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Workshop 21: Non Territorial Autonomy, Multiple Cultures and the Politics of Stateless Nations

Non-territorial autonomy in a failing territorial autonomy

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the Republic of Mari-El. The Republic (capital city Yoshkar-Ola, 278,000 inhabitants) is located in the north of the Volga bend. It is one of 21 ethnic republics which comprise part of the 83 subjects of the Russian Federation. Its titular people are the Mari, of whom more below. The ethnic composition of the total republic population of 728,000 as of the 2010 census (self-identification) was:¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russians</td>
<td>345,513</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mari</td>
<td>312,178</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatars</td>
<td>43,377</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuvash</td>
<td>7,418</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Udmurt</td>
<td>2,166</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the census, 51.1% identified themselves as Russian Orthodox, 15.5% as Animist (yazichestvo, the tradition religion of the Mari), 6% as Muslim, 25.5% as non-believers, 5% believe in “their own god”, and 0.5% are Protestant and others.²

The Russian Federation is a famously asymmetric federation.³ The Russian Federation has at least 193 ethnicities, and at least 89 languages. More than 40 languages other than Russian are the language of instruction in Russian schools. However, in Yoshkar-Ola only the Russian language is to be heard on the streets and in public buildings.

¹ http://www.myshared.ru/ppt/104843/# (accessed on 7 March 2013)
² http://www.myshared.ru/ppt/104843/# (accessed on 7 March 2013)
I visited Yoshkar-Ola in the first week of November 2012 as International Scholar at the Law Faculty of Mari State University, under the auspices of the Academic Fellowship Programme of George Soros’ Open Society Foundation. This has enabled three young lecturers of the Faculty Inna Garanina (who is herself half Tatar, and lives in Kazan), Tatiana Okisheva, and Oleg Sidorov to study abroad, and to receive a supplementary salary on their return. These young scholars and their colleagues ensure that the Faculty has an excellent reputation in Russia and abroad. However, the only ethnic Mari on the Faculty is the veteran professor Viktor Stepanovich Solovyov, and I had the benefit of a long interview with him during my stay. I am returning to Yoshkar-Ola in April 2013 and will continue my field-work while there.

I have published extensively on the problems of Russia’s multi-ethnicity and in particular Russia’s long tradition of territorial autonomy during the Tsarist Empire and in the Soviet period, and the experiment in National-Cultural Autonomy (NCA) since 1996. My forthcoming book has a chapter on Russian autonomy: Russia had a surprisingly strong tradition of regional autonomy both under Tsarism and the USSR. My focus has in part been on the Tatar experience, of highly successful territorial autonomy and some experiments in the NCA form. Most recently I have explored the question why the NCA form has been so successful.

In this paper, I first set the scene of my visit – some aspects of Yoshkar-Ola which aroused my curiosity. Next, I examine the history of the Mari people. Third, I explore the current state of NCA in Mari El, in particular that of the Tatars.

Perhaps the Mari are in a better position than they would have been without their “own” republic. On paper they obtain many advantages. But I heard it said that the Mari, a large number of them, who live in the neighbouring Republic of Bashkortostan, are better off. Due to its particular local circumstances, they are if anything persecuted in Mari El. At the same time, the Tatar NCA is thriving.

**First impressions of Yoshkar-Ola**

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In order to get to Yoshkar-Ola, one must fly to Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, and then drive through dense forest for two to three hours. The quality of the road is significantly worse on crossing the border between Tatarstan and Mari El.

In addition to my duties as International Scholar I was able to find time to investigate the situation of the Mari in their “own” Republic; and also to find out about the various NCAs there.

