Minority languages and geographical names in the Caucasus

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Abstract

This paper examines the rich density of languages of the Caucasus region and their status, with varying degrees of official recognition, as national minority languages.

The paper considers the demography of the region and the contact with, and phonological and orthographical influence from, the relevant national languages, principally Russian and Georgian. Particular reference is made to Abkhaz, a northwest Caucasian-family language, spoken in Abkhazia, a region at the western edge of the southern side of the Caucasus mountain range, and Avar, a northeast Caucasian-family language spoken in Dagestan to the north of the mountains towards the Caspian Sea.

The effect of the language contact with Russian and Georgian as manifest in the region's geographical names is examined; and the phonological peculiarities of northern Caucasian languages, particularly the richness of the consonant inventory, and the difficulty in capturing adequately the requisite sounds in a "borrowed" writing system (in these cases an extended Cyrillic alphabet) is also considered. Finally, the ramifications of this linguistic and orthographic situation on the development of suitable romanization systems is discussed.

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Paper

This paper is entitled 'Minority languages and geographical names in the Caucasus', and my aim is to explore these themes in their geographical and ethno-linguistic context.

This is a fascinating region politically, linguistically and toponymically and the complexity of each is to a degree interdependent and interrelated.

1. The Caucasus Region

The Caucasus is a geographical region on the border of Europe and Asia, and is bisected by the various ranges of the Caucasus mountains, most significantly the Greater Caucasus range. This impressive range, usually considered as forming a natural boundary between Europe and Asia, includes Mount Elbrus, at 5,642 metres Europe's highest mountain. The area to the north of the mountains lies in Russia and is divided into 9 first-order level administrative units: 2 *krays* (territories, with a dominant Russian population): Krasnodar and Stavropol'; and 7 *republics* (former *autonomous republics* & *autonomous regions*, each with a considerable proportion of non-Russian population, and being majority Muslim): from west to east Adygeya, Karachayevo-Cherkesiya, Kabardino-Balkariya, Severnaya Osetiya-Alaniya (North Ossetia), Ingushetiya, Chechnya, and Dagestan.

The southern and larger part of the Caucasus, Transcaucasia, features a more rugged terrain crossed by chains of mountains in addition to the dominant Greater Caucasus range. This region comprises Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and also part of north-eastern Turkey and is bordered to the west by the Black Sea, to the east by the Caspian Sea, and to the south by Iran.

2. Languages and language families of the Caucasus

It is in the context of this mountainous region that I will consider the peoples, their languages and their geographical names. The Caucasian region is a rich tapestry of ethnic groups and languages, described by 10th Century Arab geographer Al Mas'udi as a "Mountain of

Tongues",[1] and is characterized by having indigenous languages that scholars believe are not relatable to any other language families, as well as being home to other entirely distinct language families: Indo-European and Turkic.

Interestingly, perhaps because the region has for the most part not formed part of a single state, the Caucasus has not until relatively recently had a single *lingua franca*. Residents have usually been bilingual or even multilingual according to necessity. As Nichols notes (Nichols, 1998), geography and the size of speech community have been correlated: traditionally in highland villages many people knew the language(s) of lower villages, but not vice versa, because economic advantages such as markets and winter pasture were to be found in the lowlands. Accordingly, it has tended to be the highland languages that have diminished over time. Nevertheless, at least 37 indigenous Caucasian languages still exist today.

Scholars have been interested in the Caucasian languages for a long period, because they are believed to be a unique group: as yet no links to other languages have been proven. Even at first glance they are evidently very unusual and they are often characterized as having a rich density of consonant phonemes and corresponding paucity of vowels.

To describe the breakdown of the languages in a little more detail (see Comrie, 1981, p.196), they are usually acknowledged as comprising three language-families: South Caucasian, Northwest Caucasian, and Northeast Caucasian. The South Caucasian languages, Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz, and Svan, are closely related to one another. A map showing the ethno-linguistic groups of the region is included as an appendix to this paper (DGC, 2011).

