

*Bondo Kupatadze*

## **Language Policy of The Russian Empire in Georgia \***

In the latter half of XIX c. struggle for Georgian language became the important point for Georgian national liberation movement. The leader of this movement, Ilia Chavchavadze wrote: “We have three sacred things from our ancestors: language, homeland, religion... The first feature for national identity is language”.<sup>1</sup>

In 1801 and 1810 Russian Empire occupied two Georgian kingdoms (Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti and Kingdom of Imereti) and thus abolished Georgian statehood. From the beginning of the XIX c. till the 60s Russian policy towards Georgian identity was becoming more and more severe: the autonomous status of some Georgian regions was abolished, Russian rule of government was spread all over the Georgian territory, from 1842 Georgian word “Sakartvelo” (meaning Georgia) disappeared from official papers, instead two new terms were invented: gubernia of Tbilisi and Kutaisi. In 1882 to mention the word “Sakartvelo” became forbidden in public (even in informal) situation.<sup>2</sup>

In 1811 and 1814 Russian government forced to abolish the independence of Georgian church. Mtsketa and Bichvinta, two clerical entities in eastern and western Georgia, were given to Russian “Sinod” (Russian supreme religion body). The language of orthodox service in Georgia was changed from Georgian into Russian. So, two main features of Georgian national identity – statehood (territorial independence) and religion (independence of Georgian church) were abolished in the first half of the XIX c. Georgian language became the only tool in the second half of XIX c. to sustain the national identity, that’s

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<sup>1</sup> Writings of I. Chavchavadze. v. 3. 1953, p. 206 (in Georgian).

<sup>2</sup> A. Iovidze. Iakob Gogebashvili (Documentary materials). “Saistorio moambe”, v. 5 1950, p. 69 –71 (in Georgian).

why its role became especially important. Russian administration realized the importance of Georgian language and the policy towards the language became especially strict.<sup>3</sup>

Russian government from very early period of its governance in Caucasus abolished Georgian educational institutions and formed Russian elementary and high schools (gymnasiums). The first Russian two grade elementary school was opened in Tbilisi in 1802, September 22, and was closed very soon, as pupils were not able to study in Russian language. In 1804 the new elementary school was established for nobility. At first it had 2 grades, from 20s it became 6grade School and in 1830 it was established as gymnasium (high school). In 1850 another gymnasium was opened in Kutaisi and one more private gymnasium in Tbilisi. The boarding school for women in Tbilisi was transformed into the institute in 1840. In 1830 Russian elementary schools were opened in 7 Georgian regions (“Yezd”). All of them were secular schools.

What about the clerical education? Tsarist Empire definitely needed Russian speaking clergymen. In 1817 Russian clerical seminary was opened in Tbilisi. From 1818 clerical schools were opened in the regions too. Educational language was Russian, but till 60s pupils were taught Georgian language too and even some other subjects were taught in Georgian.<sup>4</sup>

Educational system in Caucasus was subordinated to the Kazan educational district first, and after to the Kharkov. Independent Caucasus Educational district was established in 1853. In 1864 by the legislation of Caucasus Educational district every local body and private person was granted the right to establish schools. Public schools could be of different types and for all the strata of society. By 1867 legislation it became possible to teach Georgian language, but ethnically non-Georgian pupils were free from this obligation. By 1873 legislation Georgian language was taught in elementary schools (pro-gymnasium), though it was not compulsory. The new legislation in 1881 abolished teaching of Georgian language even in elementary schools.<sup>5</sup>

Georgian public figures opposed this policy against Georgian language. They were using two methods: 1). to organize public speeches for the popularization of Georgian language and history. 2). to establish private Sunday schools.

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<sup>3</sup> History of Georgia. 19<sup>th</sup> Century. edit: V. Guruli, B. Kupatadze. Textbook. Tb. 2004 (in Georgian).

<sup>4</sup> G. Tavzishvili. Public Educational and Pedagogical Principles in Georgia v. II, 1948, p. 146 (in Georgian).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 416.

The organizer of this movement was the Society for the Dissemination of Literacy in Georgia, that was established in 1879. The first chairman of the society was Dimitri Kipiani. After Ilia Chavchavadze took this position. The society was supported by private persons. The most significant role played some famous Georgian businessmen (Sarajishvili, Khoshtaria, Lagidze, Maiashvili...).<sup>6</sup>

According to the regulation of the society, to disseminate literacy all over the Caucasus among Georgian ethnical groups was the main goal of the society. To achieve this goal the society was organizing different projects and events: to open schools, to open libraries in established schools, to organize public meetings for reading Georgian texts, to gather Georgian manuscripts, folk and numismatic materials, to publish text-books, popular readers, historical and fiction books, to prepare the teachers and to coordinate their activities, to organize trainings for the pupils, to support printed media. Among the schools established by this society agrarian school in Kartli (village Tsinamdzhvriankari) and the private gymnasium established by Georgian public figure Ioseb Otskheli in 1900. Georgian gymnasium effectively existed in Tbilisi and there appeared numerous Georgian elementary schools all over the territory of Georgia as well as outside of its border (Baku, Kiev) for ethnical Georgians.

