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[The promotion of minority languages in Russian Federation and the prevention of interethnic conflicts: the case of Kalmykia

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Year 2001

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Introduction

The events taking place in the Caucasus since 1994, with two consecutive Russo-Chechnian wars (including an unsuccessful Chechen invasion of Dagestan), prove the absolute necessity of solving and preventing interethnic conflicts in order to guarantee a minimum level of well-being in the local populations and to satisfy their aspirations. In addition, it is also urgent to guarantee a correct management of the ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity so as to prevent violent vindications from spreading and interethnic conflicts in the periphery of the Russian Federation from multiplying.(2) Consequently, it is fundamental to involve Russian linguistic and cultural minorities in the formulation, adoption, application and evaluation of protection policies, as well as policies fostering their rights at international, national and local levels. The effective participation of these communities constitutes a necessary element for a better management of the human, social and economic resources of the area, as well as for the exercise of a better control of the actions of the local governments in order to guarantee the equality of rights and the non-discrimination for all the parties involved. Obviously, the great variety of aspirations and the huge ethnic and cultural complexity of the area demand that the most suitable mechanisms to create the necessary conditions for stimulating a real and effective participation of the local populations in public affairs, according to the peculiarities of each of the Republics, are identified in the most rigorous and proper way. However, this participation will only be possible within a context that respects the universal values of human rights, including cultural, social and economic rights, as a *sine qua non* condition for the exercise of these and other rights. It is therefore extremely urgent, among other things, that the peripheral regions of Russia can begin to design and apply relevant strategies in the areas like the promotion of autochthonous languages and cultures, the construction of civil societies and the prevention of interethnic conflicts in order to guarantee the development of minority languages, the increase in economic activities and the improvement in living conditions, the strengthening of local social networks, the consolidation of some emergent civil societies and a sustainable local development. Thus, for instance, most of the North Caucasus and of the Siberian Republics of Tuva, Khakassia and Buryatia are increasingly becoming deserts, a situation which is at its most dangerous point in Kalmykia.

As I see it, the promotion of autochthonous languages and the strengthening of civil societies must mainly aim at increasing the relationships between democracy and national identity: the promotion of values such as tolerance, the setting-up of educational systems that disseminate messages of pacific cohabitation and mutual understanding, based more on cultural identities than on national identities, and the implementation of policies which stimulate local development constitute essential elements to reinforce the prevention of conflicts and the improvement of the well-being of the peripheral populations of Russia.

In short, fostering a pacific cohabitation, an harmonic multiculturalism and a sustainable development are the main challenges that the regions of Russia have to face today, very specially those of the North Caucasus. In order to guarantee their development, credible and effective policies have to be set in motion so as to reinforce the links among the autochthonous populations and the European regions and institutions (very especially the EU), as well as with the NGO's that may develop a twofold role as mediators and promoters to help the local social partners to design and apply flexible and realistic initiatives using their own resources. Only in this way may we help to prevent Russia and Europe from undergoing new wars such as those of Kosovo and Chechnya.

Finally, Kalmykia has been chosen to exemplify the processes which promote autochthonous languages and prevent from interethnic conflicts because:

- a) it is a relatively homogeneous Republic from the ethnolinguistic point of view, for more than 80% of the population is distributed among autochthonous (45%) and Russians (38%);
- b) it is well-known for its tolerance as regards linguistic, cultural and religious diversity;
- c) its authorities maintain good relationships with other Autonomous Republics and with the Federal Government;
- d) its geographical position at the doors of the Caucasus, the Asiatic origins of its autochthonous population and its deep-rooted traditional culture in society make it a melting pot of nationalities which is unique in Russia;
- e) despite the fact that its national language is on the verge of extinction, the Government of the Republic invests a great amount of effort in its conservation; and

f) the flexibility of its local authorities and the dynamism of the emerging civil society.

1. Interethnic tensions in the Russian Federation in the post -Soviet era

The break-up of the Soviet Union and the increase of interethnic tensions within the very same Russian Federation implied the intensification of the Russian identity crisis which had been taking place during the process of construction of the Russian patriotism from the mid 30's. The first signs of tension coincided with the declaration of sovereignty of the Autonomous Republics of Mari El, Komi and Tatarstan during the summer of 1990. These declarations of sovereignty meant an attempt to force the federal authorities into granting them a higher level of autonomy that would allow local authorities to control and manage their natural resources (diamonds, petroleum, gas, the wood industry) in order to have direct access to foreign markets. The initial negotiations aiming at the signature of the Union Treaty of 1991 accelerated this process in such a way that, not only the sixteen Autonomous Republics of the RSFSR (3) declared their sovereignty, but also the Autonomous Regions of Birobidzhan, Karachay-Cherkessia, Khakassia, Gorno-Altay and Adygea, which claimed their conversion into Autonomous Republics, also did the same. In addition, as was the case at the beginning of the 20's, new territorial entities with no legal basis emerged, constituted from the unilateral decisions taken by local Soviets: the Greater Volga Association (the Astrakhan, Volgograd, Ulianovsk, Nizhni-Novgorod Districts and the Autonomous Republics of Tatarstan, Chuvashia and Mordvinia); the Greater Ural Association (the Orenburg, Ekaterinburg and Perm Districts and the Autonomous Republics of Bashkiriya and Udmurtia); the Far East Association (the Khabarovsk, Sakhalin, Kamchatka Districts and the Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan); the Association of the Towns of Southern Russia made up of all the towns of Southern Russia plus Krasnodar and Astrakhan; the aforementioned old Autonomous Regions reconverted into Autonomous Republics; the independent Republic of Chechnya; and finally, the Tiumen District. Thus, Russia faced, throughout the entire Soviet State, a process of territorial, economic and social disintegration which had marked consequences on the configuration of a new national identity which, for the first time since the Middle Ages, had to dissociate the concepts of Empire and State. Consequently, the Russian nation nowadays faces an acute crisis of national identity and is looking for its own self-definition. In contrast with the classical paradigm according to which the national and identity issue is mainly the preoccupation of 'incomplete nations'(4) that are struggling to reaffirm themselves in the face of larger and more 'complete' nations, in today's Russia it is the dominant ethnic group which is looking for its self-definition. Broadly speaking, the existence of a Russian State (*Rossiiskoe Gosudartsvo*) was

