Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 1171 (1998)[1]

Endangered uralic minority cultures

Parliamentary Assembly

1. More than 23 million people in the world speak Uralic languages and, according to a 1989 census, nearly 3.3 million of them live as minorities in the Russian Federation. Not all of them use their language on a regular basis. The Assembly is concerned by the endangered status of Uralic languages and cultures in Russia.

2. Of the Uralic peoples living in Russia, the Karelians, the Mordvins, the Mari, the Komi and the Udmurts enjoy statehood in the form of their own eponymous republics; the Khanty, the Mansi, the Komi-Permyaks and the Nenets have autonomy in their autonomous administrative districts. However, not all the Uralic peoples live within the territory of their own republics or autonomous districts, and in many of these entities they are not the majority of the population. The Assembly expresses great concern about the difficult physical circumstances and low level of social protection of small Uralic peoples, who live in the arduous conditions of sub-Arctic regions and at bare subsistence levels.

3. Statistics show that those who speak their national language or consider it their mother tongue have been constantly declining as a proportion of the population. The main reasons are urbanisation, modern demographic and migration trends, mixed marriages and a decline in the traditional way of life. Abandonment of national languages has been most rapid among urban dwellers and young people. The development of the languages of some small Uralic peoples is also hindered by their nomadic way of life and scattered settlements.

4. With society and the economy in turmoil, the status of minority languages has become even more precarious as people are forced to concentrate on the problems of everyday life and earning a living. In the Nordic countries, the Samis now have a statutory right to their own language, culture and education in their native tongue. The Constitution of the Russian Federation, the laws on the languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation and on national cultural autonomy as well as the constitutions and the laws of the national republics, have provisions on the preservation and development of national languages and cultures. In the national republics, the national languages are state languages alongside Russian. However, under the current difficult socio-economic conditions the state is unable to provide enough resources to implement these provisions.

5. In the Russian Federation, the teaching in schools is given in seventy-five national languages, including thirteen Uralic languages. In the republics and districts inhabited by Uralic peoples there are both national primary and secondary schools and Russian schools, mainly in rural areas, where Uralic languages are studied as separate subjects. Because of the crisis of the education system in the Russian Federation these schools are not increasing in number and are experiencing an acute shortage of teachers and textbooks. The Assembly believes that the educational field is the most important one for the preservation of the national identities and cultures of the Uralic peoples, and considers it vital to take urgent measures to preserve and develop education in the national languages of the Uralic peoples. Some of the languages of the indigenous peoples of central and northern Russia and Siberia exist only in oral form.

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1. Assembly debate on 25 September 1998 (32nd Sitting) (see Doc. 8126, report of the Committee on Culture and Education, rapporteur: Mrs Isohookana-Asunmaa). Text adopted by the Assembly on 25 September 1998 (32nd Sitting)

6. Native speakers of Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian attach value to their linguistic background, which is not Indo-European. Diversity of cultures and languages should be seen as a precious resource that enriches our European heritage and also reinforces the identity of each nation and individual.

7. The Uralic peoples living as minorities in the Russian Federation are not presenting any demands that aspire to political change, but need the support of the public authorities for their languages and cultures, several of which will probably become extinct without action on the part of organisations such as the Council of Europe. The Assembly is deeply concerned about the possible deterioration of the Uralic peoples' national cultures, including the fall-off in publications, radio and television programmes in national languages and the discontinuation of support for national theatres and traditional arts because of the economic crisis in the Russian Federation.

8. The Assembly recalls its Recommendation 1203 (1993) on Gypsies in Europe and Recommendations 1291 (1996) on Yiddish culture and 1333 (1997) on the Aromanian culture and language, which refer to the establishment, in co-operation with the Council of Europe, of a research centre for dispersed minority cultures. The tasks of this body would be to help these minorities preserve their cultural traditions and awareness of their past, to support the collection and recording of linguistic monuments and oral tradition, to promote the publication of material in their own languages and, in general, to do its utmost to prevent European languages and cultures from disappearing. This is considered very important. The research centre should also be assigned a monitoring function.

9. The Assembly supports continued work on the subject by the Committee on Culture and Education in co-operation with the Russian authorities.

10. The Assembly encourages the countries where the Uralic linguistic minorities live and in particular the Russian Federation, in their efforts to guarantee a living future for such minorities on the cultural map of Eurasia. The following principles should be taken into account:

10.1. the native language school is the foundation on which to revive and develop languages and cultures. Therefore the states in question should be encouraged and supported in providing children with teaching in their mother tongue, first in the lower classes of elementary schools and later, by gradual extension, in higher classes. Native language schools should be established in towns and cities as well as in rural areas;

10.2. as a basis for the establishment of schools for ethnic minorities and native language instruction, teaching aids and learning material will first have to be provided in those languages. Efforts will also have to be made to support teacher training. Achieving these goals presupposes positive attitudes in policies on minorities and will require the allocation of resources for reforming teaching, training teachers and producing educational material;

10.3. a prerequisite for the preservation of languages is their active use in all written and oral communication. Therefore newspapers, radio and television programmes and other electronic media in minority languages must be maintained or promoted and contacts between national minorities living in different republics and regions must be ensured;

10.4. exchanges of personnel and students between the Uralic areas and universities, research institutes and state bodies in other countries should be stepped up. Cultural exchanges of performing artists, writers, etc., between different minority peoples likewise reinforce their own identity and create links with a multicultural world. In addition to that, aid should be channelled to various organisations and societies to enable them to work at local level to revive and protect native languages;

10.5. the Uralic peoples should be taken into consideration in the implementation of Recommendation 1291 (1996), especially in relation to the research centre for dispersed minority cultures;

10.6. heritage sites such as the old town of Tsygma (Kozmodemyansk) should be placed on the World Heritage List of Unesco in order to preserve old round-log buildings and wood carvings.