

Language Policy in the Russian Federation: language diversity and national identity

by Marc Leprêtre

Abstract

This paper gives an overview on the different language policies implemented in the Russian Federation, stressing the relevance of the historical background, the relations between language and nationalism, and language promotion as a tool for preventing inter-ethnic conflicts and for ensuring a peaceful and balanced linguistic diversity. The text is structured in four sections: historical overview (language policy and nation-building in the USSR); interethnic tensions in the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet context; the awakening of national groups in Russia; and strategies for a peaceful and balanced management of linguistic diversity in the Russian Federation and the Soviet successor states.¹

1. Historical overview: language policy and nation-building in the USSR

The processes of language planning and language policy carried on since 1991 in the Russian Federation can't be explained without a short reference to the historical, political and social outcomes raised by the nationality and language policies implemented during decades in the former USSR. Nevertheless, insofar as the topic of this paper is what is going on nowadays regarding the management of language diversity, I will try to summarize this historical background².

The ideological bases of the Soviet nationality policies and the process of nationalization³ implemented in the republics had a rather paradoxical character as far as on the one hand the Soviet regime entitled the nationalities with a well-defined political and territorial status -even for those which had not yet reached a pre-capitalist level of development- which led to a process of nation-building where political and territorial units were created on the basis of nations that constituted themselves as historical cultural communities during the Tsarist period, contrary to what had been the usual pattern in Western Europe. On the other hand, these processes took place in a parallel way with a gradual policy of repression of national historical cultures that only preserved the most ethnographic and folkloric elements. Furthermore, and according to the analysis proposed by Gellner regarding the formation of nations during the processes of modernization⁴, we can argue that Soviet Marxism-Leninism did not consider the peripheral nationalities as deep rooted societies in the modern economic and politic structures, but rather as 'folkloric' or 'ethnographic' nations. Nonetheless, the logical ground of Bolshevik policy towards nationalities after the Revolution - the *korenizatsiia*⁵- constituted a formula according to which those nations whose collective rights had been denied and repressed during the Tsarist period should have access to the free exercise of these rights within the general framework of the building of socialism in order to reach by themselves the conclusion that national sovereignty was not by itself a solution to all the national, cultural, social, politic and economic problems of development. The final goal was therefore the merger of all nations into a single socialist community, once all national cultures had had the opportunity to bloom during the period of construction of socialism as stressed by Stalin at the XVI Congress of the CP(b)SU⁶ in 1930⁷.

This policy was likewise aimed to be a lenitive for the social, political and national tensions that emerged successively in the cities, the rural areas and the periphery of the State during the Revolution, the Civil War and the process of building of the Soviet state. In order to solve these tensions, the Bolsheviks implemented simultaneously three kinds of policies: the application of the principle of national-territorial autonomy as the cornerstone of the recently created Socialist Federative Soviet Republic of Russia; the formation of autonomous territorial units in peripheral regions; and the implementation of *korenizatsiia* at large scale. At the same time, these policies were followed by two corollaries to ensure full support from peasants and urban workers to the regime: the NEP and the massive enlistment of proletarians into the Party. From a sociolinguistic point of view, the outcomes of the Soviet nationality policies can be

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² For further details and in-depth analysis see Kirkwood (1989) and Liber (1991).

³ *Natsionalnoe stroitel'stvo* [construction of nations] has broadly speaking the same meaning that the concept of 'nation-building' which will be used from now onwards.

⁴ Gellner (1983).

⁵ Nationalisation policy of the State's nations and ethnic groups applied during the 20's, overlapping with the N.E.P. [*Novaya Ekonomicheskaya Politika*].

⁶ Communist Party (bolsheviks) of the Soviet Union [official name of the Parti until 1936].

⁷ See Bogdan, 1993:219.

summed up as follows: *"La politique linguistique est sans aucun doute le plus original de l'action menée par le pouvoir en matière nationale. C'est aussi, cela est certain, sa plus parfaite réussite"*⁸.

