

## STRUGGLE OVER THE KARELIAN LANGUAGE(S) AND IDENTITY

### 1. Attempts to improve the status of Karelian language(s) in post-Soviet Karelia

Language is an important factor in self-identity and social identification. This was one major reason why, in 1937, Iosif Stalin prohibited the use of Finnish language in what then was called the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Karelia (Karelian ASSR) and decreed, after Russian, the second official language of the republic should be a Karelian language developed from the Tver Karelian dialect in the early 1930s. By forbidding Finnish, Stalin wanted to strengthen the power of Moscow and to undermine the influence of native Finnish-speaking communists, and by introducing a Tver Karelian language he intended to weaken the position of the republic's own speakers of Karelian dialects<sup>1</sup>. Tver, formerly known as Kalinin *oblast*, is a region midway between Novgorod and Moscow. Its Karelian population dates back to the mid-seventeenth century.

The 'language' created by Stalin's decreed never appeared to be viable: the Latin alphabet was foreign to most Karelians, its orthography varied and a great majority of native speakers did not see any reason why they should learn Karelian, which they could not use outside their own circles.<sup>2</sup> Thus, although the Karelian constitution of 1937 declared Karelian as the third official language (after Russian and Finnish)<sup>3</sup>, the new language was buried in silence and, in 1940, substituted with Finnish. At the same time, the Karelian ASSR was renamed the Karelian-Finnish Republic. That language fell into disfavour in 1956, when the republic was again 'degraded' into an autonomous region. Today, Russian and Finnish are again the official languages of the Karelian Republic<sup>4</sup>. During the Soviet era Russian had a privileged position, because almost all higher education was given in Russian. Moreover, being the language of administration and (official) culture, the social status of Russian was higher than that of other languages. Therefore even most of those parents who themselves did not have Russian as their mother tongue tended to speak Russian at home, at least to their children<sup>5</sup>.

In the last Soviet census in 1989, some 79,000 persons or 10 per cent of the whole population of the Karelian Republic identified themselves Karelians<sup>6</sup>. During the 1990s, some of them became more and more vociferous in demanding the recognition of (unspecified) Karelian as the republic's second official language. In demanding this, they also were aspiring to an official acknowledgement of their Karelian nationality.<sup>7</sup> For that purpose, the Karelian Cultural Association was founded in 1989 in the republic's capital, Petroskoi (in Russian, Petrozavodsk). Since 1990, the association has been known as Karjalan rahvahan liitto (the League of the Karelian Nation). In the same year 1990 also the Tver Karelian Culture Association was founded. Thanks to its efforts, Moscow granted Tver cultural autonomy in 1997<sup>8</sup>.

There were also signs of the reappearance of Karelian identity outside the Russian territory, for example, in 1995 the Association for the Karelian Language (in Finnish, Karjalan kielen seura) was founded in Finland. In addition, various Finnish Karelian organizations (established after the expulsion of Karelians from areas belonging to Finland between the World Wars) have given spiritual and material support to improve the status of Karelian language(s) and culture in Finland and in the Karelian republic<sup>9</sup>.

One of the goals of Karelian associations in Russia is to turn Karelian into a written language taught in schools and used on official occasions. Without such status, Karelian cannot achieve the position of an official language. However, the problem is that there is no one single language but several Karelian dialects. In the area of Tver and in the northern part of the Karelian Republic, a dialect called Karelian (in Finnish, varsinaiskarjala) is spoken. In the south of the republic Livvi or the Olonets (Aunus) dialect or, in some parts, Lude predominates<sup>10</sup>. The speakers of Karelian in the republic number at least 5,000. Lude is spoken by a couple of thousands and Livvi by about 30,000. The number of Karelians in Tver was estimated at some 23,000 in 1989, but in practice they are two to five times that number<sup>11</sup>.

