

Summer 2021

# The Current Language Crisis in Siberia

Emma L. Vandehey  
*Portland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/honorstheses>



Part of the [Russian Linguistics Commons](#), and the [Russian Literature Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

## Recommended Citation

Vandehey, Emma L., "The Current Language Crisis in Siberia" (2021). *University Honors Theses*. Paper 1135.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.1166>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

The Current Language Crisis in Siberia

By

Emma L. Vandehey

An undergraduate thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Bachelor of Arts

In

University Honors

And

Russian Language

Thesis Adviser

Anna A. Alsufieva

Portland State University

2021

## **Abstract**

In the early years of the Soviet Union, state leaders were hesitant to create laws that would establish a national language. The USSR prided itself on multiculturalism and its ability to unify people from a variety of cultural backgrounds. As the Soviet Union became more established, ideations shifted from unity to uniformity. Indigenous languages from all over the country and various states were phased out, and the Russian language was implemented for children starting in primary school. Policies regarding heritage languages in primary and secondary schools stayed in place after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now indigenous peoples living in the Russian Federation are concerned with the status of their languages. The laws state that each individual has the right to use their heritage language in all aspects of life, including government. However, these laws have not helped in the revitalization of indigenous languages around Russia, especially in Siberian republics where population numbers are sparse. This thesis explores the current language crisis that exists today in Siberia along with the relevant historical background regarding indigenous languages in Siberia. It discusses the education systems for indigenous communities, and the current struggle activists are facing in Siberia. Finally, the researcher addresses a hypothetical plan to revitalize languages in Siberia by combining scenarios from ex-Soviet countries and current Russian Republics that have reestablished their heritage languages despite the politicization of their languages.

## **Statement of the Problem**

In the last century, and many argue longer than that, the governing bodies of Russia have created policies and procedures that oppress the local languages. As a result, communities indigenous to Russia have struggled to maintain their heritage languages, and now more than 131 indigenous languages are in danger of going extinct (Soyan, 2020; <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas>). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the data in Peretlsvaig (2014), 45 of those languages belong to the indigenous peoples of Siberia. In this research analysis, the researcher will focus on the languages of the peoples originating from Siberia.

Siberia is a broad term used to describe the region of the Russian Federation that is east of The Urals (Vitebsky & Alekseyev, 2015). In this region, there are several republics, all of which function under the federal government and self-ruling local governments according to the State Duma website (<http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/28748/>).

In the Russian Federation, the government recognizes groups with 50,000 or fewer people as “numerically small indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation” (Zamyatin, 2017, p. 188; Vandehey, 2021). This restrictive interpretation of indigenous peoples is due to the assumption that groups that are larger than 50,000 people are better protected within their titular regions (Zamyatin, 2017). However, in more than half of the 21 republics in the Russian Federation, titular groups are still a minority, with some groups containing less than two percent of the total population for the region. Regardless, census data from 2010 shows that-- even in regions where titular groups are politically marginalized-- there are typically better language retention rates due to the

accessibility to national schools<sup>1</sup> and the higher number of interlocutors for those speaking the heritage language.

Siberia is a linguistically dry area compared to its Asian and European neighbors (Pereltsvaig, 2012). Many of the languages in Siberia have a dangerously low and rapidly declining number of speakers; most are now classified as endangered per the criteria provided by UNESCO. According to UNESCO, there are six categories that a language could be classified under (see appendix, figure 1). Most Siberian languages are classified as definitely endangered, severely endangered, or critically endangered, with some even being extinct. As the number of speakers in a certain language declines, so do the chances of revitalizing said language. Some might ask why the revitalization of these languages is important, and the answer is deeply rooted in human culture. As communities lose their mother tongue, they also lose the ability to connect with certain aspects of their culture that are interdependent with language. These aspects may include music/songs, literature, history, and communication with elders and family members. Consider this poem *On My Land*<sup>2</sup> (1961) by Evenki poet Alitet Nemtushkin (1939-2006):

If I forget my native speech,  
And the songs that my people sing  
What use are my eyes and ears?  
What use is my mouth?

---

<sup>1</sup> National schools are the schools located within indigenous communities where instruction is given in the national language of the republic/group that it represents.

<sup>2</sup> “Земле моей” (Zemle moei) translated by UNESCO (From the book «Сибирские строки. Русские и советские поэты о Сибири» (1984) (*Sibirskie stroke. Russkie I sovetskie poetry o Sibiri*))

\*Here and further, the American Library Association (ALA) and the Library of Congress (LC) transliteration system is used (URL:

<https://www.transliteration.com/transliteration/en/russian/ala-lc/>)

If I forget the smell of the earth  
And do not serve it well  
What use are my hands?  
Why am I living in the world?

How can I believe the foolish idea  
That my language is weak and poor  
If my mother's last words  
Were in Evenki?

