
From Language Revival to Language Removal? The Teaching of Titular Languages in the National Republics of Post-Soviet Russia

Konstantin Zamyatin*

University of Helsinki

Minority language education has been planned in post-Soviet Russia for two decades. During this period, language policy in education has shifted from compulsory to voluntary study of native languages in school. The effect of this move in policy and its relation to general trends on language education has not yet been systematically evaluated. Addressing this gap, the current article employs a quantitative method to calculate dynamics in the relative share of native language learners attending school. This study demonstrates that, after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the significant investments by regional authorities to extend titular language teaching resulted in the provision of native language teaching to most of the titular students in some former autonomous republics, notably the Turkic republics in the Volga and Ural areas. In contrast, steps for the promotion of titular languages in the Finno-Ugric republics have had less impact on native language teaching. Throughout the two post-Soviet decades, the insufficient amount of teaching of the Finno-Ugric languages in titular republics failed to ensure the transfer of language competence to a considerable proportion of children. This failure to ensure revival of the titular languages may accelerate the language shift from minority languages towards Russian.

Keywords: minority language education, language revival, education reform, Finno-Ugric republics, Volga and Ural Turkic republics, Russia

Since the early 1990s, “language revival” has been at the core of language policy in education in Russia’s national republics. Have the policies actually “revived” the languages? The problem of evaluating the policy impact on the teaching of the republics’ titular languages in post-Soviet Russia has been a subject of scholarly interest. Some research has been conducted on language revival in education in the republics titled after peoples speaking Turkic languages, starting in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan (e.g. Boiko *et al.*, 2002; Garipov *et al.*, 2006; Gataullina, 2001; Safin, 1997; Graney, 1999; Gorenburg, 2005 and others). There are also studies into the dynamics of change in the republics titled after peoples speaking Finno-

* Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland. Email: konstantin.zamyatin@helsinki.fi. Research for this article was made possible through the grant of the Academy of Finland, research project *Revitalization and Empowerment Trends among the EU and Russian Minorities* (chair: Janne Saarikivi).

Ugric languages (e.g. Gabov, 2006; Klementiev, 2006 and 2010; Mosin, 2010; Shutov, 2003; Strogalshchikova, 2008; Lallukka, 1994 and others). The research typically demonstrated trends towards an increase in language teaching in the 1990s.

However, the current situation on language education and overall trends in language teaching remained understudied. Official statistics and research are far from exhaustive in this respect. Official sources typically provide the absolute numbers and sometimes also the relative share of minority language learners in relation to all students of a republic. However, they rarely, if ever, provide information on the relative share of students of titular ethnic origin studying their languages. Authorities report that:

during the last decades, the tendency can be observed in most regions of Russia (Bashkortostan, Komi, Tatarstan, Tuva, Sakha (Yakutia), etc.) for an increase in the number of children studying in general education institutions where the language of instruction is native (non-Russian) and humanities are taught based on ethnic culture (Russia's State Council Report, 2011, author's translation).¹

Yet, as this study will demonstrate, data on minority language education present a significantly more multifaceted picture and largely contradict the optimism of the authorities. Why were some republics more successful in promoting and sustaining their titular languages in education than others?

The aim of this study is to measure access to native language learning in the republics during the last twenty years. The study objectives are the following: 1) to outline figures from the author's original research that show varying dynamics in language education in the republics, 2) to demonstrate how the legacy of the Soviet period has predetermined the diversification of post-Soviet institutional educational settings, 3) to understand the reasons behind the trends in the current situation, and 4) to explain varying trends in language education in the Turkic and Finno-Ugric republics.

The empirical study producing the data on language teaching in the republics will be presented in the first section of this article. This section will give some general demographic data on the republics necessary for the research, discuss the research design, and generalize the data on language teaching in a way to reveal the dynamics of changes in the proportions of pupils involved in the three modes of teaching: 1) "state languages", 2) "native languages", and 3) "media of instruction". Unlike many other domains of public language use, the field of language education is accessible for quantitative research. The amount of language teaching is taken in this study as the most observable dependent variable to measure the effect of policy on the language education situation in a republic. Based on the data obtained, the trends in different republics will be analyzed in the second section. This section will explain how the Soviet patterns in educational policy repeated themselves in post-Soviet Russia, first

in the language revival policy of the 1990s, and then in its abandonment in the 2000s. In the conclusion, the effect of language policy in education in general and the possible effect of education reform in the late 2000s in particular will be evaluated.

An analysis of the data indicates a shift that was imposed in language education policy by the federal authorities around the turn of millennium. As a result of the policy shift, the efforts that republican authorities had invested into language revival since the early 1990s started declining in the early 2000s. This was followed by a subsequent stagnation and, in some cases, even a decrease in the amount of language teaching. Arguably, the education reform carried out in the second half of the 2000s would accelerate the removal of native language teaching from school curricula. The study of minority language education provides an insight to understanding language policy and the dynamics of language shift away from minority languages in post-Soviet Russia. The findings about the effects of the language policy in education provide a certain understanding on the character of the policy itself.

1. Trends in language teaching: empirical study

1.1 *General demographic data on the republics*

Russia is a federation that consists of 89 federative units. Its rather complicated federative structure includes both territorially defined units – regions, territories and federal cities – and ethnically defined units – 21 national republics, 4 autonomous districts and one autonomous region. Republics and other ethnically defined units are situated in three large areas of Russia: in the European part (European North, Volga and Ural areas), in the North Caucasus, and in Siberia.

The titular peoples of the republics in the European North, Volga and Ural areas, which are the focus of this article, have many common features because geographically their territories are situated closer to Moscow and, historically, they experienced the Russian presence for centuries longer than in other regions. The languages of these peoples are classified as belonging to the Finno-Ugric (Uralic) and Turkic (Altaic) language groups. After the Russian conquest of their territories, the Finno-Ugric peoples and Chuvashs were baptized, while the Tatars and Bashkirs remained Muslims; the religious marker reinforces their identities.

Demographic trends in the post-Soviet period can be traced through the data of the 1989, 2002 and 2010 censuses. Although the census arrangements have been a matter of

extensive criticism, the results (systematized in Tables 1 and 2) are a useful source of data on the ethnopolitical and sociolinguistic situation.