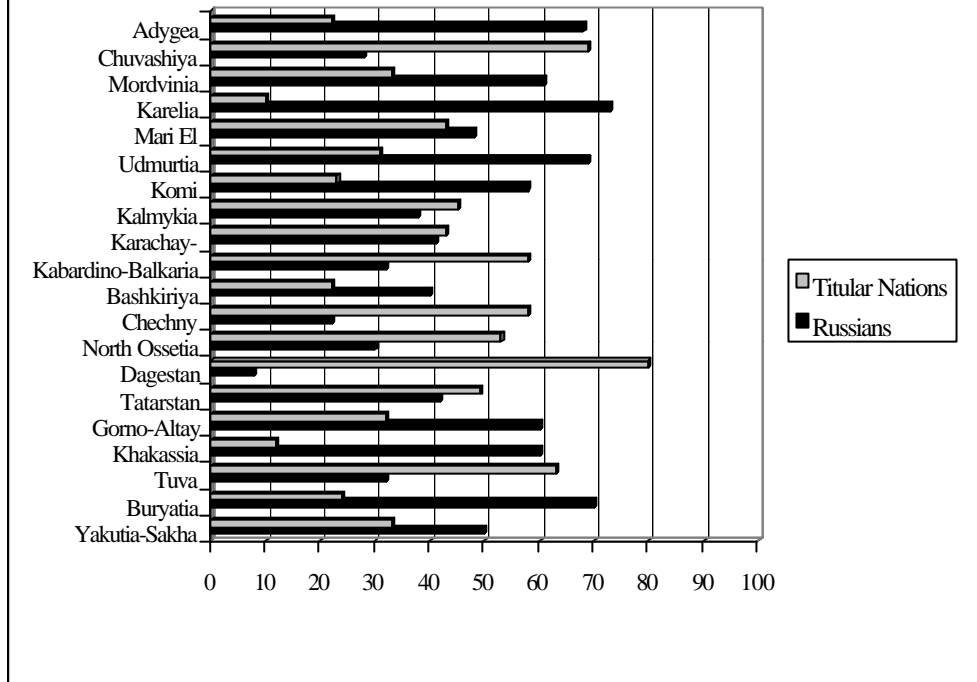
previous to the Russian nation (*Russkaya narodnost*) and, at the same time, the Russian Empire preceded the Russian State. According to this, the emergency of Russia as a nation was infallibly linked to the continuous process of expansion of the Empire towards the territories inhabited by alien ethnic groups. Another feature of the Russian Empire, later on shared with the Soviet Union, was found in the relations that were established between the Russian Nation and alien peoples. During Tsarism, the dominant classes of the peripheral societies were progressively assimilated by the elites of the centre, such as was the case of the Tatars, the Georgians, the Germans, the Balts or the Polish. During some specific periods of the Communist regime, this same type of relationship was established, insofar as class or ideological considerations prevailed over ethnic identifications. In addition, during the period of the *korenizatsiia* (5) to be Russian or to belong to a Russified national elite implied a curb on individuals who aspired to holding important positions in the national Republics. On the other hand, the very same Russians did not consider themselves as a particularly favoured nation by the previous regime: the economic indicators of the RSFSR were not substantially better than those of the other Republics, the purges of the 30's had caused more victims there than anywhere else, the Russians had contributed more than any other people to the Second World War, the environmental situation was awful, ethnical minorities identified them with Soviet totalitarianism, their contribution to the maintenance of the Centro-Asiatic Republics was considerable, etc. Finally, from the political point of view, the RSFSR was in no way privileged since it shared same rank with a great number of smaller ethnical groups and it was even underrepresented from the institutional point of view, insofar as many All-Union institutions took the place of Russian institutions. From this point of view, the coming of independence has not implied an improvement in the situation. While the loss of territories included in the Russian Empire and later on in the Soviet Union (especially Central Asia and Transcaucasia) was not a very traumatic experience, the secession of Belorussia and Ukraine was interpreted as an historic, identity and cultural amputation. In addition, the new map of the borders has turned almost 25 million ethnic Russians into foreign citizens in the old Federated Republics that many had long since considered to be their homeland.

Although the disappearance of the Soviet State has allowed the Russians to go from being a little bit more than 50% of the USSR's population to represent more than 80% of the Russian Federation, the reinforcement of the Russians as an ethnic majority in stark contrast with a multiplicity of ethnic minorities has even more highlighted the idea that Russia is not only the State of the Russians but that the Russian identity must also integrate alien elements. As a last resort, the present Russian Federation reproduces, on a smaller scale, the traditional contradiction between the ethnic and cultural groups and the political and territorial variables of the Russian national identity.

This situation becomes more complex because the Russian Federation is made up of 89 subjects (of which 32 are defined in ethnic terms) between old Autonomous Republics, regions, districts and federal towns, all with equal rights and obligations according to the 1993 Constitution. But given the fact that the 1992 Federal Treaty appears to be more generous towards the Republics, there exists a duplicity of interpretations as regards the responsibilities that must be assumed by the federal institutions and those corresponding to the Republics. Therefore, after the break-up of the Soviet State, Russia has made its first steps along the path towards the recovery of its national identity and the reconstruction of its nationality. This new Russian identity is based, broadly speaking, on the Orthodox religion and a nationalism that reproduces, for lack of other models, the egalitarian, authoritarian and communitarian schemata of the traditional Russian society. This search for a new identity takes place within the framework of the traditional contradiction of a Russia split between its western aspirations and its tendency towards isolation. Being used to living within its own myths, Russian society looks for new social and moral points of reference to find a new position as a nation, given the fact that the pre-Revolutionary myths based on religion, Empire and autocracy were eliminated by the Bolshevik Revolution and were replaced by the new Bolshevik myths (proletarian internationalism, construction of socialism), now in decline. However, significant changes took place gradually in the subjective perception that the Russians had their own identity, mainly as a consequence of the increase and the radicalisation of alien peoples' defence of their rights which provoked an unavoidable confrontation between the centre and the periphery. The Russians entered into direct competition with alien groups when claiming the solution of inequalities and grievances; from becoming aware of the huge financial aids granted to the Federated Republics, the delicate environmental situation, the moral corruption of the Soviet society as a whole, to the real extension of the Stalinist regime of terror and the arbitrarinesses of the previous decades, which resulted not only in an explosion of nationalist feelings in the Republics, but also encouraged the leaders of the periphery to elude their responsibilities by means of systematic attacks on the centre and the federal authorities identified with the Russians. The latter, seeing that they were associated with a policy and authorities that for seven decades had not treated them in any way substantially different from the way they treated other Republics and, in addition, seeing themselves as being deprived of national political, economic and cultural institutions because of the overlapping of the Soviet and Russian institutions, fired a rekindling of a deeply ethnical Russian nationalism. The emerging of nationalist movements at the heart of the RSFSR (Tatarstan, Yakutiya, Chechnya, Tuva, Buryatia, Dagestan, Ossetia, etc.) provoked a chain reaction in the Russian population, in such a way that many Russian nationalist movements that arose under the protection of the *perestroika* started, unlike their predecessors of the 70's, to employ the centrifuge tactics of the peripheral nationalist movements. In such a situation,