Actually the different language policies implemented in the Soviet Union are for sure one of the most salient achievements of the regime insofar as we can't detach them from the political, social and economic events which took place during seven decades neither from the changes in the correlations of forces within the top ranks of the State and of the federated republics. The changes in the demographic structure of the population during the process of modernization of Soviet economy and society contributed likewise to strengthen, especially in the urban areas, the tensions raised by the contacts between languages together with other factors as the size of linguistic and national groups, the experience (historical or recent) of contacts with other ethnic groups, the geographic location or concrete linguistic, religious and cultural kinships. Insofar as the policies implemented by the State in order to ensure the equality between nations were based on the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the dialectical relations established between the different nationalities, the underlying motivations of linguistic and national policies were that the modernization of the different ethnic groups of the USSR could not be achieved if the autochthonous populations didn't manage to reach a high level of literacy, culture and social and political consciousness. At the same time, the new needs of the Soviet society (industrialization, technologic challenges, building of socialism) required the creation of a new society with an adequate critical mass of individuals able to deal with new technical and intellectual tools in order to implement and make real the projects designed by the State. On the other hand, the Socialist Revolution happened in a country which didn't possess the objective conditions for its consolidation - the structure of the population was overwhelmingly formed by peasant, the urban proletariat was scarce, the level of industrialization still low according to Western standards as well as the political and cultural development of the population - although the new regime managed to set up new structures of power after a long civil war. Nevertheless, the strengthening of the new State and the building of socialism required a radical change in the social, political, cultural and economic composition of the country. As far as the industrialization of the USSR was a *sine qua non* condition for its own survival, the most effective and fast way to gain the support (or neutrality) of the non-Russian nationalities, as well as to inculcate into them the new political culture was to use the autochthonous languages as one of the main tools of this process of learning and change. It was therefore necessary to set up a new educational system and new cultural, ideological and communicative domains in different languages. This is the reason why language policy was from the very beginning one of the main cruxes of the Soviet policy towards nationalities. Language policy was carried on by the Narkomnats⁹ by means of four main activities, namely: the selection of a standard code for every autochthonous language and its dissemination as a common language of communication for the populations of the autonomous territorial units; the modernization of the lexicon according to the needs of a modern industrial society; the reform or creation of new alphabets for the autochthonous languages; and the large-scale literacy campaign in the peripheral regions by means of the teaching of the autochthonous languages in new national school systems. As a long term result of this kind of policies, at the end of the Soviet Union the overall picture of the sociolinguistic situation of both the autochthonous languages and Russian as the common language of communication between all the parts of the State was as follows:

Ethnic groups, knowledge of Russian and of the language of the titular ethnic group (1989)

Republic	Majority groups (%)	% Knowledge of Russian	% Knowledge of language of titular ethnic group by other groups
Armenia	Armenians (93)	45	--
	Azeris (3)	19	7
Azerbaijan	Azeris (83)	32	--
	Russians (6)	--	15
Belarus	Armenians (6)	69	7
	Belorussians (78)	80	--
Estonia	Russians (13)	--	27
	Estonians (62)	35	--
Georgia	Russians (30)	--	15
	Georgians (70)	32	--
	Armenians (8)	52	26
	Russians (6)	--	24
Kazakhstan	Azeris (6)	35	10
	Kazakhs (40)	64	--
	Russians (38)	--	9

⁸ Carrère d'Encausse, 1978:203.

⁹ *Narodnii Kommissariat po Delam Natsionalnostej* [People's Commissariat for Nationalities Affairs].

Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyz (52)	37	--
	Russians (22)	--	12
	Uzbeks (13)	39	4
Latvia	Latvians (52)	68	--
	Russians (34)	--	22
Lithuania	Lithuanians (80)	38	--
	Russians (9)	--	38
	Poles (7)	67	21
Moldova	Moldovans (65)	58	--
	Ukrainians (14)	80	14
	Russians (13)	--	12
Tadjikistan	Tadjiks (62)	31	--
	Uzbeks (24)	22	17
	Russians (8)	--	4
Turkmenistan	Turkmens (72)	28	--
	Russians (10)	--	2
	Uzbeks (9)	29	16
Ukraine	Ukrainians (73)	72	--
	Russians (22)	--	34
Uzbekistan	Uzbeks (71)	27	--
	Russians (8)	--	5

Source: Own elaboration from the data provided by *Natsionalnii Sostav Naseleniia SSSR* (1991).

In short, Soviet language policy not only promoted the Russian language as the 'lingua franca' used for All-Union and inter-republican communications, but also improved and strengthened the position of the titular nations of the republics as well as that of their respective languages. At the same time, the gradual decline of the percentage of ethnic Russians in the USSR and a birth rate dramatically lower than that of the populations of Central Asia and Caucasus contributed to create a latent feeling of insecurity within the majority group which provoked the raising of a new type of Russian nationalism as a reaction towards the intensification of nationalists movements in the borders and the core itself of the Union. Finally, the outcomes of the Soviet language policy reflect the contradictions in the processes of centralization and decentralization and those of promotion and repression which constituted the main characteristics of Soviet nationalities policies splitted between the class strategy and the nationalist tacticism.