Table 1. The titular populations in the Finno-Ugric Republics.²

Republic	Komi	Mari El	Mordovia	Udmurtia	Karelia
1. Total population of the republic (thousands)					
Census 1989	1251	749	963	1605	790
Census 2002	1018	728	889	1570	716
Census 2010	901	696	834	1521	643
2. Total titular group population of the republic (thousands)					
Census 1989	291	324	313	496	79
Census 2002	256	312	283	460	65
Census 2010	202	290	333	410	45
3. Proportion of titular group in relation to the total population of the republic					
Census 1989	23.3%	43.3%	32.5%	30.9%	10%
Census 2002	25.2%	42.9%	31.9%	29.3%	9.2%
Census 2010	23.7%	43.9%	40%	28%	7.4%
4. Titular group in Russia (thousands)					
Census 1989	336	644	1073	715	125
Census 2002	293	604	843	637	93
Census 2010	228	548	744	552	61
5. Proportion of the titular group residing in the titular republic					
Census 1989	86.7%	50.4%	29.2%	69.5%	63.2%
Census 2002	87.4%	51.7%	33.7%	72.3%	70.3%
Census 2010	88.7%	53.1%	44.8%	74.3%	74.9%
6. Report knowledge of their language in the republic					
Census 1989	74.4%	88.4%	88.5%	75.7%	51.5%
7. Report knowledge of their language in Russia					
Census 1989	71.0%	81.9%	69.0%	70.8%	48.6%

Table 2. The titular populations in the Volga and Ural Turkic Republics.³

Republic	Chuvashia	Tatarstan	Bashkortostan	Tatar-speaking Bashkirs	Tatars
1. Total population of the republic (thousands)					
Census 1989	1338	3641	3943		
Census 2002	1313	3779	4104		
Census 2010	1251	3786	4072		
2. Total titular group population of the republic (thousands)					
Census 1989	906	1765	863		1120
Census 2002	889	2000	1221		990
Census 2010	814	2012	1172		1009
3. Proportion of titular groups in relation to the total population of the republic					
Census 1989	67.8%	48.5%	21.9%		28.4%
Census 2002	67.7%	52.9%	29.8%		24.1%
Census 2010	67.7%	53.2%	29.5%		25.4%
4. Titular group in Russia (thousands)					
Census 1989	1773	5522	1345		
Census 2002	1637	5554	1673		
Census 2010	1435	5310	1584		
5. Proportion of the titular group residing in the titular republic					
Census 1989	51.1%	32%	64.2%		
Census 2002	54.3%	36%	73%		
Census 2010	56.7%	37.9%	74%		
6. Report knowledge of their language in the republic					
Census 1989	85.0%	96.6%	74.7%	20.7%	92.9%
7. Report knowledge of their language in Russia					
Census 1989	77.5%	85.5%	59.5%		

In the period covered by the censuses, the total population in economically-stronger Tatarstan and Bashkortostan grows while the population in the other republics decreases. The proportion of the titular group increases in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan (in the latter, arguably, at the expense of the sizeable Tatar community), remains stable in Chuvashia, and slowly decreases in the Finno-Ugric republics (with rare increases as in Komi between 1989 and 2002 and in Mari El between 2002 and 2010) from census to census, usually within the margin of 1% or, rarely, 2%. One significant exception is the growth of the proportion of ethnic Mordvins⁴ in Mordovia from 31.9% up to 40% between the 2002 and 2010 censuses. This growth should be attributed to the trend that those individuals of Mordvin descent who, in previous censuses, declared themselves to be Russians changed back to declaring themselves as Mordvins as a result of encouraging regional policy and following positive changes in popular attitudes towards the titular ethnicity. Such shifts in self-identification

demonstrate fluctuating ethnic identity even within one generation and illustrate relativity in population censuses as an information source.

Still the data are able to demonstrate, for example, that significant portions of the titular groups live outside their republics and, as could be noticed from the decrease in their proportions, the processes of language shift and assimilation are more rapid there due to, *inter alia*, the virtual absence of language teaching. Furthermore, it is remarkable that titular groups in the Turkic republics of Chuvashia and Tatarstan make up over half of the republics' populations. In Bashkortostan titular Bashkirs are in minority, but the republic's ethnic composition is similar to that of the other two republics in one aspect: Bashkirs, together with culturally close Tatars, outnumber ethnic Russians. This sociological fact about the republics' ethnic composition impacts upon the sociolinguistic and ethnopolitical situation. The majority position of a titular group ensures the ability of its elites to gain political and administrative support for nation and language revival in the regional political landscapes (see Gorenburg, 2003).

A parameter of assessment with somewhat less fluctuation than ethnic identity is language competence. The last Soviet population census, held in 1989, had a separate question asking whether a person possessed knowledge of his/her native language, on the basis of his or her own personal assessment. "Native language" started to be interpreted in the later Soviet population censuses not as one's mother language, but as the language of one's ethnic affinity, thus preventing tension between one's identity and lack of language knowledge. According to the 1989 Soviet census data, 27.6% of non-Russians in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) reported Russian as their native language (14.4%, if one excludes Ukrainians and Belarusians, see Batsyn and Kuzmin, 1995: 18). Among those who declared themselves to belong to the titular nationality in their respective republics, only about one half of ethnic Karelians and three out of four Komi, Udmurts, and Bashkirs reported the knowledge of their respective language. It has been argued that the actual language knowledge is even lower (Tishkov *et al.*, 2009: 28-35). In the subsequent two decades the number of those having such language competence further decreased, although it is not easy to evaluate the language shift because there was no specific question on native language in the 2002 and 2010 censuses. Nowadays non-Russian peoples are affected by progressive language loss, in particular among younger generations. In addition to broken intergenerational language transmission within families, deficiency in language teaching provision might be another important reason for this.

1.2 Research design and the study method

Personal information about schoolchildren of titular origin who study their language would be a primary source on the amount of language learning taking place. However, given the virtual impossibility of interviewing all children, researchers can rely only on (frequently restricted) secondary data from regional education agencies. While some information on the amount of language teaching is available for most republics, a generalized diachronic framework is missing that would provide the necessary context for evaluation.

In the absence of sufficient official data, some other (tertiary) sources, such as expert data, have to be considered to build a systematic picture. Technically, the relative share of schoolchildren could be found by using the method of combining the obtained absolute numbers of language learners with the data on the ethnic origin of schoolchildren. For this purpose, a sociological assumption could be applied that children of school age constitute approximately 15% of the total population (Lallukka, 1992: 25-27; Strogalshchikova, 2008: 225, citation 33). A more precise version of this method is to find the share of children of titular origin aged seven to 17 in the age structure of the population defined by population censuses, as applied, for instance, in Karelia (Klementiev, 2006). In this study, the approximate share of schoolchildren of titular origin is calculated from the share of titular population in the total population of a region; these figures are provided in population censuses.