But my first surprise on arriving in Yoshkar-Ola was to be taken to the Hotel Lyudovik Moro, which is not only rather grand but is decorated throughout in the style of Italian Renaissance. On asking why this was, I was directed to the Hotel brochure, which contains an interview with the President of the Republic of Mari El, Leonid Markelov, of whom more below. Not only had the hotel been named so as to contain his initials, but he spoke enthusiastically about his project to re-cast Mari El as a letter-day Florence in the Volga region. He has spent lavishly to construct a large number of buildings in pseudo-Florentine style, including a kilometer long embankment of such buildings which the local people have nicknamed “Bruges”. He has also constructed a completely new Kremlin, in the traditional style, using red brick.

This is particularly strange, given that Mari El is one of the poorest regions of Russia. It is heavily dependent on federal subsidies. In 2004, federal grants accounted for 60% of the budget of the republic. Mari El has few natural resources and the republic’s military industry, which used to account for more than 80% of its gross domestic product (GDP), collapsed after the fall of the Soviet Union. Today there are only smaller-scale industries in the republic. At the same time, conditions for agricultural production are not very favorable in terms of climate and soil conditions, and the lack of modern technologies has created difficulties during the economic transition of the post-Soviet era. In 2004 the average monthly income in Mari El was 2,567 rubles (approximately €75), compared to 6,383 rubles (€187) in the RF as a whole and 5,038 rubles (€148) in the Volga Federal District. Only four Russian regions had a lower average income. What is more, in the first half of 2005, more than half of all residents of Mari El had incomes below the minimum existence level, which is calculated on the basis of costs for basic foodstuffs, services and obligatory payments and was 2,001 rubles (approximately €59) per month in late 2004.

The situation has improved since 2004, but marginally. The ice-cream factory owned by the leader of the Tatar NCA is one of a very few new industries.

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Leonid Markelov himself is widely reported to have close connections with organized crime; and it is said that this is the source of his very large-scale eccentric building programme. I discuss him and his career in detail below.

**Mari as a Finno-Ugric language**

The language of the Mari, whose titular republic this is, is one of the group of Finno-Ugric languages, distantly related to modern Finnish, Hungarian and Estonian. Finno-Ugric languages are a group of languages which together with the Samoyedic languages form the Uralic family. The following Finno-Ugric languages are spoken in Russia. The Balto-Finnic languages are: Ingrian, Karelian, Veps, Votic and Saami. The Mordovian languages: are Erzya and Moksha. There are Permic languages: Komi-Permyak, Komi-Zyrian, and Udmurt. The Ugric languages are Khanty and Mans. And finally the Mari language.

The speakers of these languages are to be found in the following subjects of the Russian Federation, each with their own impressive web-sites. The Republic of Karelia, the Republic of Komi, the Republic of Mari-El, the Republic of Mordovia, the Udmurt Republic, and the Khanty-Mansiisk Autonomous Okrug – it calls itself Yugra.

In Rein Taagapera’s *The Finno-Ugric Republics and the Russian State* the title of each chapter contains an apt epithet on the republic concerned. Karelia is “Orthodox Finland”; Mordovia (Moksherzia) is “The Siamese Twins”; Mari-El (Mariel) has “Europe’s Last Animists”; Udmurtia is “The Redhead Children of the Sun”; Komi (Komimu) is “The Northernmost Alphabet”; and Khanty-Mansiisk (Hanti-Mansia and Nenetsia) is “The Curse of Arctic Oil”.

The ethnic republics have a very special constitutional status as regards their languages. By virtue of Article 68 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation adopted on 12 December 1993:

1. The Russian language shall be a state language on the whole territory of the Russian Federation.

2. The Republics shall have the right to establish their own state languages. In the bodies of state authority and local self-government, state institutions of the Republics they shall be used together with the state language of the Russian Federation.

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16 Rein Taagapera *The Finno-Ugric Republics and the Russian State* (Hurst & Co, 1999), and Chapter 1 at [http://politnauka-komi.narod2.ru/publications/Chapter_1._Rein_Taagepera._The_Finno-Ugric_Republics_and_the_Russian_State._Hurst_and_Routledge_1999._Also_in_Hungarian_and_Estonian.pdf](http://politnauka-komi.narod2.ru/publications/Chapter_1._Rein_Taagepera._The_Finno-Ugric_Republics_and_the_Russian_State._Hurst_and_Routledge_1999._Also_in_Hungarian_and_Estonian.pdf)
3. The Russian Federation shall guarantee to all of its peoples the right to preserve their native language and to create conditions for its study and development.”