Despite problems in defining what exactly is *the* Karelian language, its teaching was started in the republic in 1989. During the first school year, there were only some 300 pupils, but during the next school years the number has increased and for years has been somewhere between 2,000 and 2,500. The 'languages' taught are Karelian and

Livvi. Each week there are two or three lessons. Since 1990, Livvi has been taught in the University of Petroskoi and, since 1992, also in the Karelian Pedagogical Institute. Two textbooks have been published in Karelian and three in Livvi<sup>12</sup>. I have no knowledge whether or not these are based on the draft text-books which appeared in 1938<sup>13</sup>.

The situation in Tver has been analogous. Mikhail Orlov (1932 – 1993), the first chairman of the Tver Cultural Association, wrote the first *Bukvar*, or ABC-book, 3,000 copies of which were printed with the support of the Finnish Ministry of Education in 1992 in Finland. The textbook was taken into immediate use in some Tverian schools<sup>14</sup>.

In Karelia, the strengthening of the position of Karelian and the republic's other minor languages was partly supported by the Russian-dominated administration. In early 1995, the republic's government initiated a two-year project for stimulating minority languages and cultures<sup>15</sup>. In the same year also a new law on languages was passed, intended to improve the official position of Karelian and Vepsian (a Finno-Ugric language closely related to Karelian, spoken by a part of the some 12,000 strong Vepsian community in Karelia). Due to the economic crisis in Russia in general and in Karelia in particular, schools and universities have been unable to implement the law and cultural reforms as intended<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, in July 1997 the republic's government, and one year later the parliament, too, rejected the proposal to promote Karelian as the second official language<sup>17</sup>. One probable reason was attempts by Russia to improve the position of the Russian language all over the CIS, a trend which has accelerated since late 1990s. Russia was concerned of the tendency of some of her neighbours, such as Ukraine and Uzbekistan, to weaken the status of Russia at the expense of Ukrainian or Uzbek. However, Russia herself has done nothing to secure the future of Ukrainian, spoken by some four million people in Russia<sup>18</sup>. Thus it seems that Karelians represent an exception, perhaps because they are not a single language block, their number, from Moscow's perspective, is insignificant and, unlike Ukrainians in Russia, they are not supported by a strong 'motherland'.

However, other minorities in Karelia, particularly the Finns, have been in dispute with the Karelians. For example, the Karelian national writer, Ortojo Stepanov, criticized attempts to create a Karelian language in an article published in December 1996 in a major Finnish newspaper. He stated that more than 13,000 pupils (most of them not Finns) studied Finnish in Karelian schools, whereas Karelian was studied by only about 2,300 pupils. Today the number of pupils studying Finnish is said to be as high as 90,000, while those studying Karelian has remained at the same level as in 1996. Stepanov's point was that for the future of Karelia, Finnish is much more important than Karelian<sup>19</sup>. His article was a comment on the proposal made in early December 1996, to displace Finnish as the republic's second official language in favour of Karelian.

Due to financial problems, today the teaching and the research of Karelian and Vepsian hangs in the balance. The number of students and graduates of these languages in universities is in decline<sup>20</sup> as are the number of publications in Karelian or Vepsian. *Vienan Viesti*, a paper established in 1931 in Uhtua, northern Karelia, and published in Karelian, was closed in autumn 1998 as a part of the 'development of mass media' as the local government put it. The circulation of the dual-language (Karelian and Livvi) paper *Oma mua* declined from January to June 1999 from about 1,900 to 700 because publishers had problems obtaining paper supplies and readers could not afford the high subscription costs<sup>21</sup>.

However, political and economic problems do not account for all of the difficulties. As already mentioned, a major problem is that the language used in schools and textbooks is an artificial language which is spoken by none. No wonder that even many Karelians are of the opinion that the republic needs only one official language, Russian<sup>22</sup>.

