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Use of indigenous languages in formal education systems in Latin America, Southern Africa and Northern Eurasia

Note by the Secretariat

Summary

At its twentieth session, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues appointed Sven-Erik Soosaar, Irma Pineda Santiago and Bornface Museke Mate, members of the Forum, to conduct a study on indigenous languages in the formal education system and to present that study to the Forum at its twenty-first session.



I. Introduction

1. The present report provides a preliminary analysis of the use of indigenous languages in the formal education systems in Latin America and Southern Africa, and in Latvia and the Russian Federation. Countries in which large numbers of indigenous peoples live were selected for particular case studies. The legal, environmental and economic conditions of indigenous peoples in these countries differ, but some general problems and solutions can be identified as a result of the analysis.
2. The study identifies both barriers to and good practices for the use of indigenous languages in education curricula to preserve the languages, increase their use in everyday communication among children and young people, and enhance their transmission between generations.
3. The language of a people is its most important cultural attribute. It is a source of creativity and power, and serves a constructive role in development and in choosing a collective way of life that is full, satisfying, valuable and valued, strengthening the existence of both the people and the language in all its forms.
4. Through language, people preserve their history, customs and traditions, memory, and unique modes of thought, meaning and expression. Language is essential for human rights protection, good governance, peacebuilding, reconciliation and sustainable development.
5. The inclusion of indigenous languages in educational systems is vital for the promotion and strengthening of indigenous languages and cultures. It is an expression of the self-determination of indigenous peoples and is crucial for building and fortifying their identities as well as their intellectual capital for cultural and scientific development.

II. International framework

6. In the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (see General Assembly resolution [61/295](#)) read as follows:

Article 13

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.

Article 14

Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.

States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including

those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

7. In article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is asserted that everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community.

8. At the World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, the foundation was laid for a global commitment to provide high-quality basic education for all people.¹ During the conference, participants endorsed an expanded vision of learning and pledged to universalize primary education and massively reduce illiteracy by the end of the decade 2005–2015.

9. At the World Education Forum, held in Dakar in 2000, participants reaffirmed vision of the World Declaration on Education for All adopted in 1990. The Special Rapporteur on the right to education from 1998 to 2004, Katarina Tomaševski, defined it as an “enabling right”, in addition to being a right in itself:

“If people have access to education they can develop the skills, capacity and confidence to secure other rights. Education gives people the ability to access information detailing the range of rights that they hold, and government’s obligations. It supports people to develop the communication skills to demand these rights, the confidence to speak in a variety of forums, and the ability to negotiate with a wide range of government officials and power holders.”

10. A number of recommendations have been made at the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues over the years concerning the formal education of indigenous peoples. The four most recent recommendations are as follows:

(a) At its fifteenth session, the Permanent Forum recommended that States recognize the language rights of indigenous peoples and develop language policies to promote and protect indigenous languages, with a focus on high-quality education in indigenous languages, including by supporting full immersion methods such as language nests and innovative methods such as nomadic schools. It was essential that States develop evidence-based legislation and policies to promote and protect indigenous languages and, in that regard, they should collect and disseminate baseline information on the status of indigenous languages. Those activities should be conducted in close cooperation with the indigenous peoples concerned (see [E/2016/43](#), para. 9);

(b) At its sixteenth session, recalling article 14 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the recommendation of the Permanent Forum at its third session, the Forum urged Member States to adopt and fully implement comprehensive national indigenous education policies and bring into practice the education of indigenous languages teachers in accordance with indigenous peoples’ initiatives. Recalling paragraph 86 of its report on its eighth session ([E/2009/43](#)), the Permanent Forum urged public and private education institutions to provide permanent positions for indigenous teachers and to establish scholarships designated exclusively for indigenous students (see [E/2017/43](#), paras. 40 and 41);

(c) At its seventeenth session, recalling paragraph 40 of its report on its sixteenth session ([E/2017/43](#)), the Permanent Forum called upon Governments in the Arctic, Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia, along with academics, to take appropriate measures to introduce the endangered languages of their regions into educational practices and include the learning of those

¹ See United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Education for All: Status and Trends* (Paris, 1993). Available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED370207.pdf>.

languages in curricula at all levels of the educational system, when requested by indigenous people (see [E/2018/43](#), para. 93);

(d) At its eighteenth session, the Permanent Forum stated that it remained concerned about the state of formal education for indigenous young people and called upon States to fully fund bilingual and culturally appropriate primary, secondary and tertiary education programmes led by indigenous peoples, including mobile education initiatives for nomadic and semi-nomadic communities. Supporting informal and formal indigenous education systems was crucial in order to maintain and transmit traditional indigenous knowledge systems. ... The Forum urged Member States and the United Nations system to provide funding to implement policies related to indigenous languages and ensure the incorporation of indigenous languages into the curricula at all education levels. ... The Forum also called upon Member States to adopt effective measures to create a sustainable language environment by using information technologies and educational systems and by documenting and monitoring indigenous/native languages and using those languages in public spheres (see [E/2019/43](#), paras. 35, 109 and 128).

