

The Failure of Tatar Language Revival

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For minority nationalist activists at the dawn of perestroika, the decline of titular languages was one of the most pressing problems facing their republics. By the late 1980s, minority languages had been largely supplanted by Russian in the urban areas of most Soviet republics. Members of minority ethnic groups used the Russian language in public more than they used their native languages. To some extent, this was the case at home as well, especially among young people. The fear of a continuing language shift was one of the main mobilizing factors in the nationalist movements that developed in virtually all ethnic regions of the USSR in the late 1980s. While the political success of these movements varied greatly, all of the former republics of the USSR, as well as a majority of the former autonomous republics, undertook language revival programs after independence.

In this memo, I discuss the extent to which government-sponsored language revival programs are able to change language use in a region that is part of a large republic with a different majority language. I focus on Tatarstan, one of the ethnic republics that remained a part of Russia and did not become independent in 1991. Given its status as part of the Russian Federation and the even split between Tatars and Russians in the republic's population, Tatarstan presents a good case for examining the extent to which government efforts to revive a language can succeed in a situation where another language continues to be widely spoken and is perceived by a large part of the population to be more prestigious and more useful than the language being revived.

Status Quo Ante: The Language Situation in Tatarstan at the Dawn of Perestroika

When the Tatar nationalist movement was being established in 1988-1989, the members of the Tatar cultural elite that served as its founders blamed the Soviet government primarily for the decline of the Tatar culture and language. They noted that the Tatar language was being used less than during any other time in modern history, pointing out that the number of books and newspapers published in Tatar annually in the late 1980s was lower than the number published in 1913. In urban areas, government services were not available in Tatar. The occasional Tatar-speaking government employee could reply to questions in Tatar, but given that almost all Tatars spoke Russian, such situations occurred rarely, if at all. Even in Tatar villages, where village council meetings often used the Tatar language, official records and correspondence with other government agencies took place in Russian. There were a number of Tatar newspapers and a negligible number of Tatar television and radio broadcasts, but these were of relatively low quality and were designed to appeal to a rural audience. Tatar was also rarely used in the industrial and service economy, where prevailing language norms ensured that the presence of any non-Tatar speakers would require Tatar-speakers to shift to Russian, even in private conversations. While the Tatar-language primary and secondary education system that had been established in the 1920s continued to function, it was largely relegated to rural areas, and virtually all Tatar children in urban areas were educated in Russian.

Survey data collected by local researchers shows that prior to the commencement of Tatarstan's language revival program, the Tatar language was relatively secure among rural Tatars, but in decline among Tatarstan's urban population. More urban Tatars were fluent in Russian than in Tatar, and even those who spoke Tatar fluently were at least as likely to use Russian to speak to their coworkers and their children. The future of the language also seemed relatively bleak, as urban Tatar children were educated almost entirely in Russian and spoke Russian almost exclusively among themselves.

The Tatarstan Language Revival Program and its Implementation

Given the extent to which Russian had displaced the Tatar language, Tatar cultural and political elites were united in their desire to reverse the decline in the use and status of the Tatar language. The republic's leaders took measures to spur the revival of Tatar, including expanding the reach of Tatar education, mandating the equal use of Tatar in government, and promoting Tatar language use in the public sphere. Relatively little effort was devoted to ensuring language revival in private business.