Evenki is one of the many languages of Siberia whose numbers are in rapid decline. In his poem, Nemtushkin questions his purpose, if not to speak his heritage language. The languages being lost are not just systems of grammatical structures and phonetic components; language represents culture and culture is often a representation of one's sense of belonging. When a language starts to disappear, an entire community of people who identify with the ethnicity of that language can no longer use the language to connect with their culture – a unique and particular way of world reflection. Many still question how languages begin to go extinct, especially because the communities surrounding these languages are still alive and well. In order to answer that question, in regard to Siberian languages, one must look into the historical background and language politics of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and what is now the Russian Federation.

## **Culture**

There are around 40 different indigenous groups recognized by the Russian Federation that originate from the Siberian region, and more than 100 ethnic groups that the government does not legally classify as indigenous small-numbered peoples

(Zamyatin, 2017). There are several ethnic groups that have relatively large populations that are excluded from being legally recognized as indigenous small numbered peoples, such as the Sakha<sup>3</sup> (Yakuts), Buryats, Komis, Tuvans, Khakas, and more (First Peoples Worldwide, 2014). Other groups, such as the Oroks, Enets, and Tazy, have dangerously low population numbers and are approaching extinction. Despite these groups having different languages and cultures, they all live fairly similar lifestyles.

In Siberia, winter weather can reach temperatures as low as negative 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Indigenous communities originating from Siberia are well-equipped to live off the land, even in arctic conditions. All these nomadic groups have survived centuries of rough weather by living off of what the land produces. Even today indigenous Siberian communities make clothing and shelter using animal hides for insulation. Many indigenous people who still desire to live like their ancestors dwell in yurt-like homes. The foundation of these homes is constructed using lumber that is gathered and shaped by hand. Then the lumber is wrapped tightly in animal hides to prevent bad weather from getting in. Animal hides also provide secure insulation to trap heat. Often there is a hearth in the center of the shelter with a stock that goes up through the roof to prevent smoke inhalation.

Despite the migration of Christian Orthodoxy making its way north along with the ethnic Russians, many Siberian communities still retain a belief system that originates in nature (Crate, 1992). All things deriving from the earth have a spirit-keeper, and many Siberians build natural altars in respect of the local spirits.

---

<sup>3</sup> Sakha is the endonym for Yakuts.

One of the most universal traditions among the nomads of Siberia could be reindeer husbandry, or “olenevodstvo<sup>4</sup>” as it is called in the Russian language. In Siberia, reindeer are kept in large herds living in vast pastures. Modern reindeer are primarily used for their meat and their hides (Nomokonova et al, 2021). This type of husbandry is often referred to as *pastoralism*. Pastoralism is a recent development in the reindeer industry. Before the 18th century, reindeer were primarily used in transportation. The blistering cold weather in Siberia and other parts of Russia made it difficult for keeping horses and other large livestock. Reindeer are more accustomed to rough temperature and demonstrate tireless endurance on long treks. Along with the change in the use of reindeers, there was also a change in the relationship with reindeer. When farmers used reindeer in transport, there was a more spiritual connection between the animal and its handler. There was more one-on-one time between the reindeer and their handlers, therefore it was more of an emotional loss when one of the reindeer died. Domesticated reindeer were still eaten, but most indigenous people looked down upon the premature slaughter of a reindeer. Now that reindeer are kept in large herds in open land, the connection between reindeer and farmer is minimal. Most do not spend any time at all with their reindeer, other than when moving them from one pasture to another and general wellness checks (Nomokonova et al, 2021). The domestication of livestock, specifically reindeer, is not exclusive to one group of indigenous peoples. Many groups across Siberia and into the Far East participate in reindeer husbandry.

---

<sup>4</sup> In Russian: Оленеводство (literally: reindeer breeding)



According to Kryazhkov & Garipov (2020), spirituality and nomadic lifestyles are not the only thing differing indigenous communities have in common. Siberians are not excluded from the racial injustice that many People of Color in Russia still face today. Many indigenous people move to larger cities seeking an easier life, only to be racially profiled. Many are refused jobs, excluded socially, discriminated against, and are forced to Russify themselves to assimilate to the westernized lifestyles of ethnic Russians. Many find that it is hard to maintain any of their traditional activities, and often lose their native language (Kryazhkov & Garipov, 2020).

### **Historical Background Information**

As far back as the Russian Empire (1721-1917) disparities in the teachings of the Russian language and indigenous languages<sup>5</sup> have caused a downfall in the number of speakers and the perceived value of these languages. According to Comrie (1981), the Russian empire granted no rights to indigenous languages. Russian served as the official language in government and most professions. However, there was no concrete plan in place that would enable non-ethnic Russians to learn the Russian language (Comrie, 1981). This left many indigenous communities in the North to comprise their own plans to assimilate to the Russian lifestyle. According to Comrie (1981), the only two options non-ethnic Russians had were to learn Russian through their own efforts, or remain in

---

<sup>5</sup> An indigenous language is a language native to the land in which it is spoken. For example, Tuvan is the indigenous language of the Republic of Tuva, while Russian and Tuvan are both the official languages.

their own community and become economically stagnant due to the lack of opportunity for those who did not speak Russian.

