

NORTH CAUCASUS

How Russian state pressure on regional languages is sparking civic activism in the North Caucasus

New legislation that makes studying minority languages voluntary in Russian schools comes as signs of decreasing usage emerge.

M

by Mikhail Kaplan

12 June 2018 • 8 min read

Share



OC Media | oDR

Sign in or Become a member to unlock the audio version of this article

Our journalism is supported by readers like you. [Click here](#) to join the OC Media community.

According to the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights, [a bill on the voluntary study of national languages](#) that was passed by parliament this April will have a [detrimental effect on inter-ethnic relations in Russia](#). The Kremlin's position on the question still remains unknown.

Meanwhile, civic activists across the national republics of the Russian Federation are demonstrating a willingness to fight for the preservation of identity. Unexpectedly for many, national linguistic policies have provoked a wave of mobilisation.

News Stories

Review | Apricot Stone: Armenian shorts at the 2026 Golden Apricot International Film Festival

18 hours ago

Georgian Foreign Minister Botchorishvili rails against 'political terrorism' in Washington

Jul 17, 2026 10:34 am

Armenian government approves \$14 million in bonuses for state officials

Jul 17, 2026 10:17 am

Karachay-Cherkessia native convicted of terrorism after 2025 extradition from France

Jul 17, 2026 10:14 am

Azerbaijani government, SOCAR reportedly owe almost \$500,000 in debts over luxury carpets

Jul 17, 2026 10:08 am

FSB claims Ukrainian agent suspected of Monaco bombing behind attempt on life of Daghestani minister

Jul 17, 2026 9:37 am

Chechen AfD member Noah Krieger creates 'German battalion' in Russian army, vows to 'march on Germany' after war

Jul 17, 2026 9:02 am

Russia sentences Circassian Congress leader sentenced in absentia over 'fake news' about army

Jul 17, 2026 8:59 am

Show more

Integral, but voluntary

The draft law is the result of a [statement made by President Putin last year](#), in which he claimed that ‘forcing someone to learn a non-native language is just as unacceptable as lowering the level of Russian education’. During the meeting of the Council for Cross-National Relations that took place in Yoshkar-Ola in July 2017, Putin urged the heads of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation to pay “special attention” to this issue.

Putin also added that, in the Russian Federation, national languages are ‘an integral part of indigenous culture of the country’s peoples’. He also emphasised that ‘the right to learn national languages is guaranteed by the Constitution, and it is a voluntary right’.

This statement led to a series of inspections by prosecutors in republics across the Russian Federation. North Ossetia, where [Ossetian has been taught as a state language](#), was one of them. However, at that time, Putin’s statements drew little attention in the North Caucasus. It seemed as if the region was indifferent to the fate of its languages. Tatarstan was the only region that [stood up against the Kremlin](#) in the fight for the fundamental rights of Russia’s federal organisation.

Perhaps it was this Volga republic’s ‘principles’ that led to the North Caucasus becoming agitated by this recent bill. Social activists in North Ossetia were the first to speak out, with the Association of Teachers and Researchers of Ossetian Language and Literature [organising a signed appeal to the Head of State](#) in December 2017.

These civic activists refer both to the Constitution of the Russian Federation and federal laws which allow individual republics to freely choose their state languages in their territories and regulate how they are studied. In their statement, the activists emphasise that ‘the laws that regulate the study of Ossetian as a state language of the Republic of North Ossetia–Alania are based entirely on the Constitution and federal legislations’.

ADVERTISEMENT

Following the example of North Ossetian activists, intellectuals and civic activists in Kabardino-Balkaria [addressed](#) the heads of the executive and legislative powers in an open letter at the end of April. The letter was published on the Kabardino-Balkarian Human Rights Centre website: ‘The bill proposed by the State Duma flagrantly violates the constitutional rights of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria [KBR], as well as those of other national republics: all of them are legal state entities that have a right of self-determination within the legal framework of Russian Federation, including the right to choose a model for preservation and development of their native languages. On that basis we categorically object to the adoption of the bill, and we demand that it be removed

Our Newsletters



OC Insider



Culture Dispatch



Tracking the rise of authoritarianism in Georgia

Your email address

SUBSCRIBE



Become an OC Media Member

Support independent journalism in the Caucasus

Join Today

The
Caucasus
Daily
Brief

Friday, 17 July 2026

from the [legislative] agenda immediately because, apart from its destructive power that aims to completely obliterate national languages, it can also seriously destabilise the socio-political climate of the multinational state’.