The study method is a comparative analysis of official sources and expert evaluations containing information on the amount of language teaching in the republics during the last two decades. This comparison is enabled by the similarity of language education organized in the different republics in Russia based on federal legislation, in particular the Education Law (10 July 1992)⁵, which integrates the republics into a unified educational space. Teaching of non-Russian languages is organized in “national schools” according to the curriculum with instruction in the native language or in Russian with “native language” taught as a subject. In addition, in some Republics all schoolchildren have to learn the republic’s titular state language as a subject “state language” irrespective of their ethnicity (for more detail on Russia’s education system see Zamyatin, 2012a). The combination of the curricula and the stages of education, depending on the extent of the native language use and level of freedom or obligation to learn languages, results in several models of “national schools” that offer different amounts of language teaching (on their heterogeneity see Lallukka, 1994).

The major dissimilarity between republics is the scope of the application of these modes and models, which is unique for each region and reflects the ability of ethno-political elites to push through their linguistic demands and ensure the availability of resources for language revival. The selection of the model used in schools is crucial for both the amount and quality of language teaching in a republic. The comparison enables the identification of similar trends in language teaching with the dissimilar contexts of the republics. The proposed method would thus allow for estimating the share of children who are taught their native languages or have it as the medium of instruction at least in primary school.

This research was started by collecting the available official data on absolute numbers of pupils studying titular languages and on the relative share of schoolchildren in schools where languages are taught in any of the three teaching modes. Data are generally available on all academic years. For the purpose of analysis, however, only the data on 1990, 2000 and 2010 are examined. These years roughly correspond to when the population censuses were held, and, more importantly, mark the times of the changes in policies. Data on other years are quoted only when noteworthy. Then any gaps were filled from numerous expert evaluations in scientific literature, which usually are cross-referenced with official data; many of them were left out from the list of sources due to the limited scope of the article and only the most important are given.

Indeed, this method can produce approximate data only. The resulting picture of the linguistic situation in education in any region will be incomplete for many reasons. Among the factors impairing the accuracy of calculating the percentage of children who study their mother tongue is that teaching of the titular language is not limited to pupils of titular origin. There are also children of Russian and other nationalities who study it as the “state language” or even as the “native language”. For example, until 2007 it was mandatory in the Republic of Karelia for all schoolchildren living in the areas of dense Karelian and Veps populations to study Karelian or Veps, respectively, as the “native language” (Klementiev, 2010: 27). As a consequence, the share of children of other nationalities among those who study titular languages may in some cases be considerable. While in the case of Karelia the margin of error in the number of pupils who study the titular language may be mere tens or hundreds, in republics with larger numbers of schoolchildren it theoretically may range from hundreds to thousands. Still, the learners of the titular language are typically also of titular ethnic origin. The language learners among the children of Russian and other nationalities who study the titular language at their own discretion are few in number because of the low prestige of the titular languages. It is nearly impossible to separate native and non-native learners of titular

languages and the data on the teaching of native languages in republics are not separated in this respect. A separate article is devoted to a more extensive analysis of language education in the Finno-Ugric republics. It provides a comparison of the legal-institutional frameworks of the republics and contains further information regarding the method of calculation and a detailed presentation of the data used also in this article (see Zamyatin, 2012b).

1.3 *Evaluation of the amount of language teaching: data and discussion*

Since the early 1990s, the republics had pursued the aim of providing all children of all communities with access to teaching in or on their own languages. The data of the empirical study are below (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Teaching of the titular languages in the republics.

Republic	Komi ⁶	Mordovia ⁷	Udmurtia ⁸	Karelia ⁹
Year	1990/1991	1990/1991	1989/1990	1989/1990
Students total ¹⁰	201,000	132,000	247,400	117,000
Students of titular origin	~ 46,800	~ 42,900	~ 76,600	~ 11,700
Native instruction	0	4719	0	0
Native instruction share	-	~ 11%	-	-
Native language subject	15,890	16,576	29,278	301
Native language share	~ 34%	~ 38.6%	29%	3.4%
State language subject	3483	-	-	-
State language share	~ 6%	-	-	-
Titular students share	~ 40%	~ 38.6%	29%	3.4%
Share in total	10.5%	~ 16%	~ 12%	~ 0.25%
Year	1999/2000	1999/2000	2000/2001	2000/2001
Students total	169,000	129,000	246,000	109,000
Students of titular origin	~ 42,600	~ 41,150	~ 72,000	~ 10,000
Native instruction	0	3,597	0	0
Native instruction share	-	~ 8.7%	-	-
Native language subject	16,926	16,136	33,143	2149
Native language share	~ 39.7%	~ 39.2%	41.2%	17.6%
State language subject	21,224	3191	-	-
State language share	~ 12.4%	~ 2.5%	-	-
Titular students share	~ 52.1%	~ 41.7%	41.2%	17.6%
Share in total	20.2%	~ 15%	~ 14.5%	~ 2%

Year	2009/2010	2009/2010	2008/2009	2009/2010
Students total	97,000	69,750	154,000	63,000
Students of titular origin	~ 23,000	~ 27,600	~ 43,100	~ 4660
Native instruction	0	1 689	0	0
Native instruction share	-	~ 6.1%	-	-
Native language subject	6200	7670	19,315	1581
Native language share	~ 27%	~ 27.8%	~ 44.8%	~ 25%
State language subject	27,800	15,493	-	-
State language share	~ 28.6%	~ 22.4%	-	-
Titular students share	~ 55.6%	~ 50.2%	~ 44.8%	~ 25%
Share in total	35%	~ 33.5%	13%	~ 2.5%

Notes:

- Data are available only for the year 1989-90 in Udmurtia and Karelia, for the year 1999-2000 in Komi and Mordovia, and for the year 2008-09 in Udmurtia.
- For students of titular origin, the symbol ‘~’ marks estimations for the numbers of student of titular nationality that are calculated by applying the share of the titular group in the total population of a republic according to the population censuses to the total number of students in the republic: the 1989 census data are applied to the estimations in the academic years 1989-90/1990-91; the 2002 census data are applied to the estimations in the academic years 1999-2000/2000-01; the 2010 census data are applied to the estimations in the academic years 2009-10/2010-11. In reality, the share of younger generations of minority groups tends to be lower than presented as a consequence of assimilation.
- For native instruction and native language subject, the number of students learning their native language as subject includes the number of students having native language instruction. Accordingly, the share of native language learners includes both categories.
- For state language subject, both non-native (Russian-speaking and others) and native students learn the titular state language in some republics. It is assumed that among the state language learners, the native students compose a share that reflects the share of the titular group in the total population according to the population censuses; these calculations cannot be verified on the basis of official statistics because they do not distinguish the ethnicity of the state language learners.
- For state language share, the symbol ‘~’ marks estimations of the share of schoolchildren of titular nationality learning their language both as native and state language. When available, official numbers are given without a symbol and estimations are given in brackets only if they significantly differ from official data. The discrepancy in the case Karelia could be explained by a lower share of Karelian children than their overall share in the total population of the republic due to deformation of the age-sex graph.
- For titular students share, the symbol ‘~’ marks estimations of the share of students learning the titular language (both as native and state language) in the total number of students in republic; numbers without a symbol are official.