After the revolution in 1917, and during the early years of the Soviet Union, leaders agreed that the politicization of language created a divide between ethnic Russians and non-ethnic Russians. The Bolshevik party wanted to create equality for all, including all languages (Comrie, 1981). Multiculturalism was soon associated closely with federalization. Local languages and culture were quickly promoted and supported in the public domain<sup>6</sup> (Zamyatin, 2017; Vandehey, 2021) and the national<sup>7</sup> languages were incorporated into the smaller state governments.

Soviet leaders decided there was to be no official language for the country as a whole. This meant that all citizens had the right to use their heritage language in all aspects of government, education, and profession (Comrie, 1981). However, there was an obstacle to overcome before indigenous languages could be integrated into everyday life. According to Grenoble (2003), less than 29 percent of the Russian population was literate, and in some regions, illiteracy was near 100 percent. Many indigenous languages did not have written language systems, meaning many indigenous communities had no means to learn how to read and write in their mother tongue. Soon a literacy campaign was created to boost language education throughout the country; however, the vast number of languages throughout the Soviet Union made it impossible to recruit teachers for every individual language (Grenoble, 2003). Thus, Soviet leaders

---

<sup>6</sup> From Vandehey 2021: в первые годы советской власти мультикультурализм поощрялся и даже был в законе... (From final coursework: Russian in the Major, *Portland State University*)

<sup>7</sup> National language (национальный язык) is a direct translation from Russian, which refers to the indigenous language(s) of a certain area.

needed to make decisions about which languages would be fully developed, and which would be left as-is.

Per the 2010 census, there are more than 170 languages throughout Russia (Soyan, 2020; [www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/](http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/)). According to Grenoble (2003), of those over 170 languages, only 19 languages in Russian territory had a written form at the time of the literacy campaign<sup>8</sup> in the 1920s. Linguist representatives for each selected language were recruited to create written alphabets, textbooks, and other literacy materials to help boost the literacy rates of the native peoples.

In the 1930s, when the government started pushing for a unified society, laws related to multiculturalism were put on hold<sup>9</sup> (Zamyatin, 2017; Vandehey, 2021). At first the government declared that Russian was to be a compulsory subject in all schools; however, according to Zamyatin (2017), parents were eventually given the right to choose the language of instruction in schools per reformed education policies. Small national schools saw a shift to teaching in the national languages to teaching in Russian. Smaller indigenous languages were then made an optional subject. This was the standard of education until the mid-1950s, when the State decided to introduce boarding schools. These boarding schools were primarily implemented in rural areas where farming, hunting, and reindeer husbandry were prevalent and income levels were low.

---

<sup>8</sup> This literacy campaign began to be widely known as Ликбез (Lik-bez) which is short for “ликвидация безграмотности” (likvidatsiya bezgramotnosti) which translates to “liquidation of illiteracy” (Grenoble, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> From Vandehey 2021: В 1930-е годы действие закона о разнообразии было приостановлено, и русский язык был введен в качестве основного языка обучения в Советском Союзе. (From final coursework: Russian in the Major, *Portland State University*)

In the 1950s, the Soviet government decided that the nomadic lifestyle of the indigenous people in the rural parts of the Soviet Union no longer fit into the Soviet societal norms (Alekseeva, 2018). Soviet leaders had an ideal image for the “Soviet chelovek,” or Soviet citizen. The indigenous peoples in various republics in Russia live quiet and relaxed lifestyles. They often live off of what the land produces for them, and do not have the necessity or desire to live in big cities. This, of course, did not meet the ideals of the “one for all” style of society Soviet leaders had in mind when forming the USSR. The introduction of boarding schools was an effort made by the Soviet government to assimilate young people to a Russified society (Grenoble, 2011; Comrie, 1981). The children who were sent to these boarding schools lived nine months of the year away from their families, where they were only exposed to the Russian language and not their heritage language. Eventually an intergenerational language barrier formed (Zamyatin, 2017). The older generations of indigenous communities did not speak Russian, and the younger generations could not speak their heritage language. Children returning home from these boarding schools were unable to communicate with parents and grandparents, as they had no retention of their mother tongue after not speaking it for nine months.

In the modern-day one can see the repercussions on language due to the historical events mentioned and the re-politicization of language beginning in the 1930s. According to census data from 2010, only 22.7 percent of indigenous people spoke in their heritage language, and today it is estimated that 90 percent of young people speak only in Russian<sup>10</sup> (Zamyatin, 2017; Vandehey, 2021). In recent years there has been a

---

<sup>10</sup> From Vandehey 2021: В 2010 году только 22.7 процента коренных жителей говорили на языке своего наследия. В наши дни 90% коренных жителей и

large push from activists to revitalize indigenous languages; however, even with modern history being more in favor of diversity, the number of indigenous language speakers declines daily. A detrimental factor in the rapid declension of speakers is the education system in the Russian Federation and the lack of proper preparation and funding for national schools located in Siberia.

