

CONTEMPORARY PROBLEM OF FINNO-UGRIC PEOPLES IN RUSSIA

On September 11—13, 1992, a conference called Finno-Ugrians and Russia was held in Tallinn, Estonia. The conference was organized by the Jaan Tõnisson Institute, a scientific and educational organization supported by the Estonian right-of-center parties. The conference focused on the present political, demographic and linguistic situation of Finno-Ugric peoples living in Russia. The purpose of the conference was to provide a forum for representatives of Finno-Ugric organizations to meet and exchange views.

During the last few years a revival of mother languages has taken place among the Finno-Ugric peoples, and a noticeable development towards a greater cultural awareness can be observed among them. Many ethnic organizations have been established, and most of them were represented in the Tallinn conference. To start with a few words must be said about the participating organizations and their goals.

The «Petserimaa» society, represented at the conference by Reet Tobre, is fighting for the rights of the Estonian citizens from the Petserimaa district, an area still partly occupied by Russia. The purpose of the society is to end the occupation and thus to reunify the district and support the Estonian and Setu cultures in the area, as well as to facilitate the return of the Setus to their homeland (most of them were deported or escaped and live now in other parts of Estonia).

Another participating organization was the Union of Ingermanlandic Finns («Inkerin Liitto»), an organization of Ingermanlandic Finns from the St. Petersburg region, represented by the Chairman Vladimir Kokko. The majority of Ingermanlandic Finns were deported from their historical homelands in the 1930s and 1940s. The Inkerin Liitto is working for the right to return to their homes in the region. The main goals are further to revive the culture and to rehabilitate the Ingermanlandic Finns that wish to return to the region. Today many Ingermanlandic Finns live outside Russia, mainly in Estonia, Finland and Sweden.

Johannes Harakka from the Union of Ingermanlandic Finns of Estonia spoke about the history of Estonian Ingermanland.

The Erzian and Mokshan (Mordvin) culture society «Mastorava», the «Mari Ušem» (Mari (Cheremis) Union) and the Society for Udmurt (Votyak) Culture were also represented at the conference. These organizations fight for the rights of their respective nations and the revival of their languages in their «national autonomies» in Russia. Raissa Kemaikina from «Mastorava» spoke about the linguistic problems in contemporary Mordva and national non-Christian religious movement. The representatives of «Mari Ušem» were Ivan Ivanov, a professor at Mari University, and the Vice-president of the society Aleksandr Abdulov. I. Ivanov spoke of the mother tongue as a means of survival and ethnic identity, and A. Abdulov provided information about the national movement in the Republic of Mari. The Udmurt representatives presented three papers to the conference. Vasilij Vanjušev, cand. phil. from the Udmurt Research Institute reported on anti-Udmurt propaganda in the czarist time, Pjotr Cernov, Chairman of the Culture Society spoke about contemporary anti-Udmurt campaigns in the Russian newspapers in Udmurtia and Vasilij Osipov about the human rights in Udmurtia.

Lidia Jarmingina from the Mari Centre (Ufa, Bashkir Republic) shed light on the situation of the Cheremis community in Bashkir Republic.

The Khanties (Ostyaks) from the Tjumen area, Siberia, were not represented at the conference (probably for the fear of repressions) but they sent their greetings to the conference through a recording. Andres Heinapuu from the Jaan Tõnisson Institute spoke about their problems and unsuccessful fight for their land against the state-owned oil companies.

At the press-conference on the first day of the conference the press and the Estonian researchers were given an opportunity to ask the representatives of the Finno-Ugric organizations questions on the present situation in Russia.

As many other minorities, the Finno-Ugric peoples have been subject to persecution. The Finno-Ugric peoples have many things in common in Russia, and their present problems and concerns are very similar. In the following some of these problems will be discussed.

Under the Soviet dictatorship the policy of russification was carried out in the regions where the Finno-Ugric peoples live. People from outside, mainly Russians, moved into the regions and in all «national autonomies» Finno-Ugric people constitute only a minority today. The traditional lifestyles of the indigenous peoples were disrupted and oppressed, and in many cases they were forced to leave their historical homelands. This development has led to great difficulties in preserving the cultural traditions and languages.

Heno Sarv from the Estonian National Museum argues that demographic data can be used to show the impact of russification on the Finno-Ugric languages. According to H. Sarv there is a clear correlation between the influx of Russians into the regions inhabited by Finno-Ugrians and the decrease in the number of individuals able to speak their mother language. As an example H. Sarv asserted that there has been a strong decrease of persons speaking the Mari language, in spite of high birthrates among the Mari people. Especially the 1970s were very destructive to the peoples' ability to speak their mother tongue. Analogous negative trends exist for many other Finno-Ugric peoples as well. H. Sarv further stated that a revival of the languages and cultures might still take place, since many methods previously supplied to suppress these cultures are no longer used by Russian authorities. He also pointed out that an improvement of the economic infrastructure and stopping of outside migration into the regions would improve the situation.

