

## **Poly-Ethnicity and a System of Education in Russia with special reference to the Siberian Federal District**

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### **Introduction**

The experience of Russia from about the 17th to the beginning of the 21st centuries shows that a feature of education and its development as a cultural phenomenon is its super-national and super-ethnic character. That is the case for natural sciences as well as the humanities. The humanities, and particularly language and ethnic studies, provide a favourable context for a productive inter-ethnic dialogue. Knowledge of a foreign language has an exclusive position here, irrespective of the status of that language: knowledge of languages with speakers in large parts of the world gives access to a large cultural stratum, while knowledge of minor languages provides access to a small cultural stratum.

When a large or a consolidated ethnic-political community comes into contact with numerous smaller ethnic groups, one of the purposes of educational politics and policy becomes the integration of the different ethnic groups into one community. The educational strategy usually defines the expedient completion of such integration.

In a complicated socio-economic situation, such as in Siberia, the development of a model for ethnic politics in the sphere of education in a unified state characterised by a multicultural society, becomes very topical. Therefore, a research project was undertaken to develop a conceptual basis for a model to ensure quality education to diverse ethnic groups in the system of education of a unique multi-cultural region, namely Siberia. In this article an attempt is made to identify basic principles and to formulate the main trends regarding the development and implementation of state ethnic policy in the sphere of education.

### **Relevant definitions**

The term “education” is closely associated with the term “civilization”. Education brings about qualitative changes to the history of ethnos, because it creates the opportunity to transmit knowledge which has not only ethnic cultural values, for instance mathematics, physics, chemistry, astronomy, geology and technology.

Ethnic policy is determined at two levels in the related investigation. Firstly, it is determined in a broad sense as a concrete sphere of socio-political life of a society in which interests and feelings of ethnic groups (generalities) and other people in society are touched. In a narrower sense, ethnic policy refers to a concrete direction of state institutions’ activities and civil society, in particular as it pertains to the regulation of public processes, including the sphere of education.

### **Ethnic policies in Russia: a historical perspective**

#### **The pre-Soviet period**

Educational ethnic policy is particularly influenced by events in the past. Russia historically consisted of an alliance of peoples, cultures and lands, all based on one purpose and strengthened by national values and interests (although “national” should not be understood in the sense of citizenship of a particular state). By the end of the 17th century, when Russian expansion to the eastern parts of Russia started, the Siberian people was characterised by different levels of economic and political power. They were economically less developed than the people in Central Russia, and ethnically they were a collection of tribes and groups with different languages.

The actual autonomy of Siberian peoples during the tsarist period was defined by their special status and high degree of the self-governance, which meant that “real, internal autonomy of indigenous inhabitants was provided in everyday people’s life” (Code of Laws, 1897: 185). The reforms of Speranskii also turned out to be positive for Siberian ethnic groups, as it practically confirmed the special status of heterogeneous control of Siberia at the legal level (Skobelev, 2002: 5).

A particular educational policy for the indigenous population of the outer reaches of Russia already existed at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century and in 1912 a broad programme for the development of schools and other educational institutions for “foreigners” was accepted at the All-Russian Congress of Teachers in Kaluga. However, the implementation of the programme did not keep to its original aims.

### The Soviet period

During the Soviet period, many indigenous peoples as well as other Russian ethnic groups experienced the totalitarian regime as arbitrary, and as being associated with kurtosis in ethnic national policy – a free demarcation of administrative-territorial borders, abolition of national regions and national village soviets as well as the repression in the attitude of the elite and intellectuals. But it can be assumed that it was during the Soviet period that Siberian peoples experienced an accelerated economic, social, cultural and spiritual development. It was during that period that the majority of those people gained a writing system and got appreciable results in economic modernisation. However, the inclusion of Siberian ethnical groups into the socio-cultural environment of the Soviet state, by means of a single writing system on the basis of Cyrillic, national literature, theatres and museums, was also a form of ideological control in the ethnic national sphere.