### **Education Systems in Indigenous Communities**

Literacy was a large issue in the early years of the Soviet Union. As stated, less than 30 percent of people in Russia were literate (Grenoble, 2011). Indigenous illiteracy is still an issue pending resolution. As of 2017, one percent of indigenous adolescents and youth remain illiterate with the highest illiteracy rates being among the Nenets, Khanty, and Evenki youth. Education rates are also low when it comes to indigenous youth, as only 48 percent of them have completed, or partially completed, a primary or secondary education (Zamyatin, 2017, p. 191). Zamyatin (2017) also claims that 17 percent of indigenous youth have not completed even a primary education.

The Republic of Tyva<sup>11</sup> (referred to as Tyva in this research) was one of many regions for whom linguists advocated for in the early years of the literacy campaign. In the 1930s, a written script for the Tuvan language was introduced by linguists and adult-literacy classes were launched in rural areas. According to Chevalier (2012), Tyva also saw the first secondary schools for children during the literacy campaign. By 1943, 84

---

большая часть молодёжи коренных народов говорят только по-русски (From final coursework: Russian in the Major, *Portland State University*)

<sup>11</sup> Also referred to as The Republic of Tuva. In Russian: Республика Тыва (Respublika Tyva).

secondary schools had opened across Tyva; however, around 40 percent of Tuvan children aged 8 to 12 still did not attend school (Chevalier, 2012, p. 142). Tyva officially became part of the Soviet Union in 1944, and with that came adjustments to the school system. When the region was officially inducted to the Soviet Union, compulsory courses in The Russian language became a curriculum requirement (Chevalier, 2012). However, Tyva was able to retain Tuvan language courses in the national schools throughout the reign of the USSR and in the years following.

Altai is a neighboring republic to Tyva. Despite being neighbors, the Russian migration to Altai was much earlier than that of Tyva. Russians began migrating to Altai in the 17th century (Chevalier, 2012). Once the Trans-Siberian Railway was completed in the 1890s, large groups of Russians began to occupy Altai. By the beginning of World War I, Altai had the largest population of ethnic-Russians in Siberia (Chevalier, 2012). The large number of Russians living in Altai made the Russification and language assimilation process occur much more rapidly than in other republics.

The Altaian language's written system was established by missionaries in the 1840s, which was preceded by the opening of an Orthodox Christian missionary-built school. In fact, at the time of the Soviet Union, all schools in Altai were missionary-built and operated. As part of the literacy campaign, there was a large effort made in the 1920s and 1930s to expand secondary education in Altai (Chevalier, 2012, p. 144). Soon after, the study of the Russian language became mandatory throughout the Soviet Union. Starting in the second grade, all Altaian youth were to learn Russian. Many schools shifted from being missionary run to being national schools, and by the 1970s all schools in Altai taught only in Russian and the Altaian language had disappeared entirely from the curriculum (Chevalier, 2012).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) there was a significant migration of people from rural areas to the North, where population sizes were larger and opportunities seemed more abundant. Because of this migration, and the now significantly lower populations in rural areas of Siberia, schools became an afterthought to those in charge of upkeep. The infrastructure of modern Siberian schools is nearly untouched from the Soviet era. Many schools lack internet, computers, and even heating systems in areas where outside temperatures can drop below zero during the winter (Zamyatin, 2017). Not only is the quality of infrastructure low, but also the quality of instruction. Unnamed authorities have suggested that addressing low-quality education can be done by using small, ungraded schools (Zamyatin, 2017, p. 191). Ungraded schools are located in small indigenous communities and have less than 14 students per classroom<sup>12</sup>. The small classroom sizes allow for a lower student-teacher ratio, meaning more one-on-one instruction for students in their heritage language. While these schools are exemplary in language retention, they fail to meet one major curricular goal: standardized testing.

The Unified State Examination (USE)<sup>13</sup> is a national requirement for all Russian citizens to graduate secondary school and move on to higher education. Despite Russian being a compulsory subject in primary schools, there is still a large push from federal forces to create perfect Russian proficiency in indigenous youth. Some republics have dropped national language courses from upperclassman curriculum in secondary schools, while others have cut national language courses from curriculum entirely and

---

<sup>12</sup> Federal education standards state that there must be a minimum of 14 students per class. (Zamyatin, 2017)

<sup>13</sup> The USE was implemented in 2009

only offer secondary education in the Russian language. Additionally, all higher education is only offered in Russian. The USE is offered only in Russian, even in republics with relatively high numbers of indigenous peoples. Students who do not pass the USE are barred from applying to universities and institutes. According to Chevalier (2012), indigenous students from rural areas of Siberia often lack the requisite Russian language skills to pass the exam (p. 148). Researchers hypothesize that the lack of skills stems from a lack of qualified teachers in these areas. Teachers in rural areas of Siberia often are not proficient in Russian themselves, therefore they lack the ability to instruct students in the areas where they will inevitably be tested. Ungraded schools may also be to blame in these situations, as they only offer instruction in indigenous languages. Students who attend school where instruction is only offered in heritage languages, or the Russian instruction is sub-par, are at a disadvantage when taking this crucial exam.