The Northwest Caucasian group consists of Abkhaz, Abaza, Adyghe, Kabardian, and Ubykh, these languages having a total today of something over half a million speakers in their ancestral lands (and many more in Turkey and the Middle East). Abkhaz is spoken in Abkhazia, to the south of the Greater Caucasus mountains, and the others to the north. The Ubykh language, however, is now extinct, its entire population having migrated in 1864 as a result of the conclusion of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus; the Ubykh moved principally to Turkey, where the language has since become extinct. Abkhaz has approximately 90,000 speakers in Abkhazia. Kabardian has some 300,000 speakers in the republics of Kabardino-Balkariya and Karachayevo-Cherkesiya. Adghye is spoken in Adygeya by approximately 100,000 people. Approximately 30,000 Abaza speakers live in Karachayevo-Cherkesiya.

A characteristic feature of the sound systems of Northwest Caucasian languages is a very limited number of distinctive vowels, some scholars even positing just one vowel. Conversely, these languages have a large and complicated consonant inventory, with over 80 different consonants being identified in Ubykh.

The Northeast Caucasian group consists of the Nakh and Dagestanian languages. Nakh languages comprise principally Chechen and Ingush. Dagestanian languages are sub-divided into three groups: Avar-Andi-Dido languages of central and western Dagestan and part of Azerbaijan, Lak-Dargwa languages of central Dagestan, and Lezgian languages, principally of southern Dagestan. The Lak-Dargwa sub-group has almost half a million speakers: Lak has some 100,000 speakers and Dargwa, 350,000; both are classified as 'vulnerable' by UNESCO (Moseley, 2010). The Lezgian language group includes Lezgian (with 240,000 speakers in Dagestan and about 170,000 in Azerbaijan); Tabasaran (about 90,000); Agul (about 12,000); Rutul (about 15,000); Tsakhur (about 11,000); Archi (fewer than 1,000); Kryz (about 6,000); Budukh (about 2,000); Khinalug (about 1,500); and Udi (about 3,700). The last four of these, each considered 'severely endangered' (Ibid.), are spoken chiefly in Azerbaijan; and one village of Udi speakers is located in Georgia.

[1] Jabal al Alsinah, جبل الألسنه

The third group is the Avar-Andi-Dido sub-group, these languages comprise the Avar language; the Andi subgroup of languages, including Andi, Botlikh, Godoberi, Chamalal, Bagvalal, Tindi, Karata, and Akhvakh; and the Dido subgroup, including Dido (Tsez), Khvarshi, Hinukh, Bezhta, and Hunzib. Of these Avar is by far the most widely spoken with over half a million speakers. Avar has literary status (see section 3) and has traditionally been used amongst these ethnic groups for intertribal communication. Avar is still widely known and spoken among them, and it is with the exception only of Avar that all of the languages of this sub-group are classified by UNESCO as 'Definitely endangered'. Avar itself is termed 'vulnerable' (Ibid.). As the Northwest Caucasian languages, the Northeast Caucasian languages are characterized by their phonological complexity.

Alongside the indigenous Caucasian languages, a significant Indo-European minority language is Ossetian; a member of the north-eastern Iranian language group with over 500,000 speakers (Woodman, 2007). Turkic languages are represented too: Karachay-Balkar comprises two dialects, and is an official language within both Kabardino-Balkariya and Karachayevo-Cherkesiya.

3. Demographics and the official status and use of indigenous languages

Having considered the geographical region and its indigenous languages, to what extent are these officially recognized and how widely spoken proportionally within their respective lands?

A word here should be given on the geo-political context of the region. Given its strategic location linking Europe and Asia and on the important trade and oil pipeline routes from East to West, particularly today the pipelines from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean, the Caucasus has long been of interest to the powers surrounding it.

The demography of the area was very significantly altered as a result of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus in the 19th Century. In 1864, the power of the victorious Russian armies pushing towards the Black Sea provoked a mass migration of the Caucasian peoples, most particularly to Turkey, Syria and Jordan. The resulting under-populated and conquered Caucasian lands in turn saw an influx of Russian, as well as Georgian and Armenian migrants, and it was at this time that Russian became the region's main *lingua franca*.

In the Soviet era twelve languages of the Caucasus region were given literary language status: Georgian, Abkhaz, Abaza, Adyghe, Kabardian, Chechen, Ingush, Avar, Lak, Dargwa, Lezgian and Tabasaran (Kirkwood, 1989). The intention of this assignment of literary status was to improve literacy, felt more likely through allowing the use of native languages, than the stipulation of non-native Russian. This status helped to preserve the languages (unlike for the diaspora, where the knowledge of the languages rapidly diminished). This is not to overstate the degree of their use though, and efforts to promote and preserve the languages have become more explicitly stated in the years since the Soviet Union's end.