faced with the intensification of the anti-Russian xenophobic feelings in the Transcaucasian and Centro-Asiatic Republics and the establishment of new legislations as regards languages and education that benefited autochthonous languages, the Russian nationalists organised themselves by creating popular fronts, as was happening in the Baltic countries or in Transcaucasia. This radicalisation of Russian nationalism provoked a double confrontation between the RSFSR and the Federated Republics, on the one hand, and between the very same RSFSR and the federal authorities, on the other. The fact that after the break-up of the USSR the Russian Federation still existed as a sole territorial entity with such a complex multiethnic composition gave rise among the Russian population to a feeling that their country, now an orphan of reference points on which to draw and construct a new identity, had simply become what was left of the USSR, once any influence on the other Federated Republics, some of which (Belorussia and Ukraine) constituted some of the symbolic references of Great Russia since the X century, had been lost.

Ethnic composition of the Russian Federation (1989)



Source: *Natsionalnii Sostav Naseleniia SSSR* Moskvá: Finansi i Statistika, 1991.

The future articulation of the Russian national identity and State is extremely complex insofar as, until now, it does not seem that they have planned either any coherent plan for development or any precise orientations on economic, social and national policies that would allow for the consolidation process of democracy in the Russian Federation. Faced with the outbreak of national and identity cohesion of post-Soviet Russia, the foundations on which the new identity and the new State should be based contain major contradictions, while the general context hinders the articulation of a civil society traditionally underdeveloped, given the fact that, neither the concept of an ethnic Russia nor that of the imperial Russia can mobilise or unite the Russian citizens under the same national project; that the intensification of the economic and regional particularities threaten to dislocate the territorial structure of the Federation; that the moral and social disorientation has become generalised among a

population lacking in points of reference and identification due to the disappearance of the old pre and post-communist values; and that the endemic economic crisis has driven tens of millions of people to subsist below the poverty level. In short, the facts and circumstances made explicit throughout these pages constitute a complex network that Russia will have to solve in order to begin the process of democracy, political, social and economic stability and national reconstruction.

2. Awakening of national groups in Russia and linguistic legislation

The Russian Federation is made up of 176 national groups and an almost equal number of languages spoken. These minority communities represent approximately 28 million people, 20% of the total population.(6) This ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity is reflected in the Federal Statutes of the country, with 21 National Republics, to which we have to add the Autonomous Regions and Districts.

Minority areas are characterised by a very strong interweaving of peoples. The Russian population represents between 30 and 80% of the population of the Republics in Siberia, between 30 and 70% of the central and northern regions, and between 10 and 40% in the Caucasus. To it we have to add the presence of other national groups which represent between 5 and 40% of the Republics' population. Besides, the titular nationality (eponym of the Republic) is only majority in 7 of the 21 Republics. Taking this multiculturalism into consideration has implied the acknowledgement of a considerable political power in the titular minorities, although this power often has to be relativised due to the absence or scarcity of financial means and that Moscow still keeps an important influence through the subsidies (that may reach 90% of some Republics' budget) and the granting of credits for the acquisition and provision of energy supplies. In addition, the important sociocultural crisis that provoked the fall of communism still perpetuates. Letting aside the North Caucasus, the *UNESCO Red Book on Endangered Languages* only reports in Russia on three minority languages that are not endangered.(7) All the others are considered as being "on the verge of extinction" or "threatened". This contrast between the will of reconstructing national identity and the real situation may imply a feeling of urgency that sometimes force titular nationalities to take radical action in order to protect their language and their identity, while often at the same time political and social tensions feed on ethnical and cultural tensions.

Within this context, the linguistic issue crystallises in the demand for the recognition of the identity of the different peoples of Russia, while this constitutes in itself a source of tensions. In the territories of the old Soviet Union, linguistic decrees and laws have very significantly

contributed to the aggravation of the tensions in Moldavia and language issues still mark the agenda of political action in the Baltic States, particularly in Estonia and Latvia. In Central Asia, Russian minorities are in a delicate situation because the use of national languages has become an important indicator of the citizens' political loyalty, although very often they lack the necessary structures from which to learn them. The situation seems less serious in Russia, where Russian still is globally accepted as a *lingua franca* and where each Republic can add one or more official languages. But quite often the problem is found in the criteria for choosing the official languages. All the Republics, excepting four of them, have adopted linguistic laws that give priority to the language of the titular nationality. In Bashkiriya, the official status of the national language together with Russian is the object of major controversy given the opposition of the Tatars -the second most important community in demographic weight after the Russians and before the Bashkirians- because of the refusal of the Bashkirians to proclaim the official status of Tatar in the Republic. The situation is especially complex in Dagestan where 80% of the population is Dagestanian but more than 30 languages cohabit. Also, some decrees establishing the adoption of the Latin alphabet instead of the Cyrillic one (for instance, the Decree of July 1999 in Tatarstan) are usually interpreted as an overt challenge which aims to increase the distancing from Moscow. In addition, the adoption of constitutional clauses that limit and even impede the access to political or administrative responsibilities for citizens that do not know the national language of the titular ethnic group, as in the case of Adygea, North Ossetia, Bashkiriya and Mari El, also represent a danger for the stability of interethnic relationships. There also exists the temptation on the part of some titular nationalities to use the linguistic issue to provoke demographic changes that would imply a higher representation of their community: what the French call "*le vote avec ses pieds*" ("the vote with one's feet") is also a reality in Russia, despite the fact that the exodus of Russians towards Republics with a majority Russian population is mainly due to economic problems. The lack of local structures for mediation to look after the legitimate interests of the Russophone communities and of the other minority groups is even more dangerous if we take into account that Moscow does not always have enough capacity or legitimacy to play this role.

