

Political Autonomy and Linguistic Freedom. The Case of the Buryat people

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Abstract

This essay is devoted to the case of the Buryat people, who tried to keep their language and cultural identity in the situation of being a minority in Russia. One can argue that Buryats are a successful minority because of their high level of education. The region the Buryat minority lives is peaceful despite the fact that many religions and ethnicities share this living space. On the other side Buryats suffer – like many minorities – from political and cultural pressure of the majority, from endangering and potential loss of their language and traditions.

Author suggests considering the question how the new politics of regional merge in Russia influence on the linguistic freedom of minorities. In the essay a short background of the Buryat case will be given and also some remarks about the system of minority relations in Russia.

Historical and political background

Buryats are the largest (over 400,000 people) ethnic minority group in Siberia, part of Mongol language group. Buryat people mainly live around Lake Baikal. Historians traced that Buryats occupied this territory back to the 13th century. Russian penetration began at the 17th century and finished in 18th century by including this territory into the Russian Empire.

During their empirical reign Buryats were determined as “inorodtsy”. This status means some limitation of economical and civil rights due to Asian origin. Although Buddhism was legitimized, some Buryats were Christianized by force.

In 1921 after the Soviet Revolution Buryat-Mongol¹ Republic was established. Buryats had a 14 year period of wide autonomy. In 1937, the Buryat-Mongol Republic was disbanded by Stalin's decree. As a result, the Republic's territory was divided into three regions: Ust-Orda Buryat Autonomous District (UOBAD), Aginsky-Buryat Autonomous District (ABAD), and Buryat Republic. A large piece of territory traditionally inhabited mostly by the Buryat population (e.g., Olkhon Island) was alienated in favor of Irkutsk and Chita regions. Consequently UOBAD and ABAD became autonomous enclaves, which have no common border with the Buryat Republic. Despite the territorial fragmentation the Buryat population of districts was closely connected with the Buryat Republic. The specifics of ethnic policy in the USSR allowed many Buryats find there "social lift" that was practically enclosed for them in the Irkutsk and Chita regions.

¹That time the Buryats determined themselves as the Buryat-Mongols. It is important to be not confused with names: The Buryat-Mongol Republic and the Mongol Republic were different states. In 1958 all “Buryat-Mongol” regions were renamed in just “Buryat”.

In 1993, as a result of the so-called "parade of sovereignties"² both districts and Buryat Republic have achieved the status of autonomous units of Russian Federation. Among Buryat community some activists appeared, who raised point about political reunification of all Buryat autonomous districts, but federal and local authorities tried to save "status-quo". The complex system of federal structure was largely tied to the old system of the former USSR. There were three³ unequal forms of autonomous entities:

- The National Republics. According to the Constitution of Russian Federation (Article 5) Republics were characterized as States. They have their own Constitution and bodies of legislative and executive power. Also Republics have a "Title nation" – the major ethnos living in Republic. There can be some preferences for a "title nation" like state support for language, culture and etc.
- The Regions. They have their own bodies of legislative and executive power, but not a Constitution. Mostly organized in territories, where Russians are the majority.
- The National autonomous districts. They have a "title nation", their own bodies of legislative and executive power, but not a Constitution.

Changes came with Putin's politics of merging regions. In December 2001, Vladimir Putin signed a new law⁴ that regulated the possibility of changing the territorial structure of the regions enshrined in the Constitution. From 2003 to 2005 three positive referendums on the enlargement of the territories were held: "The Perm region and the Komi-Perm Autonomous

² "the cascade of sovereignty declarations issued by republics of the USSR as well as by autonomous republics and other subunits of the Russian republic in 1990-1991" Jeffrey Kahn. The Parade of Sovereignties: Testing Theories of Secession in the Soviet Setting. British Journal of Political Science, 30, pp 31-56

³ Today there are also seven federal districts and two federal cities: Moscow and Saint-Petersburg

⁴ Federal Law "Accession to the Russian Federation and formation of a new subject" [О порядке принятия в Российскую Федерацию и образования в ее составе нового субъекта Российской Федерации] 17.12.2001 N 6-ФКЗ

District, the Krasnoyarsk Region and Taimyr and Evenkisky Autonomous Districts, the Kamchatka region and the Koryak autonomous district”.

Federal Authorities suggested “special status” instead of the former political autonomy. The “special status” on practice was different for every district depending on the political elites bargain. Also it was said that minorities could create non governmental organizations by which they will implement their cultural needs.

In 2005 it was announced that a referendum would be held to merge the Ust-Orda and the Irkutsk regions. In the Buryat regions a movement against the merge was appeared. It consisted mostly of young Buryat scientists and was not very large. Members were in a difficult situation, when federal and local authorities pressured them⁵ and people did not want to support them because of the stress. In 2006 and 2007 both Buryat autonomous districts were absorbed by the Irkutsk and Chita regions. Federal authorities successfully neutralized the Buryat national movement.

In this way in the XX century Buryats step by step became a minority in their autonomous regions. For example, according to the first census in USSR (1926) Buryats constituted about 50% of population in Buryatia. Seventy years later they were just 28% of the population in Buryat Republic and 37% of the population in UOBAD (because of the Russian’s work migration). Only in ABAD the Buryat population contained more than 60%⁶. The recent merge made that proportion a lot more unequal. Today, ex-autonomous districts have lost many state privileges and good work places. Specialists and youth need to move to the Republic Buryatia for new career opportunities.

