

Yamskov A. The "New Minorities" in Post-Soviet States: Linguistic Orientations and Political Conflict // *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 1994, vol. 18, No 2-3 (Summer/Fall), pp. 58-61.



Partnering with Indigenous Peoples to Defend their Lands, Languages and Cultures

The "New Minorities" in Post-Soviet States *Linguistic Orientations and Political Conflict*

By Anatoly N. Yamskov*

At present most post-Soviet states are being literally torn apart by ethnic conflicts. Possible disintegration, or transformation into confederations of "ethnic/cultural territories" confront Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Estonia, not to mention Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Tadjikistan. In the Russian Federation, Chechen or Tuva republics are demonstrating secessionist moves, while Russian Cossacks demand withdrawal of their lands from Chechenia/Ichkeria to Russia proper.

Review of the major causes of these conflicts in the Transcaucasus (Yamskov 1991a) shows that cultural and linguistic orientations of ethnic groups were among important reasons for growing tensions even during the last years of the USSR (1989-1991). Now they pose the major threat to the stability and territorial integrity of the new states, though this problem is still grossly underestimated in the mass media and by the public in general.

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ETHNIC CONFLICT IN THE REPUBLICS

In the late 1980s-early 1990s, Union and Autonomous republics, acquiring greater sovereignty as a result of reforms, were introducing languages and cultural symbols of their "titular" (indigenous) nationalities as the only official ones and at the same time limiting the use of the Russian language and Soviet symbols. Meanwhile, the emerging new leaders of titular nationalities were gradually succeeding with demands for more sovereignty or total independence, their conflicts with the central Soviet authorities waning with the demise of the USSR. In the process such conflicts caused intervention of the Soviet army and bloodshed in the capitals of Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia and Armenia, with up to a dozen and more persons killed in each incident. The storming of Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, in order to save local communist authorities and stop anti-Armenian pogroms, claimed the lives of many dozens, perhaps hundreds of civilians. It has been widely believed that colonial relations between the republics and the center (Moscow) were the major crux of ethnic problems in the Soviet Union. A few attempts to criticize this approach and draw attention to far more serious ethnic tensions growing inside the republics (Yamskov 1991a and 1991b), were ignored or perceived as simply "conservative" and pro-Moscow (Walker, 1991:717-718).

But conflicts in the republics continued to escalate and finally caused largescale ethnocivil wars in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova with many thousands of people killed and "ethnic cleansing" common. Only one week of a war between Ingushes and Ossets (Northern Caucasus, Russian Federation) in late 1992, stopped by the Russian army, and military occupation of the contested territory (currently in Northern Ossetia), caused several times more deaths (583 persons were killed, according to official estimations - see: "Neezavisimaya Gazeta", 1994) than all the conflicts accompanying the struggle for the freedom of the former Union republics (now post-Soviet states).

Ethnic minorities (non-titular nationalities) in the former Soviet republics are often neither culturally nor linguistically adapted to their new status. Both titular and non-titular nationalities behaved as minorities in the Russian-dominated USSR (or Russian Empire before 1917); they had to learn Russian as a second language and to adopt a culture, based on modern urban (European) and Russian cultures. In the early 18th and 19th centuries, the ruling elite made constant attempts to culturally "westernize" and linguistically "Russify" peoples of the Empire/Union. After 1917 such attempts transformed into an ideology and practice of constructing and spreading the "new socialist culture of a Soviet people/nation," again based on the Russian language.

Analysis of cultural orientations demands extensive argument, and to a large extent, cannot be based on certain figures. On the contrary, linguistic orientations can be measured quantitatively. Correlations between linguistic and cultural or even political orientations are by no means certain or constant. Nevertheless it can be assumed that an ethnic group has at best very weak cultural or political ties with another ethnic community when the vast majority of the former do not know (or is reluctant to admit the knowledge of) the language of the latter.

LINGUISTIC ORIENTATIONS IN THE REPUBLICS

Linguistic orientations were, in fact, obtained during the USSR census in

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January 1989 when everybody was asked to report: (1) his/her ethnic identification; (2) "native" mother tongue; and (3) "second language of the peoples of the USSR he/she speaks fluently." Resulting figures show self-estimations of command of main regional languages, respectively; Russian, that of titular nationality of the Union republic, and that of titular nationality of the Autonomous republic or province.

It would be a mistake to interpret the results as indicative of the real spread of languages, because: (1) data on mother tongues greatly overestimate real knowledge of languages due to sentiments of ethnic identification, and (2) data on second languages conceal the facts that in many cases people were not willing to admit knowledge of "imposed" languages like Russian in the Baltic republics, or that different people perceive "fluency in Russian," for instance, in very a different manner. But statistics on languages serve to show the free choices of regionally used languages people wanted to report they know.

