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Indigenous language education in Russia: current issues and challenges

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Indigenous language education in Russia: current issues and challenges

Abstract

Despite the high number of recognised Indigenous groups who are struggling to maintain their languages, cultures, and identities in Russia, there is little research done on the matters of cultural and linguistic revitalisation. This study sought to address this gap by exploring the views of two Indigenous groups, Karelian and Mari, on the development of their Indigenous languages and educational strategies to protect and revive their languages. The study relied on in-depth one-on-one interviews with 20 participants, ten from each Indigenous group. The findings show that despite older generations' relative proficiency and interest in their respective Indigenous languages, motivation to master them is fading among younger Indigenous populations. There is also a lack of opportunities to learn the languages including informal settings despite protections within the federal legal system. The participants identified three reasons for the rapid decrease of language speakers that include assimilation of the Indigenous groups, differences in rural and urban development, and globalization. The article concludes with recommendations on how to revitalise Indigenous languages in Russia.

Keywords: Indigenous languages; Indigenous language education; Russia, plurilingualism.

Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) proclaimed 2022-2032 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages thus emphasising its concern about the rights of minority language speakers (UNGA, 2019). Following that, UNESCO endorsed that an individual's right to use their native language is a human right and an integral component of an inclusive society (UNESCO, 2019). With "up to 90 percent of the languages in the world being endangered to some degree" (Bradley, 2019, p. 510), a sizable percentage of which are Indigenous (May, 2001), the ecology of humanity is undergoing the loss of human linguistic diversity which has an immense value as each language carries a unique knowledge system, traditions, history, cultural codes, and philosophy (Hallett et al., 2007). For Indigenous groups – this loss of languages means the loss of valuable Indigenous knowledge systems that can support sustainable development and sustainable living (Moore & Nesterova, 2020), group identity and a sense of belonging (Kamwangamalu, 2016), as well as intergenerational ties and cultural continuance (McCarty, 2020). In addition, mother tongue education ensures that education is effective in early years and later helps in second language learning thus promoting positive academic and linguistic outcomes (McCarty, 2020; Nesterova & Jackson, 2018). Human linguistic diversity, however, has been greatly endangered by rapid linguistic globalisation, the development of centralised nation-states (Bradley, 2019), and changes in education policies and attitudes towards language education.

While there is extensive literature on Indigenous language education and Indigenous language maintenance in Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, the United States, and other countries with Indigenous populations (Eley & Berryman, 2019; Hinton & Hale, 2001), there is little research illuminating the case of the Russian Federation which is home to more than 170 Indigenous and minority languages and more than 1 million self-identified Indigenous persons (Federal State Statistics Service (FSSS), 2010). The centuries of assimilation of minority and Indigenous groups in the country into the Russian culture and language have resulted in a gradual loss of Indigenous languages despite relatively recent movements for language preservation (Slocum, 1998). Since 2016, the federal government has placed even greater emphasis on the promotion of the Russian language, also referred to as nation-forming language in the Constitution (1993), to strengthen the "civic Russian nation" (Government of the Russian Federation (GRF), 2016). The country's minority and Indigenous communities have expressed concerns over the present and future status of their languages as well as native language learning (Evdokimov & Ashitkova, 2019) since this prioritisation of the Russian language neglects the special status of "national" Indigenous languages (Bradley, 2019) and jeopardises their transmission and maintenance.

As successful heritage language development depends on its speakers (Little, 2020), this study investigated the views of two Indigenous peoples (Karelian and Mari) in Russia regarding the development of

their languages. The study also explored educational strategies in regard to Indigenous language education in Russian schools. In particular, the study pursued the following questions:

1) How, when, why, and for what purposes are the Indigenous languages used by the Karelian and Mari Indigenous groups in the two Russian republics to which these groups are native?

2) What are Karelian and Mari peoples' views on the future of their languages, including whether and how their development and transmission should be supported?

In line with Watson-Gegeo's (1988) argument that the analysis of micro and macro levels of contextual data in a qualitative, ethnographic framework is required for understanding Indigenous language dynamics as they relate to educational practices, this article illustrates the views of the two Indigenous language communities in Russia on the preservation of their native languages, and the social and political contexts that contribute to it. Most Finno-Ugric languages in the Russian republics share a similar history. All Finno-Ugric people had experienced forced assimilation into the Russian culture till 1917 which then shifted into "the most extravagant celebration of ethnic diversity that any state had ever financed" (Slezkine, 1994, p. 414) in the 1920s. From the mid-1930s to the 1980s Finno-Ugric groups faced ethnic cleansing, forced relocation, and renewed assimilation policies (Kondrashkina, 2009; Romanova, 2007). This was followed by a rise in regional movements supporting "cultural nationalism" (Yusupova, 2018, p. 624) among Indigenous peoples of Russia in the beginning of the 21st century. Tracing a long and complicated path of the Mari language to its today's state, one can get the idea of the fate of other Finno-Ugric languages in Russia. Soviet Karelia, however, stood out as "the target of… most intense… Stalinist terror" (Kostiainen, 1996) because of the influence of the neighbouring Finns who had gained their independence from the Russian Empire in 1917. Today, despite being a titular nation's language, Karelian is still striving for legal recognition as the second official language in the Republic. The federal government justifies it by the absence of functional capacities of the language and the fact that Karelian is based on the Latin script while all the other languages in Russia use Cyrillic (Kryuchkova, 2002).