Table 4. Teaching of the titular languages in the republics.

Republic	Mari El ¹¹	Chuvashia ¹²	Bashkort. ¹³	Tatarstan ¹⁴
Year	1990/1991	1990/1991	1990/1991	1990/1991
Students total	116,000	210,000	579,000	513,000
Students of titular origin	~ 50,200	~ 142,380	~ 126,800	~ 248,800
Native instruction	8706	31,700	49,600	65,074
Native instruction share	~ 17.3%	22%	~ 39.1%	~ 26.6%
Native language subject	27,700	~ 76,700	93,950	~ 192,600
Native language share	~ 55.2%	54%	-	-
State language subject	-	-	-	-
State language share	-	-	-	-
Titular students share	~ 55.2%	54%	66.1%	~ 78.6%
Share in total	~ 31.5%	-	-	-
Year	2000/2001	2000/2001	2000/2001	2000/2001
Students total	120,400	213,000	672,000	577,000
Students of titular origin	~ 51,500	~ 144,200	~ 200,250	~ 305,200
Native instruction	6316	22,446	69,975	150,632
Native instruction share	~ 12.3%	~ 16.3%	39.7%	48%
Native language subject	25,974	~ 131,100	138,000	313,750
Native language share	~ 50.4%	~ 90.9%	-	-
State language subject	46,559	~ 10,200	-	-
State language share	~ 9.9%	~ 7.1%	-	-
Titular students share	81.9%	~ 98%	78.3%	99.6%
Share in total	60.3%	-	-	-
Year	2009/2010	2009/2010	2009/2010	2009/2010
Students total	66,100	125,000	438,000	378,000
Students of titular origin	~ 29,000	~ 84,600	~ 129,200	~ 201,100
Native instruction	0	~ 11,600	47,908	85,516
Native instruction share	~ 1%	~ 13.8%	37.8%	48.4%
Native language subject	11,616	~ 70,900	126,747	185,392
Native language share	~ 40%	~ 83.8%	-	-
State language subject	29,304	~ 13,700	-	-
State language share	~ 44.3%	~ 16.2%	-	-
Titular students share	~ 84.3%	100%	99.9%	100%
Share in total	62%	-	-	-

Since the Soviet times schoolchildren of titular nationality in Chuvashia, Mari El and Mordovia have had native language instruction only in primary education provided by schools in rural areas. Yet, despite their seemingly insignificant share, the significance of their existence cannot be underestimated. While the data only gives a snapshot of the share of those studying in primary school, those who are now in secondary schools in rural areas and have Russian as their language of instruction also had native language instruction in primary school. Thus, the share of students receiving native language instruction is two times higher or more. Moreover, it should be remembered that large portions of titular groups reside in rural areas and national schools are typically rural schools. Tatarstan and Bashkortostan used to also have native language secondary schools during the Soviet times, though they were situated only in rural areas. In the post-Soviet era, national language school expansion in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan took place mostly in urban areas.

Russian is the medium of instruction and native language is taught only as a subject in all national schools in Karelia, Komi, and Udmurtia, as well as in urban national schools in Chuvashia, Mari El, and Mordovia. The titular languages are taught as state languages in so-called “Russian schools” in Chuvashia, Komi, Mari El and Mordovia, but those schoolchildren who attend them are not only ethnic Russians. These schools are usually situated in urban areas and all schoolchildren, irrespective of their ethnicity, attend state language classes. Sometimes students of the titular nationality attend the classes by choice, but more often they simply do not have any other option as there are not many national schools in cities. Titular state languages are usually taught one or two, or rarely three, hours per week, which is not enough to develop communicative language skills.

In Tatarstan and Bashkortostan national schools also exist in the cities, so all titular schoolchildren should, in theory, have access to national schools, although in practice some of them still attend “Russian schools”. The available data for these two republics do not reveal what portion of titular schoolchildren learns their language as the state language rather than as their native language. However, equal amounts of time used to be assigned in these republics by law prior to Russian education reform for both Russian and titular state languages, which accounts for five or six hours per week. This fact allows for creating a generalized picture of the situation presented through diagrams without distinguishing the share of students learning their language as a native or state language. The data on the share of native language learners is presented below (Diagrams 1, 2, and 3).

Diagram 1. Share of pupils of titular ethnic origin learning their native language in the republics (1990).

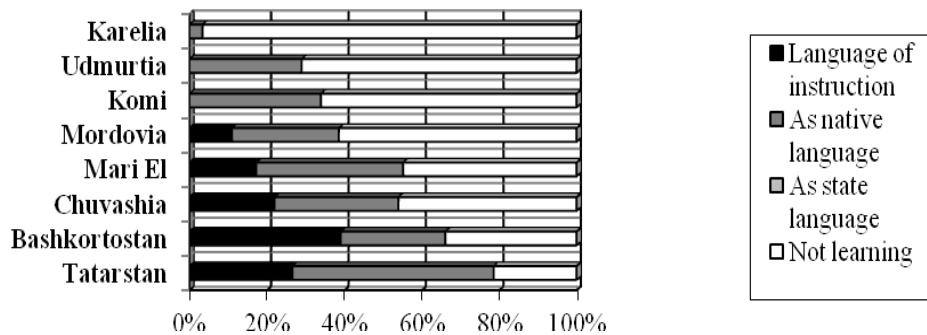


Diagram 2. Share of pupils of titular ethnic origin learning their native language in the republics (2000).

