

Imereti – In between Georgian centralism and local identity in language

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Imereti (or Imeretia) is a province in Georgia in the South Caucasus. It lies in the center of the country and has an important knot with its center – Kutaisi. Imeretians traditionally speak their own dialect of Georgian, however, in a certain aspect, Imeretian serves the cause of a language. As such, it is an important part of the Imeretian heritage and identity. Imereti had its own kingdom which existed from the 13th till the 19th century and was sometimes part of Georgia, Russia and the Ottomans, and therefore had a lot of different influences shaping their identity. Even further, the region had a supralocal importance, as the princedoms of Abkhazia, Mingrelia and Guria were part of Imereti from time to time and therefore, the region had an important impact on whole Georgia and its history. The importance of the different kingdoms is necessary in understanding the different identities within Georgia. The Meskheti Kingdom covered the western part of Georgia and is known today for the Meskhetian Turks. It is the gate between Christianity and Islam. The Kartli kingdom is name giving for the Georgian language – Kartuli.

The author of this paper informally questioned people from Georgia about their views on the Imeretian language and its perspective and therefore all the accounts given here are first-hand accounts. Imeretian is quite understandable for people all over Georgia and has a rather dialectal character. As such, Georgians see Imereti dialect downgraded and for many it does not sound educated. Especially people from Tbilisi tend to be hostile towards Imeretian speech, but also people from Imereti themselves do not like Imeretian and a woman from Kutaisi admitted that she almost speaks no dialect and that people in the city tend to strive for standard. As we can see from this first-hand account, people in urban regions and rural regions have a different view on the language. Especially in the political center of the country, promoting a strong united identity is important and therefore the necessity for everyone to learn the prestige variety. On the other hand, people in different regions of Georgia still preserved their identities. In this way, we have to differentiate between mountaineers who often keep a conservative life style and promote their heritage and traditions, keeping festivals, mythology, but also language at home alive, and the non-mountainous rural areas, altogether which is a hotspot for Georgian infrastructure and therefore centralization. Imereti is served by the E 60/ S1, as well as regionally routes connecting Kutaisi with Tkibuli, Chiatura, and many other places. All major

towns like Zestafoni and Samtredia are passed by the E 60 and therefore Imereti is an important route to Georgia's Adjara and neighboring Turkey, as well as the breakaway state of Abkhazia. Imereti is also served by major streets that go to Borjomi which has a main route to Armenia. Even further, Kutaisi has an international airport and serves flights to major European countries, such as Germany. As a result of the growing development and the good progress which is made in Georgia, the local identities face problems as they are already known in countries of the European Union, where regions go back to tend more autonomy and save their local heritage, rather than centralizing themselves in global structures. As such, Imeretian faces a problem, as according to the surveyed people, it has a low prestige in contrast to Classical Georgian. To go further, Imeretian identity phases is decreasing as people strive for jobs in the cities and want to speak the prestige language as a sign of their high education. This leads to the decline of Imeretian which serves as main language of Imereti in a sociological viewpoint, even though it is just a dialect in a linguistic viewpoint.

People in Imereti should be proud to speak their own language and get a self-confidence in their identity. Being a Georgian well-educated person and being able to communicate in a local language is no contradiction. As such Imeretian language is important to preserve the heritage of Imeretia which is very rich and which also shows the diversity in the unity of Georgia. Even after Georgia united in history, the regions were very diverse and had several languages, minorities, mythological influences, religions and identity. While Adjara, for instance, has a lot of Muslim features and has lots of Ottoman charm, Imereti has its own uniqueness. The preservation of the Imeretian language and the encouragement of Imereti in public can open many doors for the people. Especially the influence of the Colchis, which left Greek traces and subjects of Greek mythology in Western Georgia are of importance. But also the Arabs and Persians who shaped Georgia during the time when Imereti was Lasika, over thousand years ago, enriched the heritage.

As an essential part of this is the local language which should be taught more actively. Even if Imeretian does not qualify itself as a minority language, as in fact, it is a dialect of the majority language, this does not mean that the dialect can get a certain prestige and upgrade. It should be pointed out that even if Imereti gets a stronger confidence in its identity, it will not lead to a decline of Georgian identity. As many regions are so unique, some of them tended to go their own ways, such as Adjara which was governed by a secessionist government backed by Russia till 2007 and the Mingrelian awakening in the 1990s which was accompanied by an insurgency until 2003. Therefore, keeping together Georgia is one of the main policies of the country, but Imereti's population identifies itself as Georgian as the surveyed people pointed out. Therefore, even if Imereti heritage is strengthened it is unlikely that a kind of national movement could arise, since most people in Imereti are Christian Orthodox and identify themselves with their state. As a historical center for Western Georgia and an important hub

for economy, strengthening the local diversity will lead to even more progress in the country. It will help people identify themselves stronger with their region and avoid that people move away, as like in every progressing country, people tend to move from towns to the cities. Imeretis will move back to the towns and help improving infrastructure and development there if their heritage is stronger encouraged and the worth of Imereti is stressed. In addition, same as the individuality through the diversity, so is the diversity of creativity through preserving the local language. If everyone only speaks the prestige variety, then creative processes that are developed through local expressions and local thought, will disappear. By preserving Imeretian speech, the diversity will also enrich the processes in society and thus innovations for different branches which will benefit the whole of Georgia and which will strengthen this ties between people and the government, an exchange between growing centralism in the self-understanding of national unity and local Imeretian accentuation through self-reliance.

The region is the gate to Europe, but also the 'backdoor' to Russia. Imeretians should write literature in Imereti dialect and promote the spirit of the region. As such, Imereti can become a place of peace and stability where interest of Europe, Russia and Turkey can meet the rich Georgian mentality and their spirit and where new solutions for the future can be found.