The languages' preservation has in part been hindered by the region's demographic make-up. Kabardian is alone amongst Northwest Caucasian languages in its being the language of the ethnic majority in Kabardino-Balkariya. Kabardian and Russian are together official languages in both Kabardino-Balkariya and Karachayevo-Cherkesiya; similarly Adyghe has official status in Adygeya. Abaza, however, does not have any official status.

Looking in more detail at Abkhazia, an area which has been ethnically diverse over centuries, since the mass migration in the 1860-70s there have been significant fluctuations in both demographic proportions and in overall population numbers. With the restoration of Georgian sovereignty in 1918, the authorities organized considerable resettlement of Georgians into Abkhazia, allocating land to the Georgian settlers. After the establishment of Soviet rule and the creation of the Socialist Soviet Republic of Abkhazia on 31 March 1921, the influx of Georgian settlers into Abkhazia was temporarily stalled. However, under Stalin,

in 1931, the Abkhaz SSR was incorporated as an autonomous entity into the Georgian SSR, and an overt programme of Kartvelian resettlement into Abkhazia was initiated. This 'demographic engineering', managed through the 'Abkhazpereselenstroy' resettlement department, reinforced the ethno-demographic distribution in favour of Georgians, the 1959 census recording a 39% Georgian and 15% Abkhazian population (Ullman, 1959).

In the 1989 Soviet census, these proportions had widened to 45% to 18% respectively (with 15% each Armenian and Russian), the republic's overall population then being 525,000 (Kingkade, 1989). And in the years since the most notable change has been of overall population, now estimated at 180,000, this huge reduction being principally a result of the 1992-93 war with Georgia. The figures drawn from the 2003 Abkhaz census (although this is widely believed to be inaccurate, and criticized even by Abkhaz officials), recorded 44% Abkhaz, 20% Georgian 21% Armenian and 11% Russian (Civil Georgia, 2011).

All these figures notwithstanding, it must be said that it is very difficult to establish truths concerning the demographic history, as information is frequently inextricably laden with political bias. Both pro-Georgian and pro-Abkhazian 'proofs' on the indigenous population of Abkhazia are used to state that the non-indigenous people have less right to take charge of the territory now. Similar arguments are articulated over the indigenous population of Ossetia: the Georgian contention is that Ossetians arrived in the region as immigrants in the 17th Century to work as serfs; this view is manifest in the usual Georgian name of the region, Samachablo, after the princely family in whose fiefdom the Ossetians worked. This contrasts with the Ossetian view that their people are descendents of the Alans, resident in the region since the 4th Century BC (Woodman, 2007).

What is certain is that these demographic shifts have naturally had an effect on language. For instance, it is a predictable consequence of Abkhaz feelings of hostility towards Georgia that Georgian has become little used in Abkhazia. Additionally, though Russian continues to be the principal language of Abkhazia, Abkhazians have become determined not to lose their own language.

Of course, Abkhazia's political status is disputed, but the language's status is recognized both in the Georgian Constitution, which grants official status to Abkhaz alongside Georgian in Abkhazia, and in a 2007 law signed by the *de facto* president of Abkhazia, making Abkhaz a 'state' language alongside Russian, and also determining that Abkhaz would become the language of official communication within the Abkhaz government by 2010 and more generally for official communications by 2015. With the shortage of both teachers and funds, these targets have been criticized as unrealistic, and there is some concern that the law might prove counterproductive. The knowledge of Abkhaz has diminished among Abkhazians, and is extremely low amongst the other ethnic groups, who continue to form a majority. It's certainly mainly a spoken language, and its transmission to the younger generation is hampered since middle-aged and older Abkhazians have often not mastered Abkhaz.

