

## ARTICLE

# LANGUAGE POLICY IN RUSSIA: IDENTITIES, PREFERENCES AND DILEMMAS

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### ABSTRACT

Language policy political dilemmas is arising in plural societies. Finding equilibrium of language policy is at the heart of the politics in different countries. Frequently, interests of ethnic groups are directly opposed, and the interests of the elites run counter to the interests of the ethnic groups, which creates a set of political dilemmas. This article shows a set of such dilemmas in modern Russia. Throughout the 20th century, the political leaders and elites of the Russian Empire, the USSR, and then the Russian Federation provide diametrically different approaches to language policy. Nowadays Russia is trying to develop a certain unified concept of language policy to form a common national identity. However, the measures – in particular, the transition to the optional study of regional ethnic languages at school – meet with certain resistance from the regional ethno-regional elites. Regional elites would resist erosion of regional ethnic identities, which occurs also through the mechanisms of language policy. The authors focus on contradictions between the interests of national and regional elites and ethnic groups.

### INTRODUCTION

#### KEY WORDS

language policy;  
national identity; ethno  
linguistics; plural society;  
ethnic identity; ethnic  
minorities; Russian  
politics.

National identity formation is the most important task for any national state. Such an identity allows state institutions to function much better - society does not need to spend additional resources to resolve significant interethnic conflicts. However, a complete coincidence in a society of ethnic and national identities is rare. This is due not only to the fact that the borders of the resettlement of ethnic groups do not coincide with the borders of national states, but also with migration processes. Russia faces serious ethno cultural challenges related to the formation of a common civic identity. The formation of a balanced language policy is the key to a successful identity policy in Russia.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study we use sociological approach and rational choice theory. At first we identify social groups and actors, involved in politics and language policy formation. Then we focused of rationality and incentives of different decisions of groups and elites considering language policy preferences.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Every multi-national state face with the problems of language policy at some stage of its development. In countries like Britain, Spain, and India ethno-regional parties consider the problems of ethnic identity from the perspective of national language policy. It is very difficult to find the tools and methods for the implementation of language policy, which would satisfy different political actors and ethnic groups.

In this regard Russian Federation's experience can be considered as unique. During the 20th century language policy in Russia did not develop in the same direction and looked more like a pendulum. In the early 20th century the Russian Imperial government had pursued a set of policies of radical Russification of various territories, in particular, Ukraine, the Baltic states, Siberia and Central Asia and the Caucasus.

After Revolution of 1917 language policy became diametrically opposed. "Lenin's" language policy provided every region to have the ability of using and developing a language or languages according to the specifics of the ethnic composition of the population. Such policy was a reaction to the assimilation policy of the Russian Imperia, which provoked protests. But at the same time "Lenin's" language policy was caused by the ideas about the need to build a new society on a rational, scientific basis. In the first decades of Soviet, they created the conditions for the development of the ethnic minorities' languages. However, the early Soviet experiment with language policy quickly stopped. Already in the early 30s J. Stalin only spoke about the continuity in the "Lenin's case", but in practice the dominant position of the Russian language was restored throughout the USSR. The pendulum seems to have swung the other way in the era of "perestroika" and in the first years after disintegration of the USSR. The nationalist ideology flourished in the territory of the former Soviet republics and replaced the Soviet ideology. According to nationalist doctrines the Russian language was considered as a factor hindering the formation of new states, and therefore it was not desirable. There was established bilingualism in the national republics within the Russian Federation. The Russian language remained the state language, but became a competitor to the languages of ethno-national minorities [1].

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The Russian Federation is facing language policy problems for a long time. Some researchers suppose that knowledge of an impending disappearances of minority languages and declaration for change of language policy evolved into a tense situation around the development issues and learning and using languages in the members of the Russian Federation. It seemed that those conflict situations had been left behind in the first years of the 21st century. Despite the increased power vertical, funds and programs for the Support of national languages have been established (for example, government program "Preservation and development of state languages" in the Republic of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan).

However, the reform of national languages' study at the school level had led to the aggravation of contradictions in contemporary Russia. In July 2017, at a meeting of the State Council of the Russian Federation, President V. Putin declared that it was inadmissible to force people to learn a language that was not their native language. This constituted, de facto, the beginning of the campaign for the abolition of the teaching of the regional languages obligatory in the national republics within the Russian Federation. This situation fundamentally did not suit regional ethnic elites and local ethnic activists [2].

In our opinion, the differences in perception of modern language problems are connected by the deep-seated contradictions between the interests of the Russian federal center and national republics. Of course, the fundamental problem is in the objective difficulties and lack of mechanisms for implementation of the Russian civic nation. Today the problems with correlation of civic and ethnic identities is relevant for Russia.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the failure to form a "new historical community - the Soviet people", united by ideological principles, led to the flourishing of the nationalist ideology in the post-Soviet space [3]. Having gained independence, the new states began to actively form political communities based on ethno-national identity and using language as its main marker. Bilingualism was denied in the new states, and the Russian language, which turned out to be the language of national minorities of the new post-Soviet states, began to be squeezed out of the official sphere of circulation.

In Russia there was no task of developing "their own" language - it is obvious that the vast majority of the Russian population understood and used (or could use) Russian language in all spheres of life. The weakness of the federal center in the 90s of 20th century led to the fact that regional languages, having received the support of local elites, began to develop much faster than during the post-war Soviet Union. The displacement of the Russian language within some regions of Russia in the 90s vividly demonstrates the inefficiency of attempts to form a civil nation by the Russian federal center.