Protagonist of Karelian, however, will not give up. For example, in the summer of 2000 at the tenth annual Karelian language course (meaning in practice Livvi), held in the town of Vaasa, Finland, Tatyana Kleyerova, deputy chairman of the Karelian state committee for national policy, stated that 'today the importance of this work (that is, improving the status of Karelian) had begun to dawn even on the Karelian government'<sup>23</sup>. In December 2000 Sergey Katanandov, chairman of the government of the Karelian Republic, was interviewed by a local Finnish paper. He stated that within a few months Karelian will be the republic's second official language<sup>24</sup>. However, Finnish experts on Karelian affairs claimed that Katanandov was merely paying lip-service to the Finnish press<sup>25</sup>.

## 2. Language, nation, politics and social identity

Many kinds of nationalist tendencies that appeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union coincided with globalization and the re-invention of national identity in global terms<sup>26</sup>. Their reappearance indicates that large-scale attempts to standardize economic, social and ideological life can backfire, igniting in regional and local attempts to create a separate identity. This often happens in nationalistic terms. Depending on the context, 'we' becomes divorced from 'them' due to language, religion, ethnic origins or a particular territory that 'we' (but not 'they') possess by 'right'. For example, in the United States, the blacks (and whites as well) have emphasized

ethnicity (or what is sometimes called ‘race’). In Northern Ireland, both sides of the ongoing conflict have stressed religion whereas in Palestine it is the right to a particular piece of land. In Karelia, language has become what the late Victor Turner, an anthropologist, termed ‘dominant symbol’, that is, a symbol which condenses both the struggle of power between the Karelian minority and the Russian majority and the Karelian view of themselves as Karelians, that is, process of forming their identity.

During the seven Soviet decades, the only supporter of the Karelian language and identity was the Communist Party. However, it did not support the formation of a genuine national identity. The party stressed the Karelian language and nationality only on occasions that suited its general purposes. In the post-Soviet Karelian Republic, the creation of the Karelian language and identity seems to follow the same path. I do not doubt the sincerity of a part of Karelian protagonists, but among them there are also those for whom language and nationality are a means of strengthening the economic and political autonomy and power of a particular group, that is, the Karelian, people. In fact, the tendencies – cultural, political and economical – are inseparable. Committing oneself to a given culture and language carries with it a commitment to a given political and economic system, to certain kinds of social relations and, finally, to Finland (which, however weakly, supports Karelians) or Russia.

The problems and disputes in creating a Karelian language indicate that the Karelian identity is not strong. Also the Karelian tendency of coining language(s) as if in a vacuum, without reflecting on the language(s) relation to Russian, Finnish or Vepsian society and culture, may be viewed as a sign of weak identity. A strong identity is not forged by introvert meditation but in interaction with the outside world; by repeatedly asking the question: Who are we in relation to others?<sup>27</sup> As long as true mutual relations are lacking, different groups (or nations) do not comprehend each other as real actors. They view the other group via stereotypes and clichés, creating an imaginary opponent rather than facing reality.

Recently speakers of Karelian and Livvi have claimed that it is possible to reconcile the differences between these two dialects. I see this as a step forward in the building of a true Karelian identity, because it implies that although speaking different versions of Karelian, ‘we’ all are Karelians, whereas ‘they’ (speakers of other languages) are not. Thus the border is not between us but between us and them. Whether it represents lip-service or not, Katanandov’s statement, referred to above, indicates that the republic’s government appears to be considering the Karelian identity issue more seriously than earlier. Regardless of the future discussion on the status of Karelian as the second official language or its elevation to that position, the mere fact that ‘they’ somehow recognise ‘our’ identity does itself strengthen ‘our’, that is, the Karelians’, identity<sup>28</sup>.