Siberia and the Far East of Russia were “colonised” by Moscow State with the purpose of sharing in the economic riches (exploitation) of the regions, as well as the expansion of Russian settlements. This “colonisation” was completed during the Soviet period and became a natural expansion of Russia into the new territories – an extensive development of the empire.

During the Soviet period, the development of indigenous ethnics was characterised by significant asymmetry. Many peoples did not get significant attention. In some cases, the industrialisation of indigenous peoples’ territories meant that their traditional lifestyle was replaced, which caused negative effects. The main processes which influenced the ethnic-political situation in the region have the following results:

- The numbers of ethnic minorities in Siberia and the Far North declined and some groups were in danger of becoming extinct.
- Minority groups lost their native language as the main element of their original culture.
- Significant cultural assimilation, resulting in a disastrous loss of traditional religions and beliefs, lifestyle and perceptions of the world occurred.
- The destruction of traditional trades and the mode of life associated with it followed.
- These minorities experienced a deterioration of physical health, accompanied by ecological problems.
- The political situation also resulted in the fragmentation of groups, accompanied by a loss of traditional mechanisms of social control on the basis of ancient traditions and customs.

### The post-Soviet period

The global transformation of socio-political and spiritual systems during the Russian post-Soviet period appeared to be the cause of many changes which affected the character of ethnic social interaction as well as the conceptualisation regarding the development of this interaction. The socio-political and institutional deconstruction, complicated by social anomy (due to the influences of Durkheim), led to the destruction of the old Soviet system of national politics regarding ethnic policies. The result was that new models had to be found, but it still remains a problem to reconcile

theoretical approaches and political management practices, particularly in the sphere of education and culture.

The history of the region not only defines the ethnic social landscape, but also presents the most important non-institutional determinant for the formation of educational policy. The promotion of a certain attitude towards history and concrete historic events is found to be the most important mechanism in the hands of “ethnic entrepreneurs”. History is often mythologised, “extended” and manipulated by these persons in order to reach their predetermined goals.

### **The present situation**

Ethnic policy today is defined as a system of ideologies and doctrines on synchronising different interests in the ethnic sphere, including the interests of the state and ethnic groups, and the realisation of these interests by institutions of the state and civil society. As such, *ethnic policy* is a twofold policy, namely the incorporation of ethnic minorities into the socio-cultural space of the ethnic majority on the one hand, and the policy of the conservation of the cultural identity and ethnic cultural heritage of ethnic minorities on the other hand.

Thus, on a state (national) level, it is necessary to use a subsidiary model of ethnic policy in the sphere of education, which means the policy of exact equality within which an active role is given to the civil society and its institutions. The state should also perform legislating, coordinating and controlling functions. The function of the vertical integration of Russian education must be provided by the centrally accepted basic educational standards, taking into account the specific characteristics of the historic development and socio-cultural uniqueness of regional and local communities.

The analysis and comparison of the features of the ethnic social sphere in modern Russia and other countries of the post-Soviet period, emphasise many similarities and differences in ethnic policy. It is also true that while solving the problem of inter-ethnic relations, and mainly the education of an ethnic tolerant generation, “we are too obsessed to reconstruct a certain lost ideal cultural norm, which indeed has never existed, or we try to establish cultural differences on a group level, absolutely ignoring, despising and rejecting homogeneousness which is more significant” (Tishkova, 2002: 347-348).

The Russian population is diverse in an ethnic and religious sense, socially stratified and characterised by its cultural heritage. It includes more than ten ethnic groups, between which there are particular differences and similarities, as a result of the region’s complex history and the interaction between the groups. Ethnic groups are very tolerant of one another. However, there is also evidence of dynamic social processes in this region. Undoubtedly, these processes influence educational policy regarding ethnic groups in this part of Russia.

### **Education policy regarding ethnic groups in Siberia**

#### **Demographical and geographical context**

Below, the geographical features of the Siberian Federal Region are described, and it is indicated how these features influence educational ethnic policy in that area.