### **The Struggles Related to Activism**

In 2017, Russian president, Vladimir Putin, spoke out against requiring children to learn languages that are not their mother tongue and are not official state languages (Alpaut, 2021; Eckel, 2019). This statement was not well received by non-ethnic and ethnic Russians alike. Many minority activists felt that this was Putin giving regional officials permission to begin eradicating languages other than Russian, while ethnic Russians living in regions with high populations of indigenous peoples complained about the potential of a changed curriculum in schools that favored Slavic children. Other remarks made by Putin have made activists wonder if he supports a nationalistic



bias towards ethnic-Russians. Activists believe that his agenda echoes a Slavic nationalist theme (Alpaut, 2021).

Putin's agenda regarding indigenous languages has sparked outrage among activists and advocates in all autonomous regions of Russia. A 2018 legislation canceling the mandatory teaching of indigenous languages in public schools in areas governed by the Russian Federation caused outcry and activism across the region. Albert Razin, an Udmurt language rights advocate and scholar, died in September of 2019 after lighting himself on fire in front of the city hall in Izhevsk, Udmurtia (Alpaut, 2021; Eckel, 2019). Razin's actions have been widely criticized by Russian nationalists who believe that a transition to a national language is a "natural process" (Eckel, 2019 quoting Valery Tishkov). Valery Tishkov, a Kremlin advisor, published an article titled "People do not Die with Language"<sup>14</sup> in September 2019, following Razin's death. Tishkov claims that there are more than 200 languages registered to the Russian Federation, and, according to him, it is incomprehensible why someone would identify with their heritage language when their nationality is Russian. Tishkov states that it is his belief that a person is not connected to their language, meaning that when a language dies it does not take the ethnicity or the people with it. However, the actions of Razin, and the poem of Nemtushkin directly contradicts those beliefs. If the people who speak these languages would rather die with the language than live in a world without it, it is society's responsibility to protect those languages and preserve them as it would preserve the people who speak them.

---

<sup>14</sup> Original article title: Народ не умирает с языком (*Narod ne umiraet s iazykom*).

Tishkov also speaks out against UNESCO and their publication of the atlas of endangered languages. Tishkov inaccurately claims that Chechen<sup>15</sup> was mistakenly added to the list of endangered languages. Tishkov's reasoning behind this claim is that Chechen still has over one million speakers. While it is true that the Chechen language of the North Caucasus region is still spoken by a large number of people, the criteria for a language to be considered endangered is not based on population alone. According to the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), an endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct in the future (Woodbury, 2021). These predictions are based on patterns related to generational retention, genocide, and language replacement.

Despite Tishkov's negative views on the teaching and learning of indigenous languages, the government still recognizes the constitutional right to learn national languages (Eckel, 2019). Despite the open recognition of this constitutional freedom, activists noticed a recent increase in school inspections in regions where minority languages are taught. Bashkortostan is an area outside of Siberia where the Bashkir language is spoken and even an official language of the republic. In 2017, regional prosecutors inspected 1,300 schools and issued warnings for the forced teaching of Bashkir (Eckel, 2019; Unknown, 2017). While the government recognizes the freedom to study indigenous languages, they readily clarify that the right to learn these languages does not imply an obligation. In the following year, after Russian parliament passed legislation to end the mandatory instruction of indigenous languages, protests erupted all throughout the autonomous regions of the Russian Federation.

---

<sup>15</sup> Chechen is a northeastern Caucasian language spoken by 1.35 million people (according to the 2010 Russian census). The Chechen Republic is a constituent republic of Russian Federation, located in the North Caucasus in Eastern Europe, close to the Caspian Sea.

