

Language policy in the Russian Empire: legal and constitutional aspect

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1. *Introduction and methodology*

The right to get an education in the mother tongue is an inalienable right of man. It is provided by the basic documents adopted by the international community that embraces the majority of the countries of the world. In accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), «everyone has the right to education», which «shall be free at least in the elementary and fundamental stages» while «elementary education shall be compulsory» (Article 26)¹. Articles 28-29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) demonstrate that the world community recognizes the right of the child to education and considers language as one of the values of education. It also aims at developing respect for the child's native language and cultural identity². UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) further stresses that «linguistic di-

versity is a fundamental element of cultural diversity» and underlines the «role that education plays in the protection and promotion of cultural expressions»³.

The recent motions of certain ethnic groups and individuals in the Russian Federation proclaiming the need to resort solely to mother tongue education in schools and universities induce us to review the experience of the preceding generations and analyze the language policy of the Russian Empire in education. Political developments in empires and other macro-political entities have tangible influence on group identities as well as language practices⁴. That confirms the relevance of the research.

The authors aim to study the experience of mother tongue instruction in Russia over a period of 200 years. The inter-related objectives are as follows: 1) to evaluate critically the models of mother tongue education during the imperial period of Russian history; 2) to identify the flaws and benefits of Russian language-based education

of ethnic minorities; 3) to draw conclusions relevant to the present day linguistic situation in the ethnic regions of Russia. The research strategy is based on methods theoretical (analysis, systematization) and empirical (statistical, comparative).

As the language is an inseparable part of culture, in the multicultural world, it serves as an important catalyst for building and preserving ethnic and cultural identity⁵. The use of specific languages of instruction at school is closely linked with supporting and developing or, on the contrary, destroying cultural and ethnic identity of a child. The language is a socially significant form of reflecting reality and a means of acquiring new knowledge about the existing reality. Therefore, the language reflects the picture of the world inherent to a certain ethnic culture. In its turn, the language-based picture of the world is reflected in the national logics of perceiving the world, in the worldview of the nation and in the mentality of every single individual representing the ethnic community. Thus, the importance of education in the mother tongue should not be underestimated.

The approaches to teaching non-Russian pupils in the Russian Empire varied and were different for Christians, non-Christians and the peoples of the Caucasus and the Trans-Caucasian region.

2. Language policy for German and Greek colonists

Researchers of education in the imperial Russia agree that in the 18th and early 19th century the state had no definite language policy and thus did not intervene in the ed-

ucational process in the outposts of the empire. An overwhelming majority of the population were illiterate. A slim minority that had some schooling were educated in Russian (Byelorussia, Ukraine), German – in Estlad (Estonia), Kurland (Latvia) and Livland (certain parts of Estonia and Latvia), Arabic in Turkestan (Azerbaijan, Central Asia and Kazakhstan), Polish, Georgian and Armenian in the corresponding provinces of the empire. In Finland, the language of instruction was Swedish.

There is no doubt that the Russians (including so-called "Little Russians" or "Malorossy") represent the most significant part of the Russia empire in terms of their linguistic rights and attention of authorities. Even today the Russian language remains an apparent part of social life and nation-building discussions in post-Soviet countries⁶. According to the first census held in the Russian Empire, Russians (or rather, Slavonic peoples including Russians, Byelorussians and Ukrainians) constituted about two thirds of the total population of the state – 66.8%. The remaining third consisted of Poles (6.3%), Jews (4%), Kazakhs (3.3%), Tatars (3%) and Germans (1.4%)⁷.

Regular educational institutions that provided instruction in the languages other than Russian appeared in the 18th century. These were, mostly, schools for the children of German migrants during the reign of Peter I and later, the colonists that settled in Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great. One of the first among them was St. Peter's parochial Lutheran school in St. Petersburg which opened in 1710. The growth of the German population in the capital of the empire led to building more Lutheran churches and opening more schools: St. Anna's, St. Catherine's, St. Michael's, etc.

While the basic subject was catechism, curriculum had a substantial secular segment including mathematics, physics, geography, omnibus history, science and languages – German and French⁸. Most schools practiced co-education, classes were multi-ethnic with German, Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, Armenian pupils, because the standards of education in German schools were higher than in similar Russian parochial schools.

As the German colonies spread across the Russian Empire, to the Volga and the Pontic regions, so did the Lutheran churches and the schools, which employed the educated colonists as teachers and were financed by the local communities and benefactors – merchants and landowners. As a result, the German population of the Russian Empire constituted an overwhelming majority of the literate population of the country – 59% while the literate Russian population constituted only 28%⁹.

