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An Ethnolinguistic conflict on the compulsory learning of the state languages in the republics of Russia: policies and discourses

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ABSTRACT

Until recently, not only students of the titular nationalities (ethnicities) learned their native language but also ethnic Russians and other nationalities in some ethnic republics of Russia had to learn titular state languages of those republics. The political campaign in Russia against the compulsory teaching of state languages of republics started two years ago and culminated in the adoption of the amendment to the Russian education law on 3 August 2018.¹ The law enacted some additional mechanisms to ensure the voluntary study of non-Russian languages.² The law adoption signified the escalation of the conflict around linguistic rights and the compulsory study of state language. The problem is that the official discourses typically overshadow the discourses of individuals and non-governmental organization who have their own language attitudes and agendas, which distorts the depiction of the conflict. In this paper, we will study official and public discourses together, combining the 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' perspectives, in order to explore both the language policy and language ideologies, and, thus, to provide a multifaceted picture of the conflict. We use policy analysis and discourse analysis to study official documents, surveys, mass media, social media discussions.

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1. Russia's language legislation and linguistic rights

Russia is nominally a federal state that consists of republics, autonomous districts and regular administrative regions. Republics and autonomous districts are titled after their 'titular' ethnic groups and pursued language policies to promote 'titular languages'. The 1993 Russian Constitution recognised everyone's right to use his or her native language, to a free choice of the language of communication, upbringing, education, and creative work. The 1991 Language Law and the 1992 Education Law recognised the right of citizens to receive basic secondary education in their native language and to choose the language of instruction within the range of possibilities offered by the education system as well as to

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learn it; the authorities have to ensure this right by establishment of the necessary number of corresponding education establishments, classes, groups, as well as by creating conditions for their functioning. However, these are not individual but collective rights and their implementation depends on the regions that create the possibilities to study languages. Therefore, this is not a rights-based but a policy-based approach that lays at the foundation of Russia's language policy: despite the recognition of some individual language rights, law serves mostly just as a mechanism to enforce policy and not so much to restrict policy by individual rights.³

The federal state guarantees all its peoples the right to preserve their native language and to create the conditions for its study and development.⁴ The main device to fulfil the guarantee is language status planning. The Constitution designated Russian as the state language of the entire country and recognised the right of republics to have their constitutions and to establish their state languages. The latter was a postfactum legitimation of what most republics had already done back in 1990 in their declarations of state sovereignty. Almost all republics of Russia established in their constitutions both their 'titular' language(s) and Russian as their state languages.⁵ Therefore, status planning is the devices used both at the central and the republics' level.

The status of state language of a republic was envisaged both as a symbol of the republics' national statehood and as a practical tool to promote titular languages by introducing their compulsory use. The designation of the co-official status was a compromise in the republics, and between the republics and Moscow. The power constellations allowed the introduction in some republics of certain elements of compulsory use.

The status of state language was not defined in the Russian legislation but in the post-Soviet context it typically combined the symbolic function of the national language and the practical function of the official language as the language for compulsory use in the public sphere.⁶

The republics' authorities justified the compulsoriness of the state languages of republics arguing that the republics were established as the states. Thus, state languages were another feature of the national statehood, where the 'titular nations' had a 'state-founding' role. In other words, those republics that introduced the compulsory teaching of their titular languages as state languages by all schoolchildren irrespective of their ethnicity claimed to have done it on the same ground as the teaching of Russian is compulsory for all schoolchildren in Russia.

At the same time, the parallel co-official status implanted the problem for implementation of the practical use of non-Russian languages because Russian had already been used in all domains of the public sphere. The parallel status of Russian prevented fully-fledged official bilingualism, so that the titular languages could become compulsory for use only in some republics and in some spheres.⁷

Several republics established in their constitutions the requirement for the compulsory knowledge of both state languages of the republic by the head of republic. Some Russian scholars interpreted this requirement as a manifestation of 'mobilized linguisticism' that prevented access to power to members of the local ethnic Russian elites who typically had no knowledge of the titular languages.⁸ About one third of republics established compulsory teaching of their state languages as a study subject to all students irrespective of their ethnicity, that is, also to ethnic Russian students. Some republics also introduced the requirement of the titular language knowledge for some categories of public officials. For several reasons, we pay special attention in this analysis to the cases of Tatarstan and

Bashkortostan. In both republics, all students were required to study their official languages, regardless of their nationality, but the educational situation in these republics was different. It was in these republics (especially in Tatarstan) that there were the most noticeable protests against and for the compulsory study of the Tatar and Bashkir languages, so it was to these republics that the attention of the Federal centre was drawn. Finally, it was in these two republics (especially Tatarstan) that social activism around the topic we are considering was most noticeable.

Policy formation: Erosion of non-Russian language Provision

Policy formation includes the identification of the problem, agenda-setting and policy formulation. During the Soviet times, the ethnic Russians did not have to learn non-Russian languages, and perceived the introduction in the early 1990s of the compulsory study of titular languages as a problem.

The policymakers in republics realised that the amount of teaching of state languages was not sufficient to develop communicative skills of non-speakers. However, they insisted that learning had a symbolic value, because the acquaintance with titular languages should have promoted among the republics' populations the vision of the republics as multilingual communities and, thus, to serve as a mechanism of diversity management. In Tatarstan, the survey data provided some evidence that the compulsory teaching contributed to the development of positive attitudes to the titular language among the Russian-speaking population. However, there is in no case a unilateral relation between the symbolic value and language attitudes and much depends on the specific situation.