2. Interethnic tensions in the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet context

The break-up of the Soviet Union and the increase of interethnic tensions within the very same Russian Federation implied the intensification of the Russian identity crisis that had been taking place during the process of construction of the Soviet patriotism from the mid 30's. The first signs of tension coincided with the declaration of sovereignty of the Autonomous Republics of Mari El, Komi and Tatarstan during the summer of 1990. These declarations of sovereignty meant an attempt to force the federal authorities into granting them a higher level of autonomy that would allow local authorities to control and manage their natural resources (diamonds, petroleum, gas, wood industry) in order to have direct access to foreign markets.

The initial negotiations aiming at the signature of the Union Treaty of 1991 accelerated this process in such a way that, not only the sixteen Autonomous Republics of the RSFSR declared their sovereignty, but also the Autonomous Regions of Birobidzhan, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Khakassia, Gorno-Altay and Adygea, which claimed their conversion into Autonomous Republics, also did the same. In addition, as was the case at the beginning of the 20's, new territorial entities with no legal basis emerged, constituted from the unilateral decisions taken by local Soviets: the Greater Volga Association; the Greater Ural Association; the Far East Association; the Association of the Towns of Southern Russia; the aforementioned old Autonomous Regions reconverted into Autonomous Republics; the *de facto* independent Republic of Chechnya; and finally, the Tyumen District. Thus, Russia faced, throughout the entire Soviet State, a process of territorial, economic and social disintegration which had marked consequences on the configuration of a new national identity which, for the first time since the Middle Ages, had to dissociate the concepts of Empire and State.

Likewise the Russian nation nowadays faces an acute crisis of national identity and is looking for its own self-definition. In contrast with the classical paradigm according to which the national and identity issue is mainly the concern of 'incomplete nations'¹⁰ that are struggling to reaffirm themselves in the face of

¹⁰ See Gellner (1983).

larger and more 'complete' nations, in today's Russia it is the dominant ethnic group who is looking for its self-definition. Broadly speaking, the existence of a Russian State (*Rossiiskoe Gosudartsvo*) was previous to the Russian nation(ality) (*Russkaya narodnost*) and, at the same time, the Russian Empire preceded the Russian State. According to this, the emergence of Russia as a nation was infallibly linked to the continuous process of expansion of the Empire towards the territories inhabited by alien ethnic groups. Another feature of the Russian Empire, later on shared with the Soviet Union, was found in the relations that were established between the Russian Nation and alien peoples. During Tsarism, the dominant classes of the peripheral societies were progressively assimilated by the elites of the center, such as was the case of the Tatars, the Georgians, the Germans, the Balts or the Poles. During some specific periods of the Communist regime, this same type of relationship was established, insofar as class or ideological considerations prevailed over ethnic identifications. In addition, during the period of the *korenizatsiia* to be Russian or to belong to a Russified national elite implied a curb on individuals who aspired to holding important positions in the national Republics.

On the other hand, the very same Russians did not consider themselves as a particularly favoured nation by the previous regime: the economic indicators of the RSFSR were not substantially better than those of the other Republics, the purges of the 30's had caused more victims there than anywhere else, the Russians had contributed more than any other people to the Second World War, the environmental situation was awful, ethnical minorities identified them with Soviet totalitarianism, their contribution to the maintenance of the Centro-Asiatic Republics was considerable, etc. Finally, from the political point of view, the RSFSR was in no way privileged since it shared same rank with a great number of smaller ethnical groups and it was even under-represented from the institutional point of view, insofar as many All-Union institutions took the place of Russian institutions. From this point of view, the access to independence has not implied an improvement in the situation.