German schools primarily focused on the religious aspect of education. The German population being Lutheran, the Russian government found it necessary to control the activities of the schools. The easiest way to do that was to introduce Russian as an obligatory subject and then turn it into the language of instruction. Learning Russian was not mandatory at the initial stage but as the need to communicate with state officials was steadily becoming urgent, school administrations started looking for teachers who could perform classroom instruction in both languages. The first Teachers' Seminary was opened in 1828 but even before that, in 1806 a group of 17 boys from the families of German colonists in Saratov region were sent to the local community school to be taught in Russian. That



A yiddish written electoral poster from the revolutionary era

marked the beginning of russification of German colonists by means of education. The Russian language, history and geography were introduced as the subjects taught in Russian. Later, in the middle of the 19th century, German schools were forced to give up mother tongue teaching and introduce the Russian language instruction in order to receive the same rights as the official state-run Russian schools.

The Greek School of Commerce in the south of the Russian Empire serves as another example of mother tongue education. With the curriculum that included courses in modern and ancient Greek, Russian, Italian, commerce, religious studies, science and arts, the school, which was opened in Odessa in 1817, turned into an attractive

institution for the Greek population of the empire. In 1875 Odessa celebrated the opening of the four-year "Hellenic School for Girls". Moreover, a special resolution adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers allowed the Greek community to open a print shop that supplied the school with teaching materials in Greek. Thus the education of the Greek population in the mother tongue was legitimized¹⁰. The decisive factor that influenced the government's attitude to the Greek schools was their faith – Orthodox Christianity.

3. *Language of education in the western parts of the empire*

If we look west, at Poland, Byelorussia and the present-day Baltic states that used to constitute the western parts of the Russian Empire, we will see that the attitude of the government towards mother tongue education in those regions was inseparably connected with the government's home policy and the situation in the country. The influence of Poland and its culture on Byelorussia was stronger than that of Russia. The Byelorussian language was not recognized as a separate language but was seen as a dialect of Polish with certain loan words from Lithuanian. Although Orthodox Christianity was recognized in Byelorussia, the majority of the population were Catholics. There is little wonder that schooling was conducted in Polish. Russian was taught optionally.

The universities in Warsaw and Vilno (Vilnius) taught students in Latin and Polish. Russian was alternately used as the language of instruction for several subjects from 1823 to 1831 when Vilno University

was closed after the uprising of 1830-1831 which spread across Poland, Lithuania and Byelorussia.

Poland and Lithuania enjoyed the right to classroom instruction in the native languages until the Polish uprising of 1863-1864. After the suppression of the revolt, the state authorities resorted to a rapid introduction of Russian as the language of instruction from primary school to university. The aim of the language policy in Poland and Lithuania, which had supported the Polish uprising, was stern russification. Catholics in Lithuania and Byelorussia were denied the right to teach in schools and universities. That led to the migration of Lithuanian and Byelorussian intellectuals to the central regions of Russia. It was the first time that ethno-linguistic, religious and political issues were so closely intertwined and the humanitarian aspect of life was politicized.

In 1864 Lithuanian Governor General M. Mouravyov banned the use of Latin script for Lithuanian alphabet and all publishing and educational activities in Lithuanian. Together with a ban on publishing books in Ukrainian except books in belle lettre style, that action was a preventive measure at the time when Ukrainian separatism was gaining force. That only provoked the emergence of *Daraktor* schools (*Daraktorių mokykla*) – secret clandestine classes for Lithuanian children in the rural areas. Classes were given, interchangeably, on different farms and were conducted by educated Lithuanians, *daraktors*, who taught children reading, writing and arithmetic in their mother tongue. Besides, children were taught Lithuanian history and geography as well as the skills of speaking and reading in two more languages, Polish and

Russian. The authorities persecuted and fined both the teachers of Lithuanian and the parents who sent their children to clandestine schools.

Books in Lithuanian, which continued to be published in Eastern Prussia and the USA, were smuggled into the province by volunteers. (The campaign was launched by the Catholic bishop Motiejus Valančius as Catholic books in Latin were also outlawed.) This phenomenon is known as *Knygnešystė* – “book carrying”. If captured, both daraktors and book carriers were often arrested, imprisoned or fined. *Knygnešystė* is recognized by UNESCO as a unique cultural phenomenon.