In the Northeast Caucasian sphere, by contrast, indigenous people are a significant majority in Dagestan (the population being less than 5% Russian according to the 2002 Russian Census, with Avars forming almost 30%; furthermore the Russian population has become progressively smaller over the past 4 decades, whilst the overall population of Dagestan has grown consistently). Dagestan's 1994 Constitution does not specify individual languages as being official, instead stating that "all the languages of Dagestan" possess official status as state languages. In spite of this lack of specific official status, the linguistic and political dominance of Avar as the prime minority language within Dagestan is widely attested. Nevertheless, in spite of this more rosy-sounding picture, as noted in section 2, Avar is classified by UNESCO as 'vulnerable' (Moseley, 2010).

4. Language contact

Given the diminished knowledge of the region's minority languages, it is interesting to consider not only how they have been displaced by other languages, but also to what degree the languages themselves have become influenced by those around them.

Of course there are various reasons that language contact can occur. Linguistic proximity is the most obvious, and additional causes may be either political or sociocultural; and the Caucasus region has experienced contact through all of these.

The original vocabulary of the North Caucasian languages has been fairly well preserved in the modern languages, although many words have been borrowed from Arabic, the Turkic languages and Persian. There are also loanwords that have been taken from neighbouring languages (Georgian and Ossetian). However, naturally, the most significant influence on all the languages has come from Russian, which has been the major source for new words since the late 19th Century. This use of Russian loanwords for technological or 'new' vocabulary is unsurprisingly true all over the former Soviet Union. There are considerable social motives for the move towards Russian too. In an area of such ethno-linguistic diversity, any *lingua franca* takes on a disproportionate significance, and in turn this can only be to the detriment of the minority and regional languages concerned. There is some evidence (Höhlig, 1999) of the sentiment that knowledge of the respective languages has never been of social or economic advantage, and some parents are therefore reluctant to encourage their children to follow education in their minority language.

Political motives too play an important role in the interrelation of languages and geographical names are a good way of observing this. Political motives can often stimulate language contact, either through explicit intention, or as a tangential effect of a wider political situation. One such example is the considerable discussion of the effect and significance of the longevity of languages in Abkhazia. For instance, Hewitt (Hewitt, 1992), considers historical etymology, evolution and toponymic evidence in Abkhazia and through these suggests the lack of Abkhaz influence on Kartvelian languages entails that they have not been in contact for a long period, and that therefore Abkhazia was inhabited exclusively by Abkhazians.

There have also been investigations of language contact between Caucasian and other language groups, for instance, between Ossetians and Kartvelians: Thordarson (Thordarson, 1999), notes that there have been Ossetian-speaking peoples in Georgia since at least late medieval times, and that Ossetian as spoken to the south of the mountains has unsurprisingly taken on borrowings from Georgian in a way that northern Ossetian has not.

5. Toponymy

Geographical names are a gauge or outward expression of the lands they describe, providing keys to historical, political and linguistic heritage. Certainly the Caucasus is a good example of this, and unsurprisingly in this region of ethno-linguistic diversity, which has seen considerable political tensions and struggles, the place names have frequently been used for political motive and exploitation.

The Caucasus generally has seen successive periods of name changing activity and, to exemplify Abkhazia, these phases include the change to Russian names as a result of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus; the reflection of Soviet ideology through the early years of the USSR; Georgianization through Stalin's era; some reversion to Russian and Abkhaz names post-Stalin; and then further moves towards Abkhaz names since *de facto* independence.

This most recent stage of 'Abkhazization' is seen in the decrees passed by the 'Supreme Council' of the Republic of Abkhazia on renaming and retranscribing settlement names. One such decree, from September 1994, stated that "proceeding from desire of population, as well

as for the sake of restoration of historical justice" (Supreme Council of the Republic of Abkhazia, 1994) a list of name changes would take effect, including transcriptional changes from Gali to Gal, Chkhortoli to Chxwartal and Okumi to Uakwÿm as well as renamings such as Repo Ets'eri to Riap, Leselidze to Gyachrÿpsh and Gantiadi to Tsandrÿpsh.

