

Language Policy in Russia: the Case Study of the Yakut Language

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Introduction

According to the population census of 2002 the number of various ethnic groups inhabiting the Russian Federation is as high as 180 and represent about 28 million people, i.e. about 20 percent of the population worldwide. They occupy a vast area of Eurasia, from the Baltic in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the East, and from the Arctic in the North to the Caucasus in the South. There are large nations represented by millions of people (for example, the Russians comprise 83 percent of the population and are numbered in millions), medium-number population groups – some 50.000 to several hundred thousand (for example, the Yakuts count for 432.290 people), and minority ethnic groups, from less than 50.000 down to a single person. According to data published in 1992 there are 63 of such minority ethnic groups, more than 63 of them living in the North of Russia. (Neroznak, 2000).

The multiethnic composition of the Russian Federation presupposes state support for the development of all the ethnoses, of their culture and languages. Regarding the subject under discussion it means that there should be an uttered state policy including language legislation.

It is obvious that the purposes and aims of language policy and language planning are dependent upon the individual linguistic content. The paper aims to analyze the state language situation and to overview the approach toward the maintenance and development of the national language in the Sakha Republic.

Language policy and linguistic contact in the Russian Federation

Language policy in the Russian Federation

The democratic processes started with the Perestroika in the former Soviet Union highlighted the drawbacks in the national policy of the country, which had been neglected before. Among them were issues concerned with national identity development and maintenance of minority languages. Most minority languages were in the process of extinction or endangered. The strive to revive a sense of national self-identity as well as endangered languages created a feeling of urgency, sometimes leading titular nations to make radical decisions in order to protect their languages and identity. The former Soviet republics started one by one to adopt language laws that proclaimed the languages of titular nations the state languages. Many politicians and sociolinguists are of the opinion that the nationalist and linguistic issues, along with others, became the key stones in the break-up of the USSR and in some cases the language decrees and laws were direct causes of the armed conflicts, for example in Moldova. The language reforms started in the Soviet republics in 1989 has made Russia oversee the linguistic situation and adopt the relevant decrees. Russia was the last to adopt the law on languages after all the other republics of the former Soviet Union. Let us bring to your attention the main documents regulating language policy in Russia in the chronological order.

In the Law “On the languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation” adopted on October 25, 1991, the languages of all the peoples inhabiting this country are declared to be national property, part of the historical and cultural heritage protected by the state. According to

the Law on Languages, "On the territory of the RSFSR (former Soviet republic of Russia) the State shall guarantee language sovereignty of a person irrespective of the origin of a person, his or her social and material position, racial and national background, sex, education, and religion" (art.2.2). In the number of the articles of this law the languages of the minority ethnic groups are guaranteed state support, provision of necessary conditions for their preservation and further development (art.6), assistance in providing various forms of education and teaching in their native language, irrespective of the number of speakers but in accordance with their needs (art. 9.5); "any nation ... lacking a writing system of his own has the right to introduce and adopt writing in his native tongue" (art. 10.4).

"The Russian language, being the main means of the cross-national communication of the peoples of the RSFSR according to the historical and cultural traditions, has the status of the state language on the territory of the RSFSR" (art. 3.2).

The Law on Education adopted on July 10, 1992 (revised January 13, 1996) makes reference to the Law on Languages, where language policy in the field of education is concerned (art. 6.1), gives the citizens all rights to receive basic education in a mother tongue as well as to choose the language of instruction within the scope of possibilities provided by the educational system (art. 6.2).

The legal regulations concerning the languages of the peoples of Russia and guarantees for their development are confirmed on the constitutional level. The constitution of the Russian Federation adopted on December 12, 1993 prohibits propagation of language superiority (art.29.2), recognizes Russian as the official state language, provides the right of republics within the federation to introduce their own official state languages and guarantees to all the people of the Russian Federation the right to maintain their mother tongues and appropriate conditions for their study and cultivation (art.68).

Two other important documents are the federal law "On general principles to organize local self-government" of August 28, 1995, which relates municipal schooling to local self-government (art. 6.2.6) and the federal law "On national and cultural autonomy" of June 17, 1996, which proclaims state protection of mother tongues (art.8), provides the right to maintain and cultivate mother tongues (art. 9), recognizes the rights to receive basic education in a native tongue and also to choose the language of instruction (art.10, 11, 12).

And finally, the preservation and development of the

languages and cultures of the Russian peoples is one of the priorities formulated in the Concept of the State National Policy of the Russian Federation, which was confirmed by the President in 1996.

The diversity and ethnolinguistic situation in Russia alongside with the diverse panorama of different types of bilingualism and multilingualism, unpredictable development of ethnopolitical situations, endless arguments between those who were for and against the language reform – these factors alongside with the other ones did not allow the Russian Federation to elaborate and to start fulfilling the state programs for implementation of provisions of the language acts (Guboglo, 1998).

Linguistic context in the Russian Federation

The ethnopolitical situation in Russia is characterized by a historically developed combination of national-territorial and administrative-territorial principles of the state organization. According to the Constitution of 1993 (art. 65), the Russian Federation is composed of 89 subjects including 21 republics (Adygeia, Altai, Bashkiria, Buriatia, Chechnia, Chuvashia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia, Karachaevo-Cherkess, Karelia, Khakassia, Komi, Mari El, Mordovia, North Ossetia, Tatarstan, Tuva, Udmurtia, Yakutia-Sakha), one autonomous region, and ten autonomous areas, six territories, 49 regions, two cities of federal status (Moscow and St. Petersburg).

