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**The Karelian language in Russia:  
An Overview of a Language in Context**

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During the initial stage of the research project ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All) in 2010, "structured context analyses" of each speaker community at issue were prepared. These context analyses will act as a starting point for further deepened research by linguists, sociologists and lawyers. Thus, they will form the basis of further case-specific reports and the comparative report which will be the main outcome of the whole project. However, as these will be available for interested readers only at the end of the project, we wanted to publish shorter versions summarising our work so far already at this stage, thus providing up-to-date information for both the academic community and stakeholder groups. This paper, based on the context analysis by Rita Csiszár, gives a brief and up-to-date overview of the status of and research about Hungarian in Austria.

As all papers appearing in the series Working Papers in European Language Diversity, these context analyses have been subject to an anonymous peer-reviewing process. Whenever the present document is referred to, due reference to the author and the ELDIA project should be made. For more information about the ELDIA project see <http://www.eldia-project.org/>.

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# 1 Introduction: Karelian speakers in Russia

The systematic research on the language, history and culture of diverse Karelian groups started in Finland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in Russia at the beginning of the 1920s. Several aspects of the history, material and immaterial culture and everyday life of the Karelians have been actively investigated since then. During the last twenty years particular attention has been paid to language maintenance, usage and the overall development of the Karelian language. Studies on the Karelian language have traditionally concentrated on phonetics and morphology, whereas syntax and vocabulary are less studied. In the last few years, some sociolinguistic research on Karelian has also been undertaken (Kovaleva 2006, Kunnas 2006, Pyöli 1996, Sarhimaa 1999). The preliminary remarks in the current study concerning the sociolinguistic situation of Karelian in Russia are mainly based on the surveys and research done by these scholars.

The Karelians are an old minority in the historical territory of the contemporary Republic of Karelia which has been influenced by a long-term gradual influx of Slavic populations, which had presumably began in the 11th century, and the resulting intensive interaction with speakers of Slavic varieties that developed into the northwestern dialects of Russian. In the 17th century, mass migration of Karelians due to the wars between Sweden and Russia resulted in Karelian-language enclaves in the Russian interior, northwest of Moscow. From the 19th century the Russian language gradually started to dominate Karelian. In the 20th century dramatic changes followed one another and accelerated cultural change including the industrialisation and urbanisation of the 1930s, World War II, the post-war rebuilding of Soviet society, which triggered major population migrations (See: Karjala 1998). At the end of the Soviet era at the beginning of the 1990s the Karelian language had a considerably lower social status than the Russian language. The intensive assimilation policy, the border position of the Karelian Republic in the neighborhood of Finland, mixed marriages, and stigmatisation of the Karelian language caused constant language loss. The rapid language shift of Karelians to Russian monolingualism is the main trend in the present-day sociolinguistic situation.

Nowadays, Karelian is spoken in northwestern Russia, principally in the Republic of Karelia (“Russian Karelia”) and further south in a language enclave in Tver oblast near the city of Tver, northwest of Moscow. During the Soviet era, many Karelians moved to big cities (such as St. Petersburg and Moscow) and their environs (Leningrad oblast, Moscow oblast) as well as to the Murmansk oblast. According to the 2002 census, there are still around 53,000 Karelian speakers in Russia, including 35,000 in the Republic of Karelia and about 12,000 in the Tver oblast. The most active speakers are

the elderly. Karelians are in a minority in both mentioned areas that are their main areas of inhabitation.

The total number of inhabitants in the Republic of Karelia was ca. 716,000 in 2002; according to the preliminary results of the latest census (2010), it has decreased to 645,000. Seventy-five per cent of the inhabitants live in urban areas, 37% of the total population in the area of the capital Petrozavodsk. The overwhelmingly largest ethnic group are Russians (548,941, or 76.6% in 2002), while only 9.2% are Karelians (65,651 individuals, 70.3% of the total Karelian population in Russia). Other important local ethnic groups are Finns 2.3% (14,156), Veps 0.8% (4,870), Belarusians (7%) and Ukrainians (3.6%) (Data of Population Census 2002). Altogether 35,689 out of 65,651 Karelians in the Republic of Karelia live in urban areas while 29,962 live in rural areas. Less than half of the ethnic Karelians in the Republic of Karelia (48.3%) reported Karelian as their native language, whereas outside the titular republic the proportion is even smaller. Between 1989 and 2002 the number of Karelian native speakers among the ethnic Karelians dropped from 63.5% to 48.3% (Data of Population Census 2002 (2004), Volume 1).