A generally shared view at the conference was that the loss of a mother tongue would be a very grave blow which would eventually lead to the loss of cultural identity.

Professor Ivan Ivanov from Mari University reported that one of the serious problems is a common poor understanding of the value of preserving the mother tongue among the Mari people. The Mari lan-

guage has been perceived as primitive, and only Russian has been seen as important for educational and career purposes. In social and political spheres the Mari language is still undeveloped and there is a lack of terminology in various fields. New words are being created by copying the Russian language and by using its rules. I. Ivanov further said that the prospects for the Mari language are promising, however, and the number of schools where the language is taught is increasing.

Raissa Kemaikina discussed some of the linguistic problems facing the Mordva people. She rejected the use of the word *Mordva* as the term identifying the people. In her view the terms *Erzia* and *Moksha* should be used instead. She described her people as «peoples without a home and a name», and according to her the first step towards cultural identity would be to establish the names *Erzia* and *Moksha*. There is a great need for national schools and attempts are being made to teach the *Erzia* and *Moksha* languages. A national epic has been compiled and it will soon be published. The epic will be used as an aid for teaching the languages.

Another very serious problem facing Finno-Ugric peoples today is the lack of political representation in regional legislative assemblies. The lack of political power often hinders the efforts of improving the conditions of Finno-Ugric peoples. People feel that they are underrepresented and their political demands are being ignored. The political bodies still consist predominantly of Russian. Some of the delegations at the conference argued that the Russians that have moved into the areas originally inhabited by Finno-Ugrians do not understand, or do not wish to understand the needs of the Finno-Ugric peoples. Furthermore, many old hard-liners are opposing any political demands of the Finno-Ugric peoples.

One way of strengthening the position of the minority languages has been drafting language laws. The language laws would give the Finno-Ugric languages an equal status with the Russian language and provide a possibility to use these languages as languages of instruction. Such language laws have been proposed, among others, by the Mari and the Udmurts. In many a region there is no education avail-

able in Finno-Ugric languages. This is perceived as a fundamental problem considering the survival of the Finno-Ugric languages and cultures.

The language laws proposed by Finno-Ugric organizations are strongly opposed by Russian authorities. In some «national autonomies» political resistance campaigns have been organized against the demands of Finno-Ugrians. The massmedia is perceived to play an important part in this connection. The media is still mainly under the control of Russians and, therefore, it propagates Russian views.

The privatization of land also constitutes a problem for many Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia. Due to the lack of political representation people fear that they will be discriminated and that the «new-comers» in their respective regions will get a legal claim to the land that once used to belong to them. Some of the delegations expressed the opinion that the natives should be given privileges in connection with the privatization of land and that the land should be returned to them.

Vladimir Kokko said that the land in the St. Petersburg region will be given to the relocated Russian military personnel. The native population of the region will not have the same benefit. The Ingermanlandic Finns demand that they be allowed to return to their historical territories. V. Kokko also questioned the proposed privatization laws. If the new laws would be realized there would, in V. Kokko's opinion, not be any land available in the region in a few years, and any territorial claims by the natives would then be useless. This would be a very serious development for Ingermanlandic Finns.

Another issue of concern was the location of former Soviet institutions in the regions inhabited by Finno-Ugric peoples. Valentin Devjatkin from the «Mastorava» questioned the continued location of penal colonies established in the Mordva region during the Soviet era. He asserted that it should be possible for the local authorities to decide whether such institutions would be allowed in the region. Similarly, the location of a nuclear centre, which comes an environmental peril to the region, should also be questioned and challenged.

All delegations agreed that Finno-Ugric peoples should be granted greater political influence in their republics and autonomous regions. Their demands vary from different degrees of cultural autonomy to territorial autonomy in the Russian Federation.

It was also suggested that one way of working for these goals would be to join the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). The Organization was founded in the Hague in 1990, and it aims at supporting the efforts of indigenous and native peoples in gaining autonomy and independence.

Finally, it appears that a greater cooperation between the Finno-Ugric peoples is needed and that they should organize themselves into strong organizations that can work for these political goals.

In the negotiations with the Jaan Tõnnison Institute the representatives of Finno-Ugric organizations agreed to exchange information with the Institute and decided to organize a new conference in Tallinn next year.

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