In early 2021, the Republic of Komi saw mass protests following the arrest of Aleksei Navalny, an opposition activist and main contender to the presidency. These protests were labeled as unauthorized rallies and many in attendance were charged criminally, including Aleksei Ivanov. Ivanov identifies as a native Komi resident, and when his trial was held his language became more controversial than his supposed crimes. According to Alpaut 2021, when the judge began to ask Ivanov questions in Russian, he answered only in Komi. The judge reportedly became frustrated with Ivanov's use of Komi and questioned why he would speak in his heritage language when his passport is Russian and he attended Russian schools (Alpaut, 2021). However, when confronting Ivanov with these points, the judge used the word "russkii" (Russian) and not "rossiyskii" (which associates with the meaning "of the Russian State"). In English these words are the same, meaning "Russian," but in Russian it is the difference between ethnically Russian, and everything inside of Russia that doesn't have ethnic ties. For example, Ivanov, who is ethnically Komi, would be titled a "rossiianin<sup>16</sup>" and not a "russkii" because he does not come from an ethnically Russian background. For Ivanov and millions of other non-ethnic Russians in the country, the distinction between the two words is important. The judge's choice to describe the school that Ivanov attended and his passport as ethnically Russian is both inaccurate and disrespectful towards those who identify with their heritage culture and language rather than Russian. Non-ethnic Russians are increasingly becoming irritated with what they see as a national bias towards ethnic Russians (Alpaut, 2021).

---

<sup>16</sup> In the Russian language a citizen of the Russian Federation is actually called a россиянин (rossiianin) but this word had the same English translation "Russian" as the word русский (russkii.) .

The United Nations (UN) declared 2019 to be the International Year of Indigenous Languages. A large conference was held in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), where scholars from diverse backgrounds gathered to discuss the linguistic and cultural standing of indigenous languages around the world. One attendee, Richard Grounds, was amazed by the gracious offerings from his Sakha hosts. He drank kumis<sup>17</sup>, ate konina<sup>18</sup>, and participated in spiritualistic rituals that pulled him closer to the community in which he was staying. However, in an article for *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine*, Grounds expressed his distaste for the lack of indigenous voices heard during discussions and lectures. Grounds brought this point to the attention of a few scholars and indigenous attendees for the conference, who all disagreed with his statement. Despite the pushback, Grounds stands firm in his belief that the leaders for the next celebration of indigenous languages should be members of the indigenous community.

### **Where to go From Here**

According to UNESCO, more than half of the world's languages are in danger of extinction (Utoikamanu, 2021; UNESCO). How does one stop the extinction of languages? The first step is to identify factors that have led to a decline in speakers of a given language. In Russia, there are 40 recognized small-numbered groups. Legally, a small numbered group is one that consists of less than 50,000 people. However, it is not only the legally recognized indigenous peoples that have faced the peril of language

---

<sup>17</sup> Кумыс (kumys): fermented or soured horse milk

<sup>18</sup> Конина (konina): horse meat

endangerment. Almost all indigenous and aboriginal languages originating from Siberia are classified as endangered. In this paper, the researcher identifies a number of policies and protocols that have negatively affected the indigenous languages of Siberia.

The first step in revitalizing native languages is recognizing the problems that are rooted in the Russian government. While the Russian Federation has certain policies protecting indigenous languages, those policies do not protect from the criticism and retaliation one might face when using their heritage language. For example, Aleksei Ivanov wished to use his heritage language, Komi, during a court hearing. The judge criticized and ridiculed Ivanov for his choice, and this may have led to retaliation from the judge as she did not want to provide a translator. Ivanov was within his rights to speak in Komi and should have been provided with a translator when he requested that the trial occur in his native tongue. Those indigenous to Siberia who do not speak Russian, or prefer to not speak Russian, should be allowed to use their heritage language in a court of law. If a language is an official language to a republic or region in the Russian Federation, officials are required by the constitution to provide resources in said language. This policy should not be questioned or overlooked by government officials.

Boarding schools have been a problem in heritage language acquisition since their debut in the 1950's. Boarding schools in rural Siberia take children away from their homes and send them to live in a Russian-only environment for nine months out of the year. During those nine months, children are not allowed to speak, read, or write in any language other than Russian. This system creates generational gaps, where children can no longer communicate with the elders in their communities. Eventually, elders who once spoke these heritage languages die and leave the children who only speak Russian

as the ethnic heirs of the community. Generations following then only speak Russian, and the only ties they have to their community is their ethnic background. Boarding schools in vulnerable areas of rural Siberia, where parents feel as though they have no other option but to send their children away to make sure they get a proper education, should be outlawed. These schools prey on families with low incomes in areas where the quality of public education is lacking. If the government wishes to continue providing boarding schools to children in rural Siberia, then curriculum should be provided in the language of the area where the children reside. Being bilingual is a positive attribute, but barring children from their heritage language is unethical. Boarding schools have the proper funding and ability to offer courses in both Russian and the language of the children's home.

The third issue surrounding languages in Siberia is the quality of education for primary and secondary school students. As the speaker mentioned, the options for primary school and secondary school are slim for children in Siberia. Most schools have not been upgraded since their construction during the Soviet Union, and many schools are without heat, internet, technology, and other necessities related to proper education in the 21st century. The federal government needs to reallocate money to provide the republics with proper funding to upgrade their school systems.

In addition to updating schools, education policies also need to be updated. Presently, heritage languages are not compulsory in school. Children have the option to learn their heritage language, but often do not take advantage of this option. Schools should be teaching children in Russian and in the language of the area. Teachers of these languages should have degrees from higher education institutions with a foundation in the language they teach, as well. Many teachers of indigenous languages

are not properly trained in how to teach languages, and therefore the language education department is often lacking substance and reliability.