Policy shapes beliefs about what languages are valuable and worth to study. For example, the belief that foreign language like English is more important for study than Tatar is directly shaped by the fact that the former is in the Final State Examination and the latter is not. This is a policy when the situation is created that children and parents have to choose either English or Tatar. The belief about language prestige might be substantiated by arguments of the number of speakers in the world and the like. Indeed, motivation to learn English are higher because of the international dominance of American culture. Any other language could hardly compete with the international prestige of English. Yet, ineffective language-teaching methodologies similarly apply to Tatar and English. Despite the State Exam, only few individuals would actually gain a command of English in school. Further, coming to language practices, Tatarstani inhabitants would arguably encounter Tatar more often on a regular basis in their everyday life.

Language ideologies are shaped by language planning. Often the level of support for the compulsory teaching of the titular language was raising among the titular group. This happened, for example, in Mari El, one of republics. At the same time, the support was falling among the Russians throughout the post-Soviet period. Given the prevailing monolingual language ideology, the Russian-speakers took languages for their instrumental value and denied any benefits for their children in learning languages that are not their mother tongue. Moreover, they preferred to live in monolingual environment.⁹

Accordingly, the demands to abolish compulsory language study have continually been present in the discourse and were publicly voiced from time to time by some organisations that claimed to present the interests of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers.

Since the late 1990s, the Kremlin began to take measures to strengthen the position of the Russian language, which caused a weakening of the positions of other languages in the public sphere. After a Russian Constitutional Court ruling of 2001, the regional provisions on language requirements for republican presidency candidates were deemed unconstitutional as the regions were not entitled to regulate human and civil rights and thus to impose restrictions on passive suffrage: the right to be elected.¹⁰

At the same time, the compulsory study of the state languages of the republics by all schoolchildren, regardless of their ethnicity, continued and its constitutionality was confirmed by a decision of the Constitutional Court of Russia of 2004. In 2004, a decision of the Constitutional Court fixed a compromise between the Kremlin and Tatarstan on the language issue. The Court ruled that Tatarstan cannot switch the Tatar language's alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin because it had no jurisdiction to do this but recognised that it was in the jurisdiction of regional authorities to make the teaching of the non-Russian languages as the state languages of republics compulsory.¹¹

In parallel with the emergence of authoritarian tendencies in the early 2000s, Russian-speaking parents began to oppose the compulsory study of titular languages more often. They created social networks, organised rallies and filed complaints with the courts with the intention to politicise the problem. The following statement from Tatarstan was represented as a typical complaint:

Pupils in our schools spend 5–6 h a week studying the Tatar language, at the expense of core subjects (Russian, literature, mathematics and, in the senior years, physics and drawing). To give an example, 5 h are spent studying Russian language and literature instead of 8 h. Neither the children nor the parents are happy with this situation. We are not against our children studying the Tatar language, but the classes should be limited to 2 h per week or else made optional. After all, there are specialist schools in the republic for anyone who wishes to study the native Tatar language in greater depth. The curriculum is seriously flawed, with the result that pupils end up knowing neither Russian nor Tatar. And this has been going on for many years. Parents are obliged to pay private tutors to tutor their children in the core subjects from year 1 onwards. We live in Russia and are a subject of the Russian Federation, so why should our children be educated differently?¹²

These complaints were used by the authorities as a justification of the language aspects of the educational reform in 2007, aimed at weakening the position of non-Russian languages. The education reform stripped the republics' education agencies from the power to pursue their own education policies and enforced the free choice of the language learning that now had to be defined exclusively by children, their parents and schools (the similar twist was used in the Soviet 1958 education reform). The reform provoked an outrage in the republics, and after the negotiations they were assured that the state language teaching will continue.¹³

By the mid-2000s, with the abolition of the election of presidents and heads of republics, their statehood was essentially levelled and federalism was effectively undermined. In recent years, in some republics, Russian-speaking citizens continued to organise protests against the compulsory study of the state languages of the republics. Complaints to the courts were filed, primarily in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chuvashia and Komi. Some Russian-speaking parents and also some parents of the titular nationalities argued against the compulsory teaching of the titular languages because allegedly it was carried out at the expense of the core subjects. For example, in 2011 one citizen complained

the legal provisions that oblige him to study the Chuvash language as a state language ‘violate the constitutional right of everyone to free choice of the language of communication, education and training’. Another citizen in 2011 believed that ‘the compulsory study of the Komi language by students limits the possibility of in-depth study of other compulsory subjects of the curriculum’. These views, that were rejected by the courts, reflected the monolingual attitudes, that study time cannot be wasted on these useless languages without future, because the children should rather prepare for the unified state examination which is held in Russian. Ethnic activists arranged counteractions in favour of such teaching and emphasised the role of languages as the core of the ‘national identity’. Yet, the official policymakers did not react to the demands to abolish the compulsory teaching. The possibility of the compulsory study of the titular state languages was preserved also in the new 2012 federal law on education.¹⁴

Policy formation: de facto abolishment of the compulsory study of the state languages of republics in 2017

In Russia, the establishment of an authoritarian regime by the late 2010s included a major shift also in the nationalities policy, especially after 2014. Under the authoritarian regime, the Kremlin single-handedly defines political agenda, and the new agenda-setting also was a top-down initiative. In the last years, there were neither relevant changes in the legislations of the republics regarding the teaching of titular languages, nor other new circumstances that would have triggered the new move towards the abolishment of their compulsory learning. The problem was set on the agenda after the statement of President Putin. In his statement on the issue at the session of the Council for Interethnic Relations in July 2017, he announced that ‘forcing the person to learn a language which is not his/her native is impermissible’.¹⁵