The author used publications of absolute figures (USSR 1991). Calculations of proportions of those who reported that they can speak the Russian language or languages of titular nationalities, were made on the following assumptions. For every nationally this proportion are composed of two parts: (1) those who reported the language (i.e., Russian for non-Russians) to be their "native" one (language of their nationality being mentioned as "second spoken" or not mentioned at all); and (2) those who reported Russian to be their "second fluently spoken" language (language of nationality being mentioned as "native" one). For instance, in the Republic of Karelia (Russian Federation), 97% of local Karels reported they knew Russian. This figure is composed of two proportions: (a) 48% of Karels reported Russian to be their "native language" (Karelian being "second fluently

spoken language" or not mentioned at all); (b) 49% of Karels reported Russian to be their "second fluently spoken language" (Karelian being "native language").

The Russian Federation, the second (after Armenia) most ethnically homogenous among the Union Republics in 1989, demonstrates the high proportions of non-Russians who reported knowing the Russian language. Variations in this field cover the range from 97% (Karels) to 59% (Tuvinians). Nationalities from the Finnish linguistic group (Karel, Komi, Komi-Permyak, Mordva, Udmurt) and Khakasians from the Turkish linguistic group even suffer linguistic assimilation, reporting higher proportions of those speaking Russian compared to those who speak mother tongues.

The linguistic situations in the other Union republics of the USSR were very different. The data is presented in the attached appendices 1 and 2, and analysis of this data enables us to draw the following conclusions.

CONCLUSION

The figures on linguistic orientations show that in most cases titular and nontitular ethnic groups were living side by side in the Soviet republics, but major linguistic and cultural ties formed to connect them with the dominant Russian language (Soviet culture), and not with each other. As a result, before the breakup of the USSR most non-titular ethnic groups were minorities of the Russian-speaking Soviet Union as a whole, but not of the Moldovian-speaking Moldova or Georgian-speaking Georgis, for instance, even if they actually resided there.

In Central Asian or Transcaucasian post-Soviet states there are, of course, some ethnic minorities well adapted to the now official languages and cultures of titular nationalities (like Avars in Azerbaijan or Kurds in Armenia). They may be termed "old minorities" to stress that their situation is like that of indigenous or old settled minorities all over the world. This is not to say that such minorities do not have or cannot create problems, but at least they are not confronted with the necessity of changing their linguistic and cultural orientations immediately after the breakup of the USSR.

In most cases ethnic groups now in a position similar to that of minorities lack the fundamental characteristics of "real" minorities, that is, cultural and linguistic adaptations to the present dominant ethnic majorities of the new post-Soviet states. It means that well-established linguistic and cultural orientations towards the Russian language and Soviet cultures must be abandoned in favor of new ones centered on those of the titular nationalities.

The positions and problems facing "new minorities" are in part comparable to those of recent immigrants from the Third World in Western Europe: both suffer from poor knowledge of the language and misunderstanding of the culture of the dominant ethnic majorities. But unlike the immigrants in Western Europe, "new minorities" in the post-Soviet states have unique features. Most important and politically destabilizing among them are the following: 1 Most of the "new minorities" are not recent migrants but either indigenous or old settler communities, residing for many generations or even centuries in their present territories; 2 Such communities have not experienced any period when they contemplated emigration nor made any choice to emigrate to a new country and to learn its language and culture, but unwillingly and suddenly found themselves in a position of unadapted minorities after the breakup of the USSR; 3 Such communities are not dispersed over large cities, but inhabit certain territories, usually in border areas, and often constitute numerical majorities in the towns and rural settlements.

The prospects for these "new minorities" are rather bleak. Ethnic Russians have to change their mentality and cultural behavior from that of a dominant majority into that of a minority. Both Russian and non-Russian minorities need to work out new linguistic and cultural adaptations in a short time while also bearing the loss of their former social status, occupations (due to ignorance of official languages) and standards of living. Both undertakings are not easy and so are likely to provoke tensions and conflicts.

A substantial number of those from predominantly Russian migrant or settler communities may eventually (in a decade or so) leave the territories where they constitute a numerical minority. The exceptions are localities in Ukraine and Belarus (where the sociocultural distance from Russians is small and both Russians and large Russified portions of titular nationalities have to learn new official languages and cultural symbols) or in Lithuania (the level of adaptation

Ethnic Composition of Population and Knowledge of Russian Language and Language of the Titular Nationality in the Union Republics of the USSR in 1989

Republics	Total population in thousands of persons	Main nationalities	Shares of main nationalities	Proportions of persons who admitted the knowledge of:	
				Russian language	Language of the titular nationality
Estonia	1556	Estonians Russians Ukrainians	62% 30% 3%	35% — 94%	— 15% 8%
Latvia	2667	Latvians Russians Bielorussians	52% 34% 5%	68% — 85%	— 22% 18%
Lithuania	3675	Lithuanians Russians Poles Bielorussians	80% 9% 7% 2%	38% — 67% 89%	— 38% 21% 21%
Bielorussia	10152	Bielorussians Russians Poles	78% 13% 4%	80% — 82%	— 27% 67%
Ukraine	51452	Ukrainians Russians Jews	73% 22% 1%	72% — 98%	— 34% 49%
Moldova	4335	Moldavians Ukrainians Russians Gagausians	65% 14% 13% 4%	58% 80% — 80%	— 14% 12% 6%
Armenia	3305	Armenians Azerbaijanians Kurds Russians	93% 3% 2% 2%	45% 19% 7% —	— 7% 75% 33%
Azerbaijan	7021	Azerbaijanians Russians Armenians Lezgins Avars	83% 6% 6% 2% 1%	32% — 69% 29% 9%	— 15% 7% 54% 70%
Georgia	5401	Georgians Armenians Russians Azerbaijanians Osets Greeks Abkhazians	70% 8% 6% 6% 3% 2% 2%	32% 52% — 35% 39% 80% 82%	— 26% 24% 10% 54% 20% 3%