⁵ Some accidents are described in the article “If You are not Agree – You are a Terrorist” [He согласен - значит, террорист] in Gazeta 13.04.2006 (<http://www.gzt.ru/topnews/politics/76081.html>) and in “The Fair Referendum is prohibited in Chita” [В Чите запретили четный референдум] in Ъ-Kommersant № 35 (3611) 06.03.2007 (<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=748050>)

⁶More information is provided in “Newsletter “Population and Society” [Бюллетень “Население и общество”] Url: http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_26.php?reg=1338

The situation with linguistic freedom in Buryatia

In 2006 the Buryat language was added to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. According to that Atlas there are two main reasons for the language's death⁷: (1) Speakers were disappearing and (2) Speakers shifted to speaking another language – most often, a larger language used by a more powerful group. Buryat language speakers are in the second situation. Soviet ethnic politics tried to include minority elites in their “title” districts and republics. Although the first wave of Buryat clerisy connected with Buddhism was in the XVII century, the “modern” wave is a product of Soviet education that was given in Russian. So high a level of education (221 among 1000 are higher educated⁸) was accompanied with assimilation and losing their native language. In 1970 the Buryat Language teaching was practically stopped in schools and universities by authority initiative. Today there are different statistics about how many Buryats can't speak Buryat: from 20% to 70% (the last figure looks most unreal, but the situation is still serious). The urban youth that does not speak Buryat is definitely a sociological trend.

The UNESCO Atlas points out some criteria of language vitality. From an author's point of view we can identify three main types of such criterion: (1) state support, (2) demographical situation, and (3) community member's care about native language.

(1) The first type of criterion is strictly dependent on state resources: availability of materials for language education and literacy, type and quality of official documentation, governmental and institutional attitudes and policy. Today the usage of the Buryat language is very limited.

Although Buryat is the official language of the Republic (like Russian), it is used in very rare

⁷ UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00206>)

⁸ Russian Federal State Statistics Service (<http://bit.ly/bfIp3W>)

situations. Broadcasting in the Buryat language is less than 10% of the whole time on the official TV and radio channels. On the streets there are no Buryat language signs (street markers or plates). The National Buryat Library has only 15,000 books⁹ in Buryat (near 200,000 of Buryat speakers live in the Republic), because there is no federal or local support for book publishing in minority languages. Civil initiatives in that field are not supported enough either. Teaching native language in schools is on the elementary level. In UOBAD, more than half of Buryat language teachers have had no higher education. Officials acknowledge that the law "On languages of the peoples of Buryatia" is not executed enough, because it has no funding.

(2) Another criterion of language vitality is the proportion of speakers to the total population. After the district merge, the percent of Buryat population in the new regions declined. For example, Buryats represented 37% of the whole population in UOBAD, but after the merge they represented only around 5% in the Irkutsky District. Certainly the pressure to assimilate into mainstream Russian culture will increase. Also, one of the Buryat national movement activist noticed “people in that districts loss the ability to influence organs of local self-rule, which only the regional authorities can do”¹⁰. Today, four years after the merge, the law about the Buryat language still didn't adopt in the Irkutsky region.

The migration of workers from former UOBAD Buryat population to Buryatia looking for jobs in state offices (many if them were closed in UOBAD after the merge) will make the demographic situation in UOBAD even worse.

⁹ According to the interview with Alexander Bocheev - Deputy Minister of Education of the Buryat Republic for Baikal-Daily (<http://www.baikal-daily.ru/news/16/4807/>)

¹⁰ Stephen Boykewich “Planned Merger Worries Buryats” , Moscow Times, Nov 13, 2005

(3) Community members' attitude towards their own language is one of the criteria of language vitality. For outsiders it can look like the only cause for the language loss: people just stopped speaking their native language. Although there is some truth, such analysis would not be correct enough, but very convenient for authorities to ignore the problem.

It is very interesting to compare the language and religious situation amongst the Buryat population. The situation with religions is much better. Several dozens of Buddhist temples and shaman organizations function in Buryat regions. Some observe that Buryat population is even active in religious boom¹¹. People hardly care about their religious identities, but care far less about native language and secular traditions. Of course it is a very complex problem that would force us to take into consideration human psychology and sociology. But at first sight it seems obvious that the transfer of language from one generation to another is much more “costly” and complex in structure than the transmission of religious beliefs. In addition, minority languages are inferior to the majority language in its social and functional capacities. We can not say such a thing about religion, at least in Russia.

There is no doubt that linguistic freedom assumes not only substantial state support, but also members of the minority who feel personally responsible for this freedom. Such responsibility assumes that members are free and active citizens and politically autonomous agents. Within this limited freedom it is not possible to civilize the society. One can not impose on the citizens' duty to care for their native culture and language, and at the same time to deprive political autonomy, territorial and civil.

Conclusion

¹¹ J. Lee Jacobson. “Ask Your Friendly Local Lama or Shaman” in Transition Online, May 18, 2009

Today the autonomous status of “title regions” is a juridical, economical and social bias for supporting languages and cultures of the minorities in Russia.

Such system of minority relations was a bequest from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation. It was complex, problematical and not always effective. It was a product of a Soviet ideology that tried to create a new “Soviet” nationality based on the Russian language, but through a temporary transition of national self-determination at the first stage. That ideology is not challenging now. New initiative to merge is an attempt to reconsider old politics, but without a clearly articulate goal. On the contrary, the consequences are obvious enough. The continued process of the merge in Russia leads to very rapid and irretrievable loss of native language and culture of ethnical minorities.

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