11. The language competency of a society as a whole depends significantly on education. Through formal education, individuals are able to develop the skills that would enable them to acquire employment opportunities and be successful members of modern society. However, formal education in colonial and post-colonial boarding schools, in which indigenous children were isolated from their families and communities and prohibited from speaking their languages, has been particularly effective in eradicating indigenous languages, driving them to the brink of extinction. Formal education for indigenous peoples has been conceived as a means of assimilating them into mainstream national society. In the worst cases, entire peoples experienced the forced removal of their children or their forced enrolment in residential schools, in which the widespread abuse of indigenous children was practised. The dark history of boarding schools has been well covered in a previous report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues entitled “Indigenous peoples and boarding schools: a comparative study” ([E/C.19/2010/11](#)). The third volume of the report entitled *State of the Worlds’ Indigenous Peoples*² was dedicated to education in all regions of the world and addressed many of these issues.

12. Although the present study does not cover all indigenous peoples, it is intended to provide a general overview of common developments and problems surrounding the use of indigenous languages in formal educational systems in recent years.

13. The study of indigenous languages by indigenous children and students should not be voluntary, competing with foreign language lessons or afterschool recreational activities. Parents, teachers, policymakers and all other relevant stakeholders should be taught that the knowledge of an ancestral indigenous language is crucial for the survival of the language and indigenous knowledge and culture, and therefore beneficial for the sound psychological development of those who learn it.

14. The conditions created by State policies are often unfavourable for encouraging the parents of indigenous children to speak an indigenous language at home or study it in school. The diminishing use of indigenous languages in public life and society contributes to the view that indigenous languages will be unnecessary in life in the future and that only flawless and near-native use of the dominant language is conducive to a successful career in society.

15. According to the linguist, David Bradley, the key first step in the preservation and revival of indigenous languages is developing positive attitudes to their use within the community, facilitating and expanding language transmission in the family

² *State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples: Education*, vol. 3 (United Nations publication, 2017).

and community, and building resources within the community for language reclamation.³ Educational facilities must be part of this process.

16. Although legislative and language policy in all of the countries mentioned in the present study protects indigenous languages and allows for the use of indigenous languages in education and the promotion of additive multilingualism in formal education, the language practices in most of the public domains reflect the promotion of monolingualism in the dominant language, which is English, Spanish or Russian in the countries covered in the study.

17. Since education has been used as a means of assimilation for more than a century, whole generations of indigenous peoples have grown up disincentivized or prohibited from speaking their mother tongue and frequently punished by teachers for speaking an indigenous language. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that such practices have declined in recent decades, there are still examples around the world of schools and educational institutions that fail to support indigenous language use and that continue to foster assimilation.

18. In many cases, parents have the right to decide whether their child attends indigenous language lessons. However, in practice, since indigenous languages are often effectively removed from everyday public life, the right to study them often goes unclaimed and, in many cases, is not implemented because of the lack of qualified indigenous language teachers.

III. Indigenous languages in Latin America

19. Latin America has 522 indigenous peoples and 420 different languages. The Sociolinguistic Atlas of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America⁴ reveals that Latin America is the region with the greatest number of linguistic families: 99, compared to between 10 and 27 in other regions such as Africa and South Asia.⁵ The most widespread language family in Latin America is Arawak, which is spoken from Central America to the Amazon and encompasses more than 40 different languages. There are 103 indigenous languages that are spoken in more than one country, including Quechua, which is spoken in Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru. Another widely spoken language is Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, which is one of the most studied and is still spoken in parts of Mexico.

20. However, despite this wealth of linguistic diversity, almost one fifth of the indigenous peoples in Latin American have stopped speaking their indigenous language. Some 44 peoples speak Spanish as their sole language, and 55 speak Portuguese.

21. According to an article on educating indigenous people in their own language⁶ published in *El País* newspaper, the factors contributing most to the loss of native languages in the Latin American region included the following:

- (a) Lack of Intergenerational transmission;
- (b) Diminishing role of oral traditions;

³ David Bradley, "Sociolinguistics of language endangerment", paper presented at the Linguistic Forum of 2019 on the theme "Indigenous languages of Russia and the world", Moscow, April 2019.

⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, *Atlas Sociolingüístico de Pueblos Indígenas en América Latina* (Cochabamba, FUNPROEIB Andes, 2009).