*I thank Ewen MacDonald PhD for improving my English.*

### References cited

*Helsingin Sanomat, Karjalainen and Savon Sanomat are Finnish-language daily newspapers, Karjala is a Finnish-language weekly.*

<sup>1</sup>Esa Anttikoski, ”Karjalan kielisuunnittelun strategian 1920- ja 1930-luvulla”, in: *Yhtä suurta perhettä*, eds. Timo Vihavainen & Irina Takala. Kikumora Publications, Series B, 12. Helsinki: Aleksanteri-instituutti 2000, pp. 233-50; Jukka Rislakki, ”Karjalan kieli tulee jo tänä vuonna”, in: *Helsingin Sanomat* 29 January 1989; Pekka Zaikov, ”Karjalan kielen opetus ja käyttö nykypäivänä”, in: *Koltat, karjalaiset ja setukaiset: pienet kansat maailmojen rajoilla*, ed. Tuija Saarinen & Seppo Suhonen. Snellman-instituutti, A-sarja 19, Kuopio: Snellman-instituutti 1995, pp.109 – 15.

<sup>2</sup>Anttikoski 2000, pp. 236 – 7.

<sup>3</sup>Anttikosti 2000, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup>On 14 November 1991 Karelia declared itself a sovereign state within Russia. It was the last of the 16 formerly autonomous states of the Russian federation to issue such a declaration.

<sup>5</sup>See for example Raija Pyöli, ”Karjalaisetko kieltään vaihtamassa?”, in: *Karjalainen* 10 July 1996. According to official statistics, in 1999 in Karelia 82 per cent of Karelians and 90 per cent of Finns had Russian as the language used at home (Karjalainen 22 January 2001).

<sup>6</sup>About half of them considered Karelian as their mother tongue. Zaikov 1995, p. 112. In 1926, the number of Karelians was around 99,700 or ca. 38 per cent of the whole population. Vepsians numbered about 8,600 and Finns 2,500 (Seppo Lallulla, ”Luoteis-Venäjän etnisen kartan kehityspiirteitä vuoteen 1959”, in: *Yhtä suurta perhettä*, eds. Timo Vihavainen & Irina Takala. Kikumora Publications, Series B, 12. Helsinki: Aleksanteri-instituutti 2000, pp. 51 – 76, here p. 58). In 1989 in the area of Karelia there were some 18,000 Finns and 12,000 Vepsians (Karjalainen 3.8.1991). Both of them, too, have tried, and have been helped by Finns from Finland, to revive teaching

on their own language (see, for example, "Karjalaan kerätään rahaa suomenkielistä koulua varten", in: *Helsingin Sanomat* 27 February 1992; Sven Wikström, "Vähemmistökielille ja kulttuureille elvytysohjelma Karjalan tasavallassa", in: *Helsingin Sanomat* 16 March 1995).

<sup>7</sup>This was started in December 1993 when the Supreme Soviet of the Karelian republic decided that people living permanently in the republic could have double-nationality, both Russian and a separate Karelian nationality (*Karjalainen* 28 December 1993). However, in practice this has not materialised.

<sup>8</sup>"Karjalan kieltä ja kulttuuria pyritään elvyttämään", in: *Karjala* 28 June 1990; Pekka Lehtonen, "Tverin karjalaiset ovat vielä hengissä", in: *Savon Sanomat* 2 November 2000. Pekka Zaikov, a native speaker of Karelian and a linguist, was elected as chairman of the Karjalan rahvahan liitto. At the end of 1990 the association had some 500 members. Sergei Kontti, "Karjalaisilla ei ole paljonkaan päätösvaltaa Neuvosto-Karjalassa", in *Karjalainen* 23.12.1990.

<sup>9</sup>See for example Jorma Siekkinen, "Karjalan kielen elvytys keskeistä salmilaisten toiminnassa Joensuussa", in: *Karjalainen* 15 July 2000.

<sup>10</sup>To improve the status of Lude language and speakers, the Ludean Association (Lyydiläisten seura) was founded in 1999 in Finland. According to Russian scholars, Lude is a Karelia dialect, but their Finnish colleagues have a different opinion.

<sup>11</sup>Helena Valta, "Vähemmistökansallisuuksien asema kohentumassa Neuvosto-Karjalassa", in: *Karjala* 15 March 1990; Yrö Rouhe, "Karjalan kirjakieli nostattaa tunteita", in: *Savon Sanomat* 26 July 1995.