While the loss of territories included in the Russian Empire and later on in the Soviet Union (especially Central Asia and Transcaucasia) was not a very traumatic experience, the secession of Belarus and Ukraine was interpreted as an historic, identity and cultural amputation. In addition, the new map of the borders has turned almost 25 million ethnic Russians into foreign citizens in the old Federated Republics that many had long since considered to be their homeland. Although the disappearance of the Soviet State has allowed the Russians to go from being a little bit more than 50% of the USSR's population to represent more than 80% of the Russian Federation, the reinforcement of the Russians as an ethnic majority in stark contrast with a multiplicity of ethnic minorities has even more highlighted the idea that Russia is not only the State of the Russians but that the Russian identity must also integrate alien elements. As a last resort, the present Russian Federation reproduces, on a smaller scale, the traditional contradiction between the ethnic and cultural groups and the political and territorial variables of the Russian national identity.

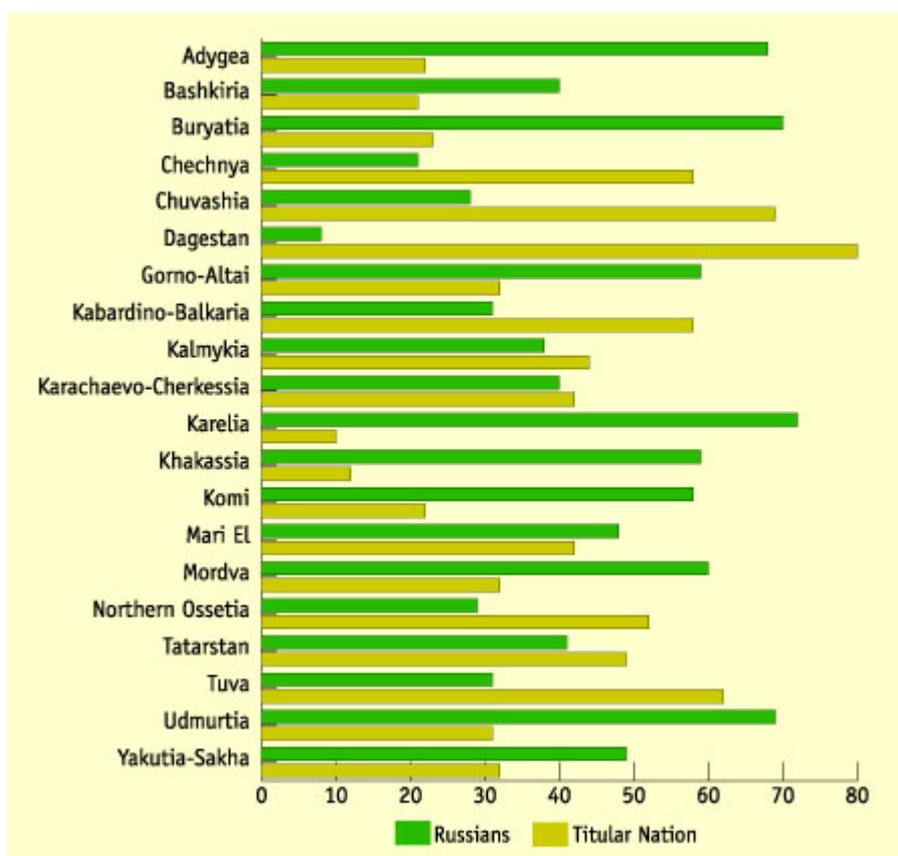
This situation becomes more complex because the Russian Federation is made up of 89 subjects (of which 32 are defined according to ethnic terms) between old Autonomous Republics, regions, districts and federal towns, all with equal rights and obligations according to the 1993 Constitution. But given the fact that the 1992 Federal Treaty appears to be more generous towards the Republics, there exists a duplicity of interpretations as regards the responsibilities that must be assumed by the federal institutions and those corresponding to the Republics. Therefore, after the break-up of the Soviet State, Russia has made its first steps along the path towards the recovery of its national identity and the reconstruction of its nationality. This new Russian identity is based, broadly speaking, on the Orthodox religion and a nationalism that reproduces, for lack of other models, the egalitarian, authoritarian and communitarian schemata of the traditional Russian society. This search for a new identity takes place within the framework of the traditional contradiction of a Russia split between its western aspirations and its tendency towards isolation. Being used to living within its own myths, Russian society looks for new social and moral points of reference to find a new position as a nation, given the fact that the pre-Revolutionary myths based on religion, Empire and autocracy were eliminated by the Bolshevik Revolution and were replaced by the new Bolshevik myths (proletarian internationalism, construction of socialism), now also disappeared.