Strengthening the federal center and pursuing a policy of centralizing power in the early 2000s could not but affect the change in language policy in Russia. The federal center has quite dramatically changed its policy in the national republics, introducing new or changing existing laws (for example, the Constitution of the Republic of Tatarstan). Soon, the central government was worried about the volume of teaching the Russian language in schools, as regional languages were included in the curriculum due to the reduction of lessons in Russian language and literature. This caused a certain level of dissatisfaction among parents, since the Unified State Exam was only possible to pass in Russian language, higher education was completely Russified. New law declare that the Cyrillic alphabet became the only possible writing system for regional languages in Russia. In 2017, the federal center decided to transfer the study of regional languages in schools on a voluntary basis. The question of learning native languages caused a significant response among the population of national republics, especially the Republic of Tatarstan.

Here we can draw a parallel with the twentieth century, since the reform of school language education in 2017 partially repeats the reform of 1958 carried out in the Soviet Union. Then in the Soviet Union republics, parents got the right to choose between a national and a Russian school to educate their children. According to researchers, this measure reduced the number of students in the languages of the Union republics: parents choose a language that in those conditions provided a better future for children. As the best universities of the country implemented their educational programs in Russian, this was (and remains at present) a significant incentive to learn Russian by schoolchildren of national republics. However, in order to mitigate the situation in 2018, the federal center decided to create a "Fund for the Preservation and Study of the Native Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation".

Thus, the language policy in modern Russia contains a set of dilemmas. The first dilemma is in the contradictions between the idea of a single civil identity of the federal center and local ethno-national elites. If the center strives to build a civic Russian national identity, then the regional elites is the preservation of local ethno-regional identity, as an ethnic group is a resource of power for the local elite. Ethnocracy and ethnic nationalism have become a source of strength for regional elites, their argument in bargaining with federal authorities and a way to protect themselves from "strangers" in their "plot" [4]. Opposition to assimilation, which is accelerating not only due to the actions of the federal center, but also due to globalization, turns into a matter of maintaining power. In this regard, local elites will use all the resources available to preserve ethno-regional identity. The most obvious and effective tool in this situation is the policy of preservation and development of national languages [5, 6].

The second dilemma, in our opinion, is in the contradictions between the interests of regional ethnic elites and the Russian-speaking minority in the national republics of Russian Federation, which does not seek to become bilingual and opposes the compulsory study of a regional language. The Russian-speaking

segments of the national republics advocate the voluntary study of regional languages, and in this context, the 2017 reform is fully consistent with their interests. Moreover, in the early 2000s Tatarstan tried to switch from Cyrillic script to Latin script – that attempt was ban by federal law [7]. However, by giving citizens who do not want to become bilinguals an opportunity to refuse to study the regional language, the regional elite offers the opportunity to refuse to study for their titular ethnic group [8, 9].

This gives rise to the third dilemma of language policy in Russia - the dominant position of the Russian language is an incentive for regional ethnic groups to abandon the study of a regional language in favor of learning Russian. This statement is especially true for large industrial urban cities, there is no need to know the regional language for comfortable everyday communication. At the same time, the vast majority (including ethnic Russians and representatives of the titular ethnic groups of the republics) is passive - they will not go out to the mass protests neither for compulsory learning of the regional language, nor for his voluntary learning. This is evidenced by the reaction, or rather the minimal reaction, to the adoption of the federal law on the study of native languages in 2018. This means that the situation continues to evolve, there will be no return to compulsory learning of the Tatar language, and the number of people who favor the full study of the language by all residents of the republic, regardless of their nationality, is minimal. Since the question of learning languages is largely related to school education, the rules for passing the exam are an important incentive for students and their parents. Since the Unified State Exam in Russian is compulsory for entering leading Russian universities, the incentives for studying Russian increase - this increases the chances of high scores and enrollment in a state-funding study. "Isn't it better to spend energy on additional study of the Russian language for the successful passing of the Unified exam and not spend time and energy studying a regional language with a limited range of uses?" - this is what the hierarchy of incentives for residents of large cities of the national republics of Russia looks like.

Thus, the language situation prevailing at the beginning of 2019 in the Russian Federation is in unstable equilibrium. The solution of our proposed dilemmas requires a substantial revision of the existing language policy in Russia. In our opinion, the difficulty is that Russia as a state is characterized by spatial heterogeneity [10]; accordingly, it is impossible to develop a unified program on language policy. Therefore, in our opinion, there remains a great deal of difficult work ahead: to develop a concept that would take into account the interests of all parties - the federal center, local elites and various ethnic groups. It is worth emphasizing that the interests of elites and the interests of citizens do not always coincide, aggregation and articulation of interests is a complex process that requires special institutions and well-functioning implementation algorithms. The creation of public mechanisms for resolving language dilemmas and contradictions is an important task and a serious challenge for Russian ethno politics in the short term.

## CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of the dilemmas shows that the inconsistency of language policies can be removed by changing incentives. Subject to the influence of the study of regional languages on the preparation for the exam is eliminated, it is possible that Russian-speaking families will not oppose the study of regional languages. Raising the prestige of regional languages is also an important task for the authorities of the constituent entities of the Federation. On the part of the federal center, the softening of language policy could increase its credibility among regional elites and activists. If Russia can combine the policy of creating a national identity with the existence of bilingual regional communities, this will be a noticeable achievement of ethno-political practice and will solve the dilemmas described above. Such a task can become a good guide for the ethno-national policy of Russia in the near future.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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### FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

None.

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