

## **The Mountain of Tongues**

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Moves are afoot to force officials in Vladikavkaz to adopt Ossetic as the dominant language of bureaucracy

Experts in North Ossetia believe the republic's ancient language, Ossetic, may be threatened with extinction.

Although Ossetic is no longer marginalised by the Russian authorities, the depredations of two centuries have taken their toll. And local intellectuals are urging the government in Vladikavkaz to take swift measures to give Ossetic a new lease of life.

An Indo-European language derived from ancient Scythian, Sarmatian and Alanian dialects, Ossetic was first mentioned 2,500 years ago by the Greek historian Herodotus in his description of the Scythian tribes.

Like most North Caucasian dialects, Ossetic was unscripted until the Russian Empire invaded the region in the 19th century and linguists began to study its roots.

These studies resulted in two landmark works on Ossetia's language, culture and history - "Ossetian Grammar" by Andrei Shegren (1844) and "Ossetian Studies" by Vsevolod Miller which appeared in the 1880s.

Then, on the threshold of the 20th century, Ossetia produced a poet and painter of outstanding calibre, Kosta Khetagurov, who laid down the cornerstones for a national literary culture.

The first years of Bolshevik rule proved beneficial to the development of this literary tradition. While the Soviet government found few ideological supporters in the province, the Ossetian alphabet was promptly changed to Latin script in a symbolic effort to erase the Imperial past.

However, this privilege proved to be short-lived. In 1937, at the height of Stalin's political repressions, the alphabet reverted to Cyrillic whilst a vicious purge of Ossetian intellectuals left few champions of the national cause. The consequences of this purge are still felt in North Ossetia today.

In the 1960s, the Moscow government ruled that all lessons in secondary schools would be taught in Russian and, within a few years, Ossetic was completely eradicated from the educational system.

The suppression of the national language reached a climax in the early 1980s when Vladimir Odintsov, an ethnic Russian, was appointed head of the government in Vladikavkaz.

During this period, any Ossetian heard using his native language in public could be reported by an ethnic Russian for "speaking in tongues".

Such intolerance is now unthinkable in North Ossetia but the language remains in a state of disarray. Although the republic's constitution cites Ossetic and Russian as the two official languages, it is far from being the lingua franca of the bureaucratic machine. And there are few schools which include Ossetic in

their curriculum.

Most importantly, Ossetic enjoys an ever decreasing following amongst the population at large - particularly the younger generation.

As a result, campaigners are calling for the state to intervene. They want local officials to sit an Ossetic language exam in order to ensure that a knowledge of the dialect is the key to self-advancement in bureaucratic circles. They believe this will prompt greater interest in Ossetic across the republic.

However, the federal authorities fear that such measures could spark a mass exodus of ethnic Russians from North Ossetia.

The Kremlin is already unhappy about an article in local election law which requires any candidate for the presidency to speak Ossetic. The Russians argue that this rule is a breach of national laws guaranteeing equal rights for citizens of the Russian Federation.

Observers agree that this is part of a pattern across the North Caucasus region where the Moscow authorities have come into conflict with any ethnic group which is anxious to preserve its national identity.

In ancient times, this region was known as The Mountain of Tongues and now, at a time when Russia's integrity is highly questionable, linguistic issues have taken on a new and far-reaching significance.

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