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Russian as the National Language: An Overview of Language Planning in the Russian Federation

Joan F. Chevalier

I. Introduction

In June of 2005 the federal legislation *On the national language* was signed into law by Vladimir Putin.¹ The bill, revised and renamed several times after its initial introduction in the Duma in 2001, proved to be highly controversial, stimulating lively public debate. The law merits discussion as the first major piece of federation legislation focused on language policy and language planning to appear in the Russian Federation in several years. The law addresses both language-status planning, which concerns the status and function of the Russian language, and language corpus planning, which attempts to affect changes in language forms and structures. The motivation to reaffirm and redefine Russian's status as the national language through the measures adopted in this law, can best be understood when viewed in historical context, as part of the evolution of language policies since the Soviet revolution. Specifically, the roots of the impetus to grant the Russian language official status can be found in Soviet policies of the post-war period. Russification policies, which were adopted in the 1950s and continued through the 1970s, provoked a backlash during Perestroika. The union republics, followed by the former autonomous republics, granted titular languages² legal status beginning in the late 1980s. *On the national language* was drafted both as a response to language-status planning efforts in the republics and as a reaction to the changes that have taken place in the Russian language since the dissolution of the USSR.

II. A Brief History of Language Policy in the USSR and the Russian Federation

The Russian language was not accorded official status during the Soviet period until the 1980s. In the early Soviet period, language policies supported minority languages and promoted mass literacy. Literacy was seen as a key tool for raising political awareness. Lenin rejected the notion that the Russian language should be granted special status, but rather stressed the equality of languages. The Bolsheviks supported a program for the development of minority languages, which included development of writing systems, publishing, and making instruction available in the mother tongue. These measures were part of a

nationalities policy known as *korenizatsiia*, or “nativization,” promising equal rights for all non-Russian peoples, guaranteeing rights to minority language use as well as economic and administrative support of these languages in the publishing, education, and cultural sectors.³ Stalin continued Lenin’s policies of language corpus planning for non-Russian languages under the slogan “national in form, socialist in content.”⁴ Article 121 of the 1936 Soviet Constitution guaranteed the right of all citizens to instruction in their mother tongue. Beginning in the late 1930s policies were adopted that gradually established Russian as the de facto lingua franca of the Soviet state. The Communist Party Central Committee issued a decree in 1938, which remained in effect until 1994 (Alpatov 1997, 87), that required the study of Russian in all schools, including schools in the union republics, from the first grade. Under Khrushchev, the Stalinist policy “national in form, socialist in content” gave way to an emphasis on the Russian language as “the language of inter-nationality communication and cooperation.” This emphasis on the importance of Russian as the “glue holding the empire together” (Kreindler 1982, 7) and a desire to encourage the spread of bilingualism motivated the education reforms of 1958–1959. The intent of these measures was to expand the teaching of Russian. Clause 19 of the reform made education in the mother tongue “voluntary” rather than compulsory. Rather than reinvigorating native language education, the measure effectively called into the question the notion that children should be schooled in their mother tongue (Kreindler 1982, 13). The right to instruction in one’s mother tongue guaranteed in the 1936 Constitution was further weakened in Article 45 of the revised Soviet Constitution, adopted in 1977, which declared that citizens have “the *opportunity* for school instruction in the mother tongue.” In 1978 Brezhnev reiterated support for the policy of expansion of the role of Russian “as the language of inter-nationality communication in the building of communism and the education of the new man” (Guboglo 1990, 247).

Two related developments can be observed in non-Russian speaking populations in the USSR during the post-Stalin era. First, there was a gradual decrease in the number of non-Russian speaking students educated in their mother tongue. While in the 1960s there were national schools in forty-seven non-Russian languages, by 1982 there were national schools in only seventeen languages. Moreover, by 1982 of the thirty-two ethnic languages offered as a school subject, twelve did not go higher than fourth grade and only in Tuva and Yakutia was eight-year schooling in native languages available (Alpatov 1997, 114). Second, by the late 1970s bilingualism in the USSR had increased significantly; from 1970 to 1979 the number of non-Russians claiming fluency in Russian as a second language rose from 48.7% of the population (13 million) to 62.2% (16.3 million)

(Guboglo 1990, 248). In spite of these developments, the overall outcome of language contact between Russian and non-Russian speaking populations within the USSR varied depending on the status of the non-Russian language, the size, growth, and distribution of both populations, the political status of the territory (the hierarchical divisions of union republic, autonomous republic or *okrug*), and other factors.⁵ Although Russian bilingualism grew fastest in the union republics (Guboglo 1990, 263), titular language speakers there were generally more resistant to full-scale language shift than ethnolinguistic minorities (speakers of non-titular languages).⁶ Language shift has been particularly widespread in areas of contact where the non-Russian speakers are a minority of the population, such as in the republics of Karelia, Bashkortostan, Mari El and Udmurtia. For example, according to the census in the period from 1970–1989 50% of Karelians and 30% of Bashkir, Maris, and Urdmurts indicated that they no longer spoke their mother tongue and have shifted to Russian.