As regards the development of linguistic legislation within the Russian Federation after the disintegration of the USSR, the 1993 Constitution marked a change concerning the previous situation, for it starts with the following Preamble:

"We, the multinational people of the Russian Federation, united by a common destiny on our land, asserting human rights and liberties, civil peace and accord, preserving

the historic unity of the State, proceeding from the commonly recognized principles of equality and self-determination of the peoples, honoring the memory of our ancestors (...)”(8)

Consequently, the old Soviet Republics started to adopt a series of legal measures that proclaimed the official status of the autochthonous language.(9) Russia also promulgated the first linguistic law of its history on October 25, 1991 (Law on the Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation), where the languages of the Republic were mentioned as an integral part of national patrimony and of its historical and cultural heritage. According to Article 2.2.,

“On the territory of the RSFSR the State shall guarantee language sovereignty of each people irrespective of its number and legal position and language sovereignty of a person irrespective of the origin of a human being, his or her social and material position, racial and national belonging, sex, education, relation to religion and domicile area.”

All the same, Article 3.2. establishes that:

“The Russian language, being a main means of cross-national communication of the peoples of the RSFSR according to the established historical and cultural traditions, has the status of the state language on the whole territory of the RSFSR”.

Because of their importance, two other legal texts also stand out: firstly, the Federal Law on the General Principles of the Local Self-Government Organisation, passed on August 28, 1995 and modified on April 22, 1996, for it grants competencies in the field of education in the autonomous territorial entities (Article 6.2.6.). The second text, the Federal Law on National and Cultural Autonomy of June 17, 1996, proclaims the right to maintain and develop the autochthonous languages of the Republics and autonomous territorial bodies (Article 9), recognises the right to be educated in Primary School in the mother tongue of the pupil and to choose the language of education (Articles 10, 11, 12).

The Constitution and the federal laws that regulate the rights of the speakers of the languages of the autochthonous communities have been followed by a long series of linguistic legislations approved by the different Republics. Thus, practically all the Constitutions of the Republics proclaim the official status of Russian and of the autochthonous language, except for those of Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Mordoviya and North Ossetia, where other languages or even dialects

of the autochthonous language can be added to them. As regards the legal texts of lesser importance, such as decrees or linguistic regulations, the Republics of Karelia, Udmurtia, Dagestan and Karachay-Cherkessia still have not adopted any as such, while this is not the case in the Republics of Tatarstan, Adygea, Kabardino-Balkariya, Chuvashiya, Tuva, Buryatia, Kalmykia, Khakassia, Sakha-Yakutia and Bashkortostan where they have done so.

The fundamental elements common to the legal dispositions as regards the languages proclaimed in the different Republics of the Russian Federation are found in the desire for conservation, development and promotion of the autochthonous language, its introduction or extension in the educational system, the training of teachers, the promotion of literature, of science and arts, as well as the use of these languages in the audio-visual media. Parallel to this, each Republic takes care of regulating the use of the official languages in the administration, in the legislation and official documents, in the juridical system and in the relations between the administration and the citizens.

3. History, language and identity in Kalmykia: from exclusion to integration

Kalmykia is a small Autonomous Republic of the Russian Federation located in the North Caucasus. With a surface of almost 76,000 square meters, it borders on the North with the Volgograd District, on the East with the Caspian Sea, on the South with the Autonomous Republics of Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria, and on the West with the Republic of North Ossetia and the Districts of Stavropol and Rostov-on-Don. The capital, Elista⁽¹⁰⁾, has a population of 95,000 inhabitants. Most of the 320,000 inhabitants of the Republic (62.7%) live in rural areas.

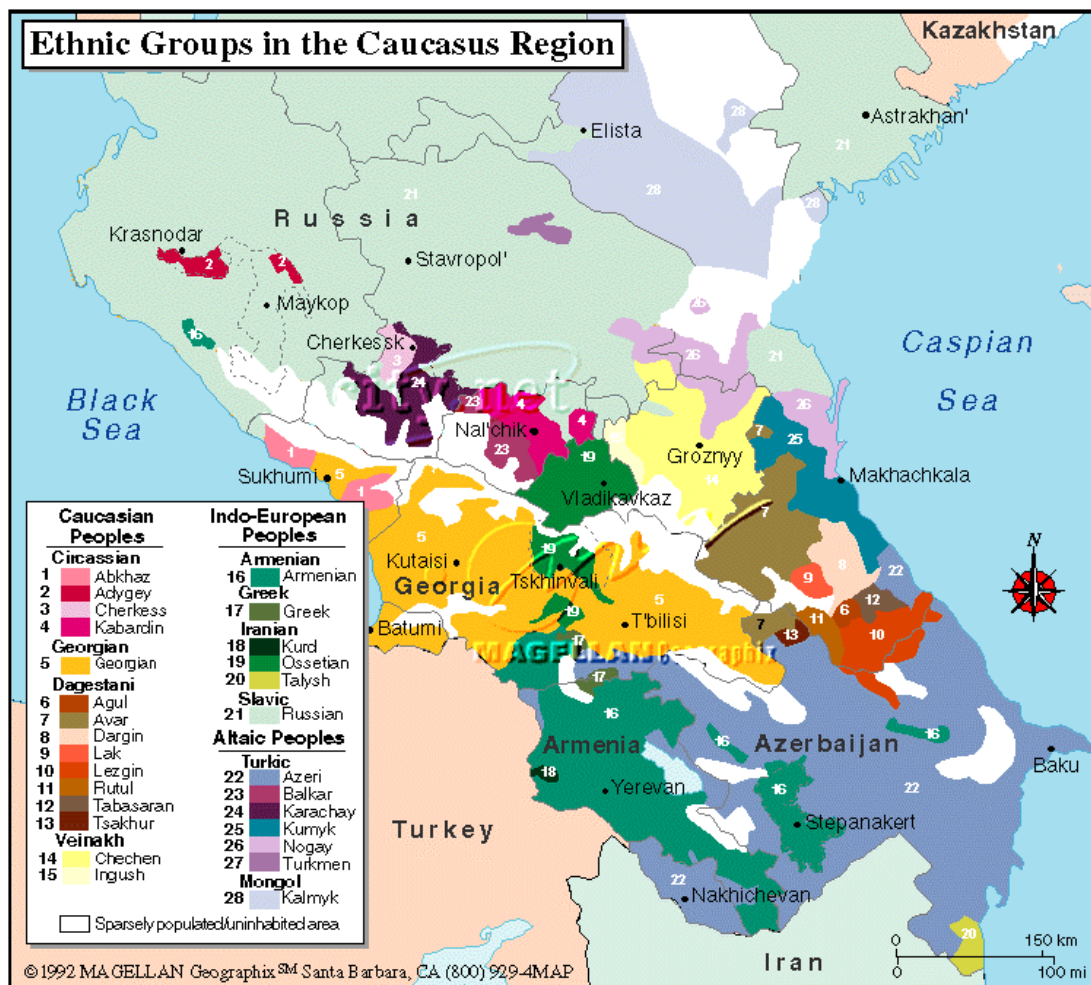
Map 1. Geographical location of Kalmykia in the Russian Federation