⁵ See Casa de América, "Lenguas indígenas: el corazón de América Latina".

⁶ See Marjorie Delgado, "Educar a los indígenas en su propia lengua", *El País*, 9 August 2009.

- (c) Sociolinguistic contexts and their effects on language;
- (d) Political conflicts;
- (e) Dependencies on external entities;
- (f) Political asymmetries;
- (g) Social exclusion;
- (h) Poverty;
- (i) Absence of the legal and effective recognition of indigenous languages;
- (j) Design and format of formal education.

22. As part of the efforts of States aimed at reversing this loss, most Latin American countries have increased the promotion of indigenous languages at the educational, social and legal levels in recent years, and some countries, including Bolivia (Plurinational State of) and Peru, have even declared them official languages. Moreover, the recognition of indigenous languages has been integrated into most Latin American constitutions in some form, including in secondary legislation and rules.

A. Indigenous languages in the school system

23. Although the promotion and dissemination of indigenous languages is often acknowledged and recognized in legislation in Latin America and the Caribbean, their daily presence in formal education spaces as languages of instruction is still far from becoming a reality.

24. In its report entitled “Indigenous Latin America in the twenty-first century: the first decade”,⁷ the World Bank Group indicated that, from 2000 to 2010, the percentage of indigenous children between the ages of 6 and 11 who attended school had increased from 73 per cent to 83 per cent in Brazil, from 87 per cent to 96 per cent in Ecuador, from 78 per cent to 92 per cent in Panama and from 85 per cent to 93 per cent in Peru, according to the results of the two most recent censuses in each country. However, a gap remains between indigenous and non-indigenous children. The gap is larger in countries with smaller and more diverse and scattered indigenous populations, such as Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), probably owing to the inherent difficulties in reaching hundreds of indigenous communities (at least 382 in those four countries alone). However, in countries such as Ecuador, Mexico and Peru, the percentage of indigenous children attending school is similar to that of non-indigenous children, particularly at the primary level.

25. Although more indigenous girls and boys are attending primary school, this does not mean that they are receiving education in their own languages, since Spanish continues to predominate as the formal language of instruction in countries in which that language is spoken, or Portuguese in the case of Brazil. While there have been attempts to implement bilingual or intercultural education models in the Latin American region since the 1990s, schools have not become the space in which indigenous languages and cultures are strengthened; on the contrary, indigenous languages merely serve as a bridge for learning the dominant language.

26. Despite the wide range of laws and regulations that protect indigenous languages and cultures and the general recognition of the importance of including

⁷ World Bank Group, *Indigenous Latin America in the Twenty-First Century: The First Decade* (Washington, D.C., 2015).

bilingual intercultural education strategies in schools, less than 31.9 per cent of indigenous peoples living in the countries included in the World Bank study continued to speak an indigenous language at the end of their primary education and only 5.3 per cent on finishing secondary education. More importantly, there is little possibility of reversing this situation by including indigenous professionals in the design and implementation of new curricula, since less than 2 per cent of indigenous people who complete a university degree speak their native language.⁸

27. On the basis of interviews conducted with indigenous education teachers, the reasons that the teaching of indigenous languages in schools is not effective include the following:

- (a) Lack of interest of States in generating educational policies and legislation and allocating adequate resources for prioritizing indigenous languages;
- (b) Small number of indigenous or bilingual schools;
- (c) Lack of teachers trained in indigenous language instruction;
- (d) Absence of educational structures dedicated to the training of specialist teachers in indigenous language instruction;
- (e) Semilingualism of teachers in indigenous education schools (whereby they do not speak Spanish or their own language fluently, because they were forced to discontinue learning their indigenous language in the course of their own education, resulting in rudimentary mastery of the language, and because they learned Spanish from non-fluent teachers);
- (f) Linguistic dislocation of teachers (whereby speakers of one language are assigned to indigenous areas in which a language other than their own is spoken);
- (g) The lack of methodologies for teaching indigenous languages;
- (h) The lack of appropriate teaching materials in each indigenous language.

B. Conclusions regarding indigenous languages in Latin America

28. An international normative framework exists that establishes and is aimed at guaranteeing the right of indigenous peoples to receive education in their own languages. However, it has not been applied, mainly because racism and discrimination continue to prevail in various Latin American States, as reflected in the lack of specific public policies and budgetary resources for implementing indigenous language education in the formal educational system.