Minority language learning in Russia and globally

Each census in Russia shows that Indigenous languages continue to lose speakers, despite the protection of Indigenous languages in the country's legal framework. For example, the law "About the languages of peoples of Russia" (Government of the Russian Federation, 1991, Article 3, item 5) states that "all the languages of peoples of Russia receive support from the government", promises citizens of the country conditions for teaching and learning their native languages (Article 10, item 1), and points out that "the Russian Federation guarantees all its peoples, regardless of their population size, equal rights to the preservation and full development of their native language" (Article 2, item 2). Nonetheless, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government has been focusing on nation-building through essentially monocultural and monolingual national identity building, ultimately aiming at cultural homogenisation (Prina, 2015). This process has been negatively affecting self-awareness among the Indigenous peoples and decreasing the number of Indigenous language speakers (Romanova, 2007) and spaces where Indigenous languages can be used.

Post-Soviet Russia has gone through waves of educational standardisation which have affected Indigenous languages. In 2009, the Russian Federal State Education Standards (FSES) for Primary General Education required "ensuring that students understand that language is a phenomenon of national culture and the main means of human communication and that students are aware of the importance of the Russian language as the state language of the Russian Federation" (p. 7). In 2012, FSES declared the expansion of opportunities for ethnocultural education and learning of languages (Shurpaeva, 2015). Indeed, FSES for Basic General Education (2010) and FSES for Secondary General Education (2012) state that education should ensure the development of writing skills in Russian and native (non-Russian) languages. This way, Indigenous students aged 11 to 18 years are expected to have a good command of Russian and their native languages. FSES for Early Childhood Education (2013) added that while education should be in Russian, it is possible to offer education programmes in mother tongues from among the minority languages of Russia. While this policy may seem to support minority language programmes at an early stage, it states that minority language education "must not be to the detriment of receiving

education in the state language," Russian (p. 7). As a result, children aged up to seven are educated predominantly in Russian. While such policy in favour of Russian is explained by its status as the prioritised official language throughout the country, it does not consider that the vital language development takes place during the first three years of children's development and is established before children turn eight (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In fact, the earlier first bilingual exposure occurs, the more likely children are to develop bilingual proficiency (Petitto, 2009). International experience also shows that making the goal of functional bilingualism explicit in the curriculum for Indigenous communities lies at the core of language revitalisation (Hirvonen, 2008) and functional bilingualism requires daily language practice for 6-8 years (Francis, 2011; May & Hill, 2008; Thomas & Collier, 2002). The Russian education system, however, neither aims at functional bilingualism nor allows for such extended teaching of an Indigenous language (Chevalier, 2018).

Interestingly, the 2020 amendments to the Constitution (1993, Article 69) guarantee "the preservation of ethnocultural and language diversity" in the country. It is not clear, however, how this amendment can be fulfilled alongside the 2018 amendments to the law "On Education in the Russian Federation" (GRF, 2012) which allows only voluntary language learning by prohibiting republics which are homelands of non-Russian ethnic minorities from making their languages compulsory for learning. This law amendment was brought about by conflicts over language rights that some republics faced – massive protests were initiated by people who were unhappy with ineffective teaching of Indigenous languages that made them feel they were being "taught nothing" (Arutyunova & Zamyatin, 2020). Instead of bilingual education, parents were asked to choose which language(s) their child will learn. This choice comes at the expense of the other languages, and for parents, this can be an impossible choice. A choice of Russian promises better educational and professional opportunities in the country, while depriving children of their right to connect to their heritage. Arutyunova and Zamyatin (2020, p. 15) argue that "the purpose of the removal of compulsory teaching is not so much the concern for the Russian-speakers' rights, as the promotion of the shift among non-Russians who are encouraged to abandon their vernacular language and to name Russian as their native language."