The Congress of Karachay People [also issued a demand to stop the bill](#) in support of the initiative of Kabardino-Balkarian civic activists. It states the following: ‘In accordance with the Republic Constitutions, the languages of the national republics are considered state languages.

Consequently, the current legislative initiative undermines the basis of statehood in the national regions and thus should be considered as destructive. Furthermore, it can even become a factor that destabilised the cross-national relations in our country’.

In May, Kumyk civic activists [addressed](#) the members of the State Duma demanding that the bill be removed from the legislative agenda because it is ‘anti-people’. This was followed by the [similar demands](#) from the National-Cultural Autonomy of Daghestani Avars.

‘A deadly threat’

North Caucasus regional languages are exposed to various degrees of threat, due to different tempos of linguistic assimilation. In the eight years between Russia’s 2002 and 2008 censi, the number of Karachay-Balkar language speakers in Kabardino-Balkaria decreased by 10,000. In 2002, the ratio of Karachay-Balkar speakers in Karachay-Cherkessia to the size of its population was above 101% — i.e., the language was also spoken by members of other national groups. However, by the year 2010, that ratio had [dropped](#) to 93%.

The number of speakers of the Kabardino-Cherkess language (the linguistically proper name) in Kabardino-Balkaria decreased by 68,000, and in Karachay-Cherkessia the number remains unchanged, even though the [Cherkess population](#), a sub-group of the Circassian people, in the region has increased slightly.

During the same period, the number of Ossetian speakers in North Ossetia decreased by nearly 43,000. The number of [Kumyk speakers](#) in Daghestan had decreased by almost 63,000. And the number of Avar language speakers in the same republic had dropped by nearly 80,000.

These numbers speak for themselves. Observations in the North Caucasus show a general tendency toward a demographic increase among all ethnic groups on the one hand, and a decrease in the number of national language speakers on the other.

Speaking to me, the head of Kabardino-Balkarian Human Rights Centre Valery Khatazhukov confirmed this trend: ‘I can claim without any exaggeration that ethnic cultures in Russia are facing a deadly threat. And this is connected first and foremost to federal-level initiatives aimed at diminishing the public and political roles native languages play in these regions’.

According to Khatazhukov, over the last decade the time dedicated to learning the native languages of Kabardino-Balkaria has been reduced by 50%, elementary classes that were taught in Kabardin and Balkarian languages have been closed, and native language learning in pre-school education has been gradually phased out. Khatazhukov believes that these are the causes of public outrage and criticism towards this new draft legislation on the voluntary learning of native languages.

It should be noted that the numbers of regional language speakers were in decline even under the conditions of compulsory education

‘While analysing the current situation, we have to face a question that is no longer rhetorical: what is to be done, and what is the role of the state in solving these problems?’ Khatazhukov adds. ‘It might be worth remembering why the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic was established in the first place, and where it gets its name from. It received its name as a result of the self-determination of both Kabardin and Balkar peoples within Russia.’

Khatazhukov explains that it is not about privileging Kabardinians and Balkarians — all citizens of the republic have their rights to self-determination along with equal civil and political rights. However, within the territory of KBR, Kabardinian and Balkarian are designated as state languages, and, according to Khatazhukov, this is why learning these languages must be obligatory.

It should be noted that the numbers of regional language speakers were in decline even under the conditions of compulsory education. The situation is predicted to worsen after learning the state languages in the republics of the North Caucasus is made optional.

A non-standard situation

Early in 2018, civic activists in the North Caucasus announced a petition against a law that initiates ‘the exclusion of the national-regional component’ from federal education policies, and which had already been enacted in 2007. This law began to be implemented in November 2008, after the Ministry of Education and Science banned the use of native (non-Russian) languages in state examinations. In other words, native-speaking students were no longer allowed to take their final school exams.