The Siberian Federal Region (SFR) represents one of the largest regions of the Russian Federation. It covers about 30% of the country’s territory, with a population of more than 20,5 million people or 14,3% of the total population of Russia. The uniqueness of the region is defined not only by its geographical territory, its peculiarities of natural-climatic conditions and remoteness from the centre, but also by the historical uniqueness of its expansion and development, its geopolitical status, its natural resources as well as its economic, scientific and human resources. What makes

SFO a problematic region, is its multi-cultural regional community, which is characterised by ethnic, religious and socio-cultural differences. These features define the uniqueness of the region as part of Russia and its value as an integral part of a multi-ethnic, diverse religious and multicultural state.

SFR includes the Altay Republic, Buryatia, Tyva, Hakasiya, Altay and the Krasnoyarsk regions, Irkutskaya, Kemerovskaya, Novosibirskaya, Omskaya, Tomskaya and the Chitinskaya areas; as well as Agin-Buryat, Taimyr, Ust-Ordynsky and Evenki Autonomous Areas. SFR has the second most inhabitants, after the Central Federal Region. Eight out of sixteen areas are ethnic national areas, and the other territories are multi-ethnic too.

More than one hundred ethnic groups live in the vast region. The representatives of seven ethnic groups, namely the Altai people, the Byryaty, the Uvinian, the Khakasses, the Dolgany, the Nenets and the Evenks, have state-national or territorial-national republics and autonomous areas. About 70 000 people belong to small indigenous groups, accounting for more than one third of the forty five indigenous groups of Siberia. Many indigenous people live in their own territories on their ancestral land. However, the administrative borders of these territories were quite often arbitrarily fixed and repeatedly revised. Many ethnic groups today still harbour bitterness and resentment about past injustices, and this negatively affects ethnic, political and educational processes.

The main role-players in ethnic processes in the region are the Russians and indigenous Siberian people. The interaction between these ethnic groups goes back more than three hundred years. An analysis of the ethnic structures of the population identifies the following groups which need to be taken into consideration in the SFO, namely:

- the *Russian-speaking population*, living on territory of the region;
- *title ethnic groups*, having their own state-national and territorial-national formation;
- *small indigenous groups of Siberia and the North*, who do not have territorial autonomy;
- *ethnic groups living in small areas; disperse ethnics*, ingrained in the region; and
- the “*new*” *ethnic groups*.

The latter group may again be divided into three subgroups, namely:

- ethnic groups that immigrated from the other regions of Russia,
- ethnic groups that immigrated from neighbouring or nearby foreign countries, and
- ethnic groups that immigrated from distant foreign countries.

The picture sketched above illustrates the complex nature of inter-ethnic cross-contacts and ethnic social interaction. The SFR is distinguished from other regions of Russia because of its diverse ethnic population and complex territorial-administrative structure.

What makes matters worse is that, even in these modern times, many Russian ethnic groups living in remote areas still follow their traditional culture and have a weak economy. For these people, national education must be the instrument to equip them for a modern economy and to modernise their society. To this end, it is necessary to balance priorities and to determine the possibilities and limitations of different models and management frameworks.

The population of the area is in constant decline, due to a declining birth rate, a high mortality rate and an increasing number of immigrations. Since 1989, the population of the SFO has decreased by a million people. The northern autonomous area and certain republics in the territory have a very small population. This, together with an ineffective communication system, is the main reason for the poor education and lack of professional achievements among small ethnic groups in Siberia.

Migration in the region has become a prominent phenomenon. A significant influx of people from Caucasus and from Central and South-East Asia, particularly from China, is a great concern for everyone in Russia in terms of its geo-political, ethno-cultural and economic consequences. All this predestines the strategy of educational ethnic policy at a regional level.