The most important compact Karelian settlements are 3 out of 15 rural districts of the Republic of Karelia, namely, the Olonetskiy, Pryazhinskiy and Kalevalskiy districts, with a total of 26,900 Karelians, which is 90% of all rural Karelians and 41% of all Karelians in Karelia. These districts have a status of national districts, which in practice means that their municipal authorities have the right to introduce Karelian as a language of instruction and a subject in schools and to use it in administrative activities. Karelians are in a minority even at the municipal level, except the small town of Olonets (*Fi. Aunus*) (comprising 55.7% of its inhabitants), the Olonetskiy and Kalevalskiy rural districts (accordingly, 69.1% and 72% of their inhabitants). Furthermore, a significant number of Karelians live in the Pryazhinskiy rural district (48.4%, Data of Population Census 1989, quoted by Öispuu 2000: 140).

The demarcation of Karelian identity is a complicated issue. Historically, the Finns were considered as the most important reference group. In 1930s there was an attempt to promote the common Karelian identity, as opposed to the Finnish identity. After World War II, language shift and assimilation with Russians became the major trend. Currently Karelians are officially presented as a separate group with a common ethnic self-identification and self-designation, and the state policy in the Republic of Karelia seeks to create for this purpose a unified Karelian language (for example, corpus planning by the Republican terminology and orthography commission). Nevertheless, there are major dialect differences, and speakers of different dialects may use their own ethnonyms. Overarching Karelian identity is rather weak (Sarhimaa 2000: 237).

Linguistically, Karelian is traditionally divided into “Karelian Proper”, Olonets Karelian (*Livvi*) and Lude (*Lüüdi*). Dialects of Karelian Proper are spoken in the northern part of the Republic of Karelia (White Sea Karelia, *Vienan Karjala*) but also in more southern areas and in the enclaves in Russia. Olonets Karelians and Ludes are not officially acknowledged as ethnic or sub-ethnic categories in population censuses, but their national elites emphasise the linguistic and cultural differences and strive to have their group recognised as being separate from Karelians.

Despite many attempts to create and politically mobilise a Karelian identity, it seems (there is no exhaustive research so far) that today's Karelians have an unclear idea about their identity. Often, linguistic and ethnic identities do not coincide. According to the 2002 census, in the Karelian Republic only half of the people identifying themselves as ethnic Karelians report Karelian as their native language. Contrary to this, in the Tver oblast a large number of Karelian speakers are officially registered as ethnic Russians. Additionally, according to estimations, there are up to five thousand Karelian speakers living in Finland but many more people remember their Karelian descent and base their Karelian identity upon it (Sarhimaa 1999, 2011).

## 2 Socio-political Context

### 2.1 Legal and Political Position

The recognition of Karelians as one of “the peoples of the Russian Federation” has both political and practical consequences in terms of institutional measures and financing. The existence of the Karelians as an ethnic entity is currently reflected in legal acts (laws, decrees) and implementation programmes. Karelians are counted as an ethnic category of Russian, Soviet and All-Russia's population censuses.

The autochtonity of the Karelians in Karelia is reflected in their status of the “titular people” in the Republic of Karelia, although it does not have direct legal and political implications. The Karelians living in the Republic of Karelia are referred to in Russian public discourse as the “titular people” of this Republic, whereas in the other regions of Russia they do not have any collective status. However, the Karelians are not mentioned in legislation as a national or ethnic minority, although they were a minority already at the time of the foundation of the Republic in the 1920s, nor are they included in the list of the so-called Numerically Small Indigenous Peoples of Russia (protected by a special federal law), as, for example, the Veps are.