Bilingual education has supported Indigenous language revitalisation in other contexts. Māori and Sami are two successful examples, although much further work is needed to ensure these languages thrive (Hornberger, 2008). Aotearoa New Zealand and Norway have been revitalising Māori and Sami respectively through bilingual education (Hirvonen, 2008; May & Hill, 2008). Mother-tongue medium bilingual education has been recognised as the most effective form of educational practice for literacy learning, overall child development in Indigenous communities, and language revitalisation (Magga et al., 2005). For example, research has demonstrated that well-developed bilingual education programmes have a significant positive effect on learners' cognitive development and their academic achievement (Adesope et al., 2010; Greene, 1998; Hakuta & Diaz, 1984; Petitto, 2009; Reljić et al., 2015; Thomas & Collier, 2002). However, there are common obstacles to bilingual education across Indigenous communities, including varying language levels among students, lack of qualified teachers, and limited access to adequate educational resources (Alanis & Rodriguez, 2008; Hirvonen, 2008; May & Hill, 2008).

These issues are important to address to ensure the success of bilingual programmes since poorly designed and implemented programmes contribute to the rise of anti-bilingual rhetoric (Cummins, 1981; May & Hill, 2008; San Miguel, 2004). Scepticism toward bilingual education undermines language revival as Indigenous parents opt out of such programmes when they perceive them as detrimental to their children's prospects (López, 2008; May & Hill, 2008). It is also important to bear in mind that minority languages often have a low status in society (Magga, 2003) leading to discrimination against minority language speakers. Bilingual programmes thus need to highlight the value of a minority language and build positive self-esteem in students to boost their learning motivation (Hirvonen, 2008). Indeed, intervention studies show the effectiveness of such programmes in boosting positive self-esteem and autonomy of Indigenous learners (Rubie et al., 2004).

Designing a successful bilingual programme is challenging and programmes that are effective in one context, cannot simply be copied in another without contextual adjustment. Still, De Korne (2010), who analysed Indigenous language policies across contexts, offered two key recommendations for their success. They include 1) using Indigenous languages as the medium of instruction to maximise learners' language exposure and 2) encouraging community-managed education that places decision-making into the hands of Indigenous people. We

view the implementation of these recommendations as essential to build effective programmes. Yet, in Russia, these recommendations have not been considered.

Mari language and people

Mari is a Finno-Ugric group numbering around 600,000 people and traditionally inhabiting the Middle Volga region of Russia. Around 547,600 Mari people live in Russia, with more than half living in the Mari El Republic; they constitute 0.4% of the country's population (FSSS, 2010). Three distinct literary versions of the Mari language are Meadow Mari (spoken by about 201,000 people), Hill Mari (spoken by 23,062 people), and Meadow-East Mari (spoken by 189 people) (FSSS, 2010).

The first book on Mari grammar was published in 1775 when after numerous unsuccessful attempts to convert Mari pagans to Christianity through the Russian language, Russian missionaries decided to preach in Mari. Since then, Mari, being reluctant to convert and have always advocated for a high status of their mother tongue. Later, the Russian Revolution of 1905 had a major influence on the rise of national consciousness of Mari people and the development of literary Mari. In 1923, three years after the establishment of the Mari Autonomous Region, Mari was declared an official language in the region and was used in government agencies. Mari strengthened its position up to the mid-1930s when for fear of Finnish invasion, the Soviet government began campaigns of political repression and prosecution of Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia. Mari intelligentsia were exiled, printed publications were destroyed, and identification with Mari ethnolinguistic culture was treated as a manifestation of nationalism (Sanukov, 1996) which at the time was equated to espionage and treason. The 1960s-1970s Soviet resettlement policy restructured ethnical composition of today's Republic of Mari El. Mari people became an ethnic minority in their own Republic amounting to only 43.3% of the total population in 1989 (Kondrashkina, 2009). After Mari language teaching was banned in the 1960s, its status deteriorated until it "almost reached the point of no return" (Sanukov, 1994, p. 12). It was not until1992, Mari was officially recognised as a state language of the Mari El Republic equally alongside Russian.

Today, Mari is used in everyday social interactions (mainly in rural areas), included in the school curriculum as an elective subject, and used in regional mass media and national theatre. There are also several non-governmental organisations such as "Mari Ushem" that are dedicated to preserving the Mari language, culture and raise Mari people's self-awareness. More recently, youth of the republic are becoming more outspoken about their concerns related to "the damage that the language and ethnic identity loss can entail" (Kudryavtseva & Shabykov, 2019, p. 177). Research shows that now about 87% of young adults in the republic self-identify as Mari (Kudryavtseva & Shabykov, 2019). This is a big change, considering in 1989 20% of Mari people did not acknowledge the Mari language as their mother tongue (Kondrashkina, 2009).