However, significant changes took place gradually in the subjective perception that the Russians had their own identity, mainly as a consequence of the increase and the radicalization of alien peoples' defense of their rights which provoked an unavoidable confrontation between the center and the periphery. The Russians entered into direct competition with alien groups when claiming the solution of inequalities and grievances; from becoming aware of the huge financial aids granted to the Federated Republics, the delicate environmental situation, the moral corruption of the Soviet society as a whole, to the real extension of the Stalinist regime of terror and the arbitrariness's of the previous decades, which resulted not only in an explosion of nationalist feelings in the Republics, but also encouraged the leaders of the periphery to elude their responsibilities by means of systematic attacks on the center and the federal authorities identified with the Russians. The latter, seeing that they were associated with a policy and authorities that for seven decades had not treated them in any way substantially different from the way they treated other Republics and, in addition, seeing themselves as being deprived of national political, economic and cultural institutions because of the overlapping of the Soviet and Russian institutions, launched a revival of a deeply ethnical Russian nationalism.

The emerging of nationalist movements at the heart of the RSFSR (Tatarstan, Yakutia-Sakha, Chechnya, Tuva, Buryatia, Dagestan, Northern Ossetia, etc.) provoked a chain reaction in the Russian population, in such a way that many Russian nationalist movements that arose under the protection of the *perestroika* started, unlike their predecessors of the 70's, to employ the centrifuge tactics of the peripheral nationalist movements. In such a situation, faced with the intensification of the anti-Russian xenophobic feelings in the Transcaucasian and Centro-Asiatic Republics and the establishment of new legislations as regards languages and education that benefited autochthonous languages, the Russian nationalists organized themselves by creating popular fronts, as was happening in the Baltic countries or in Transcaucasia.

This radicalization of Russian nationalism provoked a double confrontation between the RSFSR and the Federated Republics, on the one hand, and between the very same RSFSR and the federal authorities, on the other. The fact that after the break-up of the USSR the Russian Federation still existed as a sole territorial entity with such a complex multiethnic composition gave rise among the Russian population to a feeling that their country, now an orphan of reference points on which to draw and construct a new identity, had simply become what was left of the USSR, once any influence on the other Federated Republics, some of which (Belarus and Ukraine) constituted some of the symbolic references of Great Russia since the X century, had been lost.

The following graph shows the ethnic composition in the autonomous republics of the Russian Federation.



Source: Own elaboration from the data provided by *Natsionalnii Sostav Naseleniia SSSR* (1991)

The future articulation of the Russian national identity and State is extremely complex insofar as, until now, it does not seem that they have planned either any coherent plan for development or any precise orientations on economic, social and national policies that would allow for the consolidation process of democracy in the Russian Federation. Faced with the outbreak of national and identity cohesion of post-Soviet Russia, the foundations on which the new identity and the new State should be based contain major contradictions, while the general context hinders the articulation of a civil society traditionally underdeveloped, given the fact that, neither the concept of an ethnic Russia nor that of the imperial Russia can mobilize or unite the Russian citizens under the same national project; that the intensification of the economic and regional particularities threaten to dislocate the territorial structure of the Federation; that the moral and social disorientation is widespread among a population lacking in points of reference and core-values (very especially the youngsters) due to the disappearance of the old pre- and post-Communist values; and that the endemic economic crisis has driven tens of millions of people

to subsist below the poverty level. In short, the facts and circumstances made explicit throughout these pages constitute a complex network that Russia will have to solve in order to begin the process of democracy, political, social and economic stability and national reconstruction.

3. The awakening of national groups in Russia

The Russian Federation is made up of 176 national groups and an almost equal number of languages spoken. These minority communities represent approximately 28 million people, 20% of the total population¹¹. This ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity is reflected in the Federal Statutes of the country, with 21 National Republics, to which we have to add the Autonomous Regions and Districts. Minority areas are characterized by a very strong interweaving of peoples. The Russian population represents between 30 and 80% of the population of the Republics in Siberia, between 30 and 70% of the central and northern regions, and between 10 and 40% in the Caucasus. To it we have to add the presence of other national groups which represent between 5 and 40% of the Republics' population. Besides, the titular nationality (eponym of the Republic) constitutes the majority only in 8 of the 21 Republics. Taking this multiculturalism into consideration has implied the acknowledgement of a considerable political power in the titular minorities, although this power often has to be relativised due to the absence or scarcity of financial means and that Moscow still keeps an important influence through the subsidies (that may reach 90% of some Republics' budget) and the granting of credits for the acquisition and provision of energy supplies. In addition, the important sociocultural crisis that provoked the fall of Communism still perpetuates. Letting aside the North Caucasus, the *UNESCO Red Book on Endangered Languages* reports in Russia on only three minority languages that are not endangered¹². All the others are considered as being "on the verge of extinction" or "threatened". This contrast between the will of reconstructing national identity and the real situation may imply a feeling of urgency that sometimes force titular nationalities to take radical action in order to protect their language and their identity, while often at the same time political and social tensions feed on ethnical and cultural conflicts.