The origin of the Kalmyks is found in the Oirat nomad tribes of Oirat (11) belonging to the western Mongol group coming from the Chinese province of Xing-Jiang (also known as Chinese Turkestan according to the linguistic and ethnical features of the region) who separated from the mainstream at the beginning of the XVIIth century as a consequence of the civil wars that took place between the different Mongol *noyons* (princes). They started to inhabit the oriental areas of the lower course of the Volga (1609), while the largest group returned to their original regions.(12) Their Mongol origin explains the fact that Buddhism constitutes an essential element in their collective identity, to such an extent that in 1917 there were more than 100 *kurul* (temples) in Kalmykia and more than 3,000 monks. In the course of the successive waves of terror launched by Stalin during the second half of the 30's, Buddhist monasteries and libraries were closed, while a large number of monks were shot or condemned to long terms of confinement in the labour camps in the Far East. It was only in 1990 that the first place of prayer was opened in Elista, and in 1993 the Republic's Government created a Department for Religious Affairs in order to promote the Buddhist religion, while maintaining excellent relations with the Orthodox community.

The Kalmyks that settled permanently in the region of the Volga became subjects of the Russian Empire through a pact of direct vassalage to the Tsar Mikhail Fiodorovich Romanov (1613), that assigned them the task of protecting the southern borders of Russia against attacks coming from the Caucasus.⁽¹³⁾ After the Bolshevik Revolution and the following Civil War (1918-1920), during which the main part of the population sympathised with the White armies, the Autonomous Region of Kalmykia was created on November 14, 1920, reconverted into an Autonomous Republic of the RSFSR on October 20, 1935. The creation of the embryo of a State structure allowed for a progressive national and cultural development which would mean a first attempt for the Kalmyks at modernisation, although the policy of forced settlement applied from 1932-33 implied the destruction of their traditional social structures. The Kalmyk autonomy was abolished between 1943 and 1958, while the Kalmyks, accused of collaborating with the Nazis, were deported to Siberia, Central Asia and the Far East (Magadan, Vladivostok and the Sakhalin Islands).⁽¹⁴⁾ The memories of the deportation are still recalled traumatically by the population, even by those who did not directly experience it. Given the fact that their ethnical identification is intimately related with Buddhist and Shamanist practices, direct communication with Nature's spirits and with their most immediate geophysical environment is especially relevant. Thus, the rough deportation they suffered, suddenly projecting them into an unknown environment, absolutely foreign to their spiritual point of view, implied the progressive weakening of Buddhist practices and a psychological upheaval that is still felt nowadays.⁽¹⁵⁾ On July 29, 1958, the Autonomous Republic of Kalmykia was re-established, except for two provinces that became a part of the Astrakhan Region. Despite recovering its autonomy, Kalmykia continued to be subjected to an intense process of Russification. In short, the Kalmyks constitute a small island of Mongol language and Buddhist religion in the middle of a region for the most part inhabited by Christian Orthodox of Slavic language and by Sunni Muslims of Caucasian or Turkic language.

Map 2. Ethnic groups in the Caucasus Region



In many aspects, Kalmykia constitutes a special case within the whole of the Republics and regions that make up the present Russian Federation. Kalmykia has traditionally been one of the less developed Republics of the old Soviet Union and the situation has not varied very

much over the last ten years compared with what has been happening in other Republics. It is also one of the few territorial entities which, although having a mainly autochthonous population, has never interpreted its autonomy in terms of political sovereignty, to the extent that its Constitution contains certain restrictions to the exercise of the right of self-determination. Somehow, the explanation of this self-contention is to be found in the awareness of its leaders of its social and economic backwardness, from which a great dependency on the subsidies and aids granted by the federal authorities derives. Despite the expectations of economic growth that the recuperation of the control over the country's resources imply, the economic structures of Kalmykia remain weak. The privatisation process has been carried out in a chaotic and arbitrary way(16), the primary sector - which contributes two-third parts to the country's economic production- is in a critical situation and the unemployment rate is still very high. During the last ten years, the most important economic indicators have been declining or, at best, have remained the same: by last year, the wheat production had dropped from 532,000 tons in 1991 to less than half, and the same has happened with the production of sunflower oil, potatoes and citrus fruits. Worse than that, the important decrease in livestock has implied a serious scarcity of meat and lactic products, basic for nutrition.(17) The two following tables express the decline of the economy in Kalmykia in recent years as a consequence of a deficient modernisation of infrastructures and a rationalisation of the production processes qualitatively and quantitatively much more precarious than in other Republics of similar characteristics.