<sup>12</sup>Paavo Harakka, "KKS tukee Karjalan tasavaltaa karjalan kielen pelastamisessa", in: *Karjalainen* 4 August 1996; Martti Pänkälä, "Venäjän Karjalassa kieli elpyy vähitellen", in: *Karjala* 13 July 2000; Valta, "Vähemmistökansallisuuksien asema...", in: *Karjala* 15 March 1990; Zaikov 1995, pp. 113-14.

<sup>13</sup>For textbooks drafted in 1938 see Anttikoski 2000, pp. 242 – 243.

<sup>14</sup>Lehtonen, "Tverin karjalaiset...", in: *Savon Sanomat* 2 November 2000; Pirkko Saarikoski-Tammikallio, "Tverinkarjalaiset yrittävät elvyttää kielensä", in: *Karjalainen* 12 October 1993.

<sup>15</sup>Sven Wikström, "Vähemmistökielille ja kulttuureille elvytysohjelma...", in: *Helsingin Sanomat* 16 March 1995. Keväällä 1998 karjalaa opetettiin Tverissä 11 kyläkoulussa yksi tunti viikossa (Pekka Lehtonen, "Lukikirja Tverin karjalaislapsille", in: *Savon Sanomat* 24 May 1998).

<sup>16</sup>Pyöli, "Karjalaisetko...", in: *Karjalainen* 10 July 1996; Seppo Virtanen, "Karjalan kieltä elvytetään uudella kielilailalla", in: *Savon Sanomat* 3 September 1995.

<sup>17</sup>Paavo Ahava, "Pelastakaamme karjalan kieli", in: *Helsingin Sanomat* 1 May 1999; Seppo Virtanen, "Karjalan kielilaki vastatulessa", in: *Savon Sanomat* 27 July 1997.

<sup>18</sup>Tars Kuzio, "Language and nationalism in the post-Soviet space", in: *RFE/RL NewsLine* 3 August 2000 ([www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org)).

<sup>19</sup>Pänkälä, "Venäjän Karjalassa...", in: *Karjala* 13 July 2000; Ortjo Stepanov, "Kieliriita Karjalassa jatkuu", in: *Helsingin Sanomat* 24 December 1996; *Helsingin Sanomat* 22 January 2001.

<sup>20</sup>Jukka-Pekka Lappalainen, "Kieli vaarassa Venjän Karjalassa", in: *Helsingin Sanomat* 3 June 1996.

<sup>21</sup>Matti Ronkanen, "Venäläisnationalismi uhkaa Karjalan lehtiä", in: *Journalisti* 15/1999.

<sup>22</sup>Seppo Virtanen, "Karjalan kieli ei saa tukea parlamentilta", in: *Savon Sanomat* 16 February 1998; Pentti Väistö, "Karjalan kielilaki johtaisi viralliseen kieleen, jota ei ole olemassa - jota kukaan ei osaisi", in: *Karjalainen* 16 April 1997.

<sup>23</sup>Pänkälä, "Venäjän Karjalassa...", in: *Karjala* 13 July 2000. Karjalan kielen kesäkursseja on järjestetty vuodesta 1990 vuorotellen Suomessa ja Karjalan tasavallassa.

<sup>24</sup>"Karjalan kieli saa virallisen aseman", in: *Karjalainen* 12 December 2000.

<sup>25</sup>Pertti Stranius, "Kulttuurin alasajo jatkuu Venäjän Karjalassa", in: *Karjalainen* 29 January 2001.

<sup>26</sup>Zdzislaw Mach, *Symbols, conflict, and identity: essays in political anthropology*. Albany: State University of New York Press 1993, pp. 12 – 14.

<sup>27</sup>Mach 1993, pp. 3 – 5.

<sup>28</sup>"Karjalan kieli saa...", in: *Karjalainen* 12 December 2000; Mach 1993, p. 6.