Subsequently, the regional Public Prosecutor’s Offices initiated inspections in schools, whether this was also implemented. In the following months, the activity of Russian-speaking parents who opposed the compulsory study of titular languages increased.¹⁶ Accordingly, the authorities referred to the opinions of parents who portrayed teaching of the titular languages to be at the expense of Russian. Such arguments were part of the official discourse that emphasises the deteriorating position of the Russian language not only abroad but also in some republics of Russia, its ‘degradation’ in political and socio-economic terms, the worsening of its knowledge and its ‘contamination with the foreign words’ as well as ‘the factual displacement of Russian from the school curricula in favour of the national language’. In recent years, academic publications have emerged in which language policy is viewed as a matter of national security.¹⁷

Policy formulation

In spring 2018, a draft law on the amendments to the federal law on education entered the legislative process. The main goal of the initial draft was the removal of the compulsory teaching of state languages of republics based on the restrictive interpretation of the official status of languages reducing it only to its symbolic function. The removal of the last elements of the republics’ status serves the unification of the educational sphere. In essence, the unifying agenda is driven by the ideologies of linguistic nationalism and

linguistic assimilation that envisage monolingualism as the norm. All the four major parties in the last decade to a larger or lesser degree support the Russian nationalist agenda in its varieties.¹⁸ Notably, all the four parties, United Russia, Communist Party, Liberal Democratic Party, and A Just Russia, backed the law draft.

Only individual voices of deputies from republics were heard that challenged the draft as such, while most expressed indirect criticism, pointing at a general miserable condition of minority language education in Russia. The MPs of the minority background share with the majority the ideology of linguistic nationalism and its belief in the central role of language for identity. At the same time, they tend to hold the ideology of linguistic pluralism and envisage multilingualism as a normal condition.

Among their suggestions, the compulsory teaching of native languages only to children of the respective ethnicity was proposed as a possible compromise. However, now this proposal was rejected based on the argument about the free self-identification of ethnic identity, that is, the constitutional right that 'no one may be forced to determine and indicate his or her nationality' (Article 26.1) and, thus, forced to learn languages against 'the right to use his or her native language, to a free choice of the language of communication, upbringing, education' (Article 26.2). In 2006, the Supreme Court of Adygea, in its decision, abolished the compulsory study of the Adyghe language by pupils of the Adyghe nationality because it 'infringes upon and restricts the rights of citizens according to their language and nationality'. A collision emerged when, as a result of bargaining in the aftermath of the education reform of 2007, the compulsory study of the state languages of republics was recognised as legal, although as a general rule and not for a specific ethnic group. In 2009, Russia's Supreme Court did not find any violation of the federal legislation in the obligation to learn native languages in Dagestan because this concerned schools and not schoolchildren.¹⁹

This raises the question: what is native language? Can the phrase of Putin be interpreted in reverse that it is permissible to force the person to learn his/her native language? Since the Soviet times, ethnic and linguistic identities coincide even if by virtue of the assimilation processes, some people, declaring the corresponding ethnic identity, do not speak or have little command of the language that they defined as their native language.²⁰

The separate inclusion in the draft at the second parliamentary reading of a clause mentioning Russian among the native languages, which was not the main concern of the initial draft, made this new goal explicit. The proposal was represented as a sample piece of equality and sounded well in its symmetry, when both the Russian and non-Russian languages are taught as native and state language. However, these are the multifold nationalist ideologies that backed the issue.

Until recently, the civic version of Russian nationalism has been at the centre of domestic official discourse. The Russian citizens consider the Russian state as the most important marker that unites them with their fellow citizens (66%), along with the territory (54%), the (Russian) language (49%) and others.²¹ The ethnic version of Russian nationalism seeks to 'rehabilitate' the (ethnic) Russians as an ethnic people. Since the 1990s, the ethnic Russian nationalists, that were at that time on the margins of the political discourse, sought the attention of the state to address the 'Russian question'. The recent amendments to the Russian constitution adopted at an extraconstitutional procedure of 'All-Russia Voting' on 1 July 2020 for the first time mentions the (ethnic) Russians as 'a state-founding people, which is a member of the multinational union of equal-in-rights peoples of the

Russian Federation' (Article 68.1). In this context, the formulation of the clause contains a symbolic affirmation of the (ethnic) Russian people and explicitly states that Russian can also be a native language. The imperial version of Russian nationalism envisages 'compatriots living abroad' as part of the Russian nation. A new paragraph added by the same amendments for the first time mentions these people in the Constitution and states '[t]he Russian Federation provides support to compatriots living abroad in the exercise of their rights, ensuring the protection of their interests and preserving the all-Russia cultural identity' (Article 69.3). For defining 'compatriots living abroad', the lowest denominator in the Russian nationalist discourse abroad is the Russian language.²²

2. Growing of the saliency of the Russian ethnic identity

The context, which partly stimulated the expressions of support of voluntariness, was the strengthening of the Russian ethnic identity and the importance of language to the identity for ethnic Russians.

So, in 2015, 75% of respondents of different nationalities from the nationwide poll²³ conducted at the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences considered language to be one of the markers that united them with people of their ethnicity. All other markers turned out to be less significant. For example, for almost two-thirds of respondents (63%) among Russian citizens 'culture' is an important ethnic marker too. Other markers of ethnicity are less important for Russians, such as their 'native land, territory, nature' (53%), 'historical past' (49%), 'customs and ceremonies' (47%), 'common statehood' (33%), and 'religion' (32%). Language as a unifying feature is significant for respondents regardless of their generation, level of material wellbeing, place of residence (city or village).