The Revival of Tatar Education

The government's efforts to revive the Tatar language were initially focused on increasing the number of Tatar children who received their primary and secondary education in Tatar. While the percentage of Tatar children being educated in Tatar language schools had been as high as 70 percent as recently as 1970, by 1990 it had dropped to 24 percent, and it was only 3 percent in urban areas. Sociolinguistic studies of language use in Tatarstan showed that Tatar children educated in Russian were far less likely to be fluent in Tatar than their Tatar-educated peers and tended to speak Russian in most contexts. For this reason, Tatar leaders decided that if they wanted to ensure the survival of Tatar as a language of mass communication in the republic, restoring Tatar language education had to be their top priority. As a result of their efforts, the proportion of Tatar children educated in Tatar-language schools grew rapidly in the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2001, the proportion of Tatar students who studied all subjects in Tatar increased from 24 percent to 49.3 percent and is continuing to rise. The fastest increase, from 28.5 to 41 percent, occurred between 1992 and 1994. Whereas by the end of the Soviet period, Tatar schools were virtually nonexistent in urban areas, with only 3 percent of urban students being educated in Tatar in 1990, by 1995, 28 percent of them were receiving a Tatar language education.

Expanding the Use of Tatar in Government and the Public Sphere

After education, the most significant efforts in the Tatar language revival were focused in large part on restoring (or introducing) Tatar language use in the government and media. The legal basis for promoting the use of the Tatar language in the public sphere began with the adoption of a language law in July 1992. The law significantly increased the status of the Tatar language, requiring that the government conduct its business and publish its laws in Tatar as well as Russian. The courts, media, industrial enterprises, public transport, and scientific and cultural institutions were also required to use both languages in conducting their affairs and in interacting with the public.

After a slow start, the government was able to implement measures that led to a rapid increase in the spread of Tatar throughout public life. Tatar language classes for adults were introduced in the republic's larger cities. Synchronous translation became available for parliamentary debates. Bilingual street signs are ubiquitous, and public transport drivers frequently make announcements in both languages. A 1998 law required all products sold in the republic to have descriptions and ingredients listed in both Russian and Tatar. Several new Tatar-language journals and newspapers are now available, including children's periodicals. Radio and television broadcasting in Tatar has increased by several hours per week.

All in all, Tatarstan implemented a fairly extensive language revival program during the 1990s. The revival program was quite successful in reversing language shift in those areas on which it directly focused and in changing popular attitudes toward greater support for the use of Tatar in various contexts. However, greater support for bilingualism and even an increase in the range of functions of the Tatar language did not necessarily translate into changes in linguistic behavior among members of either ethnic group.

The Failure of Revival: Continuing Decline of Tatar Language Use Among Tatars

Despite the government's successes in implementing a language revival program during the 1990s, the percentage of Tatars using the Tatar language continued to decline throughout this period. The proportion of Tatars who considered Tatar to be their native language remained relatively unchanged at 88.3 percent, including 96.4 percent of rural and 84 percent of urban Tatars. At the same time, a 2000 survey showed that only 20.5 percent of Tatars under the age of 30 speak Tatar better than they speak Russian, with an additional 42.9 percent declaring that they speak both languages equally well, and 36.6 percent being more fluent in Russian than in Tatar.

Speaking ability among Tatars had, if anything, declined in the years since the start of the language revival program. While complete 2001 data for urban Tatars is not available, published results from this survey indicate that only 58.8 percent of urban Tatars are completely fluent in the Tatar language, as compared to 65.1 percent in 1990. A similar decline is registered among rural Tatars, of whom 91.6 percent considered themselves able to speak, read, and write in Tatar in 2001, as compared to 97.4 percent in 1990. The use of Tatar also continued to erode during the 1990s, with the percentage of Tatars using the Russian language at work increasing from 35 to 43.5 percent while the percentage of respondents who used either Tatar or both languages declined. The percentage of urban Tatars using Tatar exclusively at home also declined, from 48 percent in 1994 to 36 percent in 2001, while the proportion using Russian increased from 22 to 24 percent and those using both languages went from 30 to 38 percent. Tatar language use declined even among rural Tatars, who went from 98.6 percent Tatar speaking at home in 1994 to 89.8 percent in 2001. At work, the decline was even steeper, from 92 percent in 1994 to 69.5 percent in 2001.