One of the priorities of the society was to help the Muslim Georgian population living on the territory of former Ottoman Empire (Adjara region) and to open there Georgian schools, though it was more difficult in that region. I'd like to bring one example for illustration. In April 1909 the military governor of Batumi district wrote the letter to the Caucasus educational leader ("Popechitel"): It's my obligation to introduce you the problems of Batumi district, due to the lack of elementary schools and mistrust of the local population to the Russian schools, to allow Georgian teachers to teach the children is not desirable. Georgians are trying to open schools of the Society for the Dissemination of Literacy in Georgia and to link the Muslim population to their political goals".

One of the priorities at Society schools was to teach Georgian children Russian language in an appropriate, simple way. That's why the Georgian public figure and the founder of Georgian pedagogy Iakob Gogebashvili created text-book for Russian language "Russkoe Slovo" for Georgian children. The text-book was approved by the Russian Ministry of Education as the best text-book for non-Russian children.

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<sup>6</sup> T. Khundadze, The Society for the Dissemination of Literacy in Georgia. Tb. 1960 (in Georgian).

The policy towards the Georgian language became especially strict after 1881. The emperor Alexander II was killed and the new emperor Alexander III began to exercise hard power in every sphere of politics. Liberal vice-Roy Mikhail Romanov returned from Tbilisi to Petersburg. During 18 years he was continuing the liberal course of assimilation elaborated by Mikheil Vorontsov and was delicate to the local ethno-cultural and economic features.

The position of the governor in Caucasus took Dondukov-Korsakov. Archbishop Pavel took the position of exarch of Georgian church. Ianovskii was appointed at the position of “popechitel”. Strict censorship and supervision were established in educational and religious bodies. One of the main targets of their policy became Georgian books and printed media for distribution national and liberal ideas among the population.

In 1881 Ianovski introduced the new curriculum. According to this new curriculum all kinds of elementary schools had to take Russian language as the working language and Georgian language became elective subject for the pupils and thus was excluded from the teaching process. New methods were worked out for teaching Russian language. The teachers had to follow so called “dumb method” (the teacher had no right to use any Georgian word during the lesson). The government needed to change Georgian teachers with Russian teachers and thus to use the educational system for the full assimilation of Georgian population. This new method was the problem not only for Georgian pupils but for Russian teachers as well.

Georgian newspaper “Tsnobis Purtseli” published Georgian cartoon made by the founder of this genre in Georgia Oskar Shmerling. On the cartoon the teacher, that had no write to use words, was imitating to explain to the pupils the meaning of such verbs as: to bark, to take off clothes, to commit a suicide, to pour the water and others. The cartoon was forbidden by the censorship.<sup>7</sup>

After the Georgian language was excluded from the educational system, the new Russian recommendations appeared. By the new educational draft schools in the regions had to use dialects instead of Georgian language (Megrelian dialect in Megrelia, Svanetian dialect in Svaneti) and Turkish in Batumi district. Russian government couldn’t implement this new plan, but on political level new trends were obvious. Russian government began to establish new theory of Georgian identity and the first statistical description in Russian Em-

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<sup>7</sup> A. Iovidze. Iakob Gogebashvili (Documentary materials). “Saistorio moambe”, v. 5. 1950, p. 7 (in Georgian).

pire in 1897 described the population of Megrelia and Svaneti as the different, non-Georgian ethnical groups and the Muslim Georgian population in Batumi district as Turks. This policy had some negative outcomes later.

After 10 year political struggles Russian government denied the local government of Tbilisi the right to supervise schools.

In Megrelia the process was longer and more complicated. By the regulation in 1885 Georgian language was fully forbidden in Megrelia, though they had the right to use “Megrelian language” instead. Russian government supported Ashordia to create new alphabet (using Russian letters) for “Megrelian language”. This project was fulfilled in 1889. Clerical texts were translated from Georgian into “Megrelian language”. Though these translations were so artificial it became impossible to implement them. Clergymen in Megrelia denied to use this new language for service. In 1892 Levitski, by support of Russian Academy of Sciences, improved “Megrelian alphabet”. The same happened in Svaneti and in Abkhazia.