Within this context, the linguistic issue crystallizes in the demand for the recognition of the identity of the different peoples of Russia, while this constitutes in itself a source of tensions. In the territories of the former Soviet Union, linguistic decrees and laws have very significantly contributed to the worsening of the tensions in Moldova and language issues still mark the agenda of political action in the Baltic States, especially in Estonia and Latvia. In Central Asia, Russian minorities are in a delicate situation because the use of national languages has become an important indicator of the citizens' political loyalty, although very often they lack the necessary structures from which to learn them. The situation seems less serious in Russia, where Russian still is globally accepted as a *lingua franca* and where each Republic can add one or more official languages. But quite often the problem is to be found in the criteria for choosing these official languages. All the Republics, excepting four of them, have adopted linguistic laws that give priority to the language of the titular nationality. In Bashkiria, the official status of the national language together with Russian is the object of major controversy given the opposition of the Tatars -the second most important community in demographic weight after the Russians and before the Bashkirians- because of the refusal of the Bashkirians to proclaim the official status of Tatar in the Republic. The situation is especially complex in Dagestan where 80% of the population is Dagestani but more than 30 languages cohabit. Also, some decrees establishing the adoption of the Latin alphabet instead of the Cyrillic one (for instance, the Decree of July 1999 in Tatarstan) are usually interpreted as an overt challenge which aims to increase the distancing from Moscow. In addition, the adoption of constitutional clauses that limit and even impede the access to political or administrative responsibilities for citizens that do not know the national language of the titular ethnic group, as in the case of Adygea, Northern Ossetia, Bashkiria and Mari El, also represent a danger for the stability of interethnic relationships. There also exists the temptation on the part of some titular nationalities to use the linguistic issue to provoke demographic changes that would imply a higher representation of their community: what the French call "*le vote avec ses pieds*" ("the vote with one's feet") is also a reality in Russia, despite the fact that the exodus of Russians towards Republics with a majority Russian population is mainly due to economic problems. The lack of local structures for mediation to look after the legitimate interests of the Russophone communities and of the other minority groups is even more dangerous if we take into account that Moscow does not always have enough capacity or legitimacy to play this role.

The linguistic and cultural processes that take place in the Russian Federation are determined by a combination of factors reported on in the previous pages: the great cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of the population throughout the entire territory; the demographically predominant presence of the Russians in most of the Autonomous Republics; the influence of the national-territorial criteria established by the Soviet regime in order to manage linguistic and ethnical diversity; and the processes of economic restructuring that are taking place in a disorderly fashion.

¹¹ The population data correspond to 1989, year of the last Soviet census. Due to budget and financial constraints, the new census expected in 1999 has been delayed several times and will probably be undertaken in 2002.

¹² Tatar, Yakut and Tuvian. See Salminen (1999).

As already stated, in only 8 of the 21 national territorial entities the titular nationality constitutes the majority of the population. In addition, most of these entities reproduce on a microscale the mosaic of nationalities, languages, cultures and religions present throughout the entire Federation. In the same way, Russian constitutes the language of communication between the center and the periphery, while the Russification process which started, with some pushing and pulling movements according to the interests and legitimization strategies of the Soviet regime, in the mid 30's, still has its effects on minority languages. As we have already seen, the application of a national-territorial criteria allowed for the development of the languages of the titular nationalities by means of the creation of some regional elites, and cultural, social and economic structures that made them turn into almost-States, even before the disappearance of the Soviet State. But from 1992 onwards, and in contrast with what was happening previously, the Federal Law on the National-Cultural Autonomy also allowed the national and linguistic communities that did not have their own politico-administrative structures to also enjoy the right to constitute themselves as autonomous territorial entities and to create the necessary conditions for the preservation and promotion of their own languages.