By the late 1980s language status became a focal point for nationalist independence movements. In January of 1989 both Estonia and Lithuania declared their titular languages as official languages, and in May the Republic of Latvia passed a similar language law. By May of 1990 all Soviet republics except for the Russian SFSR had passed language laws.⁷ In October of 1990, after language laws were approved in the Soviet republics, the Russian language was granted official legal status for the first time in the legislation *On the languages of the peoples of the USSR*. This law declared Russian to be the “official” language of the USSR (Article 4), but it did not define the term “official.” The law also gave autonomous and union republics the legal right to do what the union republics had already done, to grant titular languages official status as “state” (*gosudarstvennyye*) languages. The legislation also recognized the language rights of linguistic minorities, guaranteeing citizens of the USSR the right to interact with the government in their native language and the freedom of language choice in education (Article 6). In 1991 the law was revised, expanded and renamed as *On the languages of the peoples of the Russian Federated Socialist Republic*. The new version of the law replaced the designation “official” language with “national” language. In addition, the law reiterated provisions guaranteeing basic language rights and included measures allowing the use of “state” languages other than Russian at the local and republic level (Articles 14–19). The law provided a legal basis, at least in theory, for multilingualism within the Russian Federation (RF).⁸ Although the updated version of the law did describe some of the functions of the national language of the RF, requiring its use in higher education and in federal and regional government, it did not provide a legal definition of the term “national language.” The next federal legislative

effort to address language issues occurred in 1993 with the ratification of the Constitution of the Russian Federation. The Constitution declared the Russian language as the “national language” and it reiterated many of the provisions contained in *On the languages of the peoples of the USSR*, guaranteeing language rights and supporting the freedom of language choice in education, in communication, and in the workplace.

Efforts to formulate language policies for autonomous republics began in the early 1990s when the mobilization of ethnic nationalist movements that began in the Soviet republics spread to the autonomous republics.⁹ Having been granted the legal right to give titular languages official status in 1990, the former autonomous republics followed the lead of the union republics and passed language legislation. The first laws were drafted in Chuvashia and Tuva in 1990. Although the republic language laws vary in content, scope, and form (some republic language policies are codified in republic constitutions), they all recognize both Russian and titular languages as *gosudarstvennyye*, “state” languages.¹⁰ They also pledge government support for and preservation of titular and minority languages, and they guarantee individual language rights, including the right to language choice in education.

The 1980s and 1990s presented a complex legacy to language planners. On the national level two major national laws were enacted that addressed language-status planning, identifying and pledging support of minority language rights. Both measures also granted the Russian language status as the “national language” of the Russian Federation. Neither provided a legal definition of the term “national language.” At the same time, twenty out of twenty-one republics passed legislation granting both Russian and the titular language(s) of the republics the status of “state” languages.¹¹ Typically these laws do not provide guidelines about the legal jurisdiction or functional distribution of Russian, the language defined in federal legislation as the national language, and of the titular “state” language.

The dissolution of the Soviet empire brought another set of challenges to language-status planners. While there still are a sizable number of Russian speakers today (approximately 145 million (Ethnologue 2006)), its status as one of the leading world languages suffered in the post-Soviet era. The number of Russian language learners worldwide dropped from 23 million in 1982–1983 to 10–12 million (Shvetsova 2003, 439) in the 1990s. In 1991 Russian lost its status as the lingua franca of the Soviet empire and became a minority language in many former Soviet republics.

Language-corpus planners confronted an equally daunting set of challenges. The Russian language has undergone immense changes since 1991, including stylistic “chaos,” or mixing of language styles, and an influx of loan words, principally from English, as Russian lexical items referring to the Soviet system were often replaced by English loan words for the new political and economic system.¹² Both stylistic mixing and the flood of foreign lexicon have raised public concerns about the current status of Russian. The use of jargon and lower style language forms in public, especially in mass media, where standard language prevailed during the Soviet era, has given rise to outcries about falling standards and the “degradation” of the language.¹³

In summary, *On the national language* was borne out of the social, linguistic and political upheaval of the post-Soviet era. The drafters of this law grappled with difficult language planning issues including concern about language standards, the legal status of languages, as well as language prestige. The roots of the changes in the status of the Russian language can be found in the post-war era. Language status and language rights became a rallying point for ethnolinguistic groups seeking to reclaim their identity after decades of policies designed to spread the growth of bilingualism that emerged in the 1950s. The promotion of minority language rights was preceded by a prolonged official campaign promoting Russian as the “language of inter-nationality communication.” The legal recognition of minority language rights in the RF and of the republics the right to designate languages other than Russian official status, in turn, produced confusion about the legal terminology referring to language status and the relationship of Russian, the “national” language and the designated “state” languages of each republic. This latest effort to redefine and reaffirm the status of Russian as the national language of the RF is a response to the lack of clarity in federal language laws and it is an attempt to resolve potential conflicts between republic and federal language laws. The passage of this bill can be viewed as a part of the larger movement to reassert the power of the federal branch over the regions and republics, which has been a central concern of the Putin presidency.

