



EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE POLITICS: THE CASE OF KARELIAN

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Karelians are the titular people of the Karelian Republic in the North-West of Russia. Besides, there is a considerable Karelian population in Russia's Tver and Leningrad Re-gions.

At present, there are about 125,000 Karelians in all. The general language situation in Karelia is specific, one might say, even unique. In the first place, the titular nation consti-tute about 10% of the Republic's total population. In the second place, until quite recently Karelian had no writing of its own. The Karelians were the biggest ethnos and the only titular people in Russia to find themselves in such a position. In the third place, beginning with the 1920s, Finnish, a foreign language, played an important part in the language situation in Karelia, alongside with Karelian, Vepsian and Russian, indigenous to the area.

In the 1930s, when the Soviet Union's language policy was very active and quite a number of peoples in the country were given a writing of their own, that process in Kare-lia was peculiar in many respects. At first, a Latin-based writing was created for the Karelians of Tver Region. Between 1931 and 1937, it was used as a teaching medium in primary schools. Several newspapers and a total of 50 books were published in it.

At the same time, beginning in the late 1920s, literary Finnish was taken up as a liter-ary language for the native Finno-Ugric population of Karelia (these are the Karelians and the Vepsians). It was close to one of the Karelian dialects only, and the Vepsians did not understand it at all.

Finnish was introduced on a large scale mainly for subjective reasons. Following the civil war in Finland, a great number of Finnish communists, persecuted at home, had fled to Karelia. They had taken key positions in the local Communist Party organs and ad-ministration. Natives of Finland also constituted the bulk of Karelia's intellectuals. All this had a profound impact on the language situation in the area. Karelian was proclaimed to be incapable of playing an independent role and devising a separate writing for it was considered superfluous.

In the mid 1930s, compulsory learning of Finnish was condemned as a survival of bourgeois nationalism. In 1937 a decision was taken to create a unified Karelian language for the whole of the population.

The process was hampered, however, by the existence within Karelian of 3 dialects, so different from one another as to make communication between speakers of them al-most impossible.

Prof. Dmitry Bubrikh worked out a Cyrillic-based Karelian alphabet along with the norms of a unified Karelian, on the basis of all the dialects at the same time. Between 1937 and 1940, Karelian was used as a teaching medium in primary schools, a magazine and about 200 books, mainly text-books and books for children, were published in the same period.

Yet this version of Karelian never became popular. On the one hand, it was obscure to speakers of all the dialects, who proved to be psychologically unprepared for the intro-duction of it. On the other hand, it turned out to be short-lived. Late in the 1930s, the lan-guage policy in the country radically changed. Karelian was replaced by Finnish in Kare-lian schools of the Karelian Republic and by Russian in the



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WORLD CONGRESS ON LANGUAGE POLICIES Barcelona, 16-20 d'abril de 2002

Karelian schools of Tver Re-gion. Karelian was confined to household or traditional industry use and folklore. The number of Karelian speakers dropped considerably as a result.

In the mid 1980s, marked by increased national self consciousness and interest for different languages and cultures all over the USSR, Karelian was in a deplorable state. According to the General Census of 1989, only 48.6 per cent of the Karelians considered Karelian to be their mother tongue. But the real situation was still worse. Some Karelians considered Karelian to be their mother tongue though they knew it poorly or did not know at all. And then, the knowledge of the language was very different in various age groups. For example, only about 7 per cent the 6 to 9 year-olds in the urban areas considered Karelian to be their mother tongue.

As soon as Karelian intellectuals were able to materialize their cultural and linguistic ambitions, they made an effort to revive their mother tongue. By the late 1980s, Karelian writing had been restored. Its creators took into account the ethnolinguistic situation in the country which was as follows.

1. The majority of the Karelian population, especially young people, were more proficient in Russian than in Karelian and used Russian as their first functional language;
2. There were few remaining native speakers of the Lyudikovsky dialect.
3. Many of those speaking the Northern dialect (which is close to Finnish) believed that there was no need to create a common Karelian literary language. They thought it more reasonable to use Finnish as a written language.