In Estonia and Latvia the language of schooling and university education (Dorpat, or Tartu University) was German as the ethnic languages were spoken by commoners, and were considered to be low-status. The second half of the 19th century saw a turn from the use of German in the classroom to the use of native languages and Russian. In 1874, Estonian and Latvian were introduced as the languages of instruction during the first two years of education in Lutheran schools, while Russian and German were added in the third year of schooling. But already in 1887-1893 all training in state-run and private schools was conducted in Russian.

4. Education of non-Christians and Caucasian Christians

The education of non-Christians, also known as *inorodtsy*, or Gentiles, varied. Jews had the right to be taught in Jewish by a Melamed in cheder schools. They started

learning the Jewish alphabet at the age of three and went to school at five. The subjects were limited: the Jewish language (Yiddish) and religious studies. It is worth mentioning that all Jewish children were admitted to all types of schools and universities of the Russian Empire on condition they coped with the curriculum and passed entrance examinations if there were any. University students were taught in Russian. The basic approach of the government was the following: the Gentiles were non-existent for bureaucracy and regulation of their language practices was not detailed and systemic¹¹.

The languages of the Caucasian and Trans-Caucasian regions were more or less fairly used in education in the 19th century. Even before they joined the Russian Empire, the Caucasian states and counties had practiced teaching Russian which was necessary for promoting trade contacts. The elite of the non-Christian population in the Caucasus realized the importance of knowing Russian and invited teachers of Russian for their children. After the countries joined the empire, some of the Caucasian languages preserved their official status while local administrative bodies employed interpreters and translators. The decrees passed in 1835 and 1848 provided for mother tongue instruction in Armenian and Georgian in the first two years of primary schooling while Russian was taught as a separate subject. In the third year classes were held in Russian but the local languages continued to be taught¹². The ethnic identity of pupils did not suffer dramatic changes.

In 1815, the Lazarev (Lazaryants) brothers opened the School of Oriental Languages in Moscow. Later it was turned into an institute which was to become one of Russia's recognized centres for oriental studies.

Originally, the Institute was established to give a good education to boys from underprivileged families and provide them with an opportunity to find jobs as interpreters of Persian, Turkish, Arabic, Georgian and Armenian in the sphere of commerce. Eventually, the Institute admitted boys of various ethnic backgrounds but all the students of Caucasian origin were supposed to learn their corresponding languages. In 1848, the Institute gained university status¹³. During the Soviet period it was transformed into the Institute of Oriental Studies and later became part of Moscow State Institute of International Relations.

In the predominantly Muslim regions (the Volga region, Kazakhstan, Central Asia, the Ural region) mother tongue education was common practice in religious primary (mehtabs) and secondary (madrassahs) schools. Education focused on teaching suras from the Koran, reading, writing and arithmetic. In the second half of the 19th century, reforms in education led to introducing a new system of bilingual education: mother tongue teaching in the first two years of studies with a gradual shift to teaching Russian first as a separate subject and later using it as the language of instruction. The children learned the new script by writing down words of their mother tongue in Cyrillic. The teachers were supposed to be well-educated in Russian and fluent in the local language. Muslim pupils were excused from studying Christian literature (the Holy Script) and Muslim teachers were allowed to attend classes conducted in Russian so as to control the contents of education. Muslim girls were educated in separate schools which were financed by the state.

The use of many languages of the national minorities was hindered by the absence of alphabets of their own, as well as lexical and stylistic means that could ensure the performance of the functions of a state language. Russian linguists and missionaries (P. Uslar, V. Putzek-Grigorovich, N. Ilminsky) invented alphabets, mostly on the basis of Cyrillic script, for the indigenous peoples of Russia: Yakuts, Chuvash, Mari, Udmurts, Kazakhs, Khakassia, Oirots, Tatars, Buryats, Kalmyks, Abkhazians. The Teachers' Training Seminary, that opened in Kazan in 1872, was headed by N. Ilminsky who insisted that it was binding to teach Muslim children in their mother tongue at the initial stage so that they should feel free to use their native language and at the same time see the beauty and significance of Orthodox Christianity. He shared the progressive ideas of K. Ushinsky, a prominent Russian educator and philosopher, who promoted the idea of mother tongue teaching stressing that it is beneficial to the development of the child's mentality. N. Ilminsky's system of educating ethnic minority children and students was widely used in the 1860s and proved to be effective. According to N. Lugovskaya, «the national policy in education in the tsarist Russia was aimed at achieving the unity of all the peoples by involving them in the system of Orthodox values through the Russian language and Orthodox culture»¹⁴.