A significant factor in this situation was the growth of the saliency of the Russian ethnic identity since the early 2000s. As a result, ethnic Russian respondents for the all-Russian sample identify the language as an ethnic marker even more often than respondents of other nationalities (76% and 68%, respectively). Such processes have already been observed among the ethnic Russians in the republics in the early 1990s in the context of the rise of national movements in the republics. According to the same survey in 2015, the proportion of ethnic Russians who feel connected with people on the basis of nationality (ethnicity) is similar to that of respondents of other nationalities: 75% and 82%, respectively (although most Russians answer it's to 'some extent' and not to a 'considerable extent' as others).²⁴

3. Reasons for the protest against and for the compulsory learning of the state languages of the republics

First of all, here we are talking about schools with the Russian language of instruction. In the republics there are schools with the native languages of instruction, but they are not the subject of our analysis in this article.

The Tatar language has been taught in Russian language schools of the republic since 1991, that is, the longest of all the republics of Russian Federation with their state languages (for comparison: in Bashkortostan compulsory learning of the Bashkir language started in practice since 2006) and with an extended number of hours compared to other

republics. The number of hours of Tatar language and literature gradually increased and as a result the number of hours of the Russian language and Russian literature decreased, which by the time of conflict also did not meet federal standards. This situation became the main and obvious source of tension for parents. At the same time, in spite of the efforts being made, the elementary level of knowledge of the Tatar language needed for everyday communication has largely been not achieved, let alone bilingualism. The refrain of many statements by opponents of compulsory study was: 'They taught [Tatar language] for 25 years and taught nothing'.²⁵

Contrary to this view, some successes should be noted. For example, from 2001 to 2010, the number of ethnic Russians in Tatarstan who didn't speak the Tatar language decreased from 68% to 51% due to the youngest cohort, who compulsorily studied the Tatar language at school.²⁶ Here we must keep in mind that this is a subjective self-estimation, and although it is not very high in the situation of compulsory study in the amount of several hours a week, there was a certain progress. Thus, in 2010, among the ethnic Russian youth from 16 to 24 years old (that is, among those who became the target group of regional language policy in education in Tatarstan and compulsorily studied the Tatar language at school), 8% indicated free fluency in Tatar; 15% indicated that they speak freely, but read and write with difficulties; 34% said they could speak, but with difficulties; 19% said they could understand Tatar, but couldn't speak it; and 23% said that they do not speak the Tatar language at all (1% gave no answer).²⁷ According to experts, parents, and after the escalation of the conflict, the authorities of Tatarstan much of the responsibility for the poor results of teaching the Tatar language is due to ineffective methods of teaching the language.²⁸

However, of course, quite specific reasons directly related to the format and quality of teaching state languages, in particular Tatar in Tatarstan, contributed to the growth of protest. One of the main reasons for the parents' dissatisfaction was that their children had to spend excessive efforts on learning without tangible results. For example, the schools with Russian as the language of instruction were made to use the curriculum for teaching the study subject 'Tatar language' designated for the schools with Tatar as the native language of instruction. In other words, the Russian-speaking children had to learn Tatar not from 'zero' but as if it were their 'native language'. These curricula were used in Russian-language schools, regardless of the functionally first language of children. The emphasis on the grammar of the language, complex literary texts, Tatar language, which was difficult to understand even for the Tatar-speaking people, inattention to the communicative side - this was what the children and activists spoke about describing the reasons for the rejection of the Tatar language. In fact, the protests were initially against the poor quality of teaching, but since they did not have a result, they gradually became the protests against compulsory language learning. In general, the poor quality of teaching might have been one of the reasons for the drop in the demand for Tatar knowledge among the Russians in Tatarstan. Sociological surveys in the republic in the 1990s recorded a high level of request for Tatar from ethnic Russians (up to 70%), but in 2010 it dropped noticeably (40% in 2015, 28% in 2017).²⁹

The increase in tension was aggravated by the introduction of mandatory final tests for school students in the Tatar language, and since 2014 it was the Unified Republican Testing (ERT) for the Tatar language. The assessment of this test directly conditioned the transition to the senior school grades. At the same time, in everyday life, the

communication space in the Tatar language was limited to the Tatar-speaking environment, including in places of compact residence of the Tatars. But this is not the only reason for a low motivation to learn Tatar among young people. According to some regional studies knowledge of it does not guarantee social mobility.³⁰

The issue of the compulsory study of the Tatar language in Russian-language schools began to be debated in the local press back in the 1990s. The initial wave of activism for the voluntary study of Tatar language already in the 2000s was associated with the Society of the Russian Culture of Tatarstan. Since mid-2000, a new wave of activism was triggered by the problem of the balance of teaching hours between the Tatar and Russian languages that caused the Society of Russian Culture to become more active. In 2008 the Society created a public platform for discussing the problem, which was the Internet community ‘Russian language in the schools of Tatarstan’. Since 2009, the nationalist ‘Russian Marches’ in Kazan, which at first were not coordinated, have become the forum for speaking specifically on the problem of the Russian language in Tatarstan, and meetings and single rallies were held regularly. Researchers note that in justifying their demands, the Society of Russian Culture, as a rule, emphasised its support for the Tatar national education in the republic, as well as the fact that not so much ethnic Russians but Russian-speaking people of different nationalities took part in their public activity.³¹