Table 1. Production rate of industrial goods (% compared to the previous years)

Year	1985	1990	1995	1996	1997¹⁸
Rate	110	100,2	72	70	97

Source:: *"Promyshlennost'-Respublika Kalmykia"*<http://www.society.ru/bibl/polros/KALMYK/>

(Reproduced in Grin, 2000)

Table 2. Comparison of economic indicators (1995)

	Kalmykia	Average Volga Region	% on Volga Region
Wage level 1,000 roubles/month	244	390	63
Industrial productivity (million roubles per employee)	28	59	47
Per capita GNP (million roubles)	3	9	32
GNP (billion [Brit.] roubles)	890	18.466	5

Source: Centre of Regional Analysis and Forecasting. Russian Regional Database (1995)
http://russianculture.about.com/culture/russianculture/msub30.htm?REDIR_404=yes&

In the same way, Kalmykia still suffers from the negative effects of the environmental policy applied during the Soviet period. Indeed, according to the data of a research study carried out between 1994 and 1997, the farmland and the underground waters are very much contaminated by radioactive leaks produced in the old uranium mines which are now shut, the deterioration and erosion of the soil have caused a progressive degradation of pasture land (80% of the surface is already so much eroded that we may qualify Kalmykia as the first European desert created by man) into desert, while the increase of the Caspian Sea level threatens to flood 93,000 hectares of land suitable for agriculture.(19) The situation has reached such serious extremes that in 1993 President Ilumzhinov already had to declare a state of emergency given the dangerous reduction in the Republic's water reserves. Finally, the combined effects of the ecological change and of the economic bankruptcy have spectacularly reduced the life expectancy of the local population.(20) In order to limit the impact of the environmental degradation, besides the special programme applied by the United Nations aiming at the regeneration of the ecosystem of the steppes and at the revitalisation of local agriculture, the federal authorities have also taken a series of measures to try to stop the processes of soil erosion throughout the Federation by means of the Federal Programme to Fight Against the

Process of Desertification, while a presidential decree has established an ambitious programme of periodic reforestation in the most affected areas of Kalmykia.(21)

As regards the sociolinguistic situation, although the 1989 census data (22) indicated an index of retention of the autochthonous language of 89%, a survey carried out in the same year by the Soviet Academy of Sciences and Elista University reported that only 41% of the Kalmyks used their language in everyday endogroup interpersonal relationships, while the percentage dropped to only 10% among individuals under 30 years of age.(23) In addition, the official data of the Ministry of Education of the Republic indicate that in 1999 only 3% of pupils of primary and secondary education had Kalmyk as their mother tongue, which questions the reliability of the aforementioned census data. On the other hand, those interviewed and the observation carried out on the field by the author suggest that we are dealing with a passive and partial competence of the language(24), given the fact that deportation to Siberia produced a sudden interruption in the intergenerational transmission of the language. At present, only a primary school of Elista uses Kalmyk as a vehicular language for curricular subjects. We are talking of "Altn Gasn", a pilot-school founded in 1994 where Russian (as a *lingua franca* for communication with the other peoples of the region, of the Russian Federation and the old Soviet Republics), Tibetan (as the language for religious practices), English and German are also taught to the children.(25) In the other primary and secondary schools, Kalmyk is taught as a subject, and Elista University's curriculum also includes Kalmyk Philology. The presence of Kalmyk is also testimonial in the media, for the national television special programming for Kalmykia only broadcasts in Russian and the most sold newspaper (23,000 copies), *Izvestiya Kalmykii*,(26) is entirely written in Russian; however, it includes some sections on the history, the culture and the language of Kalmykia, besides being the *de facto* Official Journal of the Republic.(27) In short, Kalmyk is an endangered language because, besides what we have already said above, we have to add that although 85% of the youth under 25 years of age consider it to be their mother tongue, only 6% declare that they can speak it correctly and it is only the common language in 6 small scarcely populated towns.

As regards interethnic relations, despite the fact that the official policy of the Republic's Government tries to balance the presence of representatives from the different ethnic groups in the administration and is very tolerant in relation to the population's linguistic, cultural and religious diversity, the autochthonous element is clearly over-represented as regards its demographic weight(28), while the two majority groups tend to live separately: in Elista, both communities live in opposite extremes of the city, separated by an imaginary dividing line, while the index of mixed marriages is scarce.

Table 3. Ethnical composition of Kalmykia

Ethnic group	Absolute number	Percentage
Kalmyks	146.316	45,4
Russians	121.531	37,7
Dargins	12.878	4,8
Chechens	8.329	2,6
Kazakhs	6.277	1,9
Germans	5.586	1,7
Ukrainians	4.069	1,3
Avars	3.871	1,2
Kумыks	1.530	0,5
Belorussians	1.334	0,4
Other	8.067	2,5

Source: Goutchinova, 1997.

In order to stop and invert the process of language substitution while guaranteeing the stability of the relationships between the different national groups in a region particularly punished by interethnic conflicts, just one year ago, the Parliament of Kalmykia passed the Law on the Languages of the Peoples of the Republic of Kalmykia (29), which contains 27 sections organised in a preamble and 7 chapters, within the framework of the Russian (Federal Constitution) and Kalmyk (*Stepnoye Ulozheniye*) constitutional systems. The Preamble establishes the aims and general principles of the Republic's linguistic legislation, with the aim of guaranteeing the "revival, conservation and promotion of languages as the fundamental element of the spiritual heritage of the Republic's peoples", while it explicitly forbids any kind of discrimination against the citizens' language. Chapter 1 establishes general dispositions on the legal status of the Law (Section 1); freedom of choice of language (Section 2); the official status of Kalmyk and Russian languages (Section 3); the linguistic rights of the citizens (Section 4); the protection of the other Republic's languages, that is to say, the non-official ones (Section 5); the Government responsibilities as regards linguistic policy (Section 6); and the measures that must be established for the development of the Law (Section 7).

Chapter 2 focuses on the linguistic rights of the citizens as regards the free choice of language and establishes the duty of all the Republic's citizens to know Kalmyk (Section 8);

the language of the educational system (Section 9); and the role that it must play in the teaching of the autochthonous language (Section 10).

Chapter 3 regulates the use of the languages in the political and administrative structures of the Republic (Section 11), in the official publications (Section 12), in the electoral processes and referenda (Section 13), in the companies and public premises (Section 14), in the archives (Section 15), in official correspondence (Section 16), in the courts and the judicial proceedings (Section 17), in communications, transportation, energy supplies and agricultural sectors (Section 18), in the postal service (Section 19), in the media (Section 20) and in the public services and commercial activities (Section 21).

