

# Towards a New Paradigm for Linguistic Diversity in the Russian Federation

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**Abstract:** *Russia is a land of many languages – over 150 of them. All in all, Russia has had a relatively good record on accommodating linguistic diversity although matters deteriorated from the 60s onwards under the more 'liberal' leaders. The Russian Federation signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 2001 but has yet to ratify it. Linguistic minorities should press for its ratification and facilitate this by taking a number of practical measures – setting up a web-site to facilitate and exchange of ideas and expertise, establish a network of linguistic minorities, engage in a linguistic community twinning arrangement with small linguistic communities in other countries.*

**Keywords:** *Language, minority, ethnic, Charter, Russian Federation, Europe, community, network.*

Russia is an ethnically and linguistically diverse country. It is estimated that there are no fewer than 150 languages spoken in the Federation. Others, using slightly different criteria, might say as many as 170. This diversity is a great source of enrichment and offers the Federation different perspectives on the world and on the issues facing humankind.

## Looking Back

It was probably only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the most part that states started to develop reasonably sophisticated language policies. Unfortunately very often these policies were negative and focused on imposing one state language on all citizens and on suppressing others. France provides a classic example of this. All in all, Russia remained reasonably tolerant.

The Revolution of 1917 was linguistically quite tolerant. Lenin, while believing that ultimately all humankind would speak the same language, expressed views on the rights of linguistic minorities characterised by democratic sensibilities, quite advanced by the standards of his times. He unambiguously stated the necessity for the State power to prevent linguistic diversity from being repressed within public communication and education. Under Lenin, work began on providing written forms

(mostly based on the Latin alphabet) for hitherto unwritten languages. The mother-tongue was introduced into the schools, and publishing in the national languages increased rapidly. At first, Stalin also opposed the idea of a special role for Russian, and his regime saw the greatest number of non-Russian languages functioning in the widest range of domains.<sup>1</sup> [We should, of course, not forget that Stalin was a Georgian, not a Russian!]

However, the rise of 'stateism' (or state nationalism, as some people would call it) signalled a return to Russian, and a rise in its legal status. Indeed, the languages which had only recently acquired a Latin-based alphabet were changed to a Cyrillic base, in order to facilitate the learning of Russian. Further blows to the national languages were the elimination of many of their native intelligentsia in the purges, the destruction of national cultural treasures and the closing of cultural institutions.

Under Khrushchev, a radical shift occurred in favour of Russian, the 'language of inter-nationality communication' and of 'cooperation of all peoples of the USSR'. Russian was increasingly used in primary education and official correspondence. Brezhnev's policies represented a continuation and intensification of these policies.

It goes without saying that, in the wake of World War II or the Great Patriotic War, as it is usually called in Russia, small ethnic groups accused of collaboration with the invading Germans enjoyed no linguistic or cultural rights. For instance, in the case of the Kalmyks, who were deported to Siberia from 1943 until 1957, their language went into sharp decline during their years of exile as they were scattered over a wide area and mixed with other deportees and indigenous Siberian peoples. Even on their return, the Kalmyk language was taught only after school hours and as an optional subject. Chechnyan was not allowed to be taught at all in Chechnyan schools, a fact that the Western media seemed to have overlooked when commenting on the causes of the recent conflict there!

### **A New Era and New Policies**

When the Communist era came to an end and things started to change, a new era of hope dawned. But the new day has not been as bright as first thought. In the new Constitution of the Russian Federation, enacted in 1993, Russian is declared to be the official state language on all of its territory. (Article 68, Section 1) Each republic has the right to instate its own official language, to be used alongside Russian in administrative and state business (Article 68, Section 2). Section 3 states that 'The Russian Federation guarantees all its peoples the right to the preservation of [their] native language, and to the creation of conditions for its study and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Isabelle Kreindler, *The changing status of Russian in the Soviet Union*, The Hague, 1982.

development. Moreover the Constitution mandates that the federal state bear some responsibility for training specialists in those languages of the Federation which do not have their own government.<sup>2</sup>

All very commendable on paper and indeed in practice in some instances! [If the French Government, for instance, were to devolve such powers to the Conseil Régional de Bretagne the Breton language would be on a much sounder basis that it is today.] This devolution of authority and responsibility worked well in those republics where the autochthonous or native population was in a majority position or, at least forms a very substantial minority e.g. Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, or your near neighbour, the Tuvan Republic. The problem is that the autochthonous population in very many republics and autonomous regions is in a minority, even in their own titular republic. From anecdotal evidence I gathered from concerned parties in the North Caucasus, Europe's so-called 'mountain of languages', it appears to me that some of the local languages are becoming moribund with intergenerational transmission at a dangerously low level. You had another classic example of this weakness here in Khakassia within the past year when a modest proposal to have the Khakass form of place names appear on road signs, alongside the Russian ones, was defeated. Nevertheless, there is real progress in other cases e.g. in Kalmykia where a language revitalisation policy is under way.