The North Caucasus is now almost devoid of schools where students are taught in their region’s native language. The only school which does was recently opened in North Ossetia, though children are taught in their native languages in some rural primary schools in Daghestan. However, there are no educational institutions where a full education is carried out in regional languages in Daghestan. No such schools exist in Chechnya and Ingushetia, which are practically mono-ethnic, either.

In the republics of Chechnya and Ingushetia, people still use regional languages for everyday communication, which creates the impression that Vainakh ethnic groups (Chechens, Ingush and Kists) are resilient against the threats of assimilation. However, according to many sociolinguists, the absence of education, visualisation, and paperwork in native languages will eventually lead to the qualitative degradation of the latter.

These are the reasons why national activists are protesting against the efforts to make regional languages optional in education. Among other things, the petition above states that ‘the realisation of the principle of choosing a native language, or promulgation of the right to choose whether to study one’s native language, will have catastrophic consequences for all the languages and cultures of non-Russian peoples’.

‘If in the final school exam [EGE], the Russian language exam is obligatory, while other subjects are examined only in Russian, most of the non-Russian parents will prefer to raise their children as

Russian native speakers because that would allow them to maximise the time spent on learning Russian as well as other subjects. Consequently, students who will keep studying their native languages will suffer in terms of their knowledge of Russian and their level of education in general.'

It would be untrue to say that regional activists are fighting for their native languages only by criticising the state powers. For example, Adygean enthusiasts (Kabardinians, Circassians, and Adygeans) created their own information platform, [CircassiaTV](#), which distributes various video materials in their native language.

Elbrussoid, the Karachay-Balkar foundation for the development of youth, is translating and dubbing popular animation and feature films. Alongside this, young programmers are creating educational gaming apps that help users learn the Karachay-Balkarian language.

Activists of Moscow-based Kumyk organisation Qumuqlar translated the whole interface of the social networking platform VKontakte. Now users of this popular social network are able to switch to the Kumyk language, which is rendered in Latin alphabet. The interface of this social network has been translated into other languages as well. Now users can choose between Kabardino-Cherkessian, Ossetian and Lezgi. Ingush, Avar and Lak versions are now in the process of being translated as well. Some Caucasian languages lost their positions in the social network due to a lack of updates — after all, every month the VKontakte interface is updated with new words.

Governmental approach

As far as Russian state's role in popularising national cultures is concerned, it appears that the government considers regional languages to be risk factors, and is trying to get rid of them as soon as possible. However, it is precisely restrictive measures that are stimulating yet another wave of ethnic mobilisation. In this sense, language appears as an entirely new factor in the North Caucasus. Until this day, the main triggers of mobilisation were, among others, resources (for example, [land](#)) or distribution of seats in the government.

The Russian government needs to rethink its linguistic policies at least for the sake of preserving stability. It is quite clear that villages, where regional languages still dominate, should use different educational approaches and even different textbooks in contrast to urban centres where knowledge of regional languages is often weak. As far as the educational system is concerned, these features must be taken into account. National activists also believe it is important to emphasise the presence of languages in the regional media.

Moscow criticises its neighbouring countries for initiating the same kind of policies towards Russian minorities

Furthermore, the government is not even training certified Caucasian language translators, even though the demand can be quite high — for example, when translators are needed in courts or during legal investigations involving people who prefer to be addressed in their native language. However, as things stand, only philologists and journalists get to learn these languages in universities.

The Russian government is applying double standards in their linguistic policies. On the one hand, we have an adoption of laws that demotivate people and create disadvantageous conditions for

learning regional languages. On the other hand, Moscow criticises its neighbouring countries for initiating the same kind of policies towards Russian minorities.

For example, in April 2018 a Russian parliamentarian described the decision by the Latvian government to gradually transform Russian schools into Latvian ones as '[linguistic genocide](#)'. This statement came in the context of the very same legislative initiative about the voluntary study of regional languages. Such hypocrisy is obviously a source of public discontent.

Quite unexpectedly, activists in the North Caucasus, Volga, Ural and other regions are starting to demonstrate solidarity in public discourse. All of the aforementioned petitions addressed to the federal government appear to represent the last stage before the conflict escalates into street protests. In Tatarstan, the government refused nearly a dozen requests to hold marches in support of the Tatar language. Moscow will find it much more difficult to ban street protests in the North Caucasus.