This activism had no influence on the language policy of education in the republic. The situation has developed that one of our informants described as ‘Everything ethnic is Tatar (in Tatarstan)’. The situation reached a certain critical mass by 2017 and that was reflected in the self-organisation of supporters of voluntariness under the conditions of a low level of development of civil society institutions, and the number of appeals to the prosecutor’s office during an inspection in autumn 2017. In total, 1716 complaints and appeals from residents of the Republic to the Prosecutor’s office of Tatarstan were filed only during the inspection of schools of Tatarstan; in general, there were more of them.³²

Escalation of the conflict in the republic of Bashkortostan

In Bashkortostan, the conflict of the level ‘regional authorities versus supporters of voluntariness’ about the language also manifested itself, but developed less intensively.³³ On the one hand, the situation was less dramatic than in Tatarstan: Bashkir language was studied as mandatory not as long as Tatar in Tatarstan, in a noticeably smaller volume (1–2 h per week) and without a final exam. The possibility of choosing Russian as a native language (informally) was there before the developments of 2017, in contrast to Tatarstan. On the other hand, because the attempts to prevent escalation from the regional leadership were obvious. For example, in 2011, responding to the public outcry, the President of the Republic of Bashkortostan at the session of the State Council of the Russian Federation in Ufa said that there would be no coercion to learn the Bashkir language in the republic:

It is necessary to promote the preservation of languages as the most important elements of culture, as the vital and spiritual needs of the peoples of the country. < ... > At the same time, we understand that it is impossible to force languages to be taught, as they say, love cannot be forced.³⁴

Since the topic surfaced periodically, the Head of the Republic of Bashkortostan reacted to it also later: ‘... those who take an active position in this opposition, we will certainly meet

halfway'. As a result, individually, some activist parents were allowed not to send children to mandatory Bashkir lessons.³⁵

Nevertheless, in general, the development of the conflict was similar to the one in Tatarstan. External attention to the Republic from the point of view of the language situation was noticeable. To some extent, this was due to a fundamentally different distribution of forces in Bashkortostan than in Tatarstan. The ethno-demographic structure of the population in the republic is composed of 29.5% Bashkirs, which is more than Tatars (25.4%), but less than ethnic Russians (36.1%)³⁶, while the Russians and Tatars have a much higher proportion of the urban population. There were no attempts at language parity in education or strong pressure from the Bashkir ethnic elites, as it was in Tatarstan.

In the end, the settlement of the conflict in Bashkortostan in 2017 occurred earlier than in Tatarstan. It was reported that curricula in schools were brought to the federal standard almost to the beginning of the school year 2017–2018. According to the authorities of Bashkortostan, about 75% of schoolchildren and their parents voluntarily chose learning Bashkir as a state language.³⁷ This method of settlement in the region was called the 'Bashkir model of the ethno-linguistic compromise'. At the same time, a heightened perception of the problem persisted in part of the society; especially when in the spring of 2018 it became clear that amendments to the law on education will be passed.³⁸

Thus, to some extent, the intensification of the protest against the compulsory learning of Tatar language in Tatarstan was the result of the accumulation of contradictions, the perceived lack of attention of the regional authorities to regional ethnic policy. For a long time, the activism of parents-supporters of voluntariness in studying Tatar or reducing the volume of its teaching remained without attention from the regional leadership, although it was expressed not only in Internet activism and school appeals, but also in the format of pickets and small rallies. The authorities of Tatarstan in the last 25 years, of course, acted within the law, establishing mandatory study of the state languages, however it created a situation in which numerous violations of the federal standards in terms of reducing the volume of teaching of the Russian language became possible.

Activist discourses and the public opinion. Increasing civil activism

In the course of development of contradictions and partially as their result solidarity of activists became more and more obvious. On the one hand, they were supporters of the obligation to study Tatar (and to a lesser extent Bashkir) languages, and on the other hand – supporters of the voluntary study of these languages. A part of the community, albeit a small one, is included in these processes in Tatarstan and to a lesser extent in Bashkortostan and some other republics. Passively, the overwhelming majority of the population of the republics is involved in the problematic situation, because as a result of bringing curricula to the federal standard, all parents were required to write statements about whether they would agree to study the state languages, as well as a statement to determine what language to learn as a native. Studying of the native language according to the federal standard is obligatory within a sample syllabus with the study of the native language, which are used in the republics and some regions.

At the school level the issue of compulsory learning was resolved after the prosecutor's checks. At the same time contradictions in public space persist, and the discourses crystallize, especially among supporters of compulsory study.

Analysing public opinion, it should be noticed that not only ethnic Russians, but also, for example in Tatarstan, some Tatars and people of other nationalities were on the side of supporters of voluntary learning of Tatar language. Similarly, the preservation of the compulsory study of Tatar in Tatarstan was also supported by non-Tatars. The example of Pavel Shmakov, director of the Kazan school 'SOINtse'³⁹ who demands the need for compulsory study of Tatar as the state language of Tatarstan in the courts is well known.

According to the survey for interethnic relations in the Republic of Tatarstan in 2018,⁴⁰ slightly more than one fifth of the Tatars (24%) support voluntary study of the Tatar language in schools of the republic. Approximately 46% of ethnic Russians also share this position. Almost the same proportion of respondents of other nationalities agree (on average 39%, but this proportions differs between ethnic groups). Compulsory study of the Tatar language in Russian-language schools, including those with fewer hours, would be supported by 29% among ethnic Russians and respondents of other nationalities and 55% of Tatars. Urban residents, more often than rural, support voluntary study of the Tatar language although among the Tatars and among Russians, the difference reaches 20%. Over half of the rural Tatars support the obligatory Tatar language in the schools of the republic (62%), a little more than a third of the rural Russians also do the same (37%). Among urban Tatars, 43% were in favour of compulsory study of Tatar language (including with a decrease in hours) and among urban ethnic Russians, 16%.