Furthermore, they attract not of the fear or xenophobia suffered by the Tatars, who are the largest minority in Russia, five and half million strong, with their own powerful and wealthy republic; the Ukrainians, the second in number; or the many immigrants from former Soviet states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, the very large numbers of Tajiks in particular performing the dirty work in Moscow as gastarbeiter. Taagepera correctly notes that:

The eastern Finno-Ugric areas are Russia's oldest colonies, subjected 700 to 400 years ago to the Russian yoke. The Russians harbor no historical animosity towards the Finno-Ugrians, given that they never threatened Russia the way the Tatars did.

He observes as follows:

Contrasting both with the distant Siberian and North Caucasian nations and the nearby but strong Bolgar, the Finno-Ugric nations are closer to Moscow and weak. This exceptional situation presents Russian democracy with a different challenge: magnanimity. There is no question that the Russians can hold on to the Finno-Ugric republics. Rather, the challenge is moral, as in the case of the Australian aborigines, the New Zealand Maoris, and the US and Canadian Amerindians. Can the dominant culture begin to treat an indigenous minority decently?

Indeed, the Finno-Ugric languages of Russia are very much endangered, despite their constitutionally-guaranteed position and impressive institutions. However, not all commentators are despondent. Seppo Lalluka commented that

… the cultural revival that began in the late 1980s gives promise that the vanishing of Finno-Ugrian communities is not so imminent as has sometimes been expected. It is certainly true that most communities of speakers of the Finno-Ugrian languages are contracting in size and there are no definite signs indicating a quick turnabout. Even though it is crucially important, language is not the only bearer of ethnic identity. If the ethnic communities are examined irrespective of language, the curves of their development look somewhat better and, as far as the larger groups are concerned, a sudden collapse is an unlikely possibility. Arguably, then, the time has not yet come for predicting the number of decades or centuries after which one or another of the Finno-Ugrian groups will cease to exist.

In a special report of 20 December 2005, “The dying fish swims in water: Russia finds outside support for its ethnic minorities threatening” The Economist reminded its readers that:

18 Taagepera (1999) p.28
19 The name given to themselves by the Volga Tatars
20 Taagepera (1999) p.29
22 Lallukka (2001) pp.33-4
23 http://www.economist.com/node/5323735 (accessed on 6 March 2013)
The Finns themselves got away for good. Their ethnic kinsfolk—the Komi, Mari, Udmurts and the like—managed it only briefly. In 1917-18 there was a big country in the middle of Russia called Idel-Ural (literally, “Volga-Ural”) which united the Finno-Ugric… and Turkic peoples in those areas. When it was crushed by the Bolsheviks in late 1918, its refugee foreign minister, Sadri Maqsudi Arsal, got a warm welcome first in Finland and then Estonia. The Mari can be divided into three ethnic subgroups: Hill (Kuryk) Mari, Meadow (Olyk) Mari and Eastern (Upo) Mari. The Meadow Mari are the largest group. There are two literary languages among the Mari and several different dialects are spoken. The Mari (who number 670,000) make up almost one-half of Mari El’s population (43 per cent). According to the Information Centre of Finno-Ugric Peoples, 52 per cent of the Mari live outside the Mari Republic, in the neighbouring republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, and in Kirov and Sverdlovsk Oblasts.24 Mari El is one of the last outposts of animism in Europe. They practice yazichество, worshipping in forest glades.