A few examples of significant current place names in Abkhazia are:

Georgian	***Georgian Romanization***[2]	***Abkhaz***	***Abkhaz Romanization***
ახალი ათონი	Akhali Atoni	Афон Ҷыц	Afon Ch̲'ÿts
ბზიფი	Bzip'i	Бзыԥ	Bzÿp
ბიჭვინთა	Bich'vinta	Пиԥунда	P'its'unda
გაგრა	Gagra	Гагра	Gagra
გალი	Gali	Гал	Gal
განთიადი	Gantiadi	Цандрыԥшь	Tsandrÿpsh
გუდაუთა	Gudauta	Гәдоуҭа	Gwdouta
გულრიფში	Gulripshi	Гәылрыԥшь	Gwÿlrÿpsh
ოჩამჩირე	Ochamchire	Очамчыра	Ochamchÿra
სოხუმი	Sokhumi	Аҟәа	Aqw'a
ტყვარჩელი	Tqvarcheli	Тҟәарчал	T'qw'archal

It may be noted from this short list that the Georgian and Abkhaz language forms are sometimes quite different; however, it is important to consider that the international community, in not recognizing the authority of Abkhazia's 'Supreme Council', does not recognize these Abkhaz forms as the official names. Given the disparities, there is clearly a delicate balance to be struck between practical utility and international diplomacy.

Indeed, the choice of place names can be politically highly sensitive, and so it proved for a high profile UK cartographic publisher whose atlas, in accordance with the UK's position, showed Abkhazia's being within Georgia, and with uniquely Georgian place names. Abkhazia's Vice-Foreign Minister (Gundjia, 2009) wrote a letter stating:

> *There is no surprise that Abkhazia was represented as part of Georgia, given the general pro-Georgian Western attitude towards my country, but what really struck me was that most of the names in Abkhazia were given in Georgian. A traveler referring to this map of Abkhazia will simply not find many of these cities and villages in Abkhazia today, since probably only members of the older generations who lived here during the period of the Soviet Union will remember such names in Georgian.*

The Soviet era produced a very high number of geographical name changes, often reflecting Soviet ideology or commemorating high profile Soviet figures, and many such changes have seen either reversions to their former names, or a further change, since the fall of the Soviet Union. The Caucasus has seen a good number of these Soviet-era changes as well as changes for a number of other motives, such as the jostling for ethno-linguistic dominance. One interesting such example is a town in the region of South Ossetia: renamed Leningori, after Lenin, but in the Georgian style (with final 'i', the word 'gora' meaning hill in both Russian and Georgian), the name Leningori (Ленингори) is still used in Russian-language contexts today. The Georgian name, however, has reverted to its previous Georgian form: Akhalgori (ახალგორი). However, the Ossetian name remains the Ossetian-language variant (without

[2] Romanized according to the BGN/PCGN Romanization System for Georgian. All other romanizations in this paper also accord to the BGN/PCGN system for the relevant language: systems are available online at http://www.pcgn.org.uk/Romanisation_systems.htm.

the Georgian ending) of the Soviet name: Leningor (Ленингор). And an interesting illustration of an outside language's presence in the name-change process is the village founded as Salme by Estonian settlers in the 1880s (Päll, 2008). Itself the name of a parish in Estonia, the Russian and Georgian names of the village reflect this Estonian name (Сальме (Sal'me) and სალმე (Salme), respectively); the modern Abkhaz name for this village, as a conscious move away from the non-Abkhaz heritage, however, is Ԥcoy (Psou), after the river near which it lies.

Here are some further examples of minority language forms alongside the 'national' forms.

In North Ossetia (from Ossetian-Russian Dictionary, 1952)

Ossetian	***Ossetian Romanization***	***Russian***	***Romanization***
Беслæн	Beslæn	Беслан	Beslan
Дзæуджыхъæу[3]	Dzæudzhykh'æu	Владикавказ	Vladikavkaz
Елхот	Elkhot	Эльхотово	El'khotovo
Мæздæг	Mæzdæg	Моздок	Mozdok
Цыкола	Tsykola	Чикола	Chikola

In South Ossetia (from Ossetian-Russian Dictionary, 1952 & Map of Georgia, 2010)

Ossetian	***Ossetian Romanization***	***Georgian***	***Romanization***
Дзау	Dzau	ჯავა	Java
Знауыр	Znauyr	ზნაური	Znauri
Квайса	Kvaysa	კვაისი	Kvaisi
Ленингор	Leningor	ახალგორის	Akhalgori
Цхинвал [4] *or* Чъреба	Tskhinval *or* Ch'reba	ცხინვალი	Ts'khinvali

In Kabardino-Balkariya (from Kabardian-Russian Dictionary, 1955)