So, the data do not show a pronounced split in relation to the study of state languages in the republican community. However, regional discourses still form with the ethnic dimension of contradictions, that is, Tatars are often seen as supporters of obligation, ethnic Russians and Russian speakers are often seen as supporters of voluntariness. In many ways, this happens because the points of solidarity, the leaders of the movements are ethnic organisations and activists. This happened in the case of the Russian Culture Society. Also the position of supporters of the obligation to study state languages is built up – it is supported and translated into discourse by Tatar ethnic organisations, in particular, the All-Tatar Public Center, and even Muslim religious figures. It is increasingly evident that the situation is perceived by one side as the restoration of a unified state and the fight against ethnocracy, and the other as an attempt to 'deprive sovereignty' and assimilate. In other words, the discursive contradictions clearly appeal to the status of the republics and their titular peoples. It is characteristic that in public discourse supporters of the obligatory study of the state languages are increasingly using the concepts of 'titular people / nation', 'indigenous people', 'our Republic', 'our land', that is, Internet communication is becoming a field of symbolic conflicts over space and strengthening ethnic borders. The use of hate speech has intensified with both sides, but is not new to the study of the situation, for example, in the 2010–2011 study documented the expression of intolerant slogans and sayings of Tatar nationalists against the supporters of the voluntary learning of Tatar or reduce hours for it in comparison with the more peaceful slogans of the second side.⁴¹

The main virtual platform for communication and self-organisation of each party was the social network Vkontakte. Shortly before the escalation of the conflict, as well as during its development in this social network formed a group 'For a single educational space of Russia' (11207 members on 25.04.2019), 'No to the law against native languages!' (1151 members), 'Parent community of Tatarstan' (4169 members), 'Parents of Chelny for the

voluntary Tatar language' (1470 members), 'Democratic Congress of the peoples of Russia' (2873 members) and a few less numerous. Some of these communities were formed in connection with the language problem, others appeared earlier and have a much wider scope of topics, but actively discuss the topic of languages in education, for example, 'Tatar boys and girls' (115214 members). Continuation of group contradictions resulted in a number of petitions on the popular platform Change.org. For example, the petition 'No law against native languages' by July 2018 was signed by more than 39 thousand people, and by April 2019 by more than 40 thousand. There are at least 20 petitions devoted to one or another aspect of the language problem on the platform. By the beginning of 2019, the severity of the problem had subsided, at least the increase in the number of participants in the above-mentioned communities, as well as signatories of the petition, is insignificant.

It is obvious that it is the opposition on the ethnic principle that can become a source of increased conflict and further solidarity at the mass level, which at the moment is only among activists. The Federal media discourse more often focuses on official changes at the level of the republics than it draws attention to their causes and group contradictions within the republics. At the same time, assessments of interethnic relations in Tatarstan remain very positive both among Tatars and Russians for 2018. About 84% of Tatarstan residents in 2018 assess relations in the Republic as friendly or calm, and equally among Tatars and Russians.⁴²

In Bashkortostan there was also solidarity of supporters of the preservation of the obligation to study the Bashkir language. The actions of the Federal centre were perceived by ethnic activists as attacks on the Bashkir language itself and its positions, which are quite vulnerable in a situation where the 'titular' ethnic group does not constitute a majority in the Republic. It was in Bashkortostan that protests against the abolition of compulsory study of Bashkir in Russian-language schools were most noticeable among all the republics. The most striking episode was the rally in defense of the Bashkir language in September 2017, it was the most massive protest in this republic in recent years (2500 people), regardless of the occasion.⁴³ At this meeting, the abolition of the mandatory study of the Bashkir language was called 'ethnocide against Bashkirs' by one of the activists at this rally. The Bashkir ethnic organisation 'Bashkort' became the organiser and inspirer of the meeting. It is becoming more and more obvious that the problem of compulsory study of the Bashkir language as the state language in schools is perceived by a part of Bashkir activists not just as a threat to the language, but as 'a threat to the sovereignty' and even the existence of Bashkirs as a separate people, and these ideas are translated by activists into the public space, which is similar to the Tatarstan situation. There are new public organisations with an ethnic component, such as The Congress of the Bashkir people of the Republic of Bashkortostan (founded in 2017), along with the existing World Kurultai of the Bashkirs. The emergence of a new organisation is most likely associated with the struggle of the Republican elites, and ethnic and especially acute language issue is used as a factor of influence and a set of political points among the Bashkirs.