IV. Indigenous languages in Southern Africa

29. Education is a powerful tool for empowering any given community and enabling its members to determine their own development. Indigenous peoples from all walks of life therefore need this tool to determine their own economic, social, cultural and other rights and needs. This end can only be achieved if indigenous languages are considered in the formulation of education policies and legislation. In Southern Africa, in particular Namibia, indigenous San communities explained during various consultations that they regarded the development and inclusion of their indigenous languages in formal education as a first priority for inclusion by the Government in

⁸ Ibid.

its national education agenda.⁹ Indigenous community members, especially young people, consistently express the importance of having access to their indigenous languages in formal education systems as a vital factor in both the current marginalization of indigenous peoples and their prospects of gaining control over their own circumstances.

30. Namibia and South Africa have some of the most progressive and inclusive educational language policies, not only in Southern Africa but in Africa as a whole. However, the policies and other pieces of educational legislation do not translate into the provision of adequate educational facilities, the inclusion of indigenous languages in formal education or access to high-quality education. Factors such as the lack of mother-tongue instruction in indigenous languages in formal educational institutions contributes significantly to low levels of school attendance, which is a major obstacle for indigenous communities in improving their economic situation and achieving a social and political status equal to that of other dominant national communities.

A. Domestic legislation on formal education and language policy

Namibia

31. Some of the critical challenges faced by the indigenous San communities of Namibia and other Southern African countries in accessing education are rooted in the shared colonial histories of the countries. The colonial administration of the Territory of South West Africa (now Namibia) fostered the view that introducing indigenous San languages into formal education would be a waste of resources, as the communities that spoke those languages were traditionally hunter-gathers. As a result, very few schools were built in the areas in which indigenous San communities lived, and little to no effort was made to encourage indigenous San children in acquiring a formal education, let alone to teach their languages in schools. Moreover, the education of indigenous communities remained a lower priority than that of other ethnic groups. This historical legacy is still evident today, as the educational level of elderly indigenous San people is generally very low, with the majority unable to read or write.

32. After achieving independence from colonial rule, many new African Governments introduced education systems aimed at overcoming racial segregation by offering equal education to all. In Namibia, for example, the right to education is guaranteed and defined in article 20 of the Constitution, in which it is further stipulated that primary education should be compulsory and that the State should provide reasonable facilities to realize that right for every citizen of Namibia. In addition, the cultural rights of people are guaranteed in article 9 and the right to use a language other than English as a medium of instruction in article 3.

33. All of the aforementioned constitutional rights laid the foundation for a range of national policies aimed at securing equal access to education. However, this aim is still a distant reality for indigenous peoples, whose languages remain underdeveloped or undeveloped for use in formal education systems and continue to be undocumented, which poses a threat for the continued existence of those languages and cultures.

34. The implementation of the language policy for schools in Namibia by the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, adopted in 1991 and revised in

⁹ See Maarit Thiem and Jennifer Hays, “Education”, in *Scraping the Pot: San in Namibia Two Decades after Independence* (Windhoek, Land, Environment and Development Project of the Legal Assistance Centre and Desert Research Foundation of Namibia, 2014).

2003,¹⁰ remains a challenge. The policy calls for the native language of learners to be the medium of instruction for the first three years of formal education, with a transition to English thereafter and the teaching of the mother tongue as a subject for the remaining years of formal education. In the policy, the importance of minority languages and the pedagogical soundness of mother-tongue education is recognized, as is “the equality of all national languages regardless of the number of speakers or the level of development of a particular language” and “the fact that language is also a means of transmitting culture and cultural identity”.¹¹ However, only one of the six Namibian Indigenous San languages, Jul’hoan, has been even partially developed. According to government authorities, this is because there are no budgetary provisions for the development of indigenous San languages, whereas other languages have been fully developed and incorporated into the formal education system up to university level.

South Africa

35. South Africa, which shares with Namibia not only a border but also the experience of apartheid rule, has arguably the most liberal and progressive language policy in Africa. The policy, adopted by South Africa on gaining independence in 1994 and incorporated into its Constitution of 1996, is one of official multilingualism, according official status to 11 of its approximately 25 languages, including Afrikaans, English and Khoisan. Despite the progressive language policy of South Africa, English has become even more dominant relative to both Afrikaans and indigenous languages in society overall and in the country’s institutions, including in education and the media. There is therefore a mismatch between the multilingual language policy and observed language practices. While the language policy promotes multilingualism in formal education, the language practices in most of the public domains reflect a tendency towards monolingualism in English.