Karelian language and people

Amounting to 60,815 in 2010 (FSSS, 2010), the number of Karelian people in Russia is steadily decreasing (MRGI, 2018). The Republic of Karelia is home to the majority of Karelians, although they constitute only 7.4% of the population compared to 82.2% of ethnically Russian people (FSSS, 2010). The Karelian language belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family and has three main dialects (Karelian proper, Livvi, and Ludic) which are acknowledged as separate languages by UNESCO and included in the Atlas of the world's languages in danger (Moseley, 2010). Some linguists also distinguish the fourth, Tvet, dialect which is spoken by Karelian people who relocated to the territory of modern Tver Oblast in 1670. Today, there are less than 7,394 Tver Karelians (FSSS, 2010). According to the 2010 Census (FSSS, 2010), as of 2010, only 25,065 people spoke Karelian in Russia.

The earliest written artefact in Karelian is a birch bark manuscript dated to the 13th century written in Cyrillic. The same as Mari, Karelians were influenced by Russian Christian missionaries already in the 13th century and were forced to speak Russian alongside their mother tongue (Pyoli, 1998). Throughout history, the influence of neighbouring Finns was so profound that Karelian was long considered a dialect of Standard Finnish (Austin, 1992). In the 1920s, an official programme called "karelianisation" was initiated by Bolsheviks who established the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and set to create a new culture, based on local

languages. Thus, in 1933, largely influenced by the Finnish linguistic traditions, a Karelian grammar using Latin script was published. In the mid-1930s, the Soviet government started the Great Purge (Takala, 2011) when Finno-Ugric intelligentsia, charged with nationalism, was prosecuted and fled into exile (Austin, 1992). "Massive repression, liquidation of traditional Karelian rural communities and establishment of Russian urban communities in the Karelian ethnic area" continued until 1989 (Kurs, 1994, p.451) and contributed to the destruction of the Karelian language and culture.

Due to assimilation into the Russian culture, the Karelian population has been steadily declining and public life in Karelia (local government, media, and education) is centred around the Russian language, culture, and lifestyle. Karelian switched codes from Latin to Cyrillic several times, and today, the language has been refused the right to be the second state language in the Republic along with Russian due to its Latin script. Karelia is the only republic with one official state language – Russian. In 2011, the Karelian language was taught as an elective subject only in 11 (out of 18) districts and two municipalities of the republic (Kovaleva & Rodionova, 2013). In 2019, only 0.7% of schoolchildren in the Republic (523 students) studied the language as a school subject (Ethnocultural Education in the Republic of Karelia, 2019). Indeed, compared to other ethnic groups in Russia Karelians today are in a particularly vulnerable position in terms of preserving their cultural heritage (Prina, 2015).

Methodology

This is an exploratory qualitative study that employed purposive sampling to select information-rich cases and obtain a wide range of views from the two groups. A multi-stage sampling process involved two strategies: 1) maximum variation sampling as it "allows researchers to explore the common and unique manifestations of a target phenomenon across a broad range of phenomenally and/or demographically varied cases" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338) and 2) snowball sampling. These sampling strategies were used due to the small population numbers of the two groups, their complex contexts, and unique characteristics. We also aimed to ensure that the sample has representatives of diverse ages, levels of education, occupations, and levels of involvement in Indigenous issues. The participants' details are presented in the Supplement.

Mari participants were reached and recruited through the website called VKontakte (VK), one of the most popular social media websites in Russia (460 million users at the moment of data collection). A series of online advertisements were posted in the Mari communities such as Mariitsy Rossii (Russia's Mari people), Mari Kanal (Mari channel). Additionally, the Mari researcher of this study invited several Mari participants through her network which helped to recruit more participants. To the best of our abilities, we ensured maximum variation for this sample group. In-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with ten Mari people (six women and four men with ages ranging from 26 to 61 years). A similar social media call was arranged for Karelian people. Online advertisements were posted in the biggest Karelian VK communities such as Karjalan Rahvahan Liitto (Karelian People's Union), Oma mua (Our own land), Myo, Karjalaiset (We are Karelian). The call for interview participants was also promoted by two Karelian bloggers from the Republic with about 5000 and 8000 followers. To ensure a reasonable level of representation, we arranged a brief pre-interview survey based on which we selected ten Karelians (seven women and three men with ages ranging from 25 to 66 years) for in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews.

Interviews were conducted primarily in Russian, although occasional code-switching between an Indigenous and Russian languages occurred in the case of three Mari and two Karelian participants. Such mixing practices happened when the participants described cultural phenomena (musical instruments, holidays, festivals, household items, religious terms). Interviews started with questions about individuals' upbringing, career paths, and educational experiences, before moving to discuss Indigenous language use and awareness of changes in Indigenous language education policies. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours and were guided by an open-ended interview guide developed for the project (see Supplementary materials). They were audio-recorded after receiving the participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, coded, and analysed using qualitative content analysis. The interviews were coded with pseudonyms starting with letters M (for Mari) and K (for Karelians). The researchers analysed the data independently and then, organised regular meetings to discuss

emerging themes. This yielded an initial list of 38 distinct themes. To ensure intercoder reliability and avoid bias, interviews were coded independently using these themes. Subsequent comparison of coding patterns proved the establishment of a shared interpretation of the data.