Kabardian	***Kabardian Romanization***	***Russian***	***Romanization***
Балъкъ	Balhq'	Малка	Malka *(river)*
Бахъсэн	Bahs̱än	Баксан	Baksan
Дых-Тау	Dyk-Tau	Дыг-Тау	Dyg-Tau *(mountain)*
Налшык	Nalshyk	Нальчик	Nal'chik
Шэджэм	Shäjäm	Чегем	Chegem
Шэрэдж	Shäräj	Черек	Cherek
Эльбрус *or* Іуащхьэмахуэ	Äl'brus *or* 'waśẖämakhwä	Эльбрус	El'brus *(mountain)*

Avar names in Dagestan (from Institute of Estonian Language Place Names Database)

Avar	***Avar Romanization***	***Russian***	***Romanization***
БецIгIор	Bets'ġor	Каракойсу	Karakoysu
ГIандадерил МегIер	Gandaderil Meġer	Андийский хребет	Andiyskiy Khrebet *(mountains)*
ГIахъуша	Gaqusha	Акуша	Akusha
Кьохь	Tl'okh	Тлох	Tlokh
ЛъаратIа	Lharat'a	Тлярата	Tlyarata
МахIачхъала	Maħachqala	Махачкала	Makhachkala
Онсоколо	Onsokolo	Унцукуль	Untsukul'
Салатави	Salatawi	Эндирей [5]	Endirey
Хьаргаби	Khargabi	Гергебиль	Gergebil'
Яхси	Yaxsi	Аксай	Aksay

[3] From 1931 to 1944 and from 1954 to 1990 this town was named Ordzhonikidze in both Russian and Ossetian.
[4] Between 1934 and 1961, this town was named Staliniri in Georgian, Stalinir in Ossetian.
[5] Formerly Andreyaul in Russian.

6. Writing systems

Before the late 19th Century these Caucasian languages were not much written: Avar had been written in an Arabic script over some centuries, and there had been some use for other languages of both Arabic and Georgian scripts, but any such use was rather sporadic and inconsistent.

In the 1920s the USSR supported the development of Roman-script alphabets across the region, such as for Avar, Abkhaz, Ossetian, Kabardian and Adyghe. These attempts were abandoned in the 1930s in favour of Cyrillic-based alphabets, with the exception of Abkhaz and South Ossetian, on which Georgian-based alphabets were imposed, until these were also returned to Cyrillic scripts after Stalin's death.

The use of Cyrillic is by no means a perfect match for the Caucasian languages: Russian's having many fewer consonant phonemes, the Russian Cyrillic alphabet is ill-equipped to capture the required sounds and the result is the frequent use of digraphs, trigraphs and even one (in the case of Kabardian, /Кхъу/) tetragraph, with the addition only of the character /I/ (called *palochka*). This has been avoided only in Abkhaz, where instead of using combinations of standard Russian letters, it employs 14 characters that do not appear in the Russian alphabet.

Also, though the script-evolutions for these languages have occurred within broadly the same timeframe, it is notable that today's Cyrillic scripts were devised independently, and that therefore, although the languages share many phonetic characteristics, these have not been shown uniformly in Cyrillic. For instance, glottalization is marked with either /I/ or /ъ/ in Kabardian, and either of these characters or indeed /ь/ in Avar, while in Abkhaz glottals are most frequently represented with the single Cyrillic base character.By way of example:

/k/ (voiceless velar stop)	
representation in Kabardian and Avar	**К**
representation in Abkhaz	**Қ**
/k'/ (velar ejective)	
representation in Kabardian and Avar	**КI**
representation in Abkhaz	**К**
/q'/ (uvular ejective)	
representation in Kabardian and Avar	**Къ**
representation in Abkhaz	**Қ**

For a little more detail on a selection of these languages:

Having first been written in the 1860s, Abkhaz Cyrillic was modified a number of times, before a 55-character script, first utilized in 1909, was adopted for the literary language as part of the Soviet drive to eradicate illiteracy. In 1926 this was replaced by a 75-character Roman-script alphabet, itself modified in 1928. From 1938 until Stalin's death, Abkhaz was compelled to accept a Georgian-based orthography (Woodman, 2008). Since 1954 the present 62-character Cyrillic-based script has been in use, though this is widely felt to be both cumbersome and inconsistent.