### Need for a New Departure

I suggest that the time is now ripe to take new and imaginative steps to conserve and promote linguistic diversity in the Russian Federation. What I propose relates both to the Federal authorities and to the minority language communities themselves.

Russia signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 2001 but has yet to ratify it.<sup>3</sup>

An instrument of ratification would again place a clear international obligation on the Federal Government to ensure at least minimum support for all of the Federation's 150+ regional languages. This would be fully in harmony with Article 68.3 of the Russian constitution which, as we already observed, places an obligation on the Russian Federation to guarantee 'all its peoples the right to the preservation of [their] native language, and to the creation of conditions for its study and development'. Such a move would be a major step in ensuring true democracy and human rights. As recently as 18 June of this year, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Mr Knut Vollebaek, observed that:

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lenore A. Grenoble and Lindsay J. Whaley, *Saving Languages – an introduction to language revitalization*, Cambridge, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> I was involved in a Council of Europe delegation that met the Federal authorities in Moscow at that time and we were given to understand that ratification would follow within about five years. That target date has now passed.

*Linguistic rights are the quintessence of minority rights. The prevention of inter-ethnic conflicts goes hand in hand with the establishment of an adequate system of protection for linguistic rights'.<sup>4</sup>*

By ratifying the Charter Russia would take a major step in giving practical effect to its constitutional provisions on language.

### **What would Ratification of the ECRML imply?**

All ratifying states agree to apply Part II of the Charter to all regional or minority languages used on its territories. This part, which deals with objectives and principles contains only one article – Article 7. This article reads:

#### *Article 7 – Objectives and principles*

1. In respect of regional or minority languages, within the territories in which such languages are used and according to the situation of each language, the Parties shall base their policies, legislation and practice on the following objectives and principles:
  - (a) the recognition of the regional or minority languages as an expression of cultural wealth;
  - (b) the respect of the geographical area of each regional or minority language in order to ensure that existing or new administrative divisions do not constitute an obstacle to the promotion of the regional or minority language in question;
  - (c) the need for resolute action to promote regional or minority languages in order to safeguard them;
  - (d) the facilitation and/or encouragement of the use of regional or minority languages, in speech and writing, in public and private life;
  - (e) the maintenance and development of links, in the fields covered by this Charter, between groups using a regional or minority language and other groups in the State employing a language used in identical or similar form, as well as the establishment of cultural relations with other groups in the State using different languages;
  - (f) the provision of appropriate forms and means for the teaching and study of regional or minority languages at all appropriate stages;
  - (g) the provision of facilities enabling non-speakers of a regional or minority language living in the area where it is used to learn it if they so desire;

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<sup>4</sup> Ambassador Knut Vollebaek speaking in Oslo at a conference to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Oslo Recommendations Regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities [http://www.osce.org/hcnm/item\\_1\\_31749.html](http://www.osce.org/hcnm/item_1_31749.html)

- (h) the promotion of study and research on regional or minority languages at universities or equivalent institutions;
  - (i) the promotion of appropriate types of transnational exchanges, in the fields covered by this Charter, for regional or minority languages used in identical or similar form in two or more States.
2. The Parties undertake to eliminate, if they have not yet done so, any unjustified distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference relating to the use of a regional or minority language and intended to discourage or endanger the maintenance or development of it. The adoption of special measures in favour of regional or minority languages aimed at promoting equality between the users of these languages and the rest of the population or which take due account of their specific conditions is not considered to be an act of discrimination against the users of more widely-used languages.
  3. The Parties undertake to promote, by appropriate measures, mutual understanding between all the linguistic groups of the country and in particular the inclusion of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to regional or minority languages among the objectives of education and training provided within their countries and encouragement of the mass media to pursue the same objective.
  4. In determining their policy with regard to regional or minority languages, the Parties shall take into consideration the needs and wishes expressed by the groups which use such languages. They are encouraged to establish bodies, if necessary, for the purpose of advising the authorities on all matters pertaining to regional or minority languages.
  5. The Parties undertake to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, the principles listed in paragraphs 1 to 4 above to non-territorial languages. However as far as these languages are concerned, the nature and scope of the measures to be taken to give effect to this Charter shall be determined in a flexible manner, bearing in mind the needs and wishes, and respecting the traditions and characteristics, of the groups which use the languages concerned.

The Federal Government would in addition apply Part III to certain languages – the stronger ones that enjoy fairly comprehensive support measures. Part III contains articles on Education, the Administration of Justice, Public Administration, Media, Cultural Activities and Facilities, Economic and Social Life and Transfrontier Cooperation. Each article contains many paragraphs and sub-paragraphs. A ratifying government must apply a minimum of 35 paragraphs or sub-paragraphs to each language covered by Part III. I fully accept that Russia could accord Part III coverage to only some of its 150+ languages as of now but Part III coverage could be

applied to additional languages as the circumstances permitted. This is evident from Paragraph 50 of the Explanatory Report on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages:

It is also clear that, at any time, a party may accept new obligations, for example by extending to an additional regional or minority language the benefit of the provisions of Part III of the Charter or by subscribing, in respect of a language or all the minority or regional languages spoken on its territory, to paragraphs of the charter not previously accepted.

