

SOVIET LANGUAGE POLICY: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT ON ETHNIC GROUPS AND LANGUAGES

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Abstract: This article examines Soviet language policy from 1917 to 1991. The analysis identifies a transition from the early promotion of national languages under *korenizatsiya* to a later system in which Russian assumed broader functions in interethnic communication, education, administration, science, and professional mobility. The study finds that this process generally increased Russian-language competence while producing diverse outcomes for titular and minority languages. Ukraine illustrates changing institutional conditions for Ukrainian, including the expansion of Ukrainian-language schooling and publishing during the 1920s, subsequent orthographic revision, and the growth of Russian-medium education in later decades. The Caucasian cases demonstrate the importance of local conditions: Armenian and Georgian retained extensive institutional functions, whereas Azerbaijani experienced repeated script changes and smaller languages had more limited support. The findings suggest that Soviet language policy generated patterns of bilingualism and language maintenance or shift that varied according to institutional, demographic, and cultural factors.

Keywords: language policy; Soviet Union; *korenizatsiya*; russification; minority languages

1. Introduction

The USSR's language policy represents one of the most ambitious and far-reaching experiments in state-directed language planning in modern history. Spanning seven decades and encompassing over 100 distinct languages and ethnic groups across the vast territory of the whole country, Soviet language policy evolved from early revolutionary ideals of linguistic equality and cultural autonomy to increasingly

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centralized Russification (Haarmann 1995). Understanding this historical trajectory is essential not only for comprehending Soviet nationality policy but also for interpreting contemporary language politics in the post-Soviet successor states, where language-oriented nationalism has emerged as a direct reaction to decades of Soviet linguistic engineering (Haarmann 1995).

The researchers examine Soviet language policy across multiple dimensions: historical periodization, theoretical frameworks, implementation mechanisms, and impacts on diverse ethnic groups; the analysis draws on comprehensive studies of language planning (Kirkwood 1990; Grenoble 2003), regional case studies from Central Asia (Bruchis 1984; Dickens 1988; Shorish 1984), to the Baltic states (Green 1997; Druviete & Strelevica-Osina 2008), Ukraine (Sichkarenko 2023; Malykhin et al. 2023), and the Caucasus (Hewitt 1990), as well as thematic investigations of specific policy instruments such as alphabet reforms (Guadagnolo & Guinn 2014), (Lane et al. 2017), educational policy (Blitstein 2001), and publishing (Rogers 1987).

The article argues that Soviet language policy should be understood neither as consistent support for linguistic diversity nor as uniform Russification. It combined the recognition of national languages with the construction of a Soviet-wide hierarchy in which Russian enjoyed greater prestige and practical value.

The analysis first outlines the historical and ideological development of Soviet language policy and examines its principal mechanisms: status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning. It then focuses on Ukraine and the Caucasus as contrasting case studies. Ukraine illustrates the complete policy cycle – from Ukrainisation in the 1920s to orthographic revision, the growing dominance of Russian, and the contraction of Ukrainian-medium schooling. The Caucasus demonstrates the diversity of regional outcomes, ranging from strong retention of Armenian and Georgian to repeated script reforms and institutional vulnerability among smaller languages.

The article shows that Soviet policies expanded Russian-language competence across the Union but did not produce identical outcomes everywhere. Their consequences were mediated by local institutional and sociolinguistic conditions, which remain important for understanding post-Soviet language politics.

2. Historical Development of Soviet Language Policy

2.1 Early Soviet Period and *Korenizatsiya* (1917-1932)

The initial phase of Soviet language policy, spanning from the Bolshevik Revolution through the early 1930s, was characterized by unprecedented support for minority languages and cultural pluralism. This period, known as *korenizatsiya* (indigenization or “putting down roots”), represented the Soviet state's attempt to win the loyalty of non-Russian populations by promoting their languages and cultures within a socialist framework (Haarmann 1995; Crisp 1990).

During that early period, Soviet language planners embarked on ambitious programs to create literary languages for ethnic groups that had previously lacked

written traditions. Crisp documents how between 1917 and 1932, linguists and policymakers developed alphabets, standardized grammar, and created educational materials for dozens of languages, particularly in Central Asia, Siberia, and the Caucasus (Crisp 1990). The policy closely mirrored the existing situation of cultural pluralism, with language policies designed to reflect and support the multilingual reality of the Soviet state (Haarmann 1995).

