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## Georgia: The Language Situation

The 1989 census lists 96 distinct nationalities. Relevant data for the 7 major peoples are illustrated below:

### 1989 Census

	<u>Total</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>E</u>
	5,400,841					
«Georgians»	3,787,393	3,777,017	4,641	--	1,203,788	13,432
Armenians	437,211	371,642	9,958	88,699	187,666	1,421
Russians	341,172	336,718	2,436	76,898	--	9,166
Azerbaijdzhanis	307,556	300,474	1,646	28,598	105,083	718
Ossetians	164,055	125,872	7,331	53,518	60,004	433
Greeks	100,324	57,230	--	15,456	44,822	10,283
Abkhazians	95,853	92,369	363	2,283	77,193	93

[Key: A = those with the group's national language as mother-tongue; 2nd language knowledge is indicated by: B for the group's national language, C for Georgian, D for Russian, E for some other language].

After rumours that Georgian was not to be formally recognised as the state-language in the Brezhnevite Constitution crowds appeared on the streets in 1978 forcing 1st Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze to yield; Article 75 of that Constitution finally began: «The state-language of the Georgian SSR is the Georgian language», which virtually recapitulates item 3 of the 1921 Menshevik Constitution. In 1976 Shevardnadze had elected to address the Georgian Party Congress in Russian and was widely criticised. During the Soviet period TV- and radio-channels were available in both Russian and Georgian throughout Georgia. After disturbances in 1978 marginal TV-broadcasting in Abkhaz was added to some already available radio-programmes.

All four Kartvelian peoples (Georgians, Mingrelians, Svans and Laz) plus the unrelated Bats of Eastern Georgia are classified as «Georgians». This

obfuscates the demographic picture, and equally opaque as a result is the extent of 1st and 2nd language knowledge of Mingrelian, Svan and Laz (plus Bats) among these «Georgians», many of whom regard all the Kartvelian languages as dialects of Georgian, a claim once pressed even for Abkhaz(!). Relatively low 2nd language knowledge of Russian among the Kartvelians and of Georgian among the non-Kartvelians (especially the Abkhazians!) is particularly significant -- N.B. the Azerbaydzhanis and Abkhazians plus many of the South Ossetians and Armenians live compactly in border-areas. The State Programme for the Georgian Language (promulgated August 1989) seeks to render Georgian obligatory in all the republic's schools; it makes passing a test in Georgian language and literature an essential qualification for entry to higher education and addresses the needs of no other language of the republic. Hitherto Georgian had been optional (Russian obligatory) in Abkhaz, Ossetic, Armenian, Azeri and Russian language-schools. No non-literary language is taught, though Assyrian once was; there are reports of Greek classes being re-introduced and of Hebrew being introduced for local Jews. Perceived dangers to the survival of local language and culture are central to the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts -- most southern Abkhazians speak Mingrelian in addition to Abkhaz and Russian. After Abkhaz and Ossetic language-schools were re-opened in 1954 following their enforced closure during the georgianisation-drive of the 1940s, teaching in those languages was upto grade 4, when the language of tuition became Russian (sc. except for local-language classes); during the early 1980s the change occurred at grade 5. Tensions could easily erupt in Mingrelia in connection with the deliberate long-term neglect of Mingrelian by the Georgian authorities.