While it is important for children to learn their heritage language, it is equally as important for adults to become fluent in their language. Indigenous language classes at the adult-level need to be offered in rural areas to boost literacy rates. Foreign language learners also deserve the opportunity to learn the indigenous languages of Siberia. Although it may be rare that a foreign language learner would be interested in such small-numbered languages, perhaps federally funded online-courses are a viable option to offer curriculum in the indigenous languages of Siberia to all who are interested.

## **Conclusion**

According to Utoikamanu (2021), the functions of language are to communicate, express originality and creative ideas, play, and to act as a gateway to emotional relaxation. Language and culture are inextricably linked, and our self-perception and identity largely depend on the system they form. Diversity enriches the global world, and part of what distinguishes groups from one another is language and culture. Right now, in Russia, the federal government is making no effort to preserve the uniqueness of Siberia. Languages are going extinct, and it is far past the time to begin preservation. Laws and educational systems are preventing children from learning the languages of their ancestors, and people are being punished for observing their right to use their mother tongue. Still, the researcher hopes that the Russian Federation government will hear the voices of ethnic groups and allow linguists and anthropologists to launch support initiatives to preserve the indigenous languages.

## Appendix

Figure 1

From the UNESCO website

(<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/atlas-of-languages-in-danger/>):

safe	language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted >> not included in the Atlas
vulnerable	most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)
definitely endangered	children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home
severely endangered	language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves



critically endangered	the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently
extinct	there are no speakers left >> included in the Atlas if presumably extinct since the 1950s

## Works Cited

Alekseeva, E.K., J.A. (2018) Языковая Политика в СССР и Постсоветский период.

[Language policy in the USSR and the post-Soviet period]. Теории и проблемы политических исследований [Theories and Problems of Political Studies], 7 (6A), pp. 71-79.

Alos i Font, Hector. (2014). Chuvash Language in Chuvashia's Instruction System: An

Example of Educational Language Policies in Post-Soviet Russia. Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe JEMIE, 13(4), 52-84.

Alpaut, Ramazan. (2021) "Russky Or Rossiisky: An Activist -- And His Native Language

-- Go On Trial In A Russian Courtroom." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*,

Russky Or Rossiisky: An Activist -- And His Native Language -- Go On Trial In A

Russian Courtroom, [www.rferl.org/a/russia-komi-minoroty-language-ivanov-court-rusky-rossiisky-navalny-putin/31108182.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-komi-minoroty-language-ivanov-court-rusky-rossiisky-navalny-putin/31108182.html).

Chaykovskaya, Elena N. (2019). *Native Language Teaching to the Siberian Peoples in Conditions of the New Language Situation*. Kemerovo State University,

Chevalier, J. F. (2012). Multilingual Education in South Siberia: National Schools in the Republics of Altai and Tyva, *Heritage Language Journal*, 9(2), 139-155. doi: <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.46538/hlj.9.2.1>

Comrie, Bernard. (1981) *The Languages of the Soviet Union*. Cambridge University Press,

Crate, Susie. (1992) "At Home in Siberia." *Culturalsurvival.org*, Cultural Survival. [www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/home-siberia](http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/home-siberia).

Eckel, Mike. (2019) "A Language Scholar's Suicide Draws Official Disdain -- And Brings Hope To Russia's Minority Groups." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, A Language Scholar's Suicide Draws Official Disdain -- And Brings Hope To Russia's Minority Groups, [www.rferl.org/a/a-language-scholar-s-suicide-draws-official-disdain----and-brings-hope-to-russia-s-minority-groups/30197171.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/a-language-scholar-s-suicide-draws-official-disdain----and-brings-hope-to-russia-s-minority-groups/30197171.html).

Grenoble, Lenore A. *Language Policy in the Soviet Union*. Springer, 2011.

Grounds, Richard A. (2019) "Missing in Yakutsk: Indigenous Voices Absent from

Official Conference on Indigenous Languages.” *Culturalsurvival.org*, Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine [www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/missing-yakutsk-indigenous-voices-absent-official](http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/missing-yakutsk-indigenous-voices-absent-official).

Jankiewicz, Szymon, et al. “Linguistic Rights and Education in the Republics of the Russian Federation: Towards Unity through Uniformity.” *Review of Central and East European Law*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2020, pp. 59–91., doi:10.1163/15730352-bja10003.

Jordan, P. (2016). *Landscape and culture in Northern Eurasia*. Routledge.

Kiseleva, Ksenia. (2020) “Языки Народов России: Кому Они Родные и Почему Мы Хотим Их Сохранить (The Languages of the Peoples of Russia: Who Are They Native to and Why We Want to Preserve Them).” *Rastimdetei.ru*, Rastin Detei, xn--80aidamjr3akke.xn--p1ai/articles/yazyki-narodov-rossii-komu-oni-rodnye.