The theoretical foundation for this approach derived from Lenin's writings on the national question, which emphasized the right of nations to self-determination while simultaneously promoting proletarian internationalism (Shelestyuk 2019). As Shelestyuk explains, the formula “national in form, socialist in content” encapsulated the early Soviet approach: minority languages and cultures would be preserved and developed but infused with socialist ideology and directed toward building a unified Soviet society (2019). That period saw the establishment of native-language schools, the publication of newspapers and books in minority languages, and the promotion of indigenous cadres in local administration (Hewitt 1990; Crisp 1990).

Shorish characterizes this phase as “planning by decree,” noting that Central Asian language policies were implemented through top-down directives that mandated the use of local languages in education and administration (1984). The literacy campaigns of the 1920s achieved remarkable results, with mass mobilization efforts bringing basic literacy to millions of previously illiterate citizens in their native languages (Crisp 1990), (Kreindler 1990). Publication figures in newly alphabetized languages showed dramatic increases, and the number of students receiving instruction in their mother tongue expanded significantly (Kreindler 1990).

However, Russian maintained a privileged position as the language of inter-ethnic communication and access to Soviet institutions (Pool 1992). The seeds of future Russification were already presented in the asymmetric relationship between Russian and minority languages, though they would not fully germinate until the Stalinist era (Haarmann 1995).

2.2 Stalinist Consolidation (1930s-1953)

The early 1930s marked a decisive turning point in Soviet language policy, as Stalin consolidated power and the state shifted from promoting diversity to enforcing uniformity. That period witnessed the systematic reversal of many *korenizatsiya* policies and the beginning of sustained Russification (Crisp 1990; Kreindler 1990).

One of the most visible manifestations of this shift was the series of alphabet reforms that swept across the Soviet Union. Lane and colleagues document how Soviet authorities mandated orthographic changes for numerous minority languages, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Lane et al. 2017). Many languages that had been given Latin-based alphabets in the 1920s were converted to Cyrillic scripts in the 1930s, ostensibly to facilitate literacy and inter-ethnic communication but effectively tying these languages more closely to Russian (Guadagnolo & Guinn 2014; Lane et al. 2017). Those alphabet reforms served multiple purposes: they disrupted continuity with pre-Soviet literary traditions, created dependence on Russian-trained

linguists and educators, and symbolically reinforced the primacy of Russian culture (Lane et al. 2017).

The Stalinist period also saw the suppression of linguists and language planners who had championed minority language development. Kreindler notes that the accusation of “wrecking on the language front” could cost a linguist his life during the last years of Stalin's rule, effectively silencing scholarly debate about language policy (1990). The ambiance brought creative language planning to a virtual halt, as professionals feared that advocacy for minority languages could be construed as bourgeois nationalism (Kreindler 1990).

Blitstein's analysis of obligatory Russian instruction reveals how educational policy became a key instrument of Russification during that period (2001). In 1938, the Soviet government mandated Russian language instruction in all non-Russian schools, marking a fundamental shift from the earlier emphasis on native-language education. The decree established Russian as the compulsory second language throughout the USSR, creating a bilingualism in which non-Russians were expected to learn Russian (Blitstein 2001).

Crisp emphasizes that the period from 1917 to 1953 should not be viewed as a simple linear progression but rather as a series of ideological shifts and policy reversals (1990). Nevertheless, the overall trajectory was clear: from the cultural pluralism of the 1920s to the increasingly centralized and Russian-dominated system of the late Stalin era (Crisp 1990).

2.3 Post-Stalin Era and Gradual Russification (1953-1980s)

The period following Stalin's death in 1953 through the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was characterized by what Kreindler describes as less dramatic but more systematic Russification (1990). Unlike the early Soviet period with its “language fronts” and mass literacy campaigns, or the Stalinist era with its mass purges, the post-Stalin decades saw the gradual, bureaucratic erosion of minority language spaces (Kreindler 1990).

Kreindler notes the absence of upbeat statistics on publication figures in minority languages or increases in mother-tongue instruction that had characterized earlier periods (1990). Instead, that era witnessed the steady expansion of Russian-medium education, the decline of native-language schools, and growing pressure on non-Russians to adopt Russian for social mobility and career advancement (Grenoble 2003), (Dietrich 2006).

Grenoble's comprehensive analysis traces how language policy evolved from the Bolshevik period through perestroika, documenting the systematic expansion of Russian at the expense of minority languages across all Soviet republics (2003). The policy of “drawing together” (*sblizhenie*) and eventual “merging” (*sliyanie*) of Soviet nationalities, articulated in the 1960s and 1970s, provided ideological justification for accelerated Russification (Grenoble 2003).