Results

Mari and Karelian speakers today

Along with a decreasing number of Mari language speakers, the Mari people have been experiencing a rise in protective attitudes towards their language. Seven Mari participants were fluent speakers, and three participants had a basic knowledge of the language. While Mari was Language 1 (L1) for all the participants, Russian was acquired either successively or simultaneously depending on the social context and parental and school influence. Fluent Mari speakers were raised in rural areas where Indigenous communities had strong ties, high density, and traditional lifestyles which included transmitting the language from generation to generation. The villagers predominantly learnt Russian as Language 2 (L2) in kindergartens or schools when interacting with Russian-speaking peers.

The Karelian participants included five fluent speakers, two speakers with a basic knowledge of Karelian, and three others with no knowledge. Three of the fluent speakers were raised in rural areas and reported that Karelian was acquired as their L1 in the family; two other fluent speakers were raised in cities and did not have many opportunities to learn Karelian as children but learned the language by selecting it as their major at university. The two participants with basic knowledge of Karelian were also raised in cities, and spoke Russian as their L1, but attempted to learn their heritage language in adulthood on their own or through language courses. Kyle (29) explained that children in Petrozavodsk (the capital city of Karelia, Petroskoi in Karelian) currently have an opportunity to learn the Karelian language in three specialised ethnic kindergartens and one school. However, the number of such educational institutions is not sufficient for a city with a population of 270,000 as there are not enough places to accommodate everyone interested. Kyle (29) expressed his discontent with one of the ethnic kindergartens in Petrozavodsk:

20 places are reserved for the Karelian study group and 25 places – for the Finnish group, whereas there is almost no one willing to get into the Finnish group and the Karelian one is already full. I asked the head of the kindergarten why they can't reallocate the places. She just mumbled that they have such a quota imposed by the local government and can do nothing about it. So, there are interested parents but no places.

Limited use of Mari and Karelian

While the symbolic functionality of Mari and Karelian is still important to the majority of the participants, their communicative functionality has become secondary to the socially and technologically improved communicative functionality of Russian, especially for young people: "The language [Mari] is not in-demand." (Miklai, 27). The participants mentioned three decisive factors that hinder the usage of the languages. They are Russification, urban-rural dichotomy, and globalisation. Three Mari and five Karelian participants discussed the phenomenon of Russification when people with different Indigenous backgrounds choose to abandon their Indigenous identity and adopt Russian customs, culture, and language (Pyoli, 1998):

> These are Mari people, yes, parents who have already Russified, I think. Consequently, they do not know good literary Mari language… (Maira, 47)
>
> I know that many of my classmates are Mari but now they pretend to be Russians. (Malika, 28)
>
> There are more people who think of themselves as Russians. (Karina, 29)

Furthermore, one Karelian parent was concerned that raising children through Karelian will damage their acquisition of Russian: "Well, first of all, my child is growing up in a Russian family as we speak Russian in the

family and impart the Russian culture. So it might be difficult to dive into the Karelian culture" (Kennett, 31). This identity shift is attributed to the legacy of Soviet times. Five Karelian and three Mari participants spoke of the historical repression that their groups suffered during the Soviet time. Extermination and forced migration of minorities during the period of political repressions and prosecutions by the Soviet government shaped how Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the country perceived Indigeneity and resulted in stigmatisation and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples. The feelings of shame for their ethnicity and fear for retribution pushed them to seek assimilation into the dominant Russian culture. Maira (47) described how the sense of inferiority has influenced language-related decisions and educational preferences of their groups:

> At school, our class group was all Mari and we felt contempt from the Russian groups. I remember they called us cheremis and also farm girls and boys. It was in the 80s. That was real mistreatment... so when I later moved to a city and entered university, we tried to speak only Russian because it was embarrassing to speak Mari. (Maira, 47)

The Soviet time school experience left older Karelians with the feeling of inadequacy of their language, inferiority, and fear, which translated into the concern for what difficulties their children might experience if they were to transmit Karelian to them. Kandyce (29) refers to his grandmother's words: "They were forbidden to speak Karelian as they could have been exiled or executed". Kyle (29) also shares family memories:

> Karelian families always used to be huge. There were eight children in my grandmother's family. She tells that they were forbidden to speak Karelian at school. Can you imagine that? They were laughed at. Laughed – just imagine – because a person speaks Karelian. That was in Soviet times.

