

# **Bilingual Education in the Republic of Tatarstan**

Russian and Tatar: The Quest for a National identity

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This paper will focus on bilingual education within the Republic of Tatarstan, represented by the largely monolingual Russian-speakers and the Mongolian Tatars, the largest ethnic minority in the Russian Federation. I interviewed a 23-year-old native of Tatarstan who currently lives in New York City, a monolingual Russian speaker named Daria who was born and raised in the Tatarstan capital city of Kazan roughly 700km east of Moscow. Daria emigrated from Kazan to the United States in 1998 to attend the Mannes College of Music.

Daria's educational experience in Russia was a rather unique one. From the age of five until she was 18, Daria attended an elite Russian music school where she focused on classical piano performance. In addition to her musical studies, the school offered a rigorous education in academics, art, literature, and the humanities. The concept of an elementary school or kindergarten is very foreign to her, as she attended the same school with the same students for thirteen years. Her parents, when choosing an institution in which to enroll her, had the choice between a school that taught French, a school that taught German, and a school that taught English as a foreign language. They could choose only one language for her to learn in addition to Russian, since each school only offered one. No stigma was attached to any of the foreign languages; indeed, the learning

of a foreign language was mandatory once Daria turned 12. Her parents chose the English school because, in her words, “It is the language of the world.”

Her education was conducted in Russian only for the entirety of her tenure there. The only classes that she had in another language were her English Language class, and even that was taught mainly in Russian. She reported having no more than four or five hours of English education a week and that, without any further practice at home or with classmates, her comprehension and conversation skills were sorely underdeveloped. No bilingual education option existed for Daria. She reported that foreign students who attended the school were expected to know Russian, and that since many of the students came from surrounding republics, the transition was little or no problem for them. For other young people Daria’s age who were living in Kazan and not educated in such a specialized school, however, the approach and importance placed on bilingual education was entirely reversed.

Tatarstan has been an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation since 1994. With a population of approximately 4 million people, Tatarstan has one of the largest concentrations of Russia’s second-largest ethnic minority, the Tatars, largely remnants from the invasion of the Mongols in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. One quarter of the four million inhabitants of Tatarstan currently speaks ‘Tatar,’ a Turkic language and part of the Altaic language family (Wertheim, 2002:2). The other majority in Tatarstan is the native Russian speakers. Under the Stalinist political centrism that fueled the concept of national Russian-bilingualism, languages like Tatar were diminished in an attempt to merge all the disparate nationalities of the Soviet Union into one ‘Soviet socialist nation’ (Tsameryan,

1979 as quoted in Herrman, 1992). The intense economic and social pressures on the inhabitants of the Soviet Union transformed what had been a relatively stable diglossia of Russian and Tatar into an encroaching diglossia where Russian slowly assumed much of the functional purposes that Tatar had once served (Wertheim, 2002:4). As such, the formation of the Republic of Tatarstan after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990 was accompanied by a large resurgence of Tatar nationalism and the formation of an ethnically Tatar government that has aggressively promoted the resurgence of Tatar language and culture and a consistent de-russification of Tatarstan with the *de facto* goal of undoing the damage done by Soviet language policies (ibid. 4,6).

One of the unique ways that the Republic has chosen to do this is by transitioning from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin alphabet, the fourth alphabet for Tatarstan in a period of less than 100 years. The new alphabet was ratified in 1999, and the ten-year transition period began with street signs and school programs in the fall of 2001, with the switch hopefully to be completed by 2011 (ibid. 18). This reform is an increasingly sensitive topic, especially with opposition coming from Moscow. The change is seen by many as an attempt to 'clean' the Tatar language of the many Russian words and elements that are found in it. Many see the move to the new alphabet as a political statement of pan-Turkic and a move away from Russian and especially Russian culture.

In addition to switching alphabets, another aspect of the aggressive de-russification of Tatarstan has come in the form of 'promotive language policies' designed to encourage...

...the use of Tatar and the expansion of its functional domains. For example, Tatar is now one of Tatarstan's two official languages (Russian being the other); Tatar language study is a compulsory subject in primary and secondary school; and government workers are rewarded a 15 percent bonus in pay for demonstrating a sufficient level of Tatar competence. Although the current political and overall climate is more conducive to the use of Tatar than in the Soviet era, there is evidence of continuing language shift: this evidence takes the form of the functional domains where Tatar is and is not used, external and internal language attitudes towards Tatar, and linguistic performance of Tatarphones, both in language choice and in style shifting to accommodate audience and setting (Wertheim, 2002:4).

Of course, these linguistic measures are strongly reflective of the Tatar desire to resist religious and cultural assimilation into the Russian majority and to preserve their own sense of nationhood (ibid. 28). As in Scotland and Catalonia and Belgium, discourse on a language is largely symbolic of a much deeper need to preserve (or in this case, forge) a national and communal identity. That said, many inhabitants of Tatarstan take issue with the compulsory bilingual education policies of the ethnically Tatar government. When asked about her feelings on the compulsory education of Tatar in school, Daria replied, "I think it is fine if they want to speak it at home or wherever. It is their language, after all, you know, but I think many people do not see the practical use of it. As long as they speak Russian, they can learn whatever language they want, but as to whether it should be compulsory, I do not know." Indeed, Daria, as a monolingual Russian-speaker, echoes the opinions of many people within Tatarstan, especially, but not exclusively, the large population of monolingual Russian speakers who regard Tatar as a 'kitchen language' or the 'language of the peasants' and 'not meriting of study' (ibid. 5).