The economic situation derived from the chaotic transition from a planned economy to a free market economy also constitutes another hindrance for the peripheral ethnic and linguistic communities, given the fact that the majority of them depend on the subsidies granted by the authorities to avoid the total collapse of their economic structures; this leaves little margin for financing policies to promote autochthonous languages, if we consider the urgent priorities as regards social welfare, education, public health care and modernization of the economy.

In spite of everything, the main risk of interethnic tensions is concerned less with the relationships that may be established from now onwards between the federal authorities and the peripheral Republics, than with the capacity of the nationalities to take into consideration the situation, the needs and the interests of the other national communities present in their territory; to conciliate their desire to promote the autochthonous language with the awareness of the complexity and the slowness of the processes of transition and change in deep-rooted linguistic habits; and to establish operational structures that allow titular nationalities and minority groups to have access to the learning of the autochthonous language, very often only recently turned into the official language along with Russian. In short, it is fundamental and urgent that the nationalities can assume and successfully face this challenge in order to avoid a true disaster and an intensification of interethnic tensions:

It is obvious that the languages of all the peoples in Russia including Russian are in a state of crisis. Many of them are on the verge of extinction. It is without a doubt, a humanitarian catastrophe although the socio-economic calamities of the last years have hidden it. The fact that the languages of indigenous peoples in the republics are decreed as state languages makes no difference. The crisis has gone so far that in many cases it seems irreversible¹³.

4. Conclusion: strategies for a peaceful and balanced management of linguistic diversity in the Russian Federation and the Soviet successor states

The events taking place since 1991 in the Russian Federation and the Soviet successor states prove the absolute necessity of solving and preventing interethnic conflicts in order to guarantee a minimum level of well-being in the local populations and to satisfy their aspirations. In addition, it is also urgent to guarantee a correct management of the ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity so as to prevent violent vindications from spreading and interethnic conflicts both in the core and the periphery of the Russian Federation from multiplying¹⁴.

Some positive developments have to be stressed, as for example the signature by Russia on May 10th, of the Council of Europe's *European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages*, which is an important step involving a change of attitude toward the protection of the more than one hundred minority languages spoken in Russia. The great Russian linguistic diversity have been object of different seminars and meetings organized by the Council of Europe, aimed to grow the Russian Government's awareness about the importance of the protection of the European cultural heritage.

It is also worth noting that on July 19, Moldova adopted a Law on Ethnic Minorities, as far as the multiethnic and multilingual situation in this country is a quite complex one since there exist six officially recognized minority groups (Russian, Ukrainian, Gagauz, Jews, Bulgarian and Rom) which nearly make up half of the state's total population. The linguistic issue is neither an easy one: Russian was the official language for 45 years until, in 1989, Romanian (Moldovan) was again recognized as the state's official language following the approval of a "law on linguistic transition" (Law on the Functioning

¹³ Bgazhnokov, 2000.

¹⁴ Vitaly Ganiushin, a well-known Russian journalist, already warned that: "We have been able to survive the disappearance of the USSR, but we could not survive the disintegration of Russia" (*New Times*, 1993, n. 30).

of Languages) which, although it was not generally refused by that time, it became increasingly criticized by the diverse groups in Moldova. The Moldovan constitution establishes in its 3rd article that the Moldovan language (with Latin script) is the national language whereas the state respects and undertakes to promote Russian and the other languages spoken within its territory. It also envisages the regulation of this article by means of a law, although it has not been yet developed.

The recent developments in Azerbaijan are also rather encouraging: the republic has signed the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities on June 26 2001¹⁵ and the document has come into force on October 1. Furthermore, the Parliament of Azerbaijan is preparing and discussing a new draft law which should define the legal basics for the protection of national minorities. The text guarantees the equality of rights and freedoms for the individuals that belong to minority groups. The draft law's third article states that "no one shall be forced to change its ethnic affiliation", apart from stressing the fact that "the state will not permit any action aimed at forced assimilation of national minorities".

Nevertheless, there are still many controversial issues which can easily lead to the raising of new inter-ethnic conflicts. For example, on October 22, the Estonian Parliament decided not to discuss the amendments of the electoral laws which require a certain linguistic knowledge in both local and general spheres for candidates to occupy public posts. The opposition "People's Union" party has proposed to postpone the discussion whereas the Center Party has suggested that the Minister of Foreign Affairs should report on such amendments. These amendments are part of the Estonian actions aimed at convincing the OSCE, which has criticised its linguistic policy in their last report on this state.

