The fight was over. All was still.  
The bodies made a grisly hill.  
Blood trickled from them, steaming, smoking...  
“Just tell me, my kunak,  
What do they call this little river?”  
“They call it Valerik”, he said,  
“Which means The River of the Dead.  
Those who named it are in Heaven...”  
Then someone else's voice I heard,  
“This day is for the war decisive”.  
I caught the mountaineer’s glance derisive.  
He grinned but did not say a word.  
And there I was; my heart so pained with pity.  
I thought: “Poor man, what are you after?  
The sky’s so blue. The world so endless.  
And still you’re fighting: Why, what for?!”

M. Lermontov, *Valerik*

The lines from the poem *Valerik* that open this publication were written by the Russian poet Michael Lermontov in the year 1840, half of which he spent in the Caucasus before being shot to death in a duel just a year later. Sent to serve in the Russian imperial army fighting Caucasian highlanders, the poet had to participate in several harsh combats. Shocked by the cruelty of the war, he was also stunned by a long history of confrontation and bloodshed experienced by the peoples of the Caucasus. Sadly, today, more than a hundred and sixty years after Lermontov wrote *Valerik*, the Caucasus is again far from tranquility, and many scholars and practitioners are trying to answer the question asked in the last line of the Lermontov’s poem. However, the aim of the present publication is not to provide an all-encompassing account for all the violent conflicts that are taking place in contemporary Caucasus. We will limit the scope of our examination to a particular aspect of the conflicts fought along ethnic fault-lines, namely, to the role of language in these conflicts.

Already many centuries ago, Arab geographers referred to the Caucasus as Jebel-ul-al-Sun – “the Mountain of Languages” (Gatagova 2000, 17). Contemporary linguists found more than forty distinct languages spoken here (Gluck 1993, iv., see also
Map 2). Hence, it must come as no surprise that in the Caucasian ethnic conflicts language is often one of the central issues to the opposition between ethnic groups, and it is natural to assume that the examination of language in relation to an ethnic conflict could lead us to a better understanding of the causes of the conflict and the reasons of endurance of ethnic hostilities. However, we need to clarify what exactly the subject of this research is.

This study is about language. And it is not about language. It is not a study about language to the extent that we are not focusing on the purely linguistic aspects of the issues discussed in this work. Indeed, in many cases of ethnic rivalries, references to language made by political opponents have little to do with linguistically adequate data. That is why the use of linguistic data in this volume is rather auxiliary to the study of politics conducted in the name of language, and that is why the primary subject of this study can be identified as language but language exploited as a political and not as a linguistic resource.

The political value of language originates in its flexible and malleable nature, which enables politicians to exploit language as an important political resource in the context of nation-building. At the same time, “languages are not only tools of nation-building but also means of political control” (Safran 2004a, 4). The symbolic use of language proved to be a particularly effective technique of political control in the Soviet Union, where language was considered to be the “primordialized” property of an ethnic group very closely linked to the historical part of the group (Rouvinski and Matsuo 2003, 112). This peculiar characteristic of the politically important link between language and history is a major factor in choosing the area and the methodology of the study of the role of language in ethnic conflicts: the Caucasus provides a sort of “natural laboratory”.

For many people – not only in the Caucasus, but especially in the Caucasus, it is rich, glorious, and long history ascribed to one or another ethnic group that contribute to the feeling of a proud attachment to a certain community. And the Caucasus can be characterized as the area of an “extreme” historical awareness. Here, one can easily see
that ethnic rivalries are accompanied and often accelerated by ethnogenetic discourses on both sides. In addition, one of the main themes of these discourses is language and the origins of competing groups. Hence, we have to establish why language is given so important place in explaining the ethnogenesis of one or another ethnic group in the Caucasus and why such ethnogenetic discourses proliferate.

It is important to emphasize that despite of the fact that during the recent years there has been a steady flow of academic publications on the topics concerned with conflicts in the South Caucasus, which has been especially prone to inter-ethnic violence after the demise of the Soviet Union, there was no attempt at all to make a comprehensive examination of the role of language in any of the South Caucasian ethnic rivalries\footnote{Traditionally, this area of the Caucasus is called Transcaucasia, the term, which originates in the Russian word ‘Закавказье’. However, in this publication, in order to denote the geographical area of the study, the ‘South Caucasus’ is used instead of Transcaucasia, following the contemporary practice in the Western political science and among the scholars of now independent South Caucasian nations.}. The Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is the subject of our in-depth examination in this volume but we also examine a number of other conflicts in the South Caucasus.