The "farm girls" comment brings us to the issue of urban-rural dichotomy. Indigenous groups in Russia traditionally resided in rural areas in tight and dense ethnic communities. In pre-revolutionary Russia, such communities were often described as illiterate and uneducated. Later, the Soviet government's forced resettlement policy (1940s-1960s) sought to improve their socio-economic situation. Forced migration and assimilation of ethnic Russians to rural Indigenous areas resulted in the mixture of languages and cultures and the development of superior attitudes towards Indigenous peoples. Marpa (23) shares her family members' memories on the matter:

> In Soviet times, many working men with different ethnic backgrounds came to the settlement Suslonger [a small town in Mari El] to work in factories. As a result, the Mari language was scarcely heard there. The town stopped being Mari. (…). I even heard that in Soviet times, many Russians came to work in the MMZ factory [machine-building factory in Yoshkar-Ola]. And they used to say something like 'those Mari people, they are so poverty-stricken' and things like that. It runs in our blood, in our ethnic consciousness that we do not have the power, we are not cool, we should keep a low profile, we are always afraid of something. You know, we have it.

Today, although slowly dissolving, the urban-rural dichotomy still characterises Indigenous language realities in Russia. Three older generation participants, living in small towns, reported using Mari every day when interacting with family members, neighbours, and friends. Four younger generation participants spoke the language only when visiting older family members in villages. Karelian, on the other hand, is hardly spoken by young adults and is mainly used in rural areas by older generations. Thus, four Karelian participants used the language with grandparents in rural areas, and only one participant uses it daily with family members and a neighbour explaining that "We're not numerous; there is hardly anyone to talk to" (Kallista, 65). At the same time, rural areas that preserved their unique traditional ways of living and customary religious activities attract tourists from other Russian areas and abroad, which contributes to the language preservation:

> One of my friends from Tula [a city in Russia outside Mari El] is really interested in pagan gatherings and wants to come observe traditional prayers in the Mari woods. (Marpa, 23)

Passing on Indigenous languages

Nine Mari participants would want their children and grandchildren to, at least, understand Mari and preferably, use basic conversational phrases. As one Mari participant explained:

> I'd like that [that own children speak Mari] because this is directly linked to our origins, and it never hurts to know own roots and history. (Marianna, 28)

At the same time, only three Karelians spoke in favour of their children learning the language because "there is no culture without the language" (Kendrick, 31). The other Karelian participants would not mind if their children wished to learn the language but would not actively encourage it. One of them explained:

> I'd say no [do not want my children to learn Karelian] because it'll be difficult to use it anywhere, and one needs to practice the language all the time not to forget it. (Karina, 29)

Contrary to some of these parents' enthusiasm, schoolchildren are not motivated to study Indigenous languages. In Mari El, for example, despite exposure to Mari in extended families and more opportunities (compared to Karelians) to learn their Indigenous language in kindergartens and schools, children are reluctant to study it. Mitri (61) shares concerns about his grandchildren's experience: "My grandchildren study Mari in school but the level is not advanced, and the content is oversimplified. Our grandson does not speak Mari and does not want to, whatsoever!" In Karelia, Kallista (65) shared the same experience of her children and grandchildren reluctance to learn Karelian, while Kelly (41), who is a teacher of Karelian herself, does not encourage her children to study the language despite their interest in it. In both republics, the reluctance stems from the decreasing practical relevance of the language as well as a perceived lack of any benefits of learning an Indigenous language. This results in gradual language attrition as one participant pointed at: "The language [Karelian] is dying, a grim picture." (Karen, 25).

Indigenous language education

Even though today's schoolchildren were described as unwilling to learn Indigenous languages, seven Karelians reported having found an interest in their culture and language as adults and voiced the regret of not learning more about their cultural heritage when they were younger:

> The older I get the more I want to learn about my ancestors and historical past. […]. I'd like my children at least to know about the language and if they get interested, I'd somehow introduce them to the language myself. (Kandyce, 29)

> Today, I wish I knew more. (Karina, 29)

That can be accounted for by an almost lost tradition of intergenerational transmission of Indigenous knowledge and the lack of Karelian-related subjects in the school curriculum. Mari participants, having preserved bits of Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and language, did not express such regrets. On the contrary, seven Mari participants emphasised the importance of understanding the significance of their Indigenous history and knowledge.