Consequently, it is fundamental to involve Russian linguistic and cultural minorities in the formulation, adoption, application and evaluation of protection policies, as well as policies fostering their rights at international, national and local levels. The effective participation of these communities constitutes a necessary element for a better management of the human, social and economic resources of the area, as well as for the exercise of a better control of the actions of the local governments in order to guarantee the equality of rights and the non-discrimination for all the parties involved. Obviously, the great variety of aspirations and the huge ethnic and cultural complexity of the area demand that the most suitable mechanisms to create the necessary conditions for stimulating a real and effective participation of the local populations in public affairs, according to the peculiarities of each of the Republics, are identified in the most rigorous and proper way. However, this participation will only be possible within a context that respects the universal values of human rights, including cultural, social and economic rights, as a *sine qua non* condition for the exercise of these and other rights. It is therefore extremely urgent, among other things, that the peripheral regions of Russia can begin to design and apply relevant strategies in the areas like the promotion of autochthonous languages and cultures, the construction of civil societies and the prevention of interethnic conflicts in order to guarantee the development of minority languages, the increase in economic activities and the improvement in living conditions, the strengthening of local social networks, the consolidation of some emergent civil societies and a sustainable local development. As I see it, the promotion of autochthonous languages and the strengthening of civil societies must mainly aim at increasing the relationships between democracy and national identity: the promotion of values such as tolerance, the setting-up of educational systems that disseminate messages of pacific cohabitation and mutual understanding, based more on cultural identities than on national identities, and the implementation of policies which stimulate local development constitute essential elements to reinforce the prevention of conflicts and the improvement of the well-being of the peripheral populations of Russia.

In short, fostering a peaceful cohabitation, an harmonic multiculturalism and a sustainable development are the main challenges that the regions of Russia have to face today, very specially those of the Northern Caucasus and Siberia. In order to guarantee their development, credible and effective policies have to be set in motion so as to reinforce the links among the autochthonous populations and the European regions and institutions (very especially the European Union and the Council of Europe), as well as with the NGO's that may develop a twofold role as mediators and promoters to help the local social partners to design and apply flexible and realistic initiatives using their own resources. Only in this way may we help to prevent Russia and all the former Soviet republics from undergoing new wars such as those of Kosovo and Chechnya.

¹⁵ Georgia also signed the Framework Convention on January 21 and Armenia signed the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages on January 25 2002.

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- ### Nom des Régions numérotées
- | | |
|--|------------------------------|
| 1 Rép. des Adyguènes | 7 Rép. des Maris |
| 2 Arrt. Aut. des Bouriates d'Oust-Ordynski | 8 Rép. de Mordovie |
| 3 Arrt. Aut. des Bouriates d'Aginskoïe | 9 Rép. d'Ossétie du Nord |
| 4 Rép. d'Ingouchie | 10 Rép. d'Oudmourtie |
| 5 Rép. des Kabardino-Balkarie | 11 Rép. de Tchétchénie |
| 6 Rép. des Karatchaïs-Tcherkesses | 12 Rép. de Tchouvaachie |
| | 13 Région Autonome des Juifs |

RUSSIE

Divisions administratives

0 500 1000 1500 km

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✳ Capitale nationale / Ville fédérale ○ Ville fédérale ● Chef-lieu de région ou territoire <i>(Dans la plupart des cas, les régions et les territoires ont le nom de leur chef-lieu)</i> ● Chef lieu d'arrond., région, territoire <i>(ayant un nom différent)</i> 	<table border="0"> <tr> <td style="width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: #90EE90; border: 1px solid black;"></td> <td>Républiques (21)</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: #9ACD32; border: 1px solid black;"></td> <td>Territoires (6)</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: #8FBC8F; border: 1px solid black;"></td> <td>Régions (49)</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: #A9D0D9; border: 1px solid black;"></td> <td>Région Autonome (1)</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: #C8E6C9; border: 1px solid black;"></td> <td>Arrondissements Autonomes (10)</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: #E0E0E0; border: 1px solid black;"></td> <td>Villes fédérales (2)</td> </tr> </table>		Républiques (21)		Territoires (6)		Régions (49)		Région Autonome (1)		Arrondissements Autonomes (10)		Villes fédérales (2)
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	Villes fédérales (2)												

Frontières : - - - - de République, Territoire ou Région - - - - de leur Zones autonomes