## Education provisioning

### Introduction

If an education system continues to function in a context of ethnic isolation and if it involves that the traditional culture and language of such isolated groups be replaced by that of the majority, small groups will disintegrate and new diasporas will develop. The diaspora of minority ethnic groups of the North of the Russian Federation includes both the nearby town population and the inhabitants of Moscow and St. Petersburg much farther away. However, people feel that this kind of education enables them to escape the prejudice against minority ethnic groups and cultures. Yet, experience proved that even within two or three generations, an education system alone is not sufficient to help people overcome these difficulties. This is mainly because society as a whole keeps their prejudices against minorities and discriminates against them when they apply for studies, subsidies and jobs. Because of this discrimination on a daily basis, minority ethnic groups have a negative attitude towards and reject ethnically oriented education. The Soviet experience showed a low quality of education in the national and extra-territorial “reserves” of education institutions. Such education institutions are regarded as being of low quality by the outside world, and their graduates are considered to possess inferior knowledge and worthless qualifications.

Ethnically oriented education was successful in Jewish and Muslim communities, but cannot be used as examples for the northern regions of Russia, because:

- the presence of confessional specificities of education and culture in these situations; and
- the volume and degree of arrangements of cultural information required by Judaism and Islam as the basic forms of ethnically oriented education, in comparison with the tasks of the education of minority ethnic groups in the Russian North.

### Policies regarding education to ethnic minorities

Thus, the development of an ethnic policy in Siberian education remains a big challenge. Education itself is regarded as a super-ethnic cultural phenomenon, which per definition brings change to the ethnic culture of minorities. Minority languages are replaced by the language of the majority and the status of traditional responsibilities deteriorates. The economic situation of these people therefore does not improve – instead, they are simply forced out of the economy.

Large ethnics groups in the Russian Federation retain their culture and group cohesiveness, because their ethnic identity is not affected by education. Minority ethnic groups, however, are fragmented along social and territorial lines when people start acquiring varying levels of education, value systems and standards of living. It then becomes very difficult for members of such groups to maintain their original language, culture and ethnical origins.

The most important political and legal document that defines the position of the Russian state in the sphere of ethnic policies in education is the State National Policy of the Russian Federation (Russian Newspaper, 1996: 5). The following principles are of special importance for this discussion:

- The equal rights and liberty for all people and equal access to all social and public institutions, irrespective of race, nationality, language or religion are recognised.
- No restrictions of people’s rights based on social, racial, national, language or religious grounds should be tolerated.
- Timely and peaceful solutions of disputes and conflicts should always be the objective.

- No activities that undermine the safety of the state or that promote social, racial, national or religious intolerance or conflict should be tolerated.

In the first place, modern ethnic policy must be civil. It must promote the building of a united nation of Russians as well as the development of inter-ethnic respect and harmony on the principles of multiculturalism and inter-ethnicity. Education must be the vehicle for this process of forming a civil nation in a poly-ethnic state.

What is proposed in this article is a model of education provisioning in which the ethnic groups in different regions have a certain degree of control. The model is proposed for implementation in the republics, autonomous districts and national regions and involves the following:

- *Firstly*, cooperation regarding education provision must be obtained from all role-players in all regions, and not only from the official, national administration.
- *Secondly*, the control must be based on a united ideology, which is formulated both centrally and regionally. It is important that decisions regarding education for a specific region or sphere should be made *by* that sphere or region, and not *for* it.

In this article, *ethnic policy in the educational sphere* is understood to incorporate the principle of a distribution of authority and responsibility in the particular sphere. *Subsidiarity* means that the central authority only performs those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level. It regulates the relations between different levels of authority and entails:

- the constitutional principle of the division of authority between different levels of responsible organisations;
- the protection of the sovereignty of a lower level; and
- the development of real democracy in a system of extended and multi-layered control.

Subsidiarity can, according to these guidelines, provide a solution for the problem to coordinate the policy for education for different ethnic groups, so that it will comply with modern demands while also protecting cultural uniqueness and identity. The existing *ethnic policy of equal results* must be replaced by an *ethnic policy of equal opportunities*.