The political position of Karelians as the titular people in their republic is typical of Russia, but the position of the Karelian language is exceptional: Karelian is the only titular language of an autonomous republic of Russia that did not become officially a state language at the beginning of the 1990s. The Constitution of the Republic of Karelia (accepted February 21, 2001) designated Russian as the sole state language of the Republic (article 11), whereas other state languages can be designated by referendum. After the amendment to the Russia's language law on December 11, 2002, the status of a state language of a republic can only be given to languages written with the Cyrillic alphabet; Latin-script languages such as Karelian can become state languages only by special provisions in federal legislation (Khairov 2002).

Another anomaly of the language policy in Karelia is the fact that the creation of the legislative framework for language revival in Karelia after the Soviet period was delayed so long. Despite numerous language law drafts and steps towards language legislation, language issues were not regulated in Karelia for a long time. The lack of language law was partly compensated by the adoption of the republican Law on Education (January 18, 1994) and the Law on Culture (January 24, 1995). Karelia's education law contained similar language provisions as the education laws of the other republics. It was stated that the Republic creates the conditions for Karelians, Veps and other nationalities to ensure their right to receive general education in native languages and to choose the language of education within the possibilities of the education system.

The Law on the State Support of the Karelian, Veps and Finnish languages in the Republic of Karelia was adopted (March 19, 2004) as a compromise and the main piece of legislation in language issues. This law has a narrower scope of application than the language laws of the other republics, and cannot be called a language law in its real sense, which is yet another exception. Nevertheless, the law created possibilities for the use of Karelian in the different domains of public sphere, including education and mass media. The regional target programme, "State Support of the Karelian, Veps and Finnish languages in 2006-2010" was accepted the following year after the adoption of the law for its implementation (December 18, 2005). According to an international expert evaluation (see, for example, the Second Opinion on the Russian Federation of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, May 11, 2006), it is a general problem in Russia that implementation lags behind the legislation. The conditions for the safeguarding of the constitutional language rights of citizens and the peoples are frequently missing at the local level, and too much is left at the discretion of the officials. In practice, language policy implementers are satisfied with everyday Russian monolingualism even among ethnic Karelians and only tolerate symbolic multilingualism in some public contexts. Yet, the statistical evidence demonstrates that the very existence of the given republic and even a modest public state support



for language revival may at least slow down language loss and ethnic assimilation. Compared with the Republic of Karelia, in the Tver oblast the processes of linguistic and ethnic assimilation were accelerated between the last censuses (Lallukka 1997).

The lack of language legislation may be due to the low representation of Karelians and in general their low share in the total population of the Republic of Karelia, the lowest among the minority republics in Russia. The low political representation and poor participation in decision-making is an issue of concern for the Karelian community. As in the other republics, a body of ethnic representation, the Congress of the Karelian People, was created at the beginning of the 1990s. All the five Congresses of the Karelian People held since then have demanded the designation of the Karelian language as a state language in the Republic. At present the Congress is only acknowledged as a non-governmental organisation (NGO), which means that they can only call attention to problems and are not directly in charge of national survival. Nevertheless, the national organisations still have the possibility to play an active role in politics and to influence authorities. The position of the language communities are presented to the state authorities at sessions of the public consultative body named the Council of the Representatives of Karelians, Veps and Finns of the Republic of Karelia.

The recent recognition of Karelian as a minority language in Finland (2009) and the ensuing revitalisation measures may have an impact on the situation of Karelian in Russia.

## ***2.2 Attitudes***

Sociological data and surveys demonstrate a wide spectrum of the attitudes of Karelians towards their ethnicity. On the one hand, national revivalist ideas spread widely among national intelligentsia and leaders of national NGOs in the 1990s. There is a collective desire of national intelligentsia to promote the language. As a consequence many educated Karelians, typically city-dwellers, having little or no knowledge of