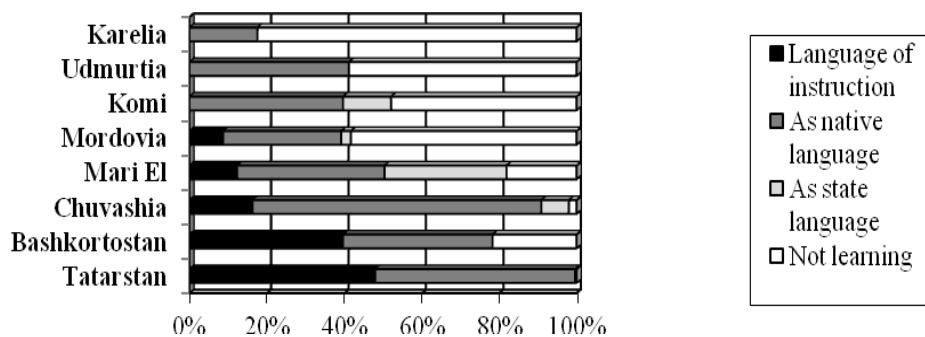
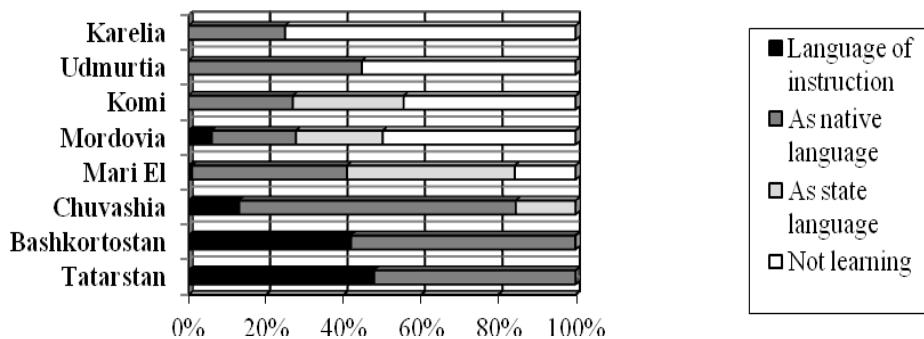


Diagram 3. Share of pupils of titular ethnic origin learning their native language in the republics (2010).



The data demonstrate that in the early 1990s the republics had uneven starting points in terms of providing native language learning. During the 1990s, access to native language learning had increased, especially in the Turkic republics where most schoolchildren of titular nationality learned their native language. In the 2000s, access either remained stable, as in Turkic republics, or was dropping, as in most Finno-Ugric republics. In the following section the data are discussed within the framework of the policy changes: What Soviet legacies predetermined the diverging starting points for language revival in the republics in the early 1990s? How have institutional settings influenced the asymmetrical routes of language revival during the 1990s and the ability of the regional education system to resist the federal policy shift after the year 2000? What effect could education reform in the late 2000s have on language education in the near future?

2. Language education policies in the Soviet Union and Russia: an ethnopolitical pendulum

2.1 Soviet educational policies: from language promotion to discouragement

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was constitutionally constructed as a federation consisting of the fifteen Union Republics (SSRs), some of which also included territorial autonomies within them. Both the SSRs and the autonomies (some of which in the 1930s became Autonomous Republics or ASSRs) were established for the realization of the right to national self-determination for autochthonous peoples and were titled after them. The borders of the SSRs and the ASSRs were drawn in a way to ensure a majority position for the autochthonous group. This corresponded with the Soviet nationalities policy of “nativization”

(*korenizatsiia*), which included “vernacularization”, and aimed to promote non-Russians in the Soviet administrative structures in their republics (see Grenoble, 2003: 44).

As a part of this policy, since the early 1920s most non-Russian children in the RSFSR had been taught at “national schools” in their native language, at least within their titular autonomies. According to the policy goal, all children of a given nationality had to be provided with the teaching in their native language, which was also implemented. For example, according to the school census of 1927, of those native students who attended primary or secondary school, 92.7% of Komi, 73.5% of Udmurt, 91.8% of Tatar, and 82.7% of Chuvash schoolchildren studied in their native language; in some years compulsory education was extended to secondary school and, thus, native language instruction was also extended (Batsyn and Kuzmin, 1995: 12; Hans and Hessen, 1930: 179-180).

After the Stalinist turn in the 1930s the policy of “nativization” was abandoned. The strive towards industrialization and collectivization resulted in the mixing of the populations and economic re-drawing of administrative borders. This led to a situation in which Russians had already become the majority in some, notably Finno-Ugric, ASSRs before World War II. An exception was the Karelian ASSR, transformed in 1940 into the Karelian-Finnish SSR, where the autochthonous group was a minority from the beginning. The Finnish language was actively inculcated in the educational system in the areas with the Karelian population and, at the time of demotion of its status back to that of the Karelian ASSR in 1956, there were practically no Karelian native language schools (see, e.g., Anttikoski, 1998).

Soviet education reform in the late 1950s negatively affected, foremost, non-Union Republic nationalities. At the core of the reform was the abandonment of compulsory native language teaching and parents ‘were to choose their children’s language of instruction and even decide whether they be taught their native language at all’ (Kreindler, 1989: 49-50). After the reform, in the RSFSR only the relatively large and wealthy Tatar and Bashkir ASSRs retained complete secondary national education, which otherwise only continued in the Union Republics. Native language schools in the ASSRs titled after the Finno-Ugric peoples and in the Chuvash ASSR were again limited to primary school. By the mid-1970s the titular languages were no longer used as a medium of instruction in the Komi and Udmurt ASSRs. Native language schools in the Mari and Mordovian ASSRs practically disappeared in urban areas and continued functioning in reduced numbers at the primary level in rural areas. For comparison, in Siberia the Buryat, Tuvinian, and Yakut ASSRs retained seven or eight-year native language education, while in the North Caucasian ASSRs primary schools

in native languages virtually disappeared by the early 1970s (Lipset, 1967; Silver, 1974; Kreindler, 1985; Batsyn and Kuzmin, 1995).

The implementation of varying policy patterns, taking into account the situation of nationalities, was a typical mechanism for Soviet language policy in general (Grant, 1989: 72-75). The policy-makers set different goals ranging from temporary maintenance of diversity to striving towards outright assimilation. In the RSFSR, the patterns of national schools arrangement varied between the European part, the North Caucasus and Siberia. As a result of differentiated treatment, autochthonous groups of some ASSRs, notably those speaking Finno-Ugric languages, had less developed national language education and were assimilating more quickly as they were a minority in “their” republics, while the other ASSRs, including those speaking Turkic languages, managed to retain national schools with only a reduction in their numbers. With every decade the downward spiral of increasingly deprived groups continued.