Russian is the state language and the means of cross-cultural communication, and the Russians account for 83 percent of the population in the Russian Federation. The analysis of the population census reveals some important tendencies in the linguistic process in modern Russia. The difference in indexes of linguistic "russification" of some peoples has turned out to be significant, rising from a small number to 70 percent and more. The highest indexes are those of numerically weak ethnic groups, especially of the aboriginal peoples of Siberia and the Far North. Some representatives of the minority peoples of the North do not use their mother tongues in their everyday life.

The Constitutions of practically all the republics declare two state languages. The exceptions are: the Constitutions of Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Mordovia – multilingualism, in North Ossetia – Russian and Ossetian (both dialects). The extended language decrees of peoples, living on the territory of a corresponding republic, are adopted in Tatarstan, Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, Chuvashia, Sakha-Yakutia, Tuva, Buryatia, Ka-

Imykia, Khakassia, Udmurtia, Bashkortostan.

The language decrees in the republics have been based on the respective federal laws adopting to a great extent their structure, conceptual framework and the interpretation of some articles. In accordance with the language decrees of the republics, the language of the peoples of the corresponding republics enjoy the protection of the state, and the latter provides for the social, economic and legal protection of the languages irrespective of their statuses. Yet the decrees of republics differ from federal ones in their stress on priorities; the former are mainly preoccupied with providing condition for revival, preservation and development of the languages of titular nations.

The main component of the republics concerning the language preservation, development and study are chapters devoted to the titular nation languages, where they provide for the development of the educational system in the national language, the training of scientific and teaching staff, the development of literature, science and art, TV and radio broadcasting.

At present a number of national republics, including the republic of Sakha-Yakutia, Tatarstan, Chuvashia, Buryatia, Kalmykia and several republics of the North Caucasus have worked out their programs concerning the preservation and development of their languages, which may be called national-regional programs.

Linguistic context and language policy in the Republic Sakha-Yakutia

In the Republic Sakha-Yakutia, as well as in other subjects of the Russian Federation, the language policy is an important part of the state policy and is aimed at the development of languages and their interaction in all the spheres of the society.

The state languages of the Republic Sakha-Yakutia are Sakha, also known as Yakut, spoken by approximately 25 percent of the population, and Russian. The Yakut language is Turkic with Mongolian influence and some borrowings from Sakha's Paleosiberian indigenous peoples. Besides, five other languages (Even, Evenk, Yuk-aghir, Chukchi and Dolgan) are used as official.

On November 19, 2002, the President of the Republic of Sakha-Yakutia issued the decree on forming the language policy Council. The latter is to create better conditions for the state and official languages development and interaction. The Council is also aimed at defending individual rights in the use of languages.

Ethnolinguistic conditions of languages functioning in Yakutia are following. According to the 2002 Census, Yakuts make up 45.5 percent of the republic's population. Other groups include Russians (41.2 percent), Ukrainians (3.7 percent), Evenks (1.9 percent), Evens (1.2 percent), Tatars (1.1 percent), Buryats (0.8 percent), Bielarusians (0.5 percent), and a host of smaller groups, each accounting for less than 0.5 percent of the total population. 2.630 people (0.3 percent) did not indicate their nationalities during the Census.

The language of cross-national communication is Russian. It is also the main language used in the educational domain.

According to statistical data presented on April 15, 2002 by the Ministry of Education of the Republic Sakha-Yakutia, there are 680 institutions of secondary edu-

Language of instruction	In towns	In villages	Total
Russian	165	74	239
Yakut	4	352	356
Bilingual	29	56	85

cation in the republic. In the figure the correlation of schools according to the language of instruction in the town and village schools is illustrated.

In all the schools Russian is taught from the 1st to the 11th class as a compulsory subject. In the schools with the Yakut language of instruction nearly all the subjects are taught in Yakut in primary classes, with the gradual transition to Russian in the 5th class. Beginning with the 6th class mathematics, geometry, physics and chemistry have been taught in Russian since 1965.

The primary language reproduction units are the family and the community, via the classic route of grandparents – parents – children. But grown up people living in towns tend to speak more Russian in their everyday life.

Each of the 34 regions of Yakutia has its own TV and radio broadcasting station. TV and radio shows are broadcast in Yakut in 8 regions, in Russian – in 11 regions, and in both languages – in 15 regions. Since 2002, the national channel, NVK, broadcasts three days a week in Russian and two days – in Yakut.

134 daily and weekly newspapers are issued in the Republic. Nearly half of them are published in Yakut. Many residents of Yakutia subscribe for the central newspapers and magazines in Russian. Also, more books are bought and read in libraries in Russian.

Russian is used during the sessions of the House of the

State Assembly, different conferences, meetings, lectures. The texts of laws of the Republic Sakha-Yakutia and other legal documents are published in the state languages. The state languages are used in the activities of the administrative authorities, local government bodies, enterprises, offices and organizations including texts of forms, stamps, seals, sign boards, official papers such as passports, certificates of birth, marriage and death, etc.

Voting and referendum papers are drawn up in Russian, but in accordance with a decision of the Electoral Commission, these papers can be published in Yakut alongside with Russian.

In the cinema, films are shown in Russian. Yet there are several amateur short films in Yakut.

Conclusion

Despite some positive changes in the favour of the Yakut language and culture the situation remains grave. Being legally equal, Yakut and Russian are not functionally equal, divided by the spheres of their application: Russian is mainly used in the official, educational, scientific

and informational spheres, while Yakut is important in the sphere of national culture and as a household language and only for part of the population it fulfills educational and informational functions. Of course, the language policy adopted by the local government positively affected the Yakut people by adding to their self-identity, self-esteem, social connectedness and links with their heritage.

Languages are considered to be highly viable and extremely flexible systems, but they should be protected and promoted to effect revival and reversal. Most of minority languages in Russia find themselves in the dangerous situation, that is why they need state protection and support.

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