III. The Evolution of *On the National Language*

The first draft of the law, originally entitled *On the Russian language*, emerged from the Federal Council on Russian language in 2001. The council, formed by Yeltsin in 1991 in order to “strengthen the Russian language,” was charged with supporting the Russian language on three levels: first, as the state language, by developing language policies designed to encourage the “development and

support of the Russian language as the national language of the Russian people"; second, as a world language; and third as the language of education and mass media. The Federal Council, reconstituted by Putin in 2000, drafted the language law *On the Russian language* (Neroznak, Oreshkin, and Sabatkoiev 2001). The first draft of the law was introduced and discussed in the Duma in February of 2001. On February 3, 2003, a revised draft of the law, renamed *On the national language of the Russian Federation*, was approved by the Duma. Ten days later the draft law was rejected by the Federation Council. The third and final draft of the law was signed by Putin in 2005. A comparison of three successive drafts of the law provides insight into how policy makers dealt with the contentious language-status planning issues and corpus-planning issues outlined above.¹⁴

The most controversial part of the law deals with the issues of language standards and the use of language in public. Kaadyr Bicheldei, a linguist and Duma representative from the Republic of Tuva who helped draft the law, and one of its most vociferous proponents, argued that one of its main purposes was to "protect" Russian as the national language of the RF from slipping standards. Bicheldei, in an interview on the radio station Ekho Moskvyy in 2002, explained "The first point is that the Russian language must be defended, not from us, but from our overly lax use of it as a means of communication...In the mass media and in official speeches very often the lower style is used. That is, a stylistic lowering of Russian can be observed in society" (Bicheldei 2002). Bicheldei argued that by providing legal norms for spheres of use, the law would increase "the respect of the Russian people themselves for their own Russian language" and would also raise the literacy rate and inspire citizens "to write and speak Russian more correctly" (ibid).

The law focuses on the issue of language norms and sets out to define and regulate non-normative language and foreign lexicon. The sections of the law regulating the use of foreign lexicon were modeled on the French language law *On the use of French*, known popularly as "Law of Toubon," after its initiator Jacques Toubon. In fact, members of the Federal Council on Russian Language who drafted the Russian law traveled to Paris in October of 2001 for a joint seminar with the Committee on International Francophonie about language politics. The aim of *On the use of French* was to raise the status of French by regulating and mandating its use in public (Ager 1999, 135), which is precisely what *On the national language* was intended to do as well. The French law set up a series of sanctions in the form of fines, designed to protect French from the encroachment of foreign lexicon. The Russian law, however, goes much farther than the Law of Toubon, as it addresses the issue of "sub-standard" or "non-

normative" lexicon. First, the Russian law stipulates that setting the standards for the norms of use of the contemporary Russian literary language is government's task (Article 1).¹⁵ Although the Russian law states that the government will play a role in establishing language standards, how it would perform this role is unclear. Second, the Russian law bans the use of non-normative lexicon (Article 6). Earlier drafts of the legislation forbid the use of swear words and obscene expressions in public as well as "insulting language" (Par. 3, Article 3). Both the ban on foreign lexicon and the prohibition of obscene language were deemed objectionable by the Federation Council, and both were mentioned in the Federation Council's rejection of the bill in February of 2003 (Parl. Khron. 2003, Feb 11–12). As Sergei Mironov, one of the members of the Council, observed, if the ban on the use of foreign lexicon were to be enforced, then the Constitution of the RF would have to be rewritten, since it contains more than thirty foreign terms (Parl. Khron. 2003, Feb. 12). The ban on obscene lexicon was left out of the final version of the bill. The restriction on the use of foreign lexicon was upheld, but it was incorporated into a ban on "words and expressions that do not correspond to the norms of contemporary standard Russian literary language" (Par. 6, Article 1).