Liddicoat's scrutiny of language-in-education policies in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan reveals the relentless expansion of Russian-medium instruction, often at the direct expense of native-language pedagogy (2019). Even as

titular languages received nominal endorsement, Russian solidified its grip on elite education and career mobility, embedding structural incentives for generational language shift. That educational tilt, therefore, functioned less as equitable bilingualism and more as a conduit for long-term Russification.

By the late Soviet period, Russian achieved near-universal status as a second language among educated non-Russians, while knowledge of minority languages among Russians remained negligible (Dietrich 2006). This asymmetric bilingualism reflected and reinforced power relations within the Soviet system, where Russian language competence was essential for access to higher education, professional advancement, and participation in all-Union institutions (Grenoble 2003; Dietrich 2006).

2.4 Doctrine of *Sovetskii Narod* and Measures of 1975–1984

The doctrine of the *Soviet people* as a new historical community, introduced in 1961, proclaimed in 1971, and constitutionalised in 1977, provided an ideological framework for linguistic integration. It was associated with the triad of *rastsvet* (flourishing), *sblizhenie* (rapprochement), and *sliianie* (merging), although *sliianie* largely disappeared from official usage after 1973 (Bromlei & Kulichenko, discussed in Alpatov 2000).

In practice, the doctrine was accompanied by measures strengthening Russian instruction. The Tashkent conferences of 1975 and 1979 recommended its earlier introduction, including preschool education. The 1983 decree introduced smaller Russian-language teaching groups and a 15 per cent salary supplement for teachers in non-Russian schools; Resolution No. 313 of 1984 added two to three weekly hours of Russian in grades II–XI (XII).

At the same time, the number of languages used for instruction declined markedly: from 104 in 1934 to 45 across the USSR in the 1970s and early 1980s, including about 35 non-Russian languages in 1980. In the RSFSR, the figure fell from 47 in the early 1960s to 34 in 1977 and 16–17 by 1982 (Isaev 1979; Alpatov 2000; Grenoble 2003).

The doctrine was not conceptually unambiguous. Soviet ethnographers disagreed over whether the *Soviet people* represented a stage towards national fusion or a stable form of coexistence, while *sliianie* was gradually removed from official discourse (Alpatov 2000; Mikhaltchenko & Solntsev 1994). Its practical measures were generally additive rather than openly substitutive: they expanded Russian teaching but did not normally abolish titular-language schooling by decree. The decline of minority-language schooling resulted chiefly from school consolidation and parental choice under the 1959 legislation.

The 1989 census suggests that the Union-wide result was primarily expanded bilingualism rather than universal language replacement: 92.7% of the population still identified the language of their nationality as native, compared with 93.1% in 1979, while 81.4% reported command of Russian (Goskomstat SSSR 1991). More substantial language substitution was concentrated in the Slavic republics, urban centres, and communities whose institutional language support had been withdrawn.

3. Theoretical Foundations and Ideological Framework

Soviet language policy combined Marxist-Leninist ideology with the practical objectives of state-building, social transformation, and political control. Its central tension lay in reconciling national self-determination with the creation of a unified socialist society.

Early policy drew on Lenin's position that nations had a right to self-determination within a framework of proletarian internationalism (Shelestyuk 2019). The formula "national in form, socialist in content" sought to preserve national languages and cultural forms while subordinating them to a common socialist ideology (Shelestyuk 2019). Language was therefore treated not as a neutral means of communication but as a political instrument capable of shaping social consciousness and legitimising intervention in scripts, vocabulary, schooling, and public communication (Ornstein 1959).

The initial promotion of linguistic diversity also served the political need to secure support among non-Russian populations (Haarmann 1995). As the Soviet state became more centralised, however, cultural pluralism increasingly gave way to linguistic integration, with Russian acquiring a privileged role as the language of Soviet civilisation (Haarmann 1995).

In the post-Stalin period, Russian was officially presented as the "language of internationalism" and the "language of friendship among peoples" (Grenoble 2003; Dietrich 2006). This discourse represented Russian as a progressive medium of interethnic communication while helping to legitimise policies that expanded its dominance (Dietrich 2006). Although official doctrine continued to affirm the equality of Soviet languages, practical arrangements created systemic incentives for non-Russian populations to acquire and use Russian (Pool 1992). The discrepancy between official equality and linguistic hierarchy became increasingly visible during the late Soviet period and contributed to language-based national mobilisation during perestroika (Haarmann 1995; Grenoble 2003).