This article is a partner post written by Mikail Kaplan and translated by Tomas Čiučelis. The original version first appeared in [Open Democracy Russia](#) on 31 May 2018.

Independent journalism thrives when readers choose to support it.



Mariam Nikuradze
OC Media Co-founder

25 / 50 members

This summer, we are on the quest of 50 new members. Readers in 40 countries are already backing us. **Help us reach our goal.**

Years ago, we made a bet: our future would be reader-funded. That bet still holds.

We've been through a lot together. Independent journalists in the Caucasus have been pressured, smeared, and silenced. Disinformation has become organised and state backed. And let's be honest, journalism like ours can only survive if readers choose [to support it](#).

When you become a member, you're not just subscribing. You're backing journalism that answers only to its readers. **Your monthly or annual contribution keeps our reporting fearless — and reaching audiences across the Caucasus and beyond.**

WHAT YOU GET BACK

Caucasus Daily Brief

A curated, daily brief of the most important stories from around the Caucasus.



Audio articles

Listen to our stories on the go.



Community events

Online and offline film screenings showcasing the best of the Caucasus' cinema.

Direct line to reporters

Chat with our journalists via Discord.

Become a member

North Caucasus

In Focus

Chechnya

Dagestan

Feature Stories

Ingushetia

Kabarda-Balkaria

Karachay-Cherkessia

North Ossetia-Alania

Russia

Languages

Adygea



Mikhail Kaplan · Follow

1 articles · 0 Followers

Mikhail Kaplan is a journalist living in Makhachkala, Daghestan.

Related Articles



KARACHAY-CHERKESSIA

Karachay-Cherkessia native convicted of terrorism after 2025 extradition from France



by Elizaveta Chukharova

17 July 2026 · 2 min read

Ruslan Botashev was extradited from France at the request of Russian authorities in 2025.



DAGHESTAN

FSB claims Ukrainian agent suspected of Monaco bombing behind attempt on life of Daghestani minister



by Elizaveta Chukharova

17 July 2026 · 3 min read

According to Russian security services, the attack was being prepared by a former Ukrainian officer.



CHECHNYA

Chechen AfD member Noah Krieger creates 'German battalion' in Russian army, vows to 'march on Germany' after war



by Elizaveta Chukharova

17 July 2026 · 3 min read

Krieger called on people to fight on Russia's side 'for the German homeland and for the German people'.



KARACHAY-CHERKESSIA

Russia sentences Circassian Congress leader sentenced in absentia over 'fake news' about army



by Elizaveta Chukharova

17 July 2026 · 2 min read

Kase Kik, who is based outside of Russia, has dismissed the sentence as 'politically motivated'.

Load more

MOST POPULAR

1. CHECHNYA

Chechen AfD member Noah Krieger creates 'German battalion' in Russian army, vows to 'march on Germany' after war

4. CHECHNYA

Activists say Kadyrov's son's wife 'divorced and

2. GEORGIA

Tbilisi greenlights demolition of 'Rike Tubes', a controversial modernist city landmark

5. GEORGIA

British veteran detained for prescription

3. ARMENIA

Armenia begins printing new biometric passports amid design and birthplace controversy

6. TRUMP ROUTE

Russia-born White House ballroom donor tapped to

beaten' after being
accused of witchcraft

medication in Georgia to
be deported after paying
\$38,000

head Trump Route project

Editor's Picks



azerbaijan

Is Azerbaijan banning the hijab in public schools?

by Aytan Farhadova
6 April 2026 • 6 min read



georgian dream

Explainer | The legislative changes that have shaped Georgia's authoritarian slide

by OC Media
1 April 2026 • 27 min read



samvel karapetyan

Explainer | Who is Samvel Karapetyan, the Russian-Armenian billionaire whose empire is under siege

by Arshaluys Barseghyan
25 August 2025 • 11 min read



Become an OC Media Member
Support independent journalism in the Caucasus

Join Today



Copyright © 2026 OC-Media.org

User agreement

Terms of use

Privacy policy

About Us

Who we are

Our team

Our writers

Our policies

FE.

Powered by FourthEstate →

Want a news site like this? Launch your own in minutes.
No code. No developers.