Despite such activation, public opinion on the necessity of studying the Bashkir language in the Republic during the escalation of contradictions was far from being polarised. The position that the Bashkir language should be studied as an elective for those who wish, that is, voluntarily, was supported by the same proportions among Bashkirs and ethnic Russians, that is, respectively, 45% and 46%, and somewhat more among

Tatars (53%). The Bashkir language as a mandatory language for all schoolchildren is supported by 23% of Bashkirs and another 16% if less time is allocated to it, that is, a total of 39%. Among the Tatars of Bashkortostan the obligation to study the Bashkir language in schools is supported by 19%, and among ethnic Russians it is 23%. In other words, there are no sharp contradictions in the perception of mandatory teaching of the Bashkir language in the Republic in different ethnic environments, and this is even more noticeable than in Tatarstan.⁴⁴

Specific regional situations hide layers of internal group contradictions, which are not always obvious at first glance. In Bashkortostan, part of the Tatars living in the Republic became active opponents of the mandatory study of the Bashkir language as the state language. There are slightly fewer Tatars in Bashkortostan than Bashkirs (25.4% of Tatars and 29.5% of Bashkirs according to The Russian Census of 2010), and they are more urbanised. Tatar ethnic activists and even regional secondary schools with Tatar ethnic component (Tatar national schools in Bashkortostan) are focused on relations with Tatarstan. As the representative of the Public Association of Tatars of Bashkortostan said, ‘Kazan helps us to be literate in terms of textbooks of the Tatar language. Tatars have always had an education. We are very proud that we have Kazan, Tatarstan’. Experts also mention the direct influence of Tatarstan on the Bashkortostan situation with languages in education, including linking the emergence of the ‘ethno-linguistic conflict’ in Bashkortostan ‘on the model and largely with the filing of neighboring Tatarstan’.⁴⁵

4. Policy adoption

The adoption of the law signified the policy change that reversed the policy developed since the early 1990s and, thus, amounted to the adoption of a new policy. The final text of the compromised variant that became law (signed by the Russian president on 3 August and published on 7 August 2018) is shorter than the initial draft.

The law removed the compulsory teaching of the titular state languages. Moreover, the law also enforced the free choice of native language, and, in effect, amounts to the removal of its compulsory teaching. The law now requires parents to make a written request about what language they wish their children to learn as their native language when enrolling their children in pre-school and first and fifth grades of school. While the education system at any stage allows making the choice both of Russian and non-Russian native language, in practice this would mean the initial choice of Russian as a native language for the purpose of learning would with all probability result in the further choice of the same language at the later stages.

It also envisaged drafting of the concept of the teaching of Russia’s native languages, in analogy to the Concept of the Teaching of the Russian Language and Literature that was approved in 2016.⁴⁶ However, the concessions such as the initiatives to establish a foundation to support the native languages of Russia with the federal funding for schoolbooks and teachers and to develop the concept of native language teaching were disconnected from the policy adoption.

Hence, they were given to the discretion of the Russian Government and the Ministry of Education (currently, Ministry of Enlightenment), which is not a minority-friendly institution. The implementation will be based on executive orders. Thus, the creation of a fund

for the preservation and study of the native languages of the peoples of Russia was stipulated recently by a decree of the Russian president.⁴⁷

Similarly, the authorities have not yet published new versions of the federal educational standards which would take into account the new law. Hence, the question about the amount of native language teaching remains open.

Conclusion

Thus, the contradictions of activists' discourses are quite relevant and are expressed at the level of public rhetoric in the regional media and the Internet space. These contradictions are not massive, but still their scale has increased many times over 2017–2018. Strictly speaking, these contradictions are not always between real groups, but between positions in the discourse that fuel tension in regional societies. The reason for these contradictions is some uncertainty in the legislation, positions and actions of central and regional authorities, as well as the development of the conflict.

The discussions regularly raised the issue that the abolition of the compulsory study of languages will inevitably undermine their functioning and threaten their existence, followed by the existence of the peoples themselves ('no language – no people'). In such disputes, the rights and freedoms of individuals are much less frequently spoken of than the rights of groups, cultures and languages.

Language policy in education is perceived and used by both regional authorities and the the Kremlin, on the one hand, as part of the 'identity politics', on the other – as one of the few remaining competences of ethnic republics that was now virtually taken away from them. In fact, both the centre and the republics, in particular Tatarstan, used similar tools and goals at their levels, and now both strategies seem short-sighted in the long term. It is obvious that the language controversy has led to intensification of ethnic tensions in some republics (to varying degrees), stimulated to new statements and activities of ethnic activists from both sides and may have some negative impact on inter-ethnic relations and strengthen ethnic boundaries.

At the same time, the issue of compulsory or voluntary study of state languages in the republics is only indirectly related to the preservation and full functioning of languages, while the removal of the compulsory teaching only partly determines their future. Language choice is a choice that is driven both by pragmatic motives and their symbolic value. In addition, some studies argue that the presence or absence of the state status of the language in a certain territory do not determine the choice of language by many individuals. Pragmatic motivation for the choice of the dominant language can be more important even in the conditions of significant state support of native languages in the language policy.⁴⁸

Language conflict in some republics of Russia is likely to increase the symbolic importance of native languages for people, but is unlikely to change the main trend. In this context, reducing the problems of the functioning of languages and their future to the issue of compulsory or voluntary learning, rather than considering them in the broad context of social, political and economic factors, oversimplifies the situation.

What the law changed was that the rights of some individuals were restored while the rights others were infringed, but it does not turn the diversity management regime into the one based on a rights-based approach. Therefore, despite the rights rhetoric that

was present in the discussions, the diversity management remains to be based on a policy-based approach.