It was decided to devise two versions of the written Karelian language. One of them was intended for speakers of the Northern dialect and the other - for speakers of the Liv-vikovsky dialect. Both versions of writing were based on the Latin alphabet. Following the introduction of Karelian writing, the Karelian language began to gain ground. In 1988, it began to be taught in the 1st through 3rd grades of three rural primary schools. By 2000, as many as 52 schools, both rural and urban, offered a course in Karelian for grades 1 through 4. Subsequent grades chose Karelian as an optional subject. It was also included in the training program for nursery schools. It is also taught in three institutions of higher learning and a teachers' training junior college. Currently textbooks are available for teaching Karelian in grades 1 through 4. There are books for children published in Karelian. Some works produced by Karelian writers (mostly poetry) are also available in Karelian. A total of the books published in Karelian amounts to 40 titles. Karelian has expanded to the media: three newspapers and a children's magazine are published in Karelian. A number of radio and TV programs are also produced in Karelian.

Karelian law-makers strive to provide a legal basis for the use of Karelian. However, the above features of the linguistics situation in the Karelian Republic hamper the implementation of the type of the Languages Law successfully used - with minor modifications - by other republics in the Russian Federation.

The first act to provide the legal basis for the use of the Karelian in Karelia was "The Non-Russian District and Local Council Legal Status Act" adopted in 1991. It provided for the use of Karelian as a language of the local administration in the areas with compact Karelian population as well as in the spheres of education and culture. In 1994, the Education Law was passed specifying the rights of the Karelian Republic's population to be educated in the language of their own. In 1995, the Karelian government decree was issued to foster meeting the ethnocultural needs of the Karelians, Veps and Finns in the Republic of Karelia without breaking the existing social, economic and cultural integration of the peoples living there. The Programme specified the steps to be taken, the parties in charge and, what is most important, the sources of financing as well. The work on the law on languages was launched in Karelia in 1992. Only in September 1996, that draft of it was submitted for discussion. There were reasons why the work took such a long time. In the majority of the Russian Federation republics that had adopted similar laws, the language of the titular nation was proclaimed the state language (along with Russian). At the same time, even most radically-minded law-makers would consider it a very bold move to grant the state language status to a language lacking a writing tradition or demographic and functional capacities. This was done however and brought about a lot of criticism. The new draft law of 1998 also caused harsh criticism, as it contained a minimum of amendments as compared to the earlier version. Many years of discussion and debate resulted in a new draft of 2000 differing radically from the two earlier ones as well as from other language laws enacted in the Russian Federation. The new Languages in the Republic of Karelia Act ruled out a second state language in Karelia. The Russian language is assigned the sole state language status with Karelian, Vepsian and

Finnish acquiring a status of regional languages.

The act ensures state guarantees for the language rights of the Karelian Republic's population alongside with guarantees of civil rights, legal status of languages in the Karelian Republic, legal, social and economic protection of the languages of other peoples re-siding in the republic.

As compared to earlier draft laws, the functional domains where the Karelian language may be used owing to a change in its status have not changed. The use of Karelian in various functional domains in its capacity of a regional language is psychologically more acceptable to the population. There is a firmly rooted belief that only a language already possessing some higher status, well-developed, widespread and prestigious can become the state one. In our view, this Act was a breakthrough in the Russian Federation, as it was an attempt to grant the languages a legal status consistent with their actual condition. The Act displays an obvious tendency to take into account the standards of the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages (1992) in addition to the Russian Federal and constituent Republics' law.

In conclusion, we would like to point out that the law-making process as well as practical work to support and develop the Karelian language is a well thought-over, goal-oriented, and balanced effort. It brings good results: the Karelian has considerably expanded its functional domains and enhanced its prestige in the eyes of its speakers, which is a good omen for its further stable development.