Ossetian has principally been written in a modified Cyrillic alphabet. A Roman alphabet was used between 1923 and 1938, at which point a script based on Georgian was introduced for Ossetian in South Ossetia, to emphasise its place within the Georgian SSR, whilst Ossetian in North Ossetia switched to a modified Cyrillic script (Woodman, 2007). This same Cyrillic script was subsequently imposed on South Ossetia in 1954; it contains one non-standard Cyrillic character /Æ/ and uses /ъ/ consistently to mark glottalization.

Meanwhile in Russia, Avar was written in Arabic script until 1928, before being altered to use of the Roman script until 1938, since which time it has used the slightly extended Cyrillic alphabet (with the *palochka*). Kabardian has been written in this same Cyrillic script since 1936, Chechen since 1938.

And it's perhaps partly as a result of the rather inadequate and inconsistent writing systems, that the minority languages are little written. Of course it's widely recognized that a language needs to be written to safeguard its use and there is discussion amongst linguists across the region of revising their existing alphabets, or of introducing the Roman alphabet.

7. Treatment of geographical names by the UK

The UK Permanent Committee on Geographical Names approves and develops romanization systems to be applied by official bodies in the United Kingdom to non-Roman geographical names so that these can be presented in a standard way on UK maps and documents. Given the complicated phonemic inventories of the Caucasian languages, their presentation in a romanization system is quite challenging as we have had to balance a desire for the system to limit its use of diacritical marks and be practicable for English-language users, whilst also reversible so that the original script can be derived from the romanized form. These preferences are not easily reconcilable considering the large number of phonemes in Caucasian languages, and the conclusion in the development of these systems has been that neither could be fulfilled perfectly, but instead a balance of both attained.

The conclusion of these considerations has been that we have developed or adopted systems in this region for Abkhaz, Avar, Kabardian as well as Ossetian and the national languages. We have also agreed the correspondences between the occasionally-used Roman-script alphabets for Chechen and Karachay-Balkar and their official Cyrillic alphabets as standards for these languages in Roman-script. This is all with the goal of being able to represent these interesting and difficult languages in Roman-script for a UK audience in a systematic, uniform and linguistically-convincing manner.

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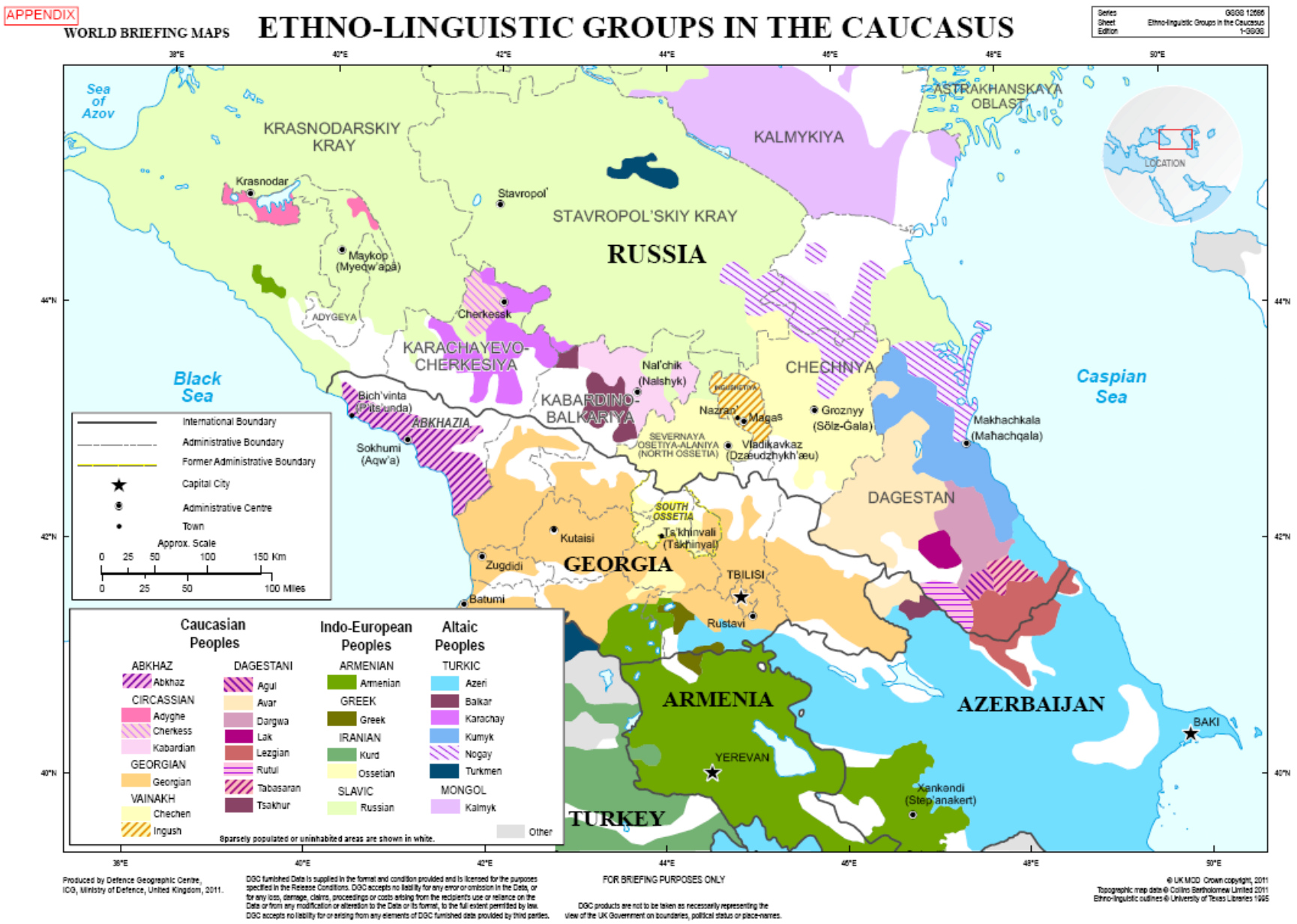
Appendix