Kryazhkov, V.A & Garipov, R.S. (2020) ILO 169 Convention as a Vector For the Aboriginal Legislation Development in Russia. *The International Journal of Human Rights*. Doi <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/10.1080/13642987.2020.1804371>

Levgold, Robert. (1998). Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad. *Foreign Affairs*, 77(6), 160-161.

Meschtyb, Nina. (2000) “Adult Education and Indigenous Peoples in Russia.” *Academy*

of Sciences. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED458369>

Nemtushkin, A. “Земле моей” (On My Land) 1-20

(<http://www.unesco.org/new/ru/culture/themes/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/>)

Nikolaev, Denis, and Dmitry Chugunov. (2012) *Education System in the Russian*

*Federation Education Brief 2012*. World Bank.

Nomokonova, T., Losey, R., Fedorova, N., Gusev, A., & Arzyutov, D. (2021). Reindeer

Imagery in the Making at Ust'-Polui in Arctic Siberia. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 31(1), 161-181. doi:10.1017/S0959774320000414

Pereltsvaig, Asya. (2016) “Indigenous Languages of Siberia: An Overview.” *Languages*

*Of The World*, Languagesoftheworld.info, [www.languagesoftheworld.info/russia-ukraine-and-the-caucasus/indigenous-languages-siberia-overview.html](http://www.languagesoftheworld.info/russia-ukraine-and-the-caucasus/indigenous-languages-siberia-overview.html).

Rohr, Johannes. (2014) International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, *Indigenous*

*Peoples in the Russian Federation*,

[www.iwgia.org/images/publications/0695\\_HumanRights\\_report\\_18\\_Russia.pdf](http://www.iwgia.org/images/publications/0695_HumanRights_report_18_Russia.pdf)

f.

Soyan, Rossina. (2020). Investigating the Needs of Foreign Language Learners of

Tuvan. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 1-13.

Tishkov, Valerey. (2019) “Народ Не Умирает с Языком (People Do Not Die With Language).” *Iz.ru*, *Izvestiya*, [iz.ru/920557/valerii-tishkov/narod-ne-umiraet-s-iazykom](https://iz.ru/920557/valerii-tishkov/narod-ne-umiraet-s-iazykom).

Utoikamanu, Fekitamoyeloa. (2021) Сохранение культурно-языкового многообразия в контексте глобальной гражданственности  
<https://www.un.org/ru/chronicle/article/21767>

Unknown. (2020) “Госдума Приняла в Первом Чтении Законопроект Об Изучении Родных Языков.” *РИА Новости*, *РИА Новости*,  
[www.ria.ru/20180619/1523019471.html](http://www.ria.ru/20180619/1523019471.html)

Unknown. (2017) “FAQ on Endangered Languages: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.” *FAQ on Endangered Languages | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, UNESCO,  
[www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/).

Unknown. (2013) “Discrimination against Visual Minorities, Roma, Migrants and Indigenous Peoples: Russia's Record before the United Nations.” *International Federation for Human Rights*, United Nations,  
[www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/russia/Discrimination-against-visual-12887](http://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/russia/Discrimination-against-visual-12887).

Unknown. (2014) “Who Are the Indigenous Peoples of Russia?” *Cultural Survival*,

[www.culturalsurvival.org/news/who-are-indigenous-peoples-russia](http://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/who-are-indigenous-peoples-russia).

Vandehey, Emma L. (2021). Сохранение Языков Коренных Народов Сибири (Preservation of the Languages of Native Siberians). Research paper for “Russian in the Major” course (2020/2021). *Portland State University*.

Warner, Andrew. (2021) “Russia Launches Project to Preserve Languages.”

*Languagemagazine.com*, Language Magazine, 7 Mar. 2021,  
[www.languagemagazine.com/2021/03/07/russia-launches-project-to-preserve-languages/](http://www.languagemagazine.com/2021/03/07/russia-launches-project-to-preserve-languages/).

Woodbury, Anthony C. (2021) “What Is an Endangered Language?”

*Linguisticsociety.org*, Linguistic Society of America,  
[www.linguisticsociety.org/content/what-endangered-language](http://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/what-endangered-language).

Zamyatin, Konstantin. (2018) “Minority Language Education in Russia: Enforcing the Voluntary Teaching of Non-The Russian languages.” *ICELDS*, International Center for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies,  
[www.icelds.org/2018/07/03/minority-language-education-in-russia-enforcing-the-voluntary-teaching-of-non-russian-languages/](http://www.icelds.org/2018/07/03/minority-language-education-in-russia-enforcing-the-voluntary-teaching-of-non-russian-languages/).

Zamyatin, Konstantin. (2017) “Indigenous Peoples and Education in the Russian Federation.” *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples*, The United Nations, pp. 185–206.

