrate their feeling of in-betweenness as their position of being a "bridge" between the state or the dominant ethnic group and ethnic Azerbaijanis who cannot speak the Georgian language. In this context, salient ethnicity is prevalent.

Observing language boundary-crossing reveals that individuals who first step into the integration process from their community – acquire the language and integrate structurally – may experience feelings of middle-ground position. This liminal position is related to the inequality and gap between their ethnic community's way of life and the socioeconomic and political life in the rest of the state. That by itself can trigger some individuals to describe themselves as "the voice of their own ethnic group" in the state.

3.5.5. **Top-down boundary-making vs Bottom-up Processes**

The Theoretical Framework has discussed the importance of the macro-level process of boundary-making - especially through the state policy, institutional frameworks, and power hierarchies.[186] The state policy can politicize language and produce it as a symbolic and social boundary of belonging – this way, language can be a boundary of group membership and shape inequality. The language can be even discursively constructed as a boundary for citizenship and determine what means "a good" and "a proper" citizen discussed in the case of Georgia in the second chapter. This policy is accepted and internalized by the Georgian Azerbaijanis but not arbitrary. It has been seen as a way for civic integration, escaping linguistic isolation, seeking socioeconomic and political

[185] Akkerman and Bakker, "Boundary Crossing and Boundary Objects," 139.
[186] Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*.

opportunities, and claiming their political identity as full citizens. The research revealed that young Georgian Azerbaijani boundary-crossers do not accept any macro-level boundary-making processes that are not perceived as serving their interests. For example, some interviewees refuse to be marked from the Georgian state as Aserbaijani's diaspora as an impediment in the civic integration process.

Moreover, the experiences of young Georgian Azerbaijanis show that individuals may even engage in the production of bottom-up narratives about integration. Some young Georgian Azerbaijani's attempt to incorporate Borchali into Georgian national culture suggests such a bottom-up process. Ethnic minority group members who crossed the language boundary may try blurring the political boundary by highlighting the ethnic boundary. For this, they incorporate distinct ethnic culture into the national past– this way, political identification to the Georgian civic nation and their integration process is also supported by a multiethnic legacy of Georgia. This can be regarded as one of the identification negotiation strategies for ethnic minority group members to negotiate their salient ethnic identification and political identity through the language boundary-crossing. Such a strategy also could support integrationist nation-building agenda.

The above mentioned may also suggest lessons (that are speculative) for studying language boundary-crossing experiences in the Post-Soviet States. In the context where civic nationalism discourse emerged and at the same time, ethnonationalism still is a part of political rhetoric; also, certain inconsistencies are noticeable in political policy and rhetoric. For instance, in Latvia and Estonia, where Russophones accept and justify the titular language acquisition and language policy

requirement,[187] such an attitude still does not automatically prove gradual de-ethnicization or even ethnic retention.

If language is introduced as part of the civic integration agenda, ethnic minority group members who recognize this kind of boundary-making and cross the language boundary may become facilitators of civic integration. They may even challenge ethnonationalist approaches towards membership in the political nation or citizenship. Importantly, state language knowledge empowers ethnic minority group members for their claim-making because of a certain characteristic of symbolic and social boundaries that, without crossing process, leaves a person in linguistic, economic, and political isolation. When language boundary-crossers invest in language learning, they may try to avoid alienation struggles in everyday life by focusing on their minority and citizen rights or even engaging in producing bottom-up narratives about multiethnicity. This can be a way to negotiate highlighted ethnic boundaries with political identification. The feelings of in-betweenness explained in the previous section also suggest the potential of this kind of identity negotiation attempt.

For studying language boundary-crossing experiences, in-depth study with certain top-down boundary-making strategies and historical and socio-political context is needed. The comparative research of two in-depth case studies can reveal new complexities on how individuals make a meaning, cross and relate language boundary and its implication for identification negotiation strategies. Such a study, for example, could be between the same linguistic group in two states or two ethnic minority groups in the same state, like Georgian Azerbaijanis and Georgian Armenians.

[187] Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the near Abroad*, 205.

Conclusion

In this research, I aimed to explore young Georgian Azerbaijani individuals' state language acquisition experiences in the integration process and the role of language learning as a boundary-crossing on their self-perception, identification categories and sense of belonging through the qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews. Before analyzing interviewees, I discussed the general, historical and political context and the top-down boundary-making processes.

The state language functions in Georgia as a symbolic and social boundary of belonging: on one hand, as a symbolic boundary, discursively defining the meaning of being a proper citizen of Georgia and a member of the nation, on the other hand, as a social boundary producing inequality. The lack of state language knowledge for ethnic minority group members means linguistic isolation and social, economic, and political marginalization.

The 2010 education reforms intended civic integration of young Georgian Azerbaijanis through state language education and differed from earlier ethnonationalist policies. However, the Georgian language teaching quality still exposes several shortcomings. Moreover, even though the civic nationalism discourse emerged as a part of the top-down boundary-making rhetoric of the post-Rose Revolution government of Georgia, ethnonationalism has not fully disappeared neither from political rhetoric nor on a societal level.