Comparison of successive drafts of the bill reveal a marked shift and narrowing of focus in language planning at the federal level away from the recognition and reiteration of minority language rights to a concern with the status of Russian as the national language. For example, Articles 10 and 11 outlining the spheres of function of the national language in the 2001 draft, define three spheres of use for the state languages: within the federal organs of state and in its administrative units (including republics), in elections, and in the courts. Each provision outlining the function of the state languages in the 2001 version states that, in addition to Russian, the state languages of the republics may also be used in official spheres. The equivalent provisions in the 2003 version of the law (Article 3) omit all references to the languages other than Russian. The final draft, signed into law in June of 2005, is narrowly focused to provide a legal definition of the "national" language, laying out its spheres of function and specifying its use in federal and local government, in elections, in the courts, and in advertisements.¹⁶

IV. Conclusion

In sum, the impetus for the legislation *On the national language* and its content are best understood when viewed within the historical context of the development of language policies in the USSR and its successor state, the Russian Federation. The law was drafted as a response to changes in the status and forms of the Russian

language that have occurred since the late 1980s. During the 1980s and 1990s Soviet and Russian language laws focused primarily on the status of minority languages, guaranteeing language rights and granting titular republic languages legal status as “state” languages. *On the national language* shifts the focus away from minority language rights. The bill seeks to reestablish Russian’s status as the supranational language of the RF by mandating its use in all governmental affairs. The law is also a reaction to the stylistic and lexical changes that have occurred in Russian, seeking to protect the language from the perceived threats of falling standards and foreign lexical borrowings. The discussions that follow in this volume address the extent to which law succeeds or fails at achieving these goals.

Notes

¹ I have translated the title of the law in Russian *O gosudarstvennom iazyke*, as *On the national language*. Three Russian terms are commonly used in discussions of language policy: *titul’nyi iazyk*, “titular language,” *ofitsial’nyi iazyk*, “official language” and *gosudarstvennyi iazyk*, which translated literally means “state language.” The term *natsional’nyi iazyk* or “national language” is not used in discussions of language policy in Russia. When the term *gosudarstvennyi iazyk* is used in reference to the language used nationwide, it is semantically equivalent to the term “national language” commonly used in language planning literature. For this reason I translated the term as “national language” when it used in reference to Russian. This translation is not suitable in reference to other languages used in republics. I have translated the term *gosudarstvennyi iazyk* as “state language” when it is used in reference to languages used in republics.

² The term *titul’nyi iazyk*, “titular language,” refers to the language spoken by the ethnolinguistic group sharing the name of the republic.

³ For a detailed discussion and analysis of *korenizatsiia* and Soviet language policies adopted in the 1920s and 1930s see Smith (1998).

⁴ The slogan “nationalist in form, socialist in content” comes from Stalin’s (1914) essay “Natsional’nyi vopros i marksizm” (originally published in the journal *Prosvetshenie* in 1913) which was reissued in 1934 as “Marksizm i natsional’no-kolonial’nyi vopros,” “Marxism and the National and Colonial Question” (Stalin 1936, 209).

⁵ See Silver (1974) for evidence that urbanization and the size of the Russian speaking population are factors that affect language shift.

⁶ I am defining “full-scale shift” as assimilation that occurs when successive bilingual populations become more proficient in Russian than in their mother tongue. The final outcome of full-scale shift is that younger generations, while fluent in Russian, lack basic proficiency in their mother tongue.

⁷ Armenia SSR, Azerbaijan SSR, and the Georgia SSR granted titular languages official status in constitutions ratified in 1978.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of how *On the languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation* provided a legal basis for multilingualism within the Russian Federation see Ermoshkin (1999).

⁹ For a discussion of ethnic mobilization in the former Soviet Union in the late and post-perestroika period, see Gorenburg (2003).

¹⁰ Language laws in Tuva and Chuvashia initially named Russian as the language of inter-nationality communication, but the laws were later changed to declare Russian and the titular languages as “state” (*gosudarstvennye*) languages.

¹¹ The Republic of Karelia is the only exception. The *Languages in the Republic of Karelia Act* enacted in 2000 designated Russian as the language of state, while Karelian, Vespian, and Finnish are recognized as regional languages (Kryuchkova 2002).

¹² For a discussion of changes in the Russian language since 1991 see Zemskaia (2000), Ryazanova-Clarke and Wade (1999), Comrie et al. (1996), and Dunn (1995).

¹³ See Krasil’nikov (2003), Grachev (2001), and Remneva (2002) for discussions focused on the degradation of Russian and falling standards.

¹⁴ For a systematic comparison of the first and second drafts of the law see Chevalier (2005).

¹⁵ The first draft of the law stated that language norms, including orthographic and punctuation rules, would be established by dictionaries and language

reference sources (Par 3., Article 3). The second and final drafts state simply that language norms will be determined by the Russian government (Par. 3, Article 1).

¹⁶ The use of languages other than Russian is allowed in these venues but a translation must be provided (Par. 2, Article 11).

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