The participants reflected on educational measures to preserve their languages. All Mari participants viewed education inclusive of Indigenous languages and cultures as key to strengthening their identities and self-awareness. Eight Mari participants emphasised that the Mari language and culture should be taught as a compulsory subject for everyone residing in the republic regardless of their ethnic background; only two participants preferred it for Mari classes to be offered as an elective. They expressed confidence that learning Indigenous languages and cultures is necessary because it pays due respect to Indigenous peoples and their land:

> Actually, it is an Indigenous land here [the Republic of Mari El]. I understand it could be hard [learning the Mari language and the culture of Mari people] but I want to say this – learning these things means paying respect to the place where you live. (Malika, 28)

Some parents, however, believe that the Indigenous component is redundant in the school curriculum. One Mari participant working as a teacher in a grammar school shared her experience with such parents:

> I work in school and often hear parents ask whether Mari will be taught at, say, Grade 10 (16-17 years) and whether there is any chance to substitute it with a more important subject. I'm asked these questions all the time. Parents claim that Mari language classes are entirely unnecessary. They believe that the language, as well as classes, is of no use (…) and these are young Mari women who say that. (Maira, 47)

The history of Karelian language education differs from that of Mari. Only three Karelians saw the need for the Karelian language and culture to become a compulsory subject in Karelian schools. The others stressed that forcing people to learn is counterproductive and that more important steps in preserving the language and culture should include providing real learning opportunities, such as additional and accessible educational institutions, updated learning materials, and innovative approaches to language acquisition. Katelyn (21) shared her perception and hopes for today's Indigenous language classes emphasising that success can be ensured only when all relevant stakeholders are enthusiastic and responsible:

> We need to use innovative creative teaching techniques to make children interested in Indigenous languages in the first place. Take, for example, learning through play. Karelian classes should not trigger that feeling when you have to concentrate and cram for hours. Nothing good comes from it. But if you present it [the Karelian language] in a different way, then … well, and teachers themselves should be enthusiastic about creative approaches.

Furthermore, when facing the choice between the Indigenous language and foreign language classes, a unanimous vote is cast in favour of English and Finnish in the case of the Karelian participants. Indeed, intense globalisation pushes aside Indigenous languages:

> It's just there is no need to learn it. Take English, for example, it's needed all around the globe, and you understand that you're nothing without English in other countries. And Karelian – where is it? Where will you use it? Even if you start speaking the language to people in Karelia, you'll be misunderstood and laughed at. (Kandyce, 29)

Discussion

The study explored the views of representatives of two Indigenous groups in Russia – Karelian and Mari people – on the current state and development of their respective languages, as well as their future. Several key findings help us understand the linguistic situation of Russia's Indigenous peoples better. First, the number of young people speaking Karelian and Mari fluently is steadily declining. Second, the key factors that hinder the use and promotion of the languages include 1/ historical Russification that has enforced assimilation of Indigenous groups into the Russian culture to escape threats and stigma; 2/ forced migration of peoples around the country that enforced mixing of cultures and languages, the domination of the Russian language, and subsequent stigmatisation and degradation of Indigenous languages; and 3/ the current Russification and globalisation that make Indigenous languages seem irrelevant compared to the dominance and relevance of Russian and world's dominant languages, and even a threat to mastering dominant languages. Third, despite the provisions for the protection of Indigenous languages within the country's legal framework, language learners hardly have real learning opportunities to maintain and improve their proficiency. While the situation of Mari is comparatively better than that of Karelian, the domination of Russian culture and language continues to endanger these Indigenous languages.

Two key messages emerge from this study. The first message is the importance of supporting Indigenous languages in a country as diverse as Russia where it might seem easiest to rely on one language, Russian, especially as these Indigenous languages are already at risk and may not be considered relevant any more by their speakers. As in other contexts with Indigenous populations, Russia's Indigenous groups view their languages as an essential part of their identity, the health of which is critical for a strengthened sense of self, belonging, and

self-respect. Languages are also a part of their heritage, and their extinction results in the extinction of a particular world view and knowledge system ingrained in that culture, including Indigenous environmental knowledges that support sustainable development (Moore & Nesterova, 2020). Learning their native languages thus equals strengthening communities and the natural and social environment they live in for generations to come (McCarty, 2020; Nesterova & Jackson, 2018).

The second message is about the need to move from rhetoric to action to close the gap between the law/policy and practice. In Russia, the Constitution (1993) stipulates that "culture in the Russian Federation is the unique heritage of its peoples; and it is supported and protected by the state" (Article 68, item 3). Yet, as this study shows, the government's real actions do not prove the truth of these words as no practical steps to effectively support Indigenous language revitalisation and development have been taken. The issues standing in the way of language revival, as indicated by the participants, resonate with other post-colonial contexts. For example, international research shows that the lack of motivation to learn a heritage language can be effectively addressed by helping learners develop positive self-esteem (Hirvonen, 2008; Rubie et al., 2004) and by highlighting cognitive benefits of being bilingual (Adesope et al., 2010; Greene, 1998; Hakuta & Diaz, 1984; Petitto, 2009; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Studies in Russia have discovered that bilingual Tatar and Russian children perform better in school and have a better knowledge of the Russian language than their monolingual peers, thus, refuting the assumption of Russian policymakers that bilingualism threatens the knowledge of Russian (Tovar-Garcia & Alos i Front, 2017). Moreover, it is essential to invest in continuous improvement of language education as poor-quality programmes create anti-bilingual sentiments both in Russia (Arutyunova & Zamyatin, 2020) and abroad (Cummins, 1981; May & Hill, 2008; San Miguel, 2004).