Ethnic Composition of Population and Knowledge of Russian Language and Language of the Titular Nationality in the Union Republics of the USSR in 1989

Kazakhstan	16464	Kazakhs	40%	64%	–
		Russians	38%	–	9%
		Germans	6%	96%	7%
		Ukrainians	5%	96%	6%
		Uzbeks	2%	55%	10%
		Tatars	2%	92%	7%
Kyrgyzstan	4258	Kyrgyzs	52%	37%	–
		Russians	22%	–	12%
		Uzbeks	13%	39%	4%
		Ukrainians	3%	94%	2%
		Germans	2%	95%	0.3%
Uzbekistan	19810	Uzbeks	71%	27%	–
		Russians	8%	–	5%
		Tadjiks	5%	18%	42%
		Kazakhs	4%	31%	15%
		Tatars	2%	81%	12%
		Karakalpaks	2%	20%	6%
Tadjikistan	5093	Tadjiks	62%	31%	–
		Uzbeks	24%	22%	17%
		Russians	8%	–	4%
		Tatars	1%	88%	3%
		Kyrgyzs	1%	19%	13%
Turkmenistan	3523	Turkmens	72%	28%	–
		Russians	10%	–	2%
		Uzbeks	9%	29%	16%
		Kazakhs	3%	41%	18%
		Tatars	1%	87%	8%
		Ukrainians	1%	92%	2%

Ethnic Composition of Population and Knowledge of Main Languages (Russian, of the Titular Nationality of the Respective Union Republic, of the Titular Nationality of the Autonomy) in Autonomous Republics and Autonomous Provinces (outside Russia) of the USSR in 1989

Union Republics and their Autonomies	Total population in thousands of persons	Main nationalities	Shares of main nationalities	Proportions of persons who admitted that they can speak:		
				Russian language	titular language of Union Republic	titular language of Autonomy
UKRAINE The Crimea	2430	Russians Ukrainians Bielorussians Crimean Tatars	67% 26% 2% 2%	– 90% 94% 87%	Ukrainian 10% – 0.6% 0.5%	
AZERBAIJAN					Azerbaijani	
Nagorno-Karabakh	189	Armenians Azerbaijanians	77% 22%	57% 22%	0.3% –	Armenian – 2%
Nakhichevan	294	Azerbaijanians Russians	96% 1%	20% –	– 10%	
GEORGIA					Georgian	
Abkhazia	525	Abkhazians Georgians Armenians Russians Greeks	18% 46% 15% 14% 3%	84% 65% 82% – 88%	2% – 1% 3.3% 2.4%	Abkhazian – 0.4% 0 1% 0.3%
Adjara	392	Georgians Russians Armenians Greeks	83% 8% 4% 2%	42% – 75% 80%	– 20% 19% 18%	
South Osetia	96	Osets Georgians	68% 30%	60% 28%	15% –	Osetian – 7%
TADJIKISTAN					Tadjik	
Gorno-Badakhshan	161	Tadjiks Kyrghyzs	89% 7%	39% 0	– 36%	
UZBEKISTAN					Uzbek	
Karakalpakstan	1212	Karakalpaks Uzbeks Kazakhs Turkmens	32% 33% 26% 5%	20% 16% 21% 8%	4% – 7% 18%	Karakalpak – 9% 23% 5%

there is already relatively high).

In the areas where the migrant or old settler communities predominate numerically, the most probable outcomes are attempts to create new autonomies (like Crimea, Transdniestria, abortive moves in Northeastern Estonia) or towards secession. Situations in Northern and Eastern Kazakhstan (especially in the areas populated by Siberian or Ural Cossacks, who consider themselves "indigenous populations"), or in Eastern Latvia may develop in this direction.

Non-Russian "new minorities" of indigenous and old settler origin are continuing their armed struggle for secession (Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia) or at least for confederative status. Many other communities of this kind are likely to claim autonomous status as soon as it becomes safe to put such demands on the political agenda and the period of ethnic wars, pogroms and military rule ends. Some "old minorities" may join the efforts as well.

As a result we can expect the spread of "ethnic territorial autonomies" in many currently unitary post-Soviet "national states" because of the activities of some "new minorities." It can happen despite the fact that the Soviet experience made virtually all post-Soviet politicians think negatively about such autonomies and view them as early steps toward secession. Ethnic migrations, not to say deportations, made the population far more homogenous in many areas, and numerous armed and nonviolent ethnoconflicts produced new ruling elites, elites used to seeing ethnicity as a fundamental, politically important, human characteristic. The concept of "ethnic federalism" appears to be the only acceptable, compromise solution to most of the current ethnic conflicts and wars.

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