In our approach, we place the emphasis not on real (or factual) identity and the difference between two languages, but on the perception or interpretation of identity/difference between language varieties. That is because if one wants to better understand the role of language in an ethnic conflict, the aim of this researcher should be not to search for absolute truth (“What is the origin of the Abkhazian language?”) but to look at what kind of image Abkhazians and Georgians hold about the language (“What ideas about the origin of the Abkhazian language matter to people in Abkhazia and Georgia?”). That is why, in addition to the task of tracing the role of intellectuals in nationalist movements, an important place in the case description is devoted to the examination of the use of historical knowledge in nationalist discourses as reflected by mass media and the system of education.

Based on the above considerations, the main objectives of this study can be
defined as two-fold:

1. to examine from a theoretical perspective what kind of role language plays in ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus
2. to provide a comprehensive empirical illustration of the role of language in one of the Caucasian ethnic rivalry, namely, in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict

Consequently, the volume is divided into two major parts: first, in which the theoretical assumptions and the background of ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus as regards the Soviet nationality policy are discussed, and second, embarking upon the examination of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict as well as some other South Caucasian ethnic rivalries. This volume is organized in the following way:

**Part I. Ethnic Enclosure: Language, Myths and Ethnic Groups in the Soviet Union**

*Chapter One, ‘Language, Ethnic Conflict and Ethnic Enclosure’,* begins with initial theoretical interrogations in the field of ethnicity and politics. In this Chapter, important academic debates on the issue of language and ethnicity have been examined in order to highlight various approaches to explore language in relation to ethnic group and evaluate the applicability of the existing theories and concepts for reaching the objectives of this research. A particular attention is paid to the modernist approach to deal with language in the context of modernization and it is shown that a new theoretical framework is needed in order to explain the role of language in contemporary ethnic conflicts. In the next part of this chapter, the notion of ethnic enclosure is introduced, and it is argued that the approach to view ethnic rivalries as attempts at simultaneous inclusion and exclusion (that is, to conduct the policy of ethnic enclosure) can successfully account for the cases of ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus.

In *Chapter Two, ‘Language Policy and the Soviet Ethno-Territorial Division’,* we discuss the process that led to the foundation of the Soviet Union and the importance of ethnic identification in the system of administrative territorial division of the USSR. We describe the trends in the language policy conducted by the Soviet authorities and show the importance attached to the link between ethnic and linguistic identities for the
purposes of status struggle provoked by ethnic discrimination ‘embedded’ in the system of the Soviet ethno-territorial division.

In Chapter Three, ‘Language and the Construction of Ethnogenetic Myths in the Soviet Union’, several key components of the process of ethnogenetic myth formation in the USSR have been explored. The main objective of this Chapter is to show the actual process of creation, maintenance, and dissemination of myths of ethnogenesis that could be used in the process of ethnic enclosure. A particular attention is paid to the discussion of the role of intellectuals in this process and the place devoted to language in historiographic discourses produced by indigenous intellectuals. In addition, it is shown how the teaching of local histories in Soviet autonomies facilitated the spread of ethnocentric myths within a given ethnic groups.

Part II. The Policy of Ethnic Enclosure in the Caucasus

Chapter Four, ‘The Formation of Abkhazian and Georgian Ethnogenetic Myths’ starts with a review of the previous studies of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and provides an overview of linguistic patterns of the population in South Caucasus. Next, we turn to the examination of the legacy of the Russian colonial rule of Abkhazia in the 19th century and the changes of ethno-demographic composition of the region. The focus of attention in the examination of the period after the fall of the Russian monarchy is on the policy conducted in Abkhazia by the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921) as concerns the issue of language and Abkhazian autonomy.