Language policy was embedded in broader projects of centralisation and social engineering. Language commissions, research institutes, and specialist training helped align linguistic decisions with Party priorities (Gurbanova & Rangsikul 2018). Control over publishing and media also reinforced unequal linguistic prestige and access to public communication (Rogers 1987).

Overall, Soviet policy moved from early minority-language development towards the increasing prestige and institutional reach of Russian. This legacy persisted after 1991, as Russian continued to function as a language of status and utility even in states pursuing de-Russification (Seiden 2022).

4. Policy Mechanisms and Implementation Strategies

4.1 Alphabet Reforms and Orthographic Standardization

Alphabet reform constituted one of the most visible and consequential instruments of Soviet language policy. The Soviet state undertook systematic efforts to create, modify, and standardize writing systems for languages throughout its territory, with profound implications for literacy, cultural continuity, and linguistic identity.

During the 1920s, Soviet linguists developed alphabets for dozens of previously unwritten languages, particularly in Siberia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus (Crisp 1990; Lane et al. 2017). Those initial alphabets were often based on Latin scripts, reflecting both practical considerations (Latin typewriters and printing equipment were more readily available) and ideological factors (Latin scripts were seen as more progressive and international than Arabic or Cyrillic) (Lane et al. 2017).

However, the 1930s brought a dramatic reversal. Lane and colleagues document how Soviet authorities mandated the conversion of Latin-based alphabets to Cyrillic scripts across Central Asia and other regions (2017). That shift served multiple purposes beyond the stated goal of facilitating literacy. Cyrillic alphabets created orthographic distance from pre-Soviet literary traditions, particularly Islamic texts in Arabic script, while simultaneously tying minority languages more closely to Russian through shared script and facilitating the borrowing of Russian vocabulary (Guadagnolo & Guinn 2014; Lane et al. 2017).

Guadagnolo and Guinn provide a detailed case study of Tatar alphabet reforms, showing how the shift from Arabic to Latin (1920s) and then to Cyrillic (1930s) reflected changing Soviet priorities and power dynamics (2014). Each change of alphabet required new textbooks, teacher retraining, and adjustment periods that disrupted educational continuity and created dependence on centralized Soviet institutions (Guadagnolo & Guinn 2014). The standardization process also involved decisions about which dialect would serve as the basis for the literary language, often privileging urban varieties and marginalizing rural or peripheral dialects (Guadagnolo & Guinn 2014).

In the last years of the USSR, the Latin script was chosen as the predominant alphabet in the world, and the use of the Cyrillic script became a main task of Russian language policy (Alpatov 2017).

4.2 Educational Language Policy

Education served as perhaps the most critical arena for implementing Soviet language policy, as schools shaped the linguistic competencies and identities of successive generations. The evolution of educational language policy from native-language instruction to Russian-medium dominance reflects the broader trajectory of Soviet language planning.

The early Soviet period saw significant expansion of native-language education. Crisp documents how the 1920s witnessed dramatic increases in the number of students receiving instruction in their mother tongue, with schools established for even

relatively small ethnic groups (1990). The expansion was supported by the development of textbooks, teacher training programs, and pedagogical materials in minority languages (Crisp 1990).

However, the 1938 decree mandating Russian language instruction in all non-Russian schools marked a fundamental turning point (Blitstein 2001). Blitstein's analysis reveals how this policy established Russian as the compulsory second language throughout the USSR, creating an asymmetric bilingualism in which non-Russians were required to learn Russian while Russians faced no reciprocal obligation (2001). The decree framed Russian instruction as necessary for "nation-building" and access to Soviet culture and science, but its effect was to privilege Russian and create structural pressures for language shift (Blitstein 2001).

The post-Stalin period saw the gradual erosion of native-language education through various mechanisms. Parents were given the choice of instructional language for their children, though structured by material incentives that favored Russian (Grenoble 2003; Dietrich 2006). Russian-medium schools typically had better facilities, more qualified teachers, and provided better preparation for higher education and professional careers (Grenoble 2003). Consequently, even parents who valued their native language often chose Russian-medium education for their children as a strategy for social mobility (Dietrich 2006).

Liddicoat's analysis of language-in-education policy in Central Asian republics (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) reveals similar patterns of Russian expansion at the expense of native languages (2019). Despite the support of native-language education, Russian-medium schools proliferated, and knowledge of Russian became essential for access to higher education and professional opportunities (Liddicoat 2019).