36. In summary, these two examples from Southern Africa show that, while it is indisputable that language policies differ from one country to another, there are certain inherent issues and trends common to the language policy and planning situations of these and most other States in Southern Africa as well as Latin America. One such trend is the inheritance and maintenance of colonial language policies, as observed in the case of Namibia. Another common issue is that of linguistic stratification and inequality, as seen in South Africa between the 11 official languages and other indigenous languages such as the San languages, which are nearly extinct and have not been incorporated into formal education. Even in South Africa, there is still stratification both among the 11 official languages and between these languages and those without official status, such as the indigenous San languages. Thus, even in places where progressive language policies have been introduced, blatant gaps between policy and practice lead to linguistic stratification and unofficial policies of monolingualism. While language policies in Southern Africa typically result from maintaining the status quo, any language planning that has occurred in these States has generally been ad hoc, in the sense that it has largely been declared, rather than proposed and debated, and has been substantially conditioned by the sociopolitical environment.

¹⁰ Namibia, Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, *The Language Policy for Schools in Namibia* (Windhoek, 2003).

¹¹ Ibid.

B. Conclusions regarding indigenous languages in Southern Africa

37. The generally low level of education of the indigenous San people in countries in Southern Africa has severe impacts on their economic situation. They cannot compete in the formal job market and are therefore highly dependent on menial work – thus their low level of education increases their high level of vulnerability. Difficulties persist in accessing information, dealing with official paperwork and developing skills, capacities, and the confidence to secure other rights, resulting in a vicious cycle from which few members of the San communities can escape. Improving both the access to and quality of education is of key importance in improving the situation of the indigenous San people, not only economically but in terms of their empowerment.

V. Indigenous languages in Eastern Europe and the Russian Federation

A. Indigenous languages in Latvia

38. Livonian is an indigenous language of Latvia that is not a part of the formal education system since Livonian families are very few and live scattered around Latvia.¹² During the Soviet period, the natural transmission of Livonian was broken. Nonetheless, since the 1980s, revitalization has been active and nowadays Livonian is used in some families as a second language. There are summer courses for children of Livonian background and social media groups dedicated to learning and practising Livonian. Since 2018, the Livonian Institute at the University of Latvia has been organizing research, language planning and courses of the Livonian language and culture.¹³

B. Indigenous languages in the Russian Federation

General framework

39. There are over 100 indigenous languages spoken in the Russian Federation.¹⁴ The exact number, however, depends on how the difference between a language and a dialect is defined. For example, Karelian has been treated as one language, but nowadays it is often treated as three or even four closely related languages. Data provided by the Center for Political Analysis and Information Security indicates that there are 277 languages and dialects used in the country, 89 of which (32 per cent) are used in the education system, including 30 (10.8 per cent) as a means of instruction and 59 (21.3 per cent) as a subject in Russian language education. According to the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 152 indigenous languages are spoken in the Russian Federation. The Foundation for the Preservation and Study of the Native Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation lists 138 indigenous languages.¹⁵

40. Populations of indigenous peoples with fewer than 50,000 members have since 2000 been included in the Common List of Minor Indigenous Peoples of Russia, which has been updated several times. It currently identifies 40 groups of indigenous peoples of the north, Siberia and the Far East and 7 groups residing elsewhere in the Russian Federation. In addition, Dagestan has compiled its own list of indigenous

¹² In 2011, there were 250 people in Latvia who claimed Livonian ethnicity.

¹³ See: <http://www.livones.net/lili/en>.

¹⁴ See: <https://minlang.iling-ran.ru/langs>.

¹⁵ See <https://родныеязыки.рф/>.

peoples which includes groups with more than 50,000 people. Different legal and institutional frameworks for the larger- and small-numbered indigenous peoples are applied in the Russian Federation.¹⁶

41. During the twentieth century several languages became extinct in the Russian Federation, for example Southern Itelmen, Northern Itelmen, Kamass, Soyot, Sirenik Yupik, and Yugh. More recently, in the twenty-first century, Akkala Sami, Kerek, Oroch and Bering Island Aleut have also become extinct. Several languages are on the brink of extinction with only a handful of elderly speakers left, for example Votic, (Western) Itelmen, Negidal and Alyutor. Language policies, such as the enforcement of the dominant Russian language as a medium of communication in the many boarding schools, have led to a switch to Russian for everyday communication, resulting in the disruption of the transmission of languages, cultural values and practices.

42. In article 26, paragraph 2, of the Russian Constitution, it is stipulated that everyone has the right to use their native language, to freely choose the language of communication, upbringing, education and creative work. In article 19, paragraph 2, the State guarantees the equality of rights and freedoms of man and citizen regardless of language, and article 68, paragraph 3, stipulates that the Russian Federation guarantees to all of its peoples the right to preserve their native language and to create conditions for its study and development. However, the exercise of these rights in practice is not always possible.