Chapter 4 is monographically devoted to toponymy (Sections 22 and 23).

Chapter 5 contains only one article, where the use of languages in the external relations between Kalmykia and the foreign States and supranational sphere organisations is regulated.

Chapter 6 touches upon the possibility of undertaking legal actions against citizens, institutions and organisations that do not comply with what is established by the Law; however, it does not establish any sort of sanctioning rules.

Finally, Chapter 7 indicates the date of enforcement of the Law from its publication in the newspapers *Khalmg Unen* and *Izvestiya Kalmykii* (November 17, 1999) and the subsequent derogation of the old 1991 Law.

Obviously, although being a first step towards the regulation of multilingualism in the Republic and the setting-up of measures for protecting and promoting the autochthonous language, the Law alone does not guarantee its conservation, given the sociolinguistic situation reported on in the previous pages. A language only survives from one generation to the other when the production and reproduction mechanisms work correctly within the family, the educational system and including the most immediate networks of interpersonal relationships; but, as we have already seen, this is not the case in Kalmykia. On the other hand, the sudden interruption of the intergenerational transmission of language due to deportation and exile have blocked the development of a variable crucial for the production and reproduction of language: the utility of knowing and using

the autochthonous language. Finally, the lack or the weakness of other variables such as language legitimisation, its institutionalisation as an endogroup reference system or even the psychological and social process by means of which the use of the language is accepted as normal, any sort of identity or militant justification being unnecessary, also constitute elements that seriously threaten the future of Kalmyk. In this situation, it is clear that the educational system must become the cornerstone of any linguistic planning and policy proposal that could derive from the new legal framework.

However, this is not enough. It is also necessary that, in order to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the different national groups existing in Kalmykia and to manage the ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity of the Republic without prompting outbreaks of interethnic tension in a region that is particularly and easily subject to confrontations, local authorities directly involve these national groups in the formulation, application and evaluation of the policies for protecting and promoting their rights. Indeed, the wide range of needs and aspirations of the minority groups demand the rigorous identification of the policies that must be set in motion in order to create an effective participation of these groups in the process of national, cultural and linguistic recovery of Kalmykia on a basis of non-discrimination and respect for the human, social and economic rights of its citizens.

In this context, one of the main aims of the national, cultural and linguistic recovery policy must be the application of balanced strategies as regards language planning. And this not only to guarantee a satisfactory level of knowledge of the autochthonous language throughout the entire population, but also to improve its social and economic development: the development of the language must be directly linked to the interests of the different communities present in the Republic's territory, to the economic activities, the social networks, the stabilisation of the territory, to the social welfare and the solution of the serious ecological problems, in order to create, consolidate and develop a strong and dynamic civil society. This implies establishing a series of priority actions, among which we highlight:

- the application of a language policy that takes into consideration the interests and needs of the local national communities and is respectful to the existing international legislation and recommendations;
- the extension of the decision-making processes on the use of the languages beyond the official spheres by means of an effective participation of society, of the existing NGO's(30) and of the representatives of the other Republic's linguistic communities;

- the financing of global actions that not only include action plans but also the design, publication and diffusion of new schoolbooks that allow access to the learning of the autochthonous language in all the linguistic communities and to the fighting against discrimination and intolerance;
- the carrying out of language use surveys in order to have reliable data available as regards the real sociolinguistic situation of the Kalmyk language, its spheres of use, the intergenerational transmission and the level of commitment of the population to the promotion of the autochthonous language; and
- the reinforcement and development of the existing educational structures such as the Kalmyk Centre for Intensive Language Teaching, so that a multidisciplinary working team is available to develop new learning methods, with special emphasis on new technologies and on adult education, and to update and improve, qualitatively and quantitatively, the research surveys in pedagogy, sociolinguistics and language planning.

In the specific case of Kalmykia, we must insist on the close relationship that must exist between the policies of recuperation and promotion of the autochthonous language and the global development of society. For it is essential to determine the influence that the processes of economic restructuring have had on the linguistic uses over a transition period going from a planned economy to a market economy, as well as how the respect for linguistic diversity and the promotion of the autochthonous language may become elements of economic and social benefit for the citizens. Therefore, it would be convenient to base the policies of Kalmyk on a series of basic principles:

1. participation of the highest possible number of social partners;
2. development of sociolinguistic research in order to detect and evaluate the processes that take place within society;
3. periodisation of the aims to avoid sudden changes in the actions carried out and allow for a gradual process of spreading the Kalmyk social use;
4. establishing of priorities as has previously been reported on;
5. search for multiplying effects in order to reach the maximum number of social sectors;
6. application of policies of persuasion and sensitisation, so that the defence of individual and collective linguistic rights does not endanger the fragile balance between interethnic relations;
7. a consensus will, on the one hand, between the two majority communities and, on the other, between the titular nationality and the minority linguistic and national groups; and

8. to associate the autochthonous language with elements of social and economic progress while respecting the traditional values deeply rooted in the Kalmyk population, in order to increase its social prestige.

4. Conclusion: the challenges of multilingualism in the Russian Federation

The linguistic and cultural processes that take place in the Russian Federation are determined by a combination of factors reported on in the previous pages: a) the great cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of the population throughout the entire territory; b) the demographically predominant presence of the Russians in most of the Autonomous Republics; c) the influence of the national-territorial criteria established by the Soviet regime in order to manage linguistic and ethnical diversity; and d) the processes of economic restructuring that are taking place in a disorderly fashion.

I have already mentioned that in only 7 of the 21 national territorial entities the titular nationality constitutes the majority of the population.⁽³¹⁾ In addition, most of these entities reproduce on a microscale the mosaic of nationalities, languages, cultures and religions present throughout the entire Federation. In the same way, Russian constitutes the language of communication between the centre and the periphery, while the Russification process which started, with some pushing and pulling movements according to the interests and legitimisation strategies of the Soviet regime, in the mid 30's, still has its effects on minority languages.