5. Regional and Ethnic Group Impacts: Case Study

This study focuses on two contrasting regional cases – Soviet Ukraine and the Caucasus – while referring to other Union republics only for comparative context.

Ukraine represents a comprehensive case of the Soviet language-policy cycle: extensive Ukrainisation in the 1920s, its abrupt reversal in 1933, state-led orthographic and terminological revision, and the long-term contraction of Ukrainian-medium schooling between 1959 and 1989. Its typological similarity to Russian also makes it especially useful for examining how linguistic affinity may facilitate language shift.

The Caucasus illustrates the greatest degree of regional variation. It included languages with stable script and literary traditions, notably Armenian and Georgian; Azerbaijani, which shifted from Arabic to Latin and then Cyrillic; and smaller languages whose institutional support, scripts, or school systems changed sharply over time. The region therefore demonstrates that similar all-Union policies could produce very different outcomes depending on local institutional, demographic, and sociolinguistic conditions.

The analysis covers the period from the early 1920s to 1991. Post-Soviet developments are considered only where they clarify the interpretation of Soviet-era evidence.

5.1 Ukraine

Soviet language policy in Ukraine alternated between the promotion and restriction of Ukrainian, with education, state institutions, and print media serving as its principal instruments. Ukrainisation expanded during the 1920s, was sharply reversed in the 1930s, and was followed by more ambiguous developments in the 1960s–1980s, culminating in the 1989 Law “On Languages in the Ukrainian SSR” amid the broader political changes of perestroika (Malykhin et al. 2023; Sichkarenko 2023).

The legal basis for Ukrainisation was established by two decrees in 1923: one concerning Ukrainian-language schooling and cultural institutions, and another requiring state institutions and officials to increase their use of Ukrainian (Liber 1992; Martin 2001; Masenko et al. 2005). Under Mykola Skrypnyk, People’s Commissar of Education from 1927 to 1933, the policy expanded from primary schools to secondary and higher education, technical terminology, and the press.

Education was central to this process, as instructional language, teacher deployment, and media shaped linguistic transmission and status. Key factors included the activity of nationally oriented organisations, demand for nationally responsive education, pedagogical support for native-language instruction, differentiated educational provision, and the psychologisation of pedagogy (Malykhin et al. 2023).

The statistical record of the decade is unusually complete.

Table 1. Measured Effects in Schooling and Publishing, 1923–1933

Indicator	Early 1920s	Peak
Primary schools with Ukrainian as language of instruction	50.7% (1923)	87–88% (1932/33)
Secondary and higher education in Ukrainian	19% (1923)	28.5% (1926); 69% (1929)
Newspapers published in Ukrainian	minority	89% by 1933 (373 of 426 titles; circulation c. 3.6 million)
Books published in Ukrainian	minority	c. 83%
Ethnic Ukrainians in the CP(b)U	23.3% (1922)	60% (1933)

Sources: Liber (1992); Martin (2001); Masenko et al. (2005)

Two features qualify the achievements of Ukrainisation. The Ukrainian-language press expanded more rapidly than secondary and higher education, suggesting that the main constraint was the shortage of qualified personnel rather than political commitment. Party statistics also reveal a gap between ethnic and linguistic indigenisation: in January 1927, 52% of CP(b)U members were ethnically Ukrainian, but only 31% identified Ukrainian as their native language (Liber 1992).

Corpus planning complemented institutional Ukrainisation. The All-Ukrainian Orthographic Conference, held in Kharkiv on 26 May–6 June 1927 and attended by about seventy-five participants, including delegates from Galicia, developed a standard

intended to unite Eastern and Western Ukrainian traditions. Approved by Skrypnyk on 6 September 1928 and introduced in 1929, the *skrypnykivka*, or Kharkiv orthography, treated both traditions as authoritative, particularly in the spelling of loanwords (Shevelov 1989; Nimchuk 2002; Kubaichuk 2020). At the same time, the Institute of the Ukrainian Scientific Language developed technical dictionaries based primarily on Ukrainian derivational resources rather than Russian models.