Wertheim notes:

Other Russians will openly express more negative attitudes towards Tatar, particularly now that pro-Tatar language policies have brought mandatory Tatar language classes to primary and secondary schools. Several people, parents of school-age children, complained to me at length about the mandatory teaching of Tatar in the schools, as well as the teaching of Tatar literature which was apparently coming at the expense of the Russian canon. They deemed the language and literature teaching to be “useless,” “a waste of time,” and “taking up time that should be used to teach ‘real’ things” (ibid. 5).

Within the Tatar-speaking population itself, however, attitudes vary widely. For most, especially older speakers of Tatar, the Tatar language is strongly connected with a proud cultural legacy and a strong sense of history. Among the politically active and those belonging to Tatar cultural organizations, the sense of pride and willingness to speak the language is very high. This is true of the Tatar intellectual and cultural elite in general, among whom the Tatar language has “covert prestige” (Trudgill, 1972) and is a deeply emotional topic (Wertheim, 2002:6). Interestingly, for the younger, under-30 group that Wertheim encountered, the more common experience was that of embarrassment when a young Tatar speaker was asked to speak Tatar in front of their friends, usually giggling nervously or covering their face, further confirming the continued perception of Tatar as a rural, or low, language even within the capital city of Kazan itself.

The asymmetrical bilingualism that existed under the Soviet Union, where minorities learned the dominant language and Russians did not, continues to be the case in Tatarstan. A 1989 census showed that 1.1 percent of the republic’s Russians spoke Tatar, while 77 percent of Tatars spoke Russian (Walker 1996, as quoted in Wertheim 2002). When the republic received its own sovereignty in 1990, Tatar was made, along

with Russian, an official language of Tatarstan. Interestingly, though, the actual bilingual presence of Tatar is relatively small, even in Kazan. While parents are afforded the choice of sending their child to a school where Russian is the medium of instruction or a school where Tatar is the medium of instruction, there are presently five times more Russian-language schools and teachers than Tatar-language schools and teachers in Kazan (Lotfullin, 2000). The asymmetrical representation is also easily seen in both the media and in public life. The vast majority of radio and television is conducted in Russian only, with four Tatar radio stations and one Tatar television station operating in Kazan. Newspapers are printed largely in Russian, and even those newspapers printed both in Tatar and Russian have entirely different editorials staff and content (Wertheim, 2002:9).

The asymmetry of Tatar and Russian proportions is even more pronounced in daily public activities in the city. As Wertheim (2002:11) illuminates:

The public domain appears to be a Russian-only one, and Tatars will often accommodate and speak Russian when in public spaces or engaged in activities in the public realm. Although Tatar is an “official” language, many Tatars feel that this official-ness is *de jure* only (‘according to law,’ or ‘by right’), and there is a sense that people are only “playing Tatar,” which is to say, presenting only enough Tatar to give an appearance of compliance and language equality (cf. e.g. Makhsimova 2000 and Fättakh 1998). For example, there is legislation requiring equal public signage, but this legislation is not enforced. The main signage for businesses and government buildings is usually bilingual, with precedence given to neither language: the description of a store’s business and the office hours are always found in both Russian and Tatar. However, with the exception of places under government jurisdiction, such as the post-office or library, or government-run stores, such as breadstores or...the city’s main department store, all other signage within a public establishment will usually be in Russian. Price tags, sale signs, descriptions of merchandise, elaborations on working hours, policy signs, these are all in Russian only. In addition, purchases are made in Russian only. The same is true of transportation: the main bus and tram signs, describing the route, the price of a ticket, and the fine for avoiding a ticket are in both Tatar and Russian, but all other signage is in Russian.

It is easy to see how a Tatar-speaking individual could feel that he were 'under siege' by Russian cultural and linguistic pressures (ibid. 12). Even though Tatar is one of the official languages of Tatarstan, the representational asymmetry that was everyday life under the Soviet Union's political centrism still has a powerful presence in shaping the attitudes of the inhabitants. Understandably, the political atmosphere within Tatarstan is complex and contradictory. An ethnically Tatar government is legislating language and social policies with the apparent intent of promoting the revitalization of Tatar while simultaneously not enforcing the very laws that it created for just that purpose.

For Daria, the issue does not seem to be as political as it is cultural. She mentioned almost in passing during our interview that the Tatars "wanted a new president" and that a "large number of people were in favor of making Tatar the only official language" of the Republic. What was clear, however, was that Daria was more concerned about the preservation of Russian as the primary language. "Once upon a time everyone spoke Russian," she said, "and now what is left of Russia speaks Russian, but within the Tatars not so much." For her, the social balance was struck at the point where the acceptance and officialness of Tatar met, but did not encroach, upon her ability to express herself and communicate in Tatarstan using Russian. I believe that is what she meant when she said, "As long as they speak Russian, they can learn whatever language they want." One would not find it hard to imagine a native speaker of Tatar feeling similarly about his own language, hoping that one day the political centrism of the Soviet Union and the encroaching diglossia of Russian that accompanied it could be reversed to a point where both Tatar and Russian achieved a stable diglossia and, hopefully, equal effectiveness and vitality once more.

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