Narratives of young Georgian Azerbaijani interviewees suggest that the top-down rhetoric of boundary-making about the necessity of state language knowledge for a good citizen is accepted. They describe the motivation for language learning as a chance to avoid socioeconomic marginalization and aspiration of a Georgian citizen's political identification without erasure of ethnocultural boundaries. The research revealed complex experiences related to language-

boundary crossing. It challenges oversimplified rhetorical elements about the state language knowledge as a panacea of all problems ethnic minority group members face and theoretical assumptions of single-way assimilation and ethnic retention.

On one hand, Georgian language knowledge is commonly narrated by interviewees as increased political identification based on citizenship with Georgia. As the Georgian language represents a boundary of belonging, the state language acquisition becomes for young people a tool to claim their political identification with Georgian citizenship more confidently. They associate the language boundary-crossing experience with increased awareness of their rights as citizens and minority group members. Importantly, the language helps young people in structural integration – getting higher education, being involved in employment structures, and participating in non-governmental organizations activities. They also have some new ethnic Georgian friends. These factors mediate their feelings of being part of Georgian socio-political space.

On the other hand, through the language boundary-crossing, interviewees relate the language differently and rethink it in line with identification categories affecting the salience and meaning-making of their ethnic identification. Some interviewees emphasize that after the state language acquisition, they are not accepted from the wide ethnic majority society in a way they expected. After the language boundary-crossing young Georgian Azerbaijani interviewees experience discrimination in interethnic communication and ethnic prejudice on social and traditional media. Additionally, through the language-related structural integration, they perceive unequal treatment and relative deprivation, causing feelings of otherness and making their distinct ethnicity a salient part of everyday life.

Language boundary crossing as a door to both positively and negatively perceived experiences conditions dynamic identity negotiation process and struggles against alienation – narratives of the

Georgian Azerbaijanis include both stories of their feelings of alienation and frustration after the boundary-crossing in the socialization process and hopeful remarks about increased acceptance from young ethnic Georgians. The findings also suggest that through the language boundary-crossing, Georgian Azerbaijanis experience feelings of in-betweenness - this can be described as a middle-ground position and feeling like a "bridge" between their ethnic community members, who have never crossed language boundary, and the state.

Young Georgian Azerbaijanis do not simply accept any top-down boundary-making, but they also critically engage with the state policy aspects that complicates their integration process. Moreover, some young Georgian Azerbaijanis engage in producing bottom-up narratives about integration. For example, they try to mark Borchali culture as Georgia's cultural legacy and challenge the exclusive notion of Georgianness. In this case, highlighted ethnic boundaries simultaneously support their political identification with Georgia. Additionally, focusing on minority and citizen rights as a part of civic nationalism is a strategy to negotiate Georgian political identification and salient ethnic boundaries.

Such bottom-up processes may be a lesson for studying language-boundary related identification processes in the post-Soviet states. Ethnic boundaries can become more salient through language boundary-crossing; however, individuals may try to engage in the bottom-up narrative making of civic integration and multiculturalism as a strategy of identification negotiation. In this way, accenting on rights or even ethnic revivalism can be a way to blur political boundaries between ethnic groups and support political identification with the state. State language knowledge empowers ethnic minority group members because of the social and economic implications of crossing a social boundary. Once ethnic minority group members are aware of civic integration

discourse, they may even challenge top-down ethnonationalist boundary-making tendencies to avoid alienation.

The research relies on twelve semi-structured interviews with respondents from the three districts of the Kvemo Kartli region. The lack of empirical generalization to all young Georgian Azerbaijanis due to the limited sample size represents the research limitation. I chose a qualitative study to show the complexity of young Georgian Azerbaijanis' state language acquisition experiences and map possible opinion variety without empirical generalization. Moreover, I chose an in-depth qualitative study for the method's potential to enrich theoretical literature.

The research critically engages and extends the theoretical literature on boundaries, integration, language, ethnic minority identification processes, and language boundary-crossing practices. The theoretical implications of Georgian Azerbaijanis' boundary-crossing experiences have been extensively analyzed in the discussions section. I choose the boundary approach as a main theoretical framework to show complex experiences related to language boundary-crossing in the integration process and avoid and challenge simplified and single-way assumptions about assimilation and ethnic retention.

I suggest that in-depth research of language boundary-crossing experiences can be crucial for studying boundaries and identification processes. Specifically, it is important to observe the full picture of individual narratives of boundary-crossing and grasp interconnections: perceived discrepancies in the way individuals relate language before, through, and afterwards crossing language boundaries can affect their perception of linguistic, ethnic and national boundaries. That can also influence the relevance, salience and meaning making of the individual's categories of identifications. The role of motivations and expectations about the boundary-crossing process and language socialization aspect should also be emphasized.

For future research of Georgian Azerbaijanis' identification categories and the state language issues, an in-depth study is needed about how the older generation who never experienced boundary-crossing relates to the language boundary. Also, the research with adolescents can enrich the understanding of boundaries. Another important direction is to study young activists' mobilization as new grassroots movements emerged after the 2010 reforms among the Georgian Azerbaijanis who acquired the state language. My research can be a basis for such research as it provides an in-depth discussion of the ordinary individual's language boundary-crossing experiences. I also suggest comparative research between the language boundary-crossing experiences of young Georgian Azerbaijanis and Georgian Armenians - whether there are some differences and why - that can tell us more about language boundary-crossing and identifications in the integration process.

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