Most important, the 1958-9 reform removed the previous principle that national schools had to teach with native language instruction and the native language ceased to be taught to all pupils. In all ASSRs of the RSFSR, including the Tatar and Bashkir ASSRs, the teaching of national languages was restricted to rural areas (Graney, 1999: 619). The share of students involved in native language learning has significantly decreased. As a consequence, at the time of the collapse of the USSR many non-Russian schoolchildren studied in national schools with Russian language as the medium of instruction or in Russian schools, and many of them did not learn their native language even as a subject. These deficiencies of native language teaching caused the extensive language shift (see Tables 1 and 2 above).

2.2 Language revival policy of the 1990s and compulsory language teaching

During the period of *perestroika*, the language shift was identified by national intellectuals as one of their main concerns. As a way to reverse the language shift, they employed “language revival” measures developed by scholars (e.g., Fishman, 1991). “National revival” and “language revival” became urgent topics on republics’ political agendas. National intellectuals proposed status planning and compulsory language teaching as a solution to the problem of the intergenerational language transmission. Language revival was adopted as the goal of language policy in education in 1990-91 after the designation of the republic’s titular languages as the state languages of republics, first in the declarations of sovereignty and later in the republican constitutions.

Soviet legacies mattered in the selection of specific goals because some former autonomous republics of the RSFSR had a higher starting point for language revival than others. Typically these were the republics with a titular majority and a corresponding dominance of titular elite in their political landscape. In the Volga and Ural Turkic republics, the goal of language revival was to overcome the negative effects of Soviet practices by making native language instruction compulsory for all titular students. The use of Chuvash as the medium of instruction was extended from four to five grades in connection with the prolonging of primary education from three to four years. The goal in the Finno-Ugric republics was not to expand language teaching through additional teaching modes and types of schools, but rather to extend native language teaching to all students of the titular nationalities within the existing modes and types. Notably, the acquiring of further modes of teaching proved to be possible in other contexts: in some republics of the North Caucasus (Adygea, North Ossetia, Kabardin-Balkaria) primary school in native languages, which was non-existent in the late Soviet decades, was introduced (three, later four grades).

In addition, in the early 1990s, some republics, including Chuvashia, Tatarstan, Komi, and Mari El set as a goal the introduction of compulsory teaching of the titular language as the state language to all students, irrespective of their ethnicity. In the other republics this goal met strong resistance on the part of the Russian-speaking elites and populations. A higher share of the titular group in the total population meant less confrontation with regard to the extension of compulsory state language as a subject. Yet, sometimes the ability of the titular elites to stick together and bargain for their demands among the republican political elites was an even more important factor than demography. Delay in reaching an agreement among the elites explains why in Mordovia and Bashkortostan compulsory state language teaching was introduced only in 2004 and 2005, respectively. Before that, these republics, as well as Udmurtia and Karelia throughout the whole period, extended the teaching of native languages only to all the students of the titular ethnic origin.

Unlike in the North Caucasus, the policy goals in the Finno-Ugric and Volga and Ural Turkic republics did not demand the restructuring of previously existing national schools, or the creation of new types of such schools. In Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, instruction in the titular languages continued until the ninth or eleventh grade, respectively, and in other languages, including Chuvash, Udmurt and Mari, until up to the fourth or seventh grade, or only as a subject for the Mordvin languages. In Chuvashia, the Chuvash and Tatar languages are formally the media of instruction for five years, but in practice few pupils attend the fifth grade in their language; the authorities did not succeed in extending native language

instruction there. Virtually all Finno-Ugric Republics have had the same model of “national schools” throughout the observed period, in which the native language is taught as a separate subject only and Russian is the language of instruction. Some rural schools in Mari El and Mordovia are an exception: they start instruction in primary school in the native language and then switch to Russian from the 4th grade. Therefore, the institutionalization of language teaching in these republics reproduced the patterns that had already formed in the Soviet period (see summarized data on all three modes of language teaching in Table 5).

Table 5. Policy goals and types of national schools in the republics.

Republic	Chuvashia	Tatarstan	Bashkort.	Mari El
Native language subject	+	+	+	+
Native instruction	+, up to 5 th	+, up to 11 th	+, up to 9 th	+, up to 4 th
State language subject	+	+	+, 2005 on	+, up to 2001
Republic	Karelia	Komi	Mordovia	Udmurtia
Native language subject	+	+	+	+
Native instruction			+, up to 4 th	
State language subject		+	+, 2004 on	

Notes:

- The symbol + indicates whether extension of the corresponding mode of language teaching to all students (or to all titular students in the case of native language instruction and native language as subject) was adopted as a policy goal in a republic.
- For native instruction, a number indicates a type of national school according to the highest grade of teaching of all subjects available in native language.
- For state language subject, a year indicates when the compulsory teaching of the titular state language was introduced or abolished in a republic.

On the basis of the data in Table 5 one could make a generalisation that in the Finno-Ugric Republics one mode of language teaching prevails - that of teaching native languages as subjects - while in the Turkic Republics two other modes are also typically used - of instruction in the native language, and the teaching of the state language as subject.

However, this rough distinction is not quite correct, because some Finno-Ugric Republics have or have had both native language instruction and state language teaching. As a result, there can be no straightforward interpretation of the data, as some republics could be placed together in the same group (Chuvashia, Bashkortostan, Mari El, and Mordovia). It is not at the policy adoption stage, but rather at the policy implementation stage, that patterns become visible.

Policy implementation could not be carried out immediately and had to be introduced through a complex series of activities. By 1995, the republics had developed a basic

legislative and institutional framework allowing them to extend the use of their languages in their education systems. Among other institutional measures, agencies on national education were created by the republican education authorities responsible for developing national schools. The legal and institutional framework for language teaching was created in all republics with varying degrees of success. Substantial efforts and significant resources had to be invested for acquisition planning in order to achieve a gradual increase in the amount of language teaching.

The 1990-2000 data on policy implementation demonstrate that the language revival took different routes in the Finno-Ugric and the Volga and Ural area Turkic Republics (compare Diagrams 1 and 2 above). In the Republics of Chuvashia, Bashkortostan, and Tatarstan, where political and administrative support for language revival was high, most students of titular nationality in Chuvashia and Bashkortostan, as well as virtually all students of titular nationality in Tatarstan, had gained access to opportunities to learn their native language either as language of instruction or at least as a subject by the year 2000. Yet, even in the Turkic republics, the goal of extending native language of instruction to all students has not been achieved.