The tragic history of the Mari

The Mari have had a rather tragic history.25 In brief, they lived under the subjection of foreign powers from the 6th century (from 551 the Ostrogoths, from the 7th century the Bolgars (now Volga Tatars), from 1236 the Mongol-Tatars, and from 1552 the Russians). The Mari did not acquiesce in Russian rule. Mari resistance to Russian conquest was so fierce that the Russian expression for being between a rock and a hard place is “to be between an abyss and the Cheremiss” (the old Russian name for the Maris). In the second half of the 16th century, following the Russian conquest of the Kazan khanate, the Mari fought desperate defensive battles, in Russian known as the “Cheremiss wars”, from 1552 to 1557, 1572 to 1574, and 1581 to 1584). These ended in defeat for the Mari. A contemporary chronicler wrote: “the marshes, lakes and rivers were filled with the bones of the Maris and the earth saturated with their blood.” Many of the Mari resettled in territories to the East, and Russian colonisation started.

In the 18th century the migration of the Mari continued, partly as a result of enforced conversion from their native animism to Russian Orthodoxy. Their historical territory was divided between the Russian provinces of Kazan, Vyatka and Nizhni Novgorod. Moreover, many of them took part in the Pugachev peasant uprising in 1775, in the time of Catherine II, and suffered the terrible consequences.

The years 1905 to 1907, following the First Russian Revolution, witnessed the “national awakening” of the Mari, and the Mari became self-conscious and organized enough to win the formation of the

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25 This is taken from Vaba and Viikberg (1996) and from Taagepera (1999)
Mari Autonomous Province in 1920. In the years that followed, a number of previously non-existent cultural and educational institutions were established in the Mari AP, and its capital Yoskar-Ola became the center for Mari publishing activities and Mari intellectual life. Mari language education rapidly expanded, and in 1927 almost half of all Mari children were taught in their own language at elementary school level.\(^{26}\) In 1936 the Mari AP was elevated to the status of an Autonomous Republic (ASSR).

This autonomy was short-lived, however, and most of the Mari intellectuals perished in the forced collectivization and mass repression of the 1930s. It has been estimated that as many as 2,000 Mari intellectuals may have been murdered.\(^{27}\) After World War II the Mari suffered a new wave of Russian industrialization and colonization, and by the 1960s scholars noted a rapid decline in the use of Mari as the language of a people. Mari became a “language of our village”.

According to Taagepera, however, the Mari resisted the severe impacts of Russian Orthodoxy and Russian Communism, and remained loyal to their traditional religion, and still practise it. Only highly destructive Russian military tactics deployed against villages, women, and children broke the Mari resistance.\(^{28}\)

A new revival took place in the last years of the USSR, the period of the so-called “parade of sovereignties”\(^{29}\). In 1989 the legal national political movement Mari Ushem (Mari Union) was re-established, as well as the political party Ushem. The Mari Congress and its elected Council represent the whole Mari nation. Since 1990 Mari schools have been restored, and congregations of their indigenous nature religion have been founded. That an animist religion has received governmental support is unique in Europe.\(^{30}\)

According to census results, that is, self-identification, the numbers of Mari were and are\(^{31}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>158,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>375,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>428,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>504,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{26}\) Taagepera (1999) p.74
\(^{28}\) Taagepera (1999)
\(^{29}\) See Bowring (2010)
\(^{30}\) Vaba and Vilkberg (1996)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>598,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>670,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>604,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>547,605</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures show a continuing decline since the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

There are currently the following Mari public associations in Mari El.\(^{33}\)

1. Congress of the Mari People
2. All-Mari Council “Mer Kanash” – Mari National Congress
3. Mari Regional Public Organisation “Union of Mari Youth “U viy””
4. Inter-regional Public Organization “Mari Ushen”
5. Public Organization “Mari Tunyktyshe” of the Republic of Mari El
6. Union of Mari Women “Saskaviy”
8. SDPO “Er Viy”

I will endeavour to meet some or all of them in April.

**Professor Solovyov**

He is in his 80s, teaching and very active. Mari is his mother tongue. The State University has an Institute of Finno-Ugric Language and Culture. He is a member of the President’s Council, in order that the Mari should be represented there. But the President does not attend its meetings.