As we have already seen, the application of a national-territorial criteria allowed for the development of the languages of the titular nationalities by means of the creation of some regional elites, and cultural, social and economic structures that made them turn into almost-States, even before the disappearance of the Soviet State. But from 1992 onwards, and in contrast with what was happening previously, the Federal Law on the National-Cultural Autonomy also allowed the national and linguistic communities that did not have their own politico-administrative structures to also enjoy the right to constitute themselves as autonomous territorial entities and to create the necessary conditions for the preservation and promotion of their own languages.

The economic situation derived from the chaotic transition from a planned economy to a free market economy also constitutes another hindrance for the peripheral ethnic and linguistic communities, given the fact that the majority of them depend on the subsidies granted by

the authorities to avoid the total collapse of their economic structures; this leaves little margin for financing policies to promote autochthonous languages, if we consider the urgent priorities as regards social welfare, education, public health care and modernisation of the economy.

In spite of everything, the main risk of interethnic tensions is concerned less with the relationships that may be established from now onwards between the federal authorities and the peripheral Republics, than with the capacity of the nationalities to take into consideration the situation, the needs and the interests of the other national communities present in their territory; to conciliate their desire to promote the autochthonous language with the awareness of the complexity and the slowness of the processes of transition and change in deep-rooted linguistic habits; and to establish operational structures that allow titular nationalities and minority groups to have access to the learning of the autochthonous language, very often only recently turned into the official language along with Russian.

In short, it is fundamental and urgent that the nationalities can assume and successfully face this challenge in order to avoid a true disaster and an intensification of interethnic tensions:

it is obvious that the languages of all the peoples in Russia including Russian are in a state of crisis. Many of them are on the verge of extinction. It is without a doubt, a humanitarian catastrophe although the socio-economic calamities of the last years have hidden it. The fact that the languages of indigenous peoples in the republics are decreed as state languages ... makes no difference. The crisis has gone so far that in many cases it seems irreversible.(32)

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Notes

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(2) Vitaly Ganiushin, a well-known Russian journalist, already warned that: "We have been able to survive the disappearance of the USSR, but we could not survive the disintegration of Russia" (*New Times*, 1993, nr 30).

(3) Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic.

(4) See Gellner (1964:174) and Hroch (1985).

(5) Nationalisation policy of the State's nations and ethnic groups (literally 'reinforcement of the autochthonous element') applied during the 20's.

(6) The population data correspond to 1989, the last year of the Soviet census.

(7) Tatar, Yakut and Tuvan.

See http://www.helsinki.fi/~tasalmin/europe_report.html.

(8) Constitution of the Russian Federation as approved by RF President Boris Yeltsin and submitted to National Referendum in December 1993.

(9) We also have to mention that the linguistic laws approved by the Baltic Republics since 1989 have had an important influence on the decrees that applied to the RSFSR as regards multilingualism.

(10) 'Elst', in Kalmyk, means 'sandy'. The town was rechristened with the name of Stepnoy ('belonging to the steppe') between 1944 and 1957, coinciding with the deportation period of the autochthonous population.

(11) The origin of the word '*oirat*' is still the object of discussions given the fact that, according to some sources, it would come from '*deben oirat*' ('alliance of four tribes'), while others consider that it comes from the word 'wolf', which otherwise was the totem of one of the Oirat tribes that set out for the West.

(12) According to some sources, the name '*Kalmyk*' would mean 'those who have stayed'.

(13) A century later, the Kalmuck cavalry was of decisive importance in the Poltava Battle (1709) where the Russian troops defeated the Swedish army of Charles XII, thus starting a long period of hegemony in Eastern Europe and in the Baltic regions. As a result of this victory, an ukase of the emperor Peter the Great made the Kalmyk war cry 'hurrah' official in all his armies. The origin of the word is the Kalmyk word '*uralan*' ('forward').

(14) The whole population was deported between December 27 and 30, 1943.

(15) Until the end of the 80's, the subject of deportation and of the years in exile was totally absent from public debates.

(16) Despite the connections of the Republic's President Kirsan Ilumzhinov with companies on an international scale, Kalmykia has not been able to attract enough foreign investments, and only some companies, mainly in the light industry sector, have been satisfactorily modernised.

(17) For a detailed analysis of the economic situation in Kalmykia, see Grin (2000).

(18) According to the data collected on the spot (see Grin, 2000), the increase corresponding to 1997 has not been maintained, as in 1999 the per capita income in Kalmykia was 38 and the cost of living 86 in relation to the Russian average (=100).

(19) See Goutchinova (1997).

(20) The seriousness of the situation has prompted the United Nations Environment Programme to provide technical and economic aid to Kalmykia in order to alleviate the desertification effects by means of the National Programme to Fight Against Desertification to prevent an "ecological genocide".

(21) One of the main aims of the Programme is the creation of a European Centre to Fight Against Desertification, with the aim of using the experience of Kalmykia to prevent this from happening again in other European regions.

(22) See *Natsionalnii Sostav Naseleniia SSSR*. Moskvá: Finansi i Statistika, 1991.

(23) The same survey was carried out in 1993 with similar results: 44% of the people interviewed affirmed that Kalmyk was their common language, while 55% answered that it was Russian. For more details, see Goutchinova (1997):48-52.

(24) Interviews and observations carried out by the author in Elista between May 9 and 15, 1999.

(25) See Baklanova (2000) for a full description of the presence of the educational system.

(26) Some old issues of the newspaper are available at <http://www.kalmykia.org.ru/ik/>

(27) There is a newspaper, *Khalmg Unen* (The Truth of Kalmykia), which has been written in Kalmyk since 1920, except for during the deportation and exile years.

(28) Only 4 of the 20 ministers are not Kalmyk and 23 Kalmyks and 4 Russians work at the office of the presidential administration.

(29) Laws 30-II-3 of October 27, 1999, which abolishes Law 137-IX of January 30, 1991 "On the Languages of the SSR of Kalmykia-Khalmgyg Tangch".

(30) In this sense, the contribution of RUMIDAP (Russian Minorities' Initiative for Democracy and Peace), with headquarters in Elista, which works with different linguistic communities of the North Caucasus (Dagestan, Adygea, North Ossetia and Kabardino-Balkaria) will be fundamental.

(31) See the graph in page 7.

(32) Bgazhnokov, 2000.

(33) The list of bibliographical references contains the cited works in this text, as well as those that allow access to better and more complete information on the subjects dealt with here.

Translation: Beatriu Krayenbühl Gusi