43. There are 85 federal subjects in the Russian Federation: 22 republics, 9 territories, 46 regions, 3 cities of federal significance, 1 autonomous region and 4 autonomous areas. Republics have special status and the right to establish their own State language, which in some cases can be used on a par with Russian. To date, 21 of the 22 republics have established a State language. The only republic not to exercise this right is Karelia.¹⁷

44. Since 2012, the Russian language has become compulsory in all preschool institutions. In 2018, the Russian Federation passed a federal law on teaching native languages in schools that limited the amount of time per week that classroom time could be dedicated to minority languages. Furthermore, the 2018 language law made all language instructions optional except for Russian. Public reception has been mixed, with those inside the autonomous ethnic republics seeing the State's push to further Russian identity as a threat to their own.¹⁸ The reactions of the academic representatives of Indigenous Peoples have been critical and, in some cases, even extreme. For example, on 10 September 2019, ethnic Udmurt sociologist Albert Razin committed self-immolation in protest over the new language law.

45. Following the adoption of the new law, those who wished to study their native language faced more obstacles. To date, with the exception of Tatarstan, all of the republics are providing fewer opportunities to study such languages than even the regressive law allows.¹⁹

¹⁶ Konstantin Zamyatin, "Indigenous peoples and education in the Russian Federation" in *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples: Education*, vol. III (United Nations Sales publication, 2017), p. 200.

¹⁷ Szymon Jankiewicz and Nadezhda Knyaginina, "The language of the republic at school: who decides?", Basic Research Programme Working Paper, WP BRP 83/LAW/2018 (National Research University, Higher School of Economics, 2018).

¹⁸ Ben Ramos, "The battle over language policy in Russia and former Soviet Republics", *World Mind*, Issue 5.2, 4 December 2021.

¹⁹ Paul Goble, "Non-Russian languages being pushed out of schools in five middle Volga republics", Fenno-Ugria, 18 September 2019.

46. In 2018, the Foundation for the Preservation and Study of the Native Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation was created.

Komi

47. In the academic year 1994/95, Komi was studied by 17,568 pupils as the native language and by 10,797 as the State language, making up 16.6 per cent of all schoolchildren in the republic. In the school year 1999–2000, Komi was studied by 16,926 pupils as the native language and by 21,224 as the State language; this was 20.2 per cent of the total of 169,000 schoolchildren in the republic but more than half of Komi schoolchildren (about 52 per cent) had Komi as a subject.²⁰

48. The Komi law on education was passed in October 2006. A month later it was amended with a new article regulating language issues. Article 1.1, among other things, restored compulsory teaching of both Komi and Russian as State languages in all educational institutions. Beginning in 2011, all students in Komi public schools had to learn the Komi language. In 2017, the initiative was cancelled because of the new federal law that banned obligatory teaching of all other languages except Russian. As from 1 September 2018, the teaching of indigenous languages in public schools has been only on a voluntary basis, requiring consent from the parents or legal guardian of each student. The schools that had used Komi as the medium for teaching switched to Russian as the medium in the 1960s, and today the Komi language is only taught as a subject. There are two approaches to teaching the language: as the mother tongue and as a State language (meaning, as a foreign language). Although the Komi language is taught at every level of education (from preschool through university and professional schools), the quality of the teaching is often poor. Today, at the preschool level, there are two programmes: one for children from homes in which Komi is used and the other for those who do not speak Komi.

49. In the 2019/20 school year, 12 per cent of preschool pupils, or about 7,000 children, learned Komi; in 2017, the number was 8,655. In a 2020 poll among Komi parents of preschool children in Syktyvkar, the capital of the Komi Republic, only 52.7 per cent of parents understood Komi and 22.1 per cent were able to speak it. Among their children only 41.4 per cent understood Komi and only 4.3 per cent were able to speak the language. Among parents, 32 per cent designated themselves as Komi, but only 13 per cent said that their children were Komi.

Tatarstan

50. Of the total population of Tatarstan in 2010, 53.2 per cent (2,012,571 people) were indigenous Tatar peoples. A majority of the Tatars, as well as some Russians in the schools of Tatarstan, have opted for the proposal to study the Tatar language as an optional additional lesson, which is often incorporated into their schedules as neither the first nor last class of the day. Since the federal law of 2018 on teaching native languages in schools came into effect, the number of lessons has dropped significantly. For example, nearly 100 per cent of schoolchildren in Tatarstan studied the Tatar language in the 2017/18 school year, compared with only 68 per cent in 2018/19 school year. The number of such lessons provided in the curricula over an 11-year period dropped from 960 to 685.²¹ The level of instruction of indigenous languages in some schools in Tatarstan is relatively good, compared with the level in

²⁰ Konstantin Zamyatin, “Finno-Ugric languages in Russian education: the changing legal-institutional framework and falling access to native language learning”, *Études finno-ougriennes*, vol. 44 (2012).