The actual reason for the decision should be not sought in the public's complaints themselves that were now suddenly heard in the Kremlin. With the major shift in the nationalities policy since 2014, the Kremlin, among other things, put several heads of republics and other regions to jail and de facto stopped to consider nationality as one of the main criteria by the appointment of the new heads of the federal units.⁴⁹ The removal of compulsory language teaching is another step of the process of the diversity management regime transformation from a multinational state to a nation-state model. The revision of the State Nationality Policy Strategy with its list of 'threats' that the challenge of ethnic and linguistic diversity entails for the state also speaks of the beginning of a new stage, in effect returning the country 'to full circle' in the 'national question'.⁵⁰

The covert target of the policy is arguably those numerous non-Russians (the term used in literature to refer to those Russian citizens who are not ethnically Russian) who still maintain their ethnic identities but declare Russian as their native language (one in four, according to the 2010 population censuses data). In the latest step, the choice of one language in education implies the refusal from another language, because no bilingual option is available with some exception, notably in Tatarstan, Chechnya and North Ossetia.⁵¹ Education is envisaged as the key instrument for building a nation. Schools in republics are seen as an obstacle for this goal because they were said to promote alternative ethno-regional identities through teaching local languages, literatures and histories.⁵²

The teaching of the titular languages as the state languages of republics was stopped, but, for the time being, the teaching of native languages continues in reduced volumes. However, the intention behind the law is to encourage non-Russians to name Russian as their native language, as some activists say. This is again the old twist when the notion of the 'second mother tongue' was introduced in the late Soviet period to mark the efforts at creating the 'Soviet people'. The law is further intended to discourage non-Russian children and their parents to demand native language teaching that will result in less and less children having access to it. In its turn, the linguistic assimilation will result in an increased refusal of children and parents to demand the teaching of native languages in the next generation.

The latest step is also a symbolic act to emphasize an exceptional role of Russian vis-à-vis other languages of Russia. The step was accompanied by a semi-official article in one of the central newspapers that justified the policy change 'from the perspective of the contemporary science'. First, the article emphasises that languages are functionally unequal. Secondly, it is argued that people have the right not only to preserve their native language, but also the right to forget it and switch to another language – the language of opportunity, that is, Russian.⁵³

Decades created a situation in which parents were deprived of incentives, and sometimes even directly forced to abandon the teaching of the native language to their children. The fact that Russian and other languages of Russia perform a different number of social functions is not a consequence of the free choice of language, but the result of the assimilationist policy, purposefully pursued with varying degrees of intensity throughout the Soviet period. In particular, the 1958 reform pursued the same purpose and used the same mechanisms as the new law. Today, the purpose of the removal of compulsory teaching is not so much the concern for the Russian-speakers's rights, as the promotion of the

shift among non-Russians who are encouraged to abandon their vernacular language and to name Russian as their native language.

The Soviet euphemism of doing something in a ‘voluntary-compulsorily’ manner (*dobrovol’no-prinuditel’no*) fits best to describe the situation after the law adoption. Linguists and anthropologists think people may have two or more native languages, be it their first language, the language of their parents or some other option, and should be free in defining their native language. Before the adoption of law people did not have to choose and this multiplicity of the meaning of native language remained with them. Now the parents are forced to choose native language for their children to learn through submitting the written request. In practice, the non-Russian parents would be discouraged to demand the teaching of their language to their children because of the promoted attitude that native language is the first language. Accordingly, if a person does not demand the teaching of a non-Russian language and instead claims Russian as their native language, then he or she would also lose the right to study the non-Russian language. In effect, these measures would enhance language shift.

The law was said to advance the free choice of individuals, but there are too many instances of how the society forces individuals to prefer the dominant language. ‘Common people’ of different nationalities who reside in the republics do not have a genuinely free choice as they depend on the circumstances. The major limitation for the choice to learn the languages is restricted by ‘the range of possibilities provided by the education system’. These possibilities are typically not provided in the urban areas. For example, less than half of schoolchildren of titular nationalities have access to the language teaching in the Finno-Ugric republics.⁵⁴ Thus, the authorities have many ways to misrepresent the free choice of individuals.

The changes adopted by the law satisfy the Russian-speaking activists in the republics. The titular activists continue to accumulate a sense of resentment and take steps to passive resistance.⁵⁵ The policy change further intensifies the irritation of regional political elites and national intelligentsia. However, after relatively minor public protests, the Kremlin is confident that it controls the situation and is thus encouraged to take further measures aimed at unification and assimilation. Its emphasis on the ethnic Russian component in the strategy of nation-building continues to grow.⁵⁶ The last major step in this direction was that, among the recent amendments to the Russian constitution of July 2020, one establishes the status of the Russian language as ‘the language of a state-founding people’ (Article 68.1).⁵⁷

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Notes

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2. Federal Law of 3 August 2018 N 317-ФЗ ‘On the Amendments to Articles 11 and 14 of the Federal Law ‘On Education in the Russian Federation’; for the text of the law and documents passed in the process of its adoption, see the website of the draft law № 438863-7: <http://sozd.parliament.gov.ru/bill/438863-7>; the text of the Federal Law ‘On Education in the Russian Federation’ of 29 December 2012 N 273-ФЗ is available at: <http://zakon-ob-obrazovanii.ru>. (accessed August 12, 2020).
 3. The Constitution of the Russian Federation, adopted at National Voting on 12 December 1993. See: Konstantin Zamyatin, ‘The Evolution in Language Ideology of Post-Soviet Russia: The Fate of the State Languages of the Republics’, in *Cultural and Linguistic Minorities in the Russian Federation and the European Union. Comparative Studies on Equality and Diversity Series: Multilingual Education*, Vol. 13. eds. H.F. Marten, M. Rießler, J. Saarikivi and R. Toivanen (Cham-Heidelberg-New York-Dordrecht-London: Springer International, 2015), 279–313.
 4. Texts of the documents: http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_15524/, http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_1888/, <http://www.constitution.ru>.
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