APPENDIX
WORLD BRIEFING MAPS
ETHNO-LINGUISTIC GROUPS IN THE CAUCASUS
Series GSGS 12666
Sheet Ethno-linguistic Groups in the Caucasus
Edition 1-GSGS
Sea of Azov
KRASNODARSKIY KRAY
KALMYKIYA
ASTRAKHANSKAYA OBLAST
LOCATION
Krasnodar
Stavropol'
STAVROPOL'SKIY KRAY
RUSSIA
Maykop (Myeqw'apa)
ADYGEYA
Cherkessk
KARACHAYEVO-CHERKESIYA
Black Sea
Nal'chik (Nalshyk)
CHECHNYA
Caspian Sea
Bich'vinta (P'its'unda)
ABKHAZIA
KABARDINO-BALKARIYA
Nazran'
Magas
Groznyy (Sölz-Gala)
Makhachkala (Mahachqala)
Sokhumi (Aqw'a)
SEVERNAYA OSETIYA-ALANIYA (NORTH OSSETIA)
Vladikavkaz (Dzæudzhykh'æu)
DAGESTAN
SOUTH OSSETIA
Ts'khinvali (Tskhinvali)
Kutaisi
Zugdidi
GEORGIA
TBILISI
Batumi
Rustavi
ARMENIA
AZERBAIJAN
BAKI
YEREVAN
Xankəndi (Step'anakert)
TURKEY
International Boundary
Administrative Boundary
Former Administrative Boundary
Capital City
Administrative Centre
Town
Approx. Scale
0 25 50 100 150 Km
0 25 50 100 Miles
Caucasian Peoples
ABKHAZ
Abkhaz
CIRCASSIAN
Adyghe
Cherkess
Kabardian
GEORGIAN
Georgian
VAINAKH
Chechen
Ingush
DAGESTANI
Agul
Avar
Dargwa
Lak
Lezgian
Rutul
Tabasaran
Tsakhur
Indo-European Peoples
ARMENIAN
Armenian
GREEK
Greek
IRANIAN
Kurd
Ossetian
SLAVIC
Russian
Altaic Peoples
TURKIC
Azeri
Balkar
Karachay
Kumyk
Nogay
Turkmen
MONGOL
Kalmyk
Sparsely populated or uninhabited areas are shown in white.
Other
36°E 40°E 42°E 44°E 46°E 48°E 50°E
44°N 42°N 40°N
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