The "new-method" bilingual schools which opened in the 1880s in the Muslim regions of the empire were based on the principle of secular education with respect for the ethnic language and culture and the necessity to learn Russian as the official language of the state. This method faced numerous protests from religious elites

which adhered to traditional syllabic method of teaching¹⁵.

Although some of the modern historians claim that the languages of the national minorities were completely banned, statistical data show that at the turn of the 20th century publishing activities in languages other than Russian were steadily developing. The year 1913 saw 267 book publications in Tatar, 263 in Armenian, 236 in Georgian, 228 in Ukrainian, 95 in Azerbaijani, 37 in Kazakh, 36 in Uzbek, 12 in Byelorussian, 17 in Mari, 1 of each in Karelian, Avarian, Yakut and Ossetian. The number of copies was quite impressive for each language.

In 1906 the Russian Empire received its Code of Fundamental Laws which is commonly known as the first Russian Constitution. Article 3 defined Russian as the state language which was to be used in the army, the navy and all state and public institutions. The use of local languages and dialects in state and public affairs was to be determined by special laws¹⁶. Thus the policy of russification gave the users of Russian an opportunity to make a civil or military career and feel no language impediments when addressing state officials.

The analysis of the language policy of the Russian Empire shows that it had fragmental character up to the middle of the 19th century and had no constitutional basis (for lack of constitution) until 1906. Administrative acts concerning the use of languages in education were either passed by the government and approved by the emperor or issued by the local authorities as local legal acts. These gave certain autonomy to the ethnic minorities ranging from complete

non-interference in the linguistic-cultural aspect of life of the ethnic minorities to banning the use of a language in various spheres of public life. The government pursued a very diplomatic language policy in the Caucasus and Trans-Caucasian region.

The research has shown that the choice of the language of instruction within the educational system of the Russian Empire was officially determined by the laws, governmental acts and the first Russian constitution of 1906.

Religion was an important component of education. The process of using the native language in the classroom had a complex aim: to turn pagans, Jews and Muslims into Orthodox Christianity and build state identity. The major factor that determined the possibility of mother tongue teaching in the ethnic regions of the Russian Empire was confessional rather than ethnic¹⁷. It was largely determined by the need to protect the political interests of the state, the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church and ensure state security. The easiest way to achieve that aim was through compulsory use of the Russian language that could influence cultural patterns of ethnic minority children. Was that linguistic imperialism? It certainly was. Robert Phillipson, who introduced and developed the concept of "linguistic imperialism", explains that the latter embraces the use of a certain language (the majority language for the Russian Empire) in the more advanced social relations «where language interlocks with other dimensions, cultural..., economic and political»¹⁸. Learning Russian naturally influenced the picture of the world but did not totally destroy it because the native languages were still used in informal and sometimes formal communication, except for some periods of social

unrest. At the same time, the choice of Russian as a mandatory language in education was motivated by the need to unify the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural population and provide them with an opportunity to communicate in the official language. Moreover, the knowledge of Russian made it possible for ethnic nationals to get vocational training, comprehensive secondary and university education.

In certain situations the ethno-linguistic relations acquired a political aspect. The basic factors that influenced the attitude of state officials towards educational and the related institutions of ethnic minorities were faith, loyalty and state security. As Greeks profess Orthodox Christianity they enjoyed state preferences. Protestant Christians and Catholics were in a worse position than their Orthodox brethren but the government was much more tolerant of them than of the Gentiles – Jews, Muslims and pagans.

Today the Constitution of the Russian Federation recognizes Russian as the state language (Article 68) and guarantees to all of its peoples «the right to preserve their native language and to create conditions

for its study and development»¹⁹. School education is conducted in Russian and in the various languages of the constituent republics as well as in the languages of the republican ethnic minorities. Projecting the experience of the Russian Empire on today's situation in Russia, we can conclude that bilingual education provides certain beneficial opportunities for ethnic minorities' integration in the multicultural society and exercise of the right to education and social mobility. On the contrary, education conducted solely in the mother tongue of an ethnic group leads to ethnic and social seclusion and deprives the children of their rights granted by the Constitution.

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights / URL: <<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>>.

² Convention on the Rights of the Child. Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989, pp. 28-29 / URL: <<http://www2.ohchr.org/English/law/pdf/crc.pdf>>.

³ Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity

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