After ten years, the increase in Tatar language education for ethnic Tatars has not had an appreciable impact on Tatar language use among Tatar youth. The majority of Tatars under the age of 30 use Russian when speaking with friends and when reading, while usage in the home is almost evenly split between Tatar, Russian, and both equally. Given that

surveys in the mid-1990s showed more than half of the Tatar youth speaking Tatar at home, it appears that Russian is continuing to make inroads among Tatar children in both rural and urban areas.

Why Failure? A Comparative Explanation

The virtual impossibility of enacting policies that directly impact individual language choices is the greatest difficulty faced by language revival programs. While the goal is usually to increase the number of speakers and the range of contexts in which these speakers use the endangered language, language revival policies focus on improving the status of the language by increasing its use in government, education, the media, and the workplace. The hope is that if people have more opportunities to learn the language and feel that the language is undergoing a revival, they will be more likely to learn and use it.

Several European states have succeeded in reversing the decline of minority languages. The cases of Catalonia and Euskadi (the Basque country) in Spain are particularly relevant. Spain, like the USSR, was for several decades a repressive state that sought to replace regional languages with the national language. To this end, Castilian Spanish was the only language the Franco government allowed to be used in the classroom and in government. Also, like in the USSR, wealthy minority regions attracted large numbers of immigrants, most of whom belonged to the majority linguistic group.

After the end of the Franco dictatorship, both regions instituted language revival programs that required the teaching of the regional language to all students and encouraged all schooling to gradually shift to that language. In Catalonia, the ability to pass a Catalan language exam became a high school graduation requirement for all students. The language revival programs also extended to the government and the media. Whereas in the late 1970s very few civil servants could speak Catalan, by the mid-1980s Catalan became the exclusive language in parliament, all laws were written in Catalan, and regional government officials always spoke Catalan in public. The government also began a serious effort at providing language-training courses for civil servants. The Basque government required all civil servants to pass a Basque language exam. At the same time, governments in both regions expanded TV and radio broadcasting in the local language.

The results of the language revival programs in increasing language knowledge and use were impressive in both regions and appeared quickly after the commencement of the program. The ability to understand Catalan increased from 81 percent in 1981 to 90 percent of the population in 1986 and 95 percent of the population by 1996. Speaking, reading, and writing abilities rose more gradually. The impact of the education program on Catalan is shown by the high rates of Catalan knowledge

among 15-29 year olds, who were 15 percent more likely to know Catalan than 30-44 year olds and 27 percent more likely than 45-64 year olds.

The percentage of the population who consider themselves Basque-speakers increased from 21.6 percent of the population in 1981 to 32.3 percent in 2001. Most interestingly, the percentage of respondents who declared Castilian to be their mother tongue and consider themselves fluent in Basque increased from 4.7 percent in 1986 to 14.6 percent in 2001. This shows that the Basque language is, for the first time, beginning to make some inroads among the Castilian immigrant community.

How can we explain the success of efforts to reverse language shift in Catalonia and Euskadi and the failure of similar efforts to stem the decline in language knowledge and use in Tatarstan? The main difference appears to be the mandatory nature of most of the new rules in place in the Spanish cases. In Tatarstan, most of the revival efforts took the form of efforts to encourage increased use of Tatar in various contexts or the provision of more opportunities to use or learn Tatar. In Catalonia and Euskadi (as well as in other places with successful language revival programs, such as Quebec and Wales), the government provided specific positive and negative incentives for people using the local language. In some cases, knowledge and/or use of the language was a requirement for jobs in the public sector. In Quebec, the government required almost all children to attend French-language schools. These rules went well beyond the salary bonuses for bilingual employees and weekly Tatar lessons in school that were the extent of positive and negative incentives in Tatarstan.

The lesson of successful minority language revival programs in Western Europe is that if a minority region wants to reverse the decline of its language, it needs to institute programs that go beyond simple encouragement and mandate the use of the minority language in various contexts. Of course, such programs are likely to violate individual rights regarding language use. The trade-off between successful language revival and protecting individual rights is a difficult one, but one that will be impossible for governments in this situation to avoid.