Furthermore, a comment made by a Mari participant that "people should not aggrandise it [Mari] that much" reminds us that "the decision to maintain or renew a threatened language must be made by the speakers of that language, not by outsiders such as linguists or anthropologists, no matter how well intentioned" (Henze & Davis, 1999, p. 3-4). In our study, Mari participants expressed a desire to keep Mari lessons as part of a compulsory curriculum while Karelian participants mostly advocated for the healthy maintenance of their cultural and linguistic knowledge at home and through non-formal education, even if that entails keeping the subjects related to the Karelian language and culture out of the school curriculum. Also, both Karelian and Mari participants did not see the need for using their language as the medium of instruction in schools. In view of these findings, it is crucial for language planning and revival policies in Russia to ensure that Indigenous people are decision-makers and owners of educational and learning programmes that aim to support language revival (De Korne's, 2010). This way, policymakers can ensure that programmes are context-specific, address the issue at hand, and there is community buy-in. After all, as López and García (2016, as cited in McCarty, 2020) point out, Indigenous language programmes thrive when they are supported by and built upon by the resources of families, communities, as well as schools. Using Indigenous languages as the medium of instruction might be an important component of language revival in other contexts (De Korne's, 2010) but our participants currently do not see it as a realistic option for their communities. Moreover, the 2018 amendments to the law "On Education in the Russian Federation" prohibit schools from organising instruction in Mari and Karelian without having all parents on board (Arutyunova & Zamyatin, 2020). It is indeed clear that parents in the two republics are not ready to replace Russian-based instruction with anything else.

With an understanding that Indigenous people have varied preferences as regards to language learning in formal settings, another recommendation is for the federal and local governments to offer a variety of real educational opportunities for families/children to choose from including a bilingual programme, a monolingual Russian language programme, or any other arrangement. Such decisions should be informed by evidence and clear explanations to be provided to parents/guardians and their children. Having said that, we acknowledge the utopianism in expecting immediate comprehensive support from the federal government for small group languages. After all, the lack of institutional support for these languages is one of the key reasons for their diminishing vitality. At the same time, one feasible measure can be the allocation of funds to support local initiatives involving innovative approaches to Indigenous language preservation. This can include the organisation of conferences, community gatherings, development of mobile applications, creation of video lectures, online courses with materials that can be shared with members of Indigenous communities, and other activities involving

digital technology. Indeed, Galla (2016) underlines that new and innovative uses of technology positively impact Indigenous language learning and teaching across different geographic locations. Besides, Chevalier (2018) speculates that exposure to the Internet might "make Russian youth more or less tolerant of linguistic and cultural differences" (p. 113). Moreover, Karelia already has experience in developing successful language nests with grassroots efforts (Chambers, 2015). These Karelian language nests would certainly benefit from more support from the local government.

One more way to promote Indigenous languages, as mentioned by Mari participants, is to promote cultural tourism in historical areas with a dense population of Indigenous communities. Indigenous language revitalisation does not evolve only around languages but encompasses cultures, traditions, knowledges, and identities of language speakers and communities. As such, language revitalisation should become part of larger programming of Indigenous development that includes the different aspects of Indigenous cultures and go beyond that to embrace the world Indigenous people inhabit. While tourism can have a damaging impact on the land of Indigenous peoples and may transform Indigenous cultures into a culturally and historically "authentic" caricature of Indigeneity imagined by tourists (Sissons, 2005), "tourism preserves the past in some cases" (Ayaydin & Akgönül, 2020, p. 407) and can support Indigenous cultural and linguistic development when designed and owned by Indigenous people themselves. In fact, in 2018, the Mari village Shorunzha was selected as the Finno-Ugric capital of culture by the URALIC Centre that promotes and protects the human rights of Indigenous peoples worldwide (URALIC, 2018). This honour attracted the local government's attention which led to the allocation of additional financial support for the Mari people. This example of cultural tourism also showcases the importance of community-designed and -owned initiatives that, when actively supported by the government and civil society, can support cultural and linguistic revitalisation.

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Supplementary materials

Summary table for all participants: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.12024018

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