Chapter Five, “Language and Myths in Soviet Abkhazia (1921-1988)”, is devoted to the examination of the mutual Georgian and Abkhazian attempts to conduct the policy of ethnic enclosure in Abkhazia during the period between 1921, the year of the declaration of the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist republic, and the end of the 1980s, when the ability of the central Soviet authorities to control the situation in the South Caucasus greatly weakened and the clash of policies of ethnic enclosure became particularly strong. In this Chapter, we examine the content of Georgian and Abkhazian historiographic discourses, in which language was a fundamental issue. Also, we discuss
an interesting phenomenon of “Abkhazian letters”, a specific feature of the Soviet settings in Abkhazia and an important tool of the status struggle of Abkhazians.

Chapter Six, ‘The Georgian-Abkhazian War and the Persistence of Myths’, continues with the examination of the role and place of language in the conflict, when the conflict turned violent and during the period after the end of the open warfare between Georgia and Abkhazia. Whereas not much space is allocated to the description of military aspects of the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhazian war, enough attention is given to the examination of those actions of belligerent sides that can be explained by the impact of the policy of ethnic enclosure conducted during the Soviet period in Abkhazian history. We also describe the continuation of the attempts at ethnic enclosure of Abkhazia during the period that followed the ceasefire and discuss the role of language in other South Caucasian cases, in particularly in the Georgian-South Ossetian and the Armenian-Azerbaijani ethnic conflicts, in order to show similar patterns with the case of Abkhazia.

Conclusion summarizes the main findings presented in this volume and pointing out the most important academic contributions.

The following sources were consulted during the writing and editing of this volume:

Primary documents became one of the important sources for the empirical part of the work. At the same time, the situation with archive materials and unpublished primary documents deserves a special explanation. When the Georgian army was in control of the Abkhazian capital Akua (Sukhum), an order was issued to destroy the Abkhazian State Archives. On that day (23 October 1992), a great number of documents perished after the Archive’s building was burned down. Many documents kept at the Archives of the Gulia Institute for the Abkhaz language, literature and history were also lost during the war. Nowadays, Abkhazian scholars at the Gulia Institute for Humanitarian Research of the Abkhazian Academy of Science are putting great efforts in order to preserve the remaining documents, but the availability of primary sources
during the visit to Abkhazia in August 2005 was very limited for understandable reasons. Many published primary documents have been used due to the above-mentioned scarcity of direct sources.

In addition to the work with primary documents, interviews were conducted in Sukhum as well as in London and Washington, D.C. The purpose of these interviews was not only to obtain factual information about events in Abkhazia in the past but also to learn about the existing activities to ease ethnic tensions in the South Caucasus in the long run, by improving school and university curricula and organizing meetings between historians along both sides of the barricade.

School textbooks is another key source for this study, because, for the Soviet period, the examination of the textbooks is often the only way of knowing the official version of history, endorsed by the authorities, and the revision of school textbooks played an important role in the processes that are subject of this research. Not least important is the fact that it is at school where most people gain a significant part of their knowledge of the remote past. Therefore, it was considered essential to examine the coverage of language issues in the Soviet and post-Soviet school history and geography textbooks, by selecting for analysis those textbooks, which are representative (say, by the number of copies published) for each period of the modern South Caucasian history. The methodological approach for a comparative study of textbooks was based, mainly, on recommendations given in Pingel (1999) and Seixas (2004) and included both qualitative and quantitative assessments of the textbooks. Some 20 textbooks from Georgia, Abkhazia, Ossetia, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been examined during a research trip to the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in April and May, 2005.

Newspapers and the Internet, which are actively used as propaganda tools for “the creation of the demonized ‘other’ (O’Shaughnessy 2002, 218) turned out to be the other important source of data. The Soviet time newspapers (Sovetskaya Abkhazia, Literaturnaya Abkhazia, Literaturnaya Gruzia, Zariya Vostoka, Pravda and others) were examined at the Russian State Library, whereas the most recent issues of
Abkhazian newspapers were either obtained en situ or from the Internet. About two dozen issues of Abkhazian and other South Caucasian newspapers were available to the author in the digital format.

In addition to the use of the above-mentioned sources, in some parts, the author had to rely on the descriptions provided in secondary sources, especially, for the analysis of the historiographic discourses in Georgia and Abkhazia (Sagariya 1991; Marykhuba 1994; Shnirelman 2001, 2003 and others).

The conflicts examined in this volume are ongoing and the situation is changing everyday. The efforts were made to account for the most recent developments in the Caucasus. However, some omits seem to be unavoidable.