The policy was reversed in 1933. Skrypnyk was removed in February and died by suicide on 7 July; a new commission headed by Andrii Khvyliya produced *Pro ukrainskyi pravopys*, approved on 5 September 1933. Its approximately 126 amendments to the 1928 standard included abolishing the letter *r* and generally brought Ukrainian orthography and morphology closer to Russian, particularly in loanwords and foreign names (Shevelov 1989; Masenko et al. 2005; Kubaichuk 2020; Danylenko & Naienko 2019). Terminological bulletins of 1934–1935 replaced about 14,500 technical terms, largely substituting Russian or internationalist forms for vocabulary created during the 1920s (Rozhankivsky 2003; Masenko et al. 2005).

The Ukrainian SSR law of 17 April 1959 made the study of the republic's second language dependent on parental choice. This framework contributed to a later contraction of Ukrainian-medium schooling. Policy during the 1960s–1980s combined a Khrushchev-era relaxation with renewed Russification in the 1970s and early 1980s, when Russian became increasingly dominant in urban life outside western Ukraine (Sichkarenko 2023).

The shift was especially pronounced in cities. By 1987, 73.7% of schools in oblast centres were Russian-medium, while Chernihiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, and Simferopol had no Ukrainian-medium schools (Masenko et al. 2005). As these centres concentrated administration, higher education, and industry, Russian-medium education was closely linked to upward mobility. Ivan Dziuba's *Internationalism or Russification?*, written in 1965 and circulated through *samizdat* from 1966, articulated a contemporary critique using the language of Leninist nationality policy (Dziuba 1998 [1966]).

Census data show a gradual decline in ethnic Ukrainians across the USSR identifying Ukrainian as their native language, from 72.99% in 1959 to 64.67% in 1989; the decline within the Ukrainian SSR was smaller, and rural retention remained high (Goskomstat SSSR 1991; Pavlenko 2015). By 1989, 56.2% of Ukrainians in the USSR reported fluency in Russian as a second language—the highest rate among the large titular nationalities outside the Baltic republics (Goskomstat SSSR 1991).

A further outcome was the spread of *surzhyk*, a mixed Ukrainian-Russian variety. Because census respondents had to report one native language, this repertoire complicates measurement of linguistic identification. Its stigmatisation in both Ukrainian- and Russian-oriented discourse reflects the standardisation history described above, while debates on mixed speech were already present in the 1920s and 1930s (Martin 2001, 353–54, cited in Bilaniuk 2005). Overall, Soviet language policy in Ukraine developed through distinct phases and produced measurable institutional consequences rather than following a single, static pattern (Sichkarenko 2023; Malykhin et al. 2023).

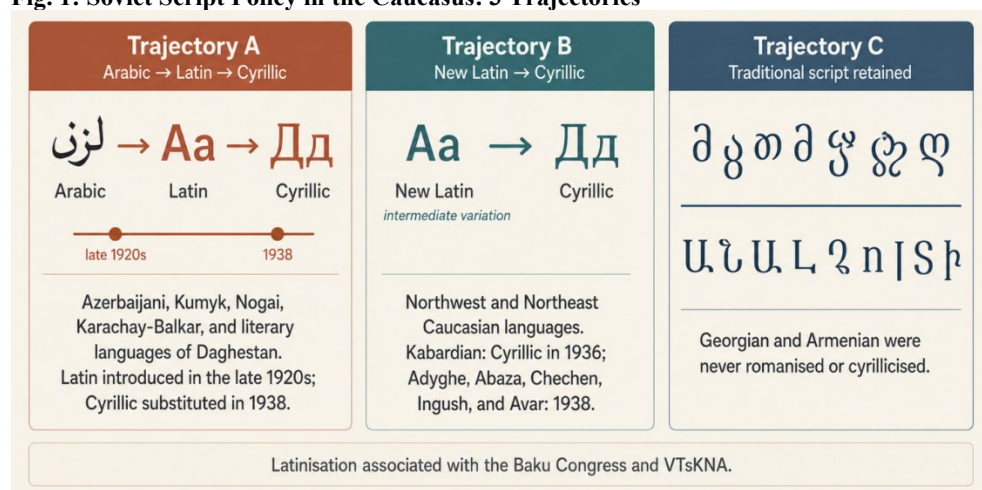
5.2 Caucasus Region

The Caucasus presented Soviet language planners with the densest concentration of linguistic diversity in the Union: languages of the Kartvelian, Northeast Caucasian, Northwest Caucasian, Indo-European (Armenian, Ossetic, Talysh, Tat) and Turkic (Azerbaijani, Kumyk, Karachay-Balkar, Nogai) families, distributed across three Union republics, several autonomous republics and regions, and an unusually complex administrative geography. Two of these languages, Georgian and Armenian, possessed their own alphabets and continuous literary traditions long antedating the Russian Empire; most of the others were either written in Arabic script by a narrow literate stratum or unwritten.