²¹ See article on learning native languages in schools in Tartarstan (“Изучение родных языков в школах Татарстана”), available at https://idelile.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_67.html.

other republics, but even in most urban schools it is still not effective enough to guarantee an ability to use the language beyond the home.²²

Mari El

51. In Mari El, where indigenous Mari (290,863 people) made up 41.7 per cent of the total population in 2010, only 7,775 students, or 10.5 per cent of the student population, indicated the Mari language as their mother tongue and chose to study it as a subject in the 2018/19 academic year, a decrease from 17.6 per cent in the 2011/12 academic year. The Mari language is studied on an optional basis in some schools in the context of a course that addresses the history and culture of the peoples of Mari El and the basics of the Mari language. The course that is available in most schools is on the history and culture of the peoples of Mari El, but it does not include study of the Mari language. At regional centres, where about 50 per cent of the students are enrolled, national languages are either studied to a minimal extent or not studied at all. In cities, national languages are hardly studied at all as mother tongues.²³

52. Multilingual schools have been created or are being planned in Bashkortostan, where the largest population of Mari people outside of Mari El live. In addition to Russian and English, a third language, either Bashkir, Tatar or Mari, is used for teaching some subjects. According to the 2010 census, 103,658 Mari people lived in Bashkortostan. In 2021, 4,500 schoolchildren in 103 schools studied the Mari language.²⁴ Taking into account the numbers of students in Mari El, where the Mari language is a State language, the situation there is much worse than in the diaspora of Bashkortostan, where 4.34 per cent (compared with 2.67 per cent in Mari El) of the total Mari population attends classes of the Mari language as a mother tongue.

53. The greatest threat to the Mari population is not the direct attacks on its language by making its study voluntary but rather the ways in which Russian legislators work to make the Mari language “unnecessary” to its speakers.²⁵

Other republics of the Russian Federation

54. The situation is similar or even worse in most of the other republics of the Russian Federation. In 2014, only one tenth of the children of non-Russian ethnicity studied in their native languages. Education delivered in non-Russian languages is organized only in the republics, mostly in rural schools in Bashkortostan, Kalmykia, Sakha (Yakutia), Tatarstan, Tuva and, to a lesser extent, urban schools.²⁶ In 2019, for example, 523 Karelian schoolchildren studied the Karelian language as a school subject, which constitutes 0.7 per cent of all schoolchildren in the republic.²⁷ Lack of mother tongue education results in cultural alienation, loss of language, Russification, lowered self-esteem and ultimately to the extinction of languages.

55. According to studies undertaken by Vyacheslav Shadrin, a researcher at the Institute for Humanitarian Research and North Indigenous Peoples Problems, Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in the Arctic areas of the Russian Federation: “The languages of indigenous peoples are on the brink of

²² Paul Goble, “Non-Russian languages” (see footnote 19 above).

²³ See https://idelile.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_9.html.

²⁴ See <https://mariuver.com/2021/09/27/bashk-uglub-mari/>.

²⁵ Paul Goble, “Kremlin’s strategy for non-Russians: make their languages and then their speakers unnecessary”, MariUver, 22 February 2019.

²⁶ A. L. Arefiev, “Languages of indigenous minorities of the North, Siberia and the Far East in the education system: past and present, Social Forecasting and Marketing Centre, 2014, pp. 110–113.

²⁷ Daria Khanolainen, Yulia Nesterova and Elena Semenova, “Indigenous education in Russia: opportunities for healing and revival of the Mari and Karelian indigenous groups?”, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* (20 October 2020).

extinction. And there is no unified approach to teaching indigenous traditional knowledge in the education system. ... At the moment, unfortunately, we have no education in mother tongues. At practically no level, even from kindergarten and primary schools.”²⁸

Seto people

56. Seto is a language spoken on the border area of Estonia and the Russian Federation by Orthodox Seto peoples. The Seto language is closely related to Estonian and has been considered a dialect of Estonian. There are about 12,000 people in Estonia who can speak the Seto language, but very few speakers are left in the bordering Pskov oblast of the Russian Federation, where, according to the 2011 census, only 123 Setos were living.