I wonder if it would be appropriate for the Conference to adopt a resolution along these lines and forward it to the Federal authorities in Moscow?!

### **Non-Governmental Organisations and a Network for Linguistic Diversity**

In democratic societies Non-Governmental Organisations [NGOs] often play leading roles in language promotion. This has not yet happened widely in Russia. I suggest that it is time for it to start happening.

In practical terms what I am proposing that Russia's linguistic minorities organise themselves into a network and take imaginative and coordinated initiatives on behalf of their languages. For convenience sake, let's call it the Russian Network for Linguistic Diversity [RNLD]. The objectives of such a network would be to:

- Facilitate a sharing of information and experience among the various language communities themselves;
- Act as a forum for discussing new ideas;
- Formulate and make joint representations to the Federal authorities;
- Develop contacts with small linguistic communities outside of Russia and share expertise with them;
- Investigate sources of funding for language promotional projects e.g. certain EU programmes, European Cultural Foundation and the Soros Foundation:  
*and*
- Develop a sense of common purpose and solidarity.

How such a network or union could be organised, one might ask! The cost would surely be prohibitive. Not necessarily so, I think! I envisage a network that would function virtually i.e. using modern information and communication technology. The centrepiece would be an excellent website. The website would encompass such elements as:

- A. A notice-board where information on developments such as new publications, new policy initiatives, upcoming conferences etc. might be posted;

- B. Chat-rooms where interested people could discuss aspects of language promotion such as early childhood bilingualism, the production of teaching materials, teacher training etc.;
- C. A 'virtual library' of academic papers made available by academics from universities around the Russian Federation and from abroad; *and*
- D. Up-to-date information on funding opportunities.

A quarterly and eventually a monthly electronic newsletter might be added.

What would be essential would be a small steering committee and a reliable web-master. The members of the network's committee might meet physically only once a year. Meetings might be tied in with conferences or other events and could be hosted by a republic or autonomous region.

I would like to emphasise at this point that I see the RNLD working with Federal Authorities in a spirit of cooperation and solidarity – not in any confrontational sense.

### **Language Community Twinning**

I would suggest that the RNLD could organise a programme of language community twinings. This would involve minority language communities in the Russian Federation and similar communities in other countries. The programme would operate along similar lines to those obtaining in the case of town twinings. Obviously, language communities in similar situations should be paired. A strong community, such as the Tatars would be paired with a strong one in Western Europe e.g. the Catalans. The Bashkirs might be twinned with the Welsh, the Kalmyks with the Irish, the Volga Germans with the Südtirol and the Khakassians with the West Frisians etc. The active support of the newly-formed Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity [NPLD],<sup>5</sup> which enjoys European Union funding, should be sought.

I hasten to add that twinning need not, nor should not, be limited to Western European linguistic minorities. The programme might include communities from other continents (e.g. the Maori in New Zealand, Native Americans in the USA or Berbers in North Africa)

But what practical benefits would flow from such a twinning programme? For a start it would help to develop a spirit of cooperation and solidarity. It would facilitate and exchange of ideas and experiences. Books and other publications would be exchanged, speakers invited to conferences, seminars and symposia. Study visits would be organised and work experience programmes for young people put in place. The information gathered would be made available on the RNLD, NPLD and other web-sites.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.npld.eu/Pages/default.aspx>

### **Workshops**

A further initiatives the RNLD might undertake would be to organise workshops on various aspects of language planning in different parts of Russia. Languages cannot be legislated into life. Legal provisions can create a framework in which a language may grow but it requires careful and detailed language planning to make it happen. There have been many advances in language planning in recent years and some of us in the Abakan Action group would be happy to make our services available free of charge.

### **Looking Forward**

Are these proposals over-ambitious? I don't think so. They would require planning and a fair amount of organisational work in the initial stages. But once up and running they should develop its own dynamic.

Let me go a step further! Could or should the Khakass State University take a leading role in this work? I am convinced that you have people here with the ability and the energy.

The support of Linguapax would, I feel sure, be forthcoming. The aim of Linguapax is to rally linguistic communities worldwide around the belief that languages, as essential vehicles of identity and cultural expression are inseparable from the goals of peace and intercultural understanding. Might you have a Linguapax Centre here that would serve as a hub for Siberian language communities?

If you of you think my proposals are unrealistic and over-ambitious, I do not blame you. They may sound so. But my main message is clear. New and imaginative measures are needed to conserve and revitalise your languages. The conservation of linguistic and cultural diversity is a global issue. And it is a struggle we can and must win. I offer you the warm greetings of Abakan Action as well the goodwill and support of people in different parts of the world who share our dream of unity in peace and diversity.