From the diagrams, one could get a false impression that in Bashkortostan there was virtually no growth in number of native language schools. In reality, while the increase during the 1990s was remarkable, the language revival actually started there somewhat earlier: between 1988 and 1990 the number of students having native instruction increased from 30% to 39.1%. By the year 2000 it was 39.7%, but the overall number of Bashkir students significantly increased, at least on paper.

In the Finno-Ugric republics even the extension of native language teaching as a subject to all students of the titular nationalities has not been achieved. There was some growth in the share of those having access to native language instruction as a subject, yet the number of pupils in native language rural schools in Mari El and Mordovia decreased. An increase in the total number of pupils studying languages as a subject ‘would hardly compensate for reduction of instruction in native language’ (Strogalshchikova, 2008: 149). In sum, access to native language learning had increased from less than a fifth of students of titular nationality in Karelia up to a half of students in Mari El. The higher share of students that had access to native language learning by the year 2000 in Chuvashia compared to Mari El, the closest republics in two groups, should be attributed to the fact that it is easier to shape the educational process in the conditions of titular majority.

2.2 Reshaping education in the 2000s and closure of small rural schools

During the two decades of the post-Soviet period, the ethnopolitical pendulum of the Soviet nationalities policy repeated itself. While Russia was again forced to make concessions to its minorities during its weak period in the 1990s, since the year 2000 its authorities started recentralizing and building “vertical power”. It was started by bringing regional legislation into accordance with the federal legislation. The conversion of the recentralization agenda into federal policy and legislation and then into regional legislation required some years. However, the change in attitudes among the officials towards policy implementation at the regional level was immediate. Language revival ceased to be a priority on the agenda for the development of a recentralized educational system.

This shift in agenda priorities coincided with an important demographic change: the number of schoolchildren reached its highest point around the year 2000 and started declining rapidly. According to official data (Analytical Bulletin, 2011; Federal Programme, 7 February 2011),¹⁵ the total number of schoolchildren in Russia dropped during the 2000-2010 decade by more than 40%, due to the ongoing population decline. In the Finno-Ugric republics the decrease was even bigger: on average the number of students decreased there by half during the same period (see *Rossiiskii statisticheskii iezhegodnik*, 2011).¹⁶

The drop in the number of students was followed by a corresponding drop in the number of schools. First of all, rural schools were being closed through the campaign for “optimization” of small rural schools (*malokomplektnye shkoly*) (Russian Government Decree, December 17, 2001).¹⁷ Generalized data on this trend are not available, but this was a significant change. For example, in Komi between the years 2007 and 2011 the closure of small rural schools led to a drop in their share among the all schools from 66% to 51% (Education in the Komi Republic, 2010 and 2011)¹⁸ and in Mordovia between 2007 and 2010 from 68% to 60% (Statistical Data and Indicators, 2010).¹⁹ These were national schools providing teaching of native languages as a medium of instruction and a subject.

The atmosphere discouraging language revival, as well as the closure of schools, made further expansion of national schools virtually impossible. The available data illustrate that the increase in the amount of language learning that continued throughout the 1990s slowed down and practically stopped after 2000 in all republics and even reversed in those with a Russian majority. In some republics the year 2000 was not the peak in supply. For instance, in Karelia the growth in language learning continued for one more year, but this was caused by the inertia of the previous years. It seems that even with the unfavourable conditions of the federal policy in the 2000s, the republics with a titular majority were able to

retain the level of national education that they established during the 1990s. However, there was practically no growth in the share of students with native language instruction in Bashkortostan and Tatarstan (compare Diagrams 2 and 3 above).

Finno-Ugric languages are taught as native and, in some republics, as state languages. The official designation of titular languages of republics as state languages, pursued by national movements, did not immediately change the situation because it did not entail automatic compulsory teaching. A separate decision was needed to declare language teaching compulsory for all pupils, which provoked heated debates in the 1990s. Indeed, in those Finno-Ugric republics that passed such decisions the situation was better for a time (mostly until the early 2000s). While a few students were still instructed in their native language in Mordovia, normally students were taught it as either their native or state language. This resulted in a higher percentage of pupils having access to native language learning: over a half of schoolchildren of titular origin in Komi, significantly more than a half in Mari El, and about a half in Mordovia. However, if the typically rather formal and ineffective teaching of state languages is put aside, then the increasing share of students learning state languages concealed the decreasing share of those having native language teaching. Nowadays less than a half of schoolchildren of titular origin are taught their language as native in Mari El and Udmurtia and only about a quarter in Komi, Mordovia, and Karelia.

Furthermore, with the ongoing population decline, the actual difference between the two groups of republics is only that, in practice, the number of national schools closing and the shrinking amount of native language teaching in the Turkic republics does not exceed the rate of depopulation.

2.3 Education reform and the free choice of language learning

When the federal authorities started a shift in the ethnopolitical regime at the turn of the millennium, they perceived the implementation of national revival and language revival policy in the republics as an obstacle to their new identity policy aimed at the ‘consolidation of the multinational people of Russia into a single political nation’ (Concept of the National Educational Policy, August 3, 2006).²⁰ The language revival and the growth of language learning opportunities could generate an increase in demand for them, which was then seen as a threat because, in the view of policy-makers, popular movements might use this upsurge “for ethnic mobilization”. The school was then meant to become the main tool to help shape the common identity of citizens and overcome the obstacles to “consolidation” (Concept,

August 3, 2006). In these circumstances, centralization rather than localization was on the agenda of policy-makers (see Prina, 2011).

First of all, as part of the new education reform, the previous division of the state educational standards into the federal, national-regional and school components was revoked by amendments to the Education Law (Federal Law, December 1, 2007)²¹ and unified federal educational standards were introduced instead. The redistribution of powers resulted, *inter alia*, in restricting the competence of regional authorities and passing it to federal and school authorities. Within the reformed system, ministries of education in republics and education agencies in other administrative units, once the driving force of the language revival, now have limited opportunities to implement regional legislation as part of language revival. Furthermore, regional education agencies can no longer directly promote teaching school subjects of regional importance. While history, geography, languages, literatures and cultures of the titular peoples of republics and autonomous districts of Russia had previously been taught within the national-regional component, the abrogation of this component has made teaching of these subjects problematic (see Zamyatin, 2012a).