57. The Estonian medium school for Seto children in Petseri (Pechory, a town that belonged to Estonia from 1920 to 1945 but has since belonged to the Russian Federation) was discontinued in 2005. There is no Seto language education in the Russian Federation.²⁹

58. Seto is not recognized in Estonia as a separate language but rather as a regional language/dialect of Estonian, and Seto children acquire formal education in Estonian middle schools. In 2010, the Seto Institute was created in order to coordinate and promote research on Setomaa and Seto culture, and a Seto language kindergarten group was created in Värskä in 2021.³⁰

C. Conclusions on indigenous languages in Eastern Europe and the Russian Federation

59. While the right to education is outlined in Russian legislation, whether this right is exercised remains a concern. During the past decade, education reforms have reinforced Russian as the State language. The nation-building agenda envisages education as the central tool for identity construction. The closure of small ungraded schools has reduced access to education in the regions and has had an impact on the use of indigenous languages as a means of instruction.³¹

60. Concerns that their children might not do well in school if they don't learn Russian as their first language has caused parents to curtail their transmission of indigenous languages to their children. This practice is continuing even today and has led to a rapid loss of language in younger generations. Most of the languages with a smaller number of users are not taught or used in preschool education. Indigenous mother tongue teaching is available as a voluntary subject in primary classes. In many cases, such as with the Ket language, there are no child speakers left and even indigenous language teachers have weak knowledge of the language. The effectiveness of teaching is very low.³²

61. It has been argued by some that the hidden agenda of the recent legislation of the Russian Federation is to encourage the language loss and ethnic assimilation of non-Russians to foster an all-Russian national identity. Education is envisaged as the key instrument for building a nation. Schools in the republics are seen as obstacles to

²⁸ See <https://roscongress.org/en/search/?q=the+education+system+for+indigenous+peoples+of+the+arctic>.

²⁹ https://родныеязыки.рф/?page_id=4890.

³⁰ <https://news.err.ee/1608151657/ak-first-ever-seto-language-kindergarten-due-to-open-in-fall>.

³¹ Konstantin Zamyatin “Indigenous peoples and education in the Russian Federation” (see footnote 16 above).

³² See <https://minlang.site/lang/ketskiy>.

attaining this goal because they are said to promote alternative ethnoregional identities by teaching local languages, literature and histories.³³

62. Among the recommendations of the Linguistic Forum held in 2019 on the theme “Indigenous languages of Russia and beyond”, the authors of the present report fully agree with the following:

(a) To include in educational standards mandatory curricula on indigenous languages, including the titular languages of the republics of the Russian Federation;

(b) To include in educational standards mandatory curricula on the teaching of indigenous languages (with the criteria that teachers working with children be native speakers);

(c) To develop a State target programme on the teaching of minority languages of the Russian Federation, aimed at simplifying and accelerating the expert review of specialized textbooks and reducing their cost, at creating relevant content and at using modern information technologies;

(d) To introduce the possibility of a unified State examination on the subject of “native language”.³⁴

VI. General recommendations

63. **General recommendations include the following:**

(a) **Member States and relevant agencies should make greater efforts to support the modernization of indigenous education;**

(b) **Many indigenous languages remain underdeveloped for usage in formal education systems. To develop the terminology necessary for formal education in an indigenous language, a working group for language planning and development should be created for each language and be provided with State funding;**

(c) **Member States should provide disaggregated data on the number of students who attend small ungraded schools, nomadic schools and boarding schools across the regions. These schools provide the opportunity for children to remain in their communities and receive an education locally. The use of boarding schools for nomadic indigenous children should be minimized;**

(d) **Indigenous peoples must be encouraged to participate and be involved in decision-making about the development and implementation of educational programmes and curricula and in school administration. Indigenous parents need to be made aware of their right to request the inclusion of indigenous languages and other ethnocultural subject matter;**

(e) **Awareness should be raised among indigenous peoples about the opportunities to learn their own languages, and the value of bilingualism should be encouraged. Authorities should ensure that education reforms do not diminish ethnically oriented education and do not decrease the number of small ungraded schools that support indigenous students;**

³³ Konstantin Zamyatin, “A Russian-Speaking nation? The promotion of the Russian language and its significance for ongoing efforts at Russian nation-building”, in *The Politics of Multilingualism: Europeanisation, Globalisation and Linguistic Governance*. F. Grin and P.A. Kraus, eds, (Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2018), pp. 39–64.

³⁴ See https://iling-ran.ru/web/ru/conferences/2019_indigenous/resolution.

(f) Member States should support the necessary measures to incorporate interculturality into school curricula and ensure that the language of the region or area in which the school is located is studied at the school. Similarly, States should guarantee connectivity in indigenous regions so that the school-age population has access to education when it is impossible to attend schools;

(g) Member States should create the conditions to ensure that all basic education teachers assigned to indigenous areas master the language of the community and teach in that language. In the same way, the necessary resources and measures should be allocated for the training of teachers specialized in the teaching of indigenous languages;

(h) States should support the teaching and usage of minority indigenous languages at kindergartens and schools in cities and urban areas;

(i) Legislative framework should allow the use of full methods of language nests for the revitalization of indigenous languages and such nests should be included in the general educational framework;

(j) Dialectal variants should be allowed in schools since standardization can be detrimental to the preservation of endangered languages and linguistic ecology.