The Caucasus region saw extensive alphabet reforms, with many languages shifted from Arabic or Georgian scripts to Latin and then to Cyrillic (Hewitt 1990; Lane et al. 2017). Those changes disrupted cultural continuity and created dependence on Soviet linguistic institutions (Lane et al. 2017).

The region illustrates all three possible outcomes of Soviet script policy.

Fig. 1: Soviet Script Policy in the Caucasus: 3 Trajectories



Source: AI-generated image created by the authors using OpenAI GPT-4o (2026), based on the authors' textual prompt and the historical sources cited in the text.

Two languages deviated from all three patterns in instructive ways. Abkhaz received a Latin alphabet in 1926, revised in 1928; in 1938 it was transferred not to Cyrillic but to the Georgian script, and only in 1954 did it receive a Cyrillic-based alphabet. Ossetic was written in Latin from 1923, and in 1938 the North Ossetian and South Ossetian variants were separated, the former receiving Cyrillic and the latter the Georgian script; the two were reunified on a Cyrillic basis in 1954 (Alpatov 2000; Grenoble 2003; Hewitt 1990).

Hewitt's analysis of language planning in Georgian and Abkhaz illustrates the complexity of managing linguistic diversity within a single republic (1990). Georgian,

as the titular language of the Georgian SSR, received substantial support and maintained relatively strong vitality. However, Abkhaz and other minority languages within Georgia faced pressures from both Georgian and Russian (Hewitt 1990).

These two cases show that script policy in the Caucasus was not simply a matter of all-Union standardisation. Between 1938 and 1954 the operative script authority for Abkhaz and South Ossetic was republican rather than all-Union, and the alphabet chosen was that of the Union republic in which the autonomous unit was located.

5.2.1 Armenia: Continuity with Orthographic Intervention

Armenia represents the case of maximal institutional continuity. The Armenian alphabet was retained; the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, the university system and a dense publishing apparatus operated in Armenian; and the republic was ethnically the most homogeneous in the Union.

Corpus planning nevertheless occurred. The orthographic reform decreed on 4 March 1922 and associated with Manuk Abeghyan simplified the classical orthography, and a partial rollback under Gurgen Sevak was adopted on 22 August 1940, producing the standard used in the republic thereafter and distinguishing it from the classical orthography retained in the diaspora. The reform is best read as a modernisation measure of the same family as the Russian orthographic reform of 1917–1918 rather than as an instance of convergence with Russian; but its effect on the relationship between the Soviet Armenian reading public and the diaspora press was substantial.

Acquisition planning operated through the compulsory Russian curriculum rather than through the replacement of the medium of instruction. Zolyan and Hakobyan (2020) record that Russian was taught from the early 1930s as a compulsory subject at approximately four hours per week in grades 1 to 10, and that between 20 and 30 per cent of urban schools operated with Russian as the medium.

The outcome, measured by declared native language, is one of stability and even slight strengthening:

Table 2: Armenian as the Declared Native Language among Armenians, 1939–1989

Census	Armenians declaring Armenian native
1939	89.2%
1959	89.9%
1970	91.4%
1989	91.7%

Source: Goskomstat SSSR (1991); Zolyan and Hakobyan (2020)

By 1989, 47.1 per cent of Armenians reported fluency in Russian as a second language — a high figure for bilingualism combined with an equally high figure for retention (Goskomstat SSSR 1991).

5.2.2 Georgia: Institutional Density and the Constitutional Settlement of 1978

Georgia combined an unbroken script tradition with an exceptionally dense national institutional apparatus and produced the highest retention figures in the Union: 96.6 per cent of Georgians declared Georgian their native language in 1959, 96.5 per cent in 1970 and 96.1 per cent in 1979, and only 1.3 per cent of Georgians named Russian as their native language in 1959 (Lewis 1972; Goskomstat SSSR 1991).

Russian nevertheless occupied specific and consequential domains. Gabunia and Gochitashvili (2020) document the requirement that dissertations be translated into Russian for confirmation by the central attestation authorities, and the corresponding position of Russian in the higher reaches of academic and administrative life.