The following principles are suggested for an ethnic education policy:

- *Equality and liberty must be adopted as the principle point of departure and must form the basis of an ethnic education policy.*

It must be realised that democratisation as a political process does not solve all ethnic and national problems, particularly in the spiritual and cultural spheres. It has both possibilities and restrictions, and in particular it must be kept in mind that a proportional electoral system cannot provide equitable representation of the interests of ethnic minorities. The cultural and educational rights of minorities are in fact very vulnerable in modern societies and in a globalised world.

Universal human rights, and specifically the rights of minority ethnic groups, are also an important factor. Individual liberty and human rights must be practiced in accordance with the principles of ethnic tolerance, multiculturalism and respect for the language, culture and lifestyle of all ethnic groups. A democratic dispensation also does not reassure people that all ethnic groups will enjoy the same privileges and be treated the same. Furthermore, an open society encourages the flow of people across regions, which leads to increased contact between various ethnic groups and which complicates the ethnic situation.

- *A high level of ethnic tolerance and mutual respect is possible only where different ethnic values and identities can be harmonised with each other and with central, national values.*  
For instance, the idea of the rebirth of Russia as a superpower can promote the consolidation and cohesion of different peoples in the country. It is important that no ethnic group feel stigmatised or frowned upon by another.
- *All groups should have equal access to all levels of education.*

Eventually, the social stratification of one ethnic group (in terms of income, prestige, authority, access to different social institutions and values, as determined by their level of education) should be similar to the social stratification of other groups. In this regard, the issue of preferences for ethnic minorities remains problematic.

Another problem is the matter of a quota system to reserve places for ethnic minorities in the higher education system. The well-known American sociologist Lipset offers the following guideline here: “Leaving policy, concentrating on special preferences, can not and must not mean the refusal from obligation of the nation to guarantee even chances for ‘restricted’ people.” (Lipset, 1996: 149-150.)

Thus, the following conditions are necessary for ethnic cultural development through the education system:

- Firstly, the general education system and each ethnic group must reach agreement about the specific educational needs of that group and formulate an education policy accordingly, while constantly keeping in mind that the group in question does not exist in isolation but must maintain functional relationships with other groups and with the rest of the world.
- *Secondly*, it is necessary to solve all conflict between ethnic groups, through education and the resourcefulness of the state.

To summarise, ethnic education policy in modern Russia must be:

- *scientifically motivated*, based on recognised achievements of modern education science;
- *preventive*, aimed at prevention of the most serious risks and threats regarding ethnic minority groups;
- *holistic*, providing solutions to the major problems within the framework of a united strategy and ideologies;
- *integral*, harmoniously included and adapted in the general model of political, socio-economic and ethnic cultural development; and, finally,
- *identical*, taking into account particularities of different territories and local communities.

In conclusion, the new educational policy must realise that ethnic identities will be destroyed if attempts are made to increase people’s level of education through an undiversified, rigid education system. The education system needs to be adapted for each different ethnic group, to suit that group’s particular social reality. This needs to be done in cooperation with the minorities themselves. In this way, the educational policy for the different peoples of the North of the Russian Federation will provide services and privileges mainly for ethnic minorities rather than for the majority.

## Summary

The aim of the article was to develop a conceptual basis for a model to ensure quality education to diverse ethnic groups in the system of education of a unique multi-cultural region, namely Siberia. The basic relevant definitions were provided and a brief historical overview regarding ethnic policies during the pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet periods were provided.

The geographical and demographical features of Siberia, as a backdrop for the ethnic policies in education, were provided. Finally, the proposed model was provided and included the basic principles that should guide policies regarding education to minorities in Siberia as well as the conditions for ethnic cultural development in the education system. The article closed with the findings that ethnic identities will be destroyed if education is provided through an undiversified, rigid education system and that any particular education system should be adapted in co-operation with the minorities themselves, especially in Siberia.

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