In Abkhazia, as well as all over Georgia, only clerical schools were using Georgian language. Such schools were more popular than Russian public schools among the population, as it was very difficult for children to study on Russian language. In 1862 Russian linguist Peter Uslar created Abkhazian alphabet by Russian letters. From 90s Georgian language was excluded from Abkhazian schools as well as from church service.

Russian language policy to disintegrate Georgian state was deepening. Ilia Chavchavadze describes one interesting example in his article. The board of Seminary in Gori declared that as pupils were multinational representatives of 12 nations, it was impossible to use all their native languages and in such situation Russian language was much more appropriate for educational process. Among the list of nations Georgians from different parts of Georgia (Imereti, Pshavi, Guria...) were described as representatives of “different nations”.<sup>8</sup>

Some liberal Russian teachers were against such language policy. For example, the director of Gymnasium in Kutaisi Alexander Stoyanov in 1880 in his report to the Potechitel wrote: we have to use native, Georgian language for elementary education. So, we have to take Georgian teachers for elementary schools, or Russian teachers that know Georgian language... In upper grades we have to use Georgian language to teach Russian... Russian children living in Georgia are getting Russian education at gymnasiums and higher educational

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<sup>8</sup> Writings of I. Chavchavadze. v. 2, 1941, p. 578-579 (in Georgian).

institutions. After they are getting state positions in Georgia, though they don't know Georgian language, Georgian habits and cultural features. British statesmen that created the Railway system from Poti to Tbilisi were able to study Georgian language within 5-6 months, while Russians live here more than a half of the century and can't pronounce even a word in Georgian... We have to teach Georgian language as the compulsory subject and even Georgian literature in upper grades.<sup>9</sup>

Stoyanov was forced to leave his position in Kutaisi. He continued his job in Batumi where he had to play an active role in Russian strict language policy.

From 80s Georgian language was excluded from clerical education as well. The organizer of this project was exarch Pavel. He forbade to teach Georgian language and Georgian clerical and secular literature in clerical seminary of Tbilisi. He dismissed Georgian teachers and invited Russians instead.

The leaders of Georgian national liberation movement tried to oppose this policy. Tragic life of Dimitri kipiani is a good example of this.

In January 8, 1886 former Major of Tbilisi and the head of Georgian nobility Dimitri Kipiani prepared the vast paper for the Governor Dondukov-Korsakov.<sup>10</sup> Dimitri described Russian policy in Georgia and criticized it severely. In May 24, 1886, the dismissed student of Tbilisi clerical seminary Ioseb Lagiashvili killed Chudetski, the rector of the seminary. Lagiashvili was condemned to penal servitude for 20 years. On the funereal day of Chudetski exarch Pavel damned the whole Georgian nation. Dimitri Kipiani wrote another paper of protest to Pavel in June 8, 1886. By the order of the emperor on August 6, 1886, Kipiani was removed from the position and sent to Stavropol. In October 26, 1887 he was killed.<sup>11</sup>

Leaders of Georgian national movement organized to bury kipiani in Tbilisi, in Mtatsminda Pantheon of Writers and Public Figures of Georgia. The funeral of Kipiani turned into the demonstrations against Russian empire.

After 1905 revolution Russian government had to liberalize its policy in different spheres. A new curriculum was established in educational system. Elementary schools were granted the right to include Georgian language as an elective subject for the first grade pupils. Lessons of Georgian language were

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<sup>9</sup> Georgian State Central Historical Arhive (sscia), F. 416, c. 2197 (in Georgian).

<sup>10</sup> sscia, fund of Kutaisi Military Governor. v. 11, pp. 4-5 (in Georgian).

<sup>11</sup> History of Georgia. 19<sup>th</sup> Century. edit: V. Guruli, B. Kupatadze. Textbook. Tb. 2004, p. 202 (in Georgian).

twice a week as the last lessons. in spite of this new rule different officials of Caucasus educational system were trying to continue the old policy towards the Georgian language. So, the situation didn't change in many schools and Georgian language was excluded again.<sup>12</sup> In February 13, 1913 Georgian deputies of Russian Duma tried to introduce the illegal deeds of Caucasus educational district to the Duma, but in vein.

The most important piece of legislation appeared in July 1, 1914. According to that, private schools had the right to choose the working language for the school. Russian language was compulsory only for such subjects as Russian Language, History and Geography. The new rule wasn't ratified as the First World War began.

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<sup>12</sup> B. Kupatadze. Georgia and Russian IV state дума. Tb. 2005, p. 108-110 (in Georgian).