He took teacher training starting in 1931 and began teaching, in Mari, in 1941. The school in which he taught had 50% Mari and 50% Russian instruction. All teaching in primary schools was in Mari, with Russian taught as a subject. It is very different now. 65% of Mari (by self-identification) live in the villages, and only 25% of the population of Yoshkar-Ola are Mari. Even in the villages 50% of people speak only Russian. In terms of religion, only 7-8% of Mari are “Chi Mari” (Animist), while the rest are Orthodox.

The paradox for Professor Solovyov is that the Mari in Bashkortostan have retained their language and religion more effectively than the Mari of Mari El.

**President Leonid Markelov**


The IHF-MHG Report commented:\(^{34}\):

President Leonid Markelov, a native Muscovite with an ideological background in the extreme right Liberal Democratic Party, has spoken in favor of treating Mari El as any other region, thereby indirectly proposing the eradication of the special status of the Mari in the republic. Following a transformation of the upper house of the Russian parliament into a full-time professional legislature, Markelov has also overseen the appointment of deputies without any previous affiliation to Mari El or its titular nationality as the representatives of the republic.

Markelov was born in Moscow in 1963, and became a lawyer; he had no ancestry or other roots in Mari El. From 1986, at the age of 23, he was posted for his military service to Mari El as a military prosecutor. He became a Colonel of Justice, a high rank in the military *Prokuratura*. Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991 he was discharged from the armed forces in 1992, went into business, and it is reported that he was charged with participation in a large-scale fraud. Charges were dropped as a result of large-scale pressure from the leader of the extreme nationalist Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

In 1995 Markelov was elected to the State Duma of the Russian Federation on the LDPR list. He led the branch of the LDPR in Mari El. In 1996 he founded the “Markelov Blok” as a political alliance in Mari El. In December 1996 Markelov ran for president of Mari El for the first time, and was accused of using threats and violence in his campaign. However, he was defeated by the Communist Vyacheslav Kislitsyn, by 58% to 36%. Kislitsyn was a native of Mari El, born in 1948 in the village of Kosolapovo in the Mari-Turetskiy district of the then Mariiskiy Autonomous Republic (ASSR)\(^{35}\).

In December 1999 he was elected to the third State Duma, this time from the Mari El constituency, defeating the candidate of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, I. Kazankov.

In 2000 Markelov again stood for election as President of Mari El, and on the second round narrowly defeated Kislitsyn with 58% of the vote. His election was assured, as he himself admitted, by the “control” exercised by the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, and by the newly created Privolzhskiy Federal Okrug. Much to the consternation of Mari national leaders, RF President Putin awarded Markelov for his contributions to “inter-ethnic accord” in connection with the 2004 presidential elections.\(^{36}\)

Following the Beslan school hostage tragedy of September 2004, Putin as of 2005, without amending the Constitution, and without significant opposition from the elected governors of Oblasts and presidents of Republics, replaced the direct election of regional leaders with appointment by the RF

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\(^{34}\) IHF-MHG Report (2006) p.9


President Markelov has not had to face an election since then. Unlike his predecessors, however, President Markelov has refused to cooperate with the existing national movement and has instead created an alternative Mari Council to serve as an interlocutor with the authorities. This council is made up of members loyal to the president and has not shown any independent initiatives to further the interests of the Mari.

**The situation of the Mari language**

In 2006 the International Helsinki Federation and Moscow Helsinki Group published a joint report on the human rights situation of the Mari minority of the Republic of Mari El. They conducted a 6 day fact-finding mission in 2005. They reported that that in accordance with the 1993 Constitution, the Mari language is an official language in addition to Russian, and the laws of the republic oblige the authorities to protect the language, culture and national identity of the Mari. However, by 2005 the ethnic Mari represented about 40% of the 728,000 inhabitants of the republic, and were outnumbered by ethnic Russians.