The most-cited episode of Georgian language politics is the constitutional revision of 1978. The draft of the new republican constitution, following the model of the 1977 Union Constitution, omitted the provision designating Georgian as the state language of the republic. On 14 April 1978, a demonstration estimated at some twenty thousand people, predominantly students, assembled in Tbilisi. The provision was retained: Article 75 of the Constitution of the Georgian SSR, adopted on 15 April 1978, named Georgian the state language of the republic. The Armenian SSR adopted its constitution on 14 April 1978 with an equivalent provision, and the Azerbaijan SSR adopted a parallel provision the same month. The three South Caucasian republics were the only Union republics whose constitutions designated the titular language as the sole state language (Hewitt 1990; Tabatadze 2025; Zolyan & Hakobyan 2020).

The episode is instructive about the structure of late-Soviet language management. The provision at issue was declaratory rather than operative — it did not change the working language of any institution — but its symbolic weight was sufficient to produce the largest public mobilisation in the republic since the 1950s, and the centre conceded.

5.2.3 Azerbaijan: the Turkic Trajectory

Azerbaijani illustrates the full three-script sequence and, unlike Georgian and Armenian, a substantial dependency of the modern lexicon on Russian mediation. Latinisation, prepared by the Baku Congress of 1926, was completed by 1929; cyrillicisation followed at the end of the 1930s. Garibova (2020) describes the resulting configuration: Azerbaijani retained a full range of official and educational functions within the republic, while Russian occupied a strong position in Baku, in higher technical education and in scientific publication. Declared retention remained high — Azerbaijanis were among the nationalities with the lowest reported second-language fluency in Russian, 34.4 per cent in 1989 (Goskomstat SSSR 1991) — but the sociolinguistic division between the capital and the rest of the republic was sharper than in Georgia or Armenia.

Azerbaijan is also the republic that, together with Latvia, declined to include the second-language provision in its 1959 education law, with the political consequences (Loader 2017; Smith 2018).

Table 3: Comparative Outcomes within the Region

Nationality	Declaring own language native, 1989	Fluent in Russian as second language, 1989
Armenians	91.7%	47.1%
Georgians	96%	33.1%
Azerbaijanis	high (based on source data)	34.4%

Source: Goskomstat SSSR (1991)

Despite Russification pressures, some Caucasus languages maintained relatively strong positions due to factors including demographic concentration, cultural prestige, and institutional support at the republic level (Hewitt 1990). However, smaller languages without republic status faced severe challenges, and many experienced significant decline in speaker numbers and domains of use (Hewitt 1990).

Across the Union as a whole the 1989 census recorded that 92.7% of the population declared the language of their own nationality as their native language, against 93.1% in 1979; 163.5 million people declared Russian their native language, and 232.5 million, or 81.4% of the population, reported command of Russian either as a native or as a second language (Goskomstat SSSR 1991).

6. Conclusion

Soviet language policy combined support for national languages with the progressive strengthening of Russian as the principal language of state integration, education, administration, science, and social mobility. Its main instruments included alphabet and orthographic reforms, language-of-instruction policies, publishing, administrative regulation, and the expansion of compulsory Russian teaching.

The overall result was not a uniform replacement of non-Russian languages by Russian. Rather, Soviet policy generally produced asymmetric bilingualism: non-Russian populations increasingly needed Russian for access to prestigious social domains, whereas Russian speakers rarely needed to acquire titular or minority languages. The degree of language shift and institutional loss varied considerably across regions.

The Ukrainian case demonstrates the cumulative effect of status, corpus, and acquisition planning. Ukrainisation in the 1920s significantly expanded the use of Ukrainian in schooling, publishing, and administration. The reversal of the 1930s, followed by the post-1959 growth of Russian-medium education, reduced Ukrainian-language institutional space, particularly in urban and professional settings. Linguistic proximity to Russian and the shared Cyrillic script facilitated the process without eliminating Ukrainian altogether.

The Caucasus shows that central policy was mediated by local conditions. Armenian and Georgian retained strong positions because of their distinct scripts, long literary traditions, institutional density, demographic concentration, and republic-level political resources. Azerbaijani retained major functions but underwent repeated script reforms and developed a sharper urban–rural linguistic division. Smaller languages

were more vulnerable when their educational and administrative support was weakened or withdrawn.

The study therefore concludes that Soviet language policy created a hierarchical linguistic order rather than a uniform linguistic outcome. Russian acquired a durable structural advantage, while the vitality of other languages depended on their institutional, demographic, and cultural resources. This legacy continues to shape language policy and identity politics across the post-Soviet space.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

Ethics Statement

The author(s) confirm that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.