Second, the reform unavoidably affected language teaching. In line with the corresponding step in the 1958-9 reform, the current education reform established free choice for language learning. In justifying free choice, the reform developers pointed at the statistical data showing a language shift from many languages of the Russian Federation to Russian and admonished compulsory teaching of languages to pupils without considering the will of their parents. In the developers' view, the need for voluntary choice for the study of languages was justified by the prevalence of individual freedom of choice in language issues over the obligation to study languages as a communal good. Only when children and their parents have chosen curriculum using native language instruction or with native language teaching, is the native language taught to students of that school. Free choice of native language learning in school would weaken the teaching of minority languages, because it upholds the removal of native language teaching by selection of school curricula. Moreover, even if the native language is taught through any mode, the maximum number of hours ascribed to native language learning in the new standard is significantly lower in comparison with the previous standard. Even for those pupils having native language as medium of instruction, the number of hours assigned for study of Russian exceeds that for the native language (see Mustafina, 2012).

The education reform has aggravated the already adverse situation for Finno-Ugric languages in the education system. The reform has added to the general decrease in the

number of pupils studying native languages in the Finno-Ugric republics by accelerating the decline in the share of teaching these languages as native language. This acceleration may be partly explained by schools being transferred to compulsory teaching of state languages by republican authorities who are trying to prevent schools from avoiding the teaching of native languages as a consequence of free choice for language learning. According to the available data, the relative proportion of pupils who study native languages in Komi, Mari El, and Mordovia is decreasing because schools are shifting from the mode of native language teaching towards teaching as state languages, and from instruction in the native language to instruction in Russian.

Since entering into force, the new federal educational standards formal provisions on compulsory study of state languages have also stopped being reflected in practice of the Volga and Ural area Turkic Republics. For example, in Bashkortostan, since 2009 it has not been compulsory for children to learn the titular state language. According to Ministry of Education preliminary data, between the academic years 2009-2010 and 2011-2012 the share of students learning Bashkir either as native or as state language among all students dropped from 98.5% to 87% because it is not taught to children in the first and second grades whose parents are against it. A significant decrease in the share of state language learners within a few years could be easily predicted. In Tatarstan, in the last two years, the number of students having native language instruction dropped from 46.13% and 44.43%, which is the first decrease in the two post-Soviet decades (Musina *et al.*, 2011: 145). The reform has thus produced, and will continue producing, shifts in language teaching, indirectly reducing its amount and quality.

In summer 2012, the State Duma, a lower Chamber of the Russian Parliament, discussed the amendments on the exclusion of compulsory study of non-Russian languages proposed by Vladimir Zhirinovskii to the existing Language Law and Education Law. Even though the Zhirinovskii proposal was rejected, education in native language continues to be under challenge, in particular, in connection to their teaching in the Republics of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan. A forthcoming Federal Law on Education in the Russian Federation (past second reading on December 18, 2012) might have a further negative impact on teaching in non-Russian languages by formally excluding the compulsory teaching of titular languages and introducing instead the possibility to learn Russian as native language, as proposed at the parliamentary hearings in the State Duma on December 3, 2012. It might happen that the latter possibility would allow Russian as native language both for Russians and non-Russians.

Conclusion

Language revival of titular languages was explicitly stated as a policy goal of Russia's national republics in the early 1990s. The Soviet legacy in the regional education systems played a crucial role in the selection of the goals for language revival. Language planners have chosen the extension of compulsory language teaching of the titular languages to all students (alternatively, to all students of titular nationality) as the goal of language policy. While an act of symbolic recognition of languages was often sufficient in some of the other domains of language use in the public sphere, revival in education demanded significant financial and other resources. This could be provided only in republics with wide political representation of the titular groups and their elites' participation in decision-making. In addition to a higher starting point, having a titular group majority within a republic's total population and the corresponding political dominance of its elite, which ensures access to political and administrative resources, proved to be the most important conditions for effective policy implementation.

However, sufficient resources were not provided and the goals were not achieved because the situation changed since the early 2000s, when the federal policy shifted and language revival ceased to be a priority. There was no growth during the 2000s. Arguably, the trends observed hitherto have been caused more so by the closure of small rural schools and not yet to a large extent by the education reform of the late 2000s, because free choice for language teaching has been gradually enforced within the federal educational standards since the first grade in 2009 in some regions and since 2011 in the remaining regions (see Zamyatin, 2012a). More evidence is needed, but the ongoing switch in teaching from native to state languages, the removal of state language teaching, and some of the decline in the share of students having native Bashkir and Tatar as languages of instruction in the last two years, might be already consequences of the education reform. This new tendency, which evidently contradicts the assurances of the Russian authorities for steady growth in number of students educated in their native language, is even seen in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan where support for promotion of language diversity is strongest.

Despite initial success in extending language education, even in Tatarstan the language revival policy towards titular languages can be assessed as a failure because it was unable to change the language practices and overcome the ongoing language shift (Gorenburg, 2005). Local researchers assess the results of language policy implementation as moderate; in Tatarstan language shift is suspended but not reversed (Musina *et al.*, 2011:

138). No systemic research has been done on how language revival has influenced language use in the Finno-Ugric republics. The available research there also shows that there were signs of a slowing down of the language shift. Nonetheless, minority language education with the existing amount of teaching fails to ensure the transfer of language knowledge to a considerable number of children.

The new federal policy was not explicit on its goals. In fact, as the results of the current study demonstrate, the effect of the policy is the failure to ensure the reproduction of sufficient communicative skills among children, which will inevitably lead to accelerating language shift towards Russian and further loss of native language competencies with each generation. As Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) points out, education systems can actually kill a minority language. The actual effect of this policy reveals more than the ideological statements. What are then the implications of the results of this study for the interpretation of Russia's language policy? It might be that a hidden agenda in contemporary language policy in Russia is the promotion of Russian at the expense of minority languages. Cultural and linguistic homogenization leading to the assimilation of non-Russians might be seen as a favourable precondition for successful Russian nation-building. To support or overrule this hypothesis, a more extensive research on the link between the language policy in education and nation-building is needed.

Notes

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3. *Ibid.*
4. In fact, despite the regional policy of "Mordvinisation", scholars typically distinguish the Erzya and Moksha languages and often write about Erzya and Moksha as separate groups; in the current study the compiled data on the Erzya and Moksha languages are presented.
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9. Klementiev, 2006 and 2010.

10. The total number of students in the republics is given for the years 1990-91, 2000-01, 2010-11 from *Rossiiskii statisticheskii izezhgodnik*, 2011: 216-217, Table 7.14.

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