The IHF-MHG mission found that most Mari national schools are located in rural areas, where a majority of the republic’s Mari residents are concentrated.

During the school year 2004-2005, Mari was used as a language of instruction in the first four grades in 43 schools, where a total of 752 students participated in such instruction. These numbers had decreased from 64 schools and 1,210 students in 2000-2001. While the total number of schools also decreased during the same four-year period, the relative share of schools providing instruction in the Mari language was slightly lower in 2004-2005 (11%) than in 2000-2001 (15%).

As for instruction in the Mari language and literature for ethnic Mari students, a total of 18,692 students at 196 schools participated in such courses in 2004-2005. The corresponding figures in 1995-1996 were 286 schools and 29,730 students, meaning that the numbers had decreased by about one third in the past decade. The relative number of students attending Mari native language classes had, however, been around 21-22% the whole time.

About a dozen schools in the republic were then involved in pilot projects of Russian-Mari bilingual education. Among them was School No. 14 in Yoskar Ola, where one class of students receives 40% of all instruction in the Mari language in grade 1-3. According to the school director, the results of this trial class have been good, and the feedback from parents has been overwhelmingly positive. Discussions were under way to create a class that would be instructed in Mari throughout grade 11.

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In national schools where Mari was used as a means of instruction at the primary level, there was a complete transition to instruction in Russian as of grade 5.

The Report also pointed out that despite its official status, the Mari language is used only to a limited extent within the public sector. While the residents of the republic have a legally protected right to use the Mari language in contact with authorities, this provision is undermined by the fact that public officials are not required to have any command of the language. Unlike in some other ethnic regions, there is no requirement for all students in Mari El to complete courses in the titular language.

From 2001 the Mari have suffered a further great misfortune, with the election of the extreme Russian nationalist Leonid Igorevich Markelov as President of the Mari’s own republic. The first two presidents of Mari El, Vladislav Zotin (1991-1996) and Vyatcheslav Kislitsyn (1997-2000), were both native residents of the republic, albeit the former was Mari by ethnicity and the latter was ethnic Russian.

The IHF-MHG Report concluded:

Current political and social trends in Mari El serve to marginalize the interests of the Mari minority in the political process of the republic and to enhance the vulnerability of its members to cultural and linguistic assimilation. As other national minorities of the RF, the Mari experienced great assimilation during the Soviet era, and during the post-Soviet period the effects of assimilation have become even more aggravated since the titular nationality is no longer experiencing any natural growth. Reflecting a broader development of growing ethnic chauvinism and intolerance toward national minorities in Russia, social acceptance of the Mari language has reportedly decreased in Mari El in recent years, and members of the Mari and other minorities allegedly face insults and offenses in public life due to their national affiliation. What is more, on repeated occasions, leading officials of the presidential administration of Mari El have allegedly made condescending remarks regarding the titular nationality, thereby encouraging intolerant attitudes toward its members and contributing to reinforcing their vulnerability to assimilation.

In a recent study on Mari El, Elvira Nurieva observed that

Language as an inter-generational link with one’s ancestors comes to be of communicative, historical, identity-wise value. Recognizing that the interests of the Mari people are marginalized in the political process of the republic and their numerical composition already limits their opportunities to participate in governing the republic, the Finno-Ugric cultural organizations have drafted language laws that would give the republic languages an equal status with Russian and open the way to Finno-Ugric languages as effective media of instruction in schools. However, such laws are strongly opposed by most Russian authorities, which has led to political action in the form of indigenous protest campaigns.

National-Cultural Autonomy in Mari El

As I have noted in my previous publications, the Russian authorities, in their periodic reports to the Council of Europe treaty body for the Framework Convention of the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and elsewhere, showcase the Russian experiment since 1996 in National-Cultural Autonomy. This experiment is highly successful in terms of the numbers of NCAs already created and still coming into existence, despite the skepticism of Aleksandr Osipov and me as to whether the creation of an NCA gives the minority in question anything more than the existing Russian legally-defined non-governmental institutions, Non-Commercial Organisations, and Public Associations.

It was therefore perhaps no coincidence that a few days before my own visit the Chief Federal Inspector (representative of the Moscow authorities) in Mari El, Roman Beresnev, paid an official visit to the Tatar NCA. The report of his visit informed its readers that the representatives of the Tatar people (narod) occupy a significant place in the multi-national society of the republic. About 40,000 Tatars live in Mari El, amounting to 6% of the general population. The regional NCA of Tatars in Mari El carries out a wide variety of activity, directed to the preservation of the Tatar language, culture, traditions and family values of the Tatar people. The Federal Inspector discussed the harmonization of intra- and inter-ethnic relations, and the role of NCAs in these processes. Special attention was paid in this connection to youth policy and the Union of Tatar Youth of the Republic of Mari El “Khayat”, developing the activity of the new generation. The Inspector’s visit concluded with the signing of an agreement on strengthening close cooperation on questions of inter-ethnic relations. According to the Federal Registration Service of Mari El as at 1 December 2007 there were 1,026 NGOs (public associations) of which 39 were national-cultural, including 6 youth organizations.

The Finnish based Saami Foundation (Saamskiy Fond) published, in August 2012, a slide presentation entitled “The Polycultural World of Mari El: Problems of the Diaspora and Those Living in the Territory (zemlyachestv)”. This shows the existing NCAs as:

1. Public organization of the city of Yoshkar-Ola “Local NCA of Ukrainians”
2. Public organization “Regional NCA of Tatars of Mari El”
3. Local (village) NCA of Tatars of the Medvedevo village

43 “Mezhetnicheskoye soglasie – prioritet natsionalno-kulturnoi avtonomii (Inter-ethnic harmony is the priority for NCAs)” at http://gfi12.pfo.ru/?id=27956 (accessed on 7 March 2013)
44 http://moroshka.ucoz.org/ (accessed on 7 March 2013)
45 http://www.myshared.ru/slide/104843/# (accessed on 7 March 2013)
The web-site of the Ministry of Justice gives only four:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date of registration</th>
<th>Leader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local (village) NCA of Tatars of Medvedevo village</td>
<td>28/09/2006</td>
<td>Ruzyal Nuriazdanovich Usmanov, liquidator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public organization “Regional NCA of Ukrainians”</td>
<td>31/10/2006</td>
<td>Aleksandr Vasilievich Cherepenin, Chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public organization “Regional NCA of Tatars of the Republic of Mari El”</td>
<td>5/10/2006</td>
<td>Amir Tolgatovich Shakirov, Chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Organisation”Regional Jewish NCA of the Republic of Mari El”</td>
<td>25/04/2007</td>
<td>Valerii Lvovich Basin, Chair of the Council</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I could only make contact with the Tatar NCA, and had a lengthy interview with Mr Shakirov. It would appear that there are the three active NCAs in Mari El, and it is a fact that the NCA form is particularly popular with Jews, Tatars and Ukrainians in all parts of Russia.

I also found on the internet – I could not get hold of a hard copy during my stay in Yoshkar-Ola – the Order of the Government of the Republic of Mari El of 20 July 2012 No. 270 “On setting out the procedure for provision of subsidies for NCAs, and other public associations, for the support of activities, connected with the preservation and development of the national culture of peoples (narodov) living in the Republic of Mari El.”

Indeed, there are the following public ethnic organizations which are not NCAs:

1. Public Organisation “Society of Muslim Tatars “Ralina” in Yoshkar-Ola”

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46 http://to12.minjust.ru/node/2664 (accessed on 7 March 2013)
47 http://www.garant.ru/hotlaw/mariel/412513/ (accessed on 7 March 2013)
48 http://www.myshared.ru/slide/104843/# (accessed on 7 March 2013)
2. Public Charitable Organisation of the Republic of Mari El “Jewish Community Centre KHESED-MAKHOR”

3. Public Organisation “Kurultai Bashkir” in Yoshkar-Ola


5. Regional Public Organisation “Dagestanskaya Diaspora” of the Republic of Mari El

6. Regional Public Organisation “Aziya” of the Republic of Mari El


It is clear that several ethnicities find an ordinary NGO more effective for their purposes than a National-Cultural Autonomy.

**Mr Amir Shakirov**

Mr Shakirov welcomed me to the office of the Tatar NCA. He owns the leading local ice-cream business, and I sampled some of his product. The leaders of NCAs are often local businessmen, and part of the attraction of leading an NCA is to promote the business. He employs 180 people. He was born in Mari El, and his mother tongue is Tatar, a Turkic language. His NCA was founded in 2005, and I asked why it took the Tatars of Mari El nearly 10 years since the Law was enacted. His answer was that it only in 2005 became apparent that an NCA was required to protect customs, language and culture.

Mr Shakirov told me that the Russian state funds a Centre of Tatar Culture, with a hall for 300 people. The Republic provides funds for the NCA, its office and the secretary whom I also met. In May 2011 the Tatars opened a new mosque. Its construction was paid for by private donations. Finally, the NCA has assisted in the setting up of a new Tatar language class in the Yoshkar-Ola Secondary School No.14. This new class has 27 pupils. Financial assistance has been provided by the neighbouring Republic of Tatarstan, for textbooks and teacher training.

The structure of the NCA is that it has a Charter (*Ustav*). Mr Shakirov as Chair can serve two terms of four years. There are 17 elected members of the NCA Council, elected by local Tatar groups.

**Conclusion: the new Strategy of National Policy of the Russian Federation**

In this paper I have analysed the paradoxical situation in Mari El, in which the ethnicity, the ancient people, whose republic this is, are in a very poor and worsening state, while the Tatars, only 6% of the population, are thriving through their use of the NCA form.
Russian may now be in for further dramatic changes.

On 19 December 2012 President Putin signed the Decree “On the strategy of state national (ethnic) policy of the Russian Federation to 2025.”49 The full text of the decree is posted on the same webpage.50 On 19 February 2013 President Putin attended a meeting of the Council on Inter-Ethnic Relations.51 The meeting took place at the building of the Jewish Museum and Centre of Tolerance in Moscow. Participants included representatives of the President’s Administration as well as Federal organs of executive power, leaders of national (ethnic) diasporas and heads of public organizations as well as representatives of the expert community. This Council was established in order to implement the President’s Decree No.602 “On guarantees for inter-national (ethnic) harmony. In this Decree the President also ordered his administration together with the Government to elaborate the Strategy which was approved in December 2012. The report of the meeting on the Kremlin web-site contains a full stenographic record of the discussion.

Putin placed particular emphasis on the Federal Goal-Oriented Programme “Russian language in 2011-2015), for which 2.5 billion roubles were set aside in 2015. He added that it would be wrong to reply on this programme. What was needed was to widen support for the Russian language as the mother tongue, and to popularize it at the Federal level and in all region of the country without exception.

It can be seen that this is potentially very bad news for the languages of minorities and in particular the “titular” republics.

He continued that today in Russia 989 NCAs have been registered. In addition, there are a very large number of national (ethnic) associations, unions, and regional associations. All these structures contain, he said, enormous humanitarian potential and the ability to become effective sites for inter-ethnic and cultural exchange.

In his intervention, Mr Igor Slyunyaev, the new Minister of Regional Development raised serious doubts about NCAs. He pointed out that if there are 224,000 non-commercial organizations in Russia, then there are only 15 NCAs at Federal level, 245 at the regional level, and 639 local NCAs. Unfortunately, at times the activity of some NCAs resembled those of family businesses. Much tougher controls were required for NCAs, with annual audits and tax check-ups.

This appeared not only to contradict Mr Putin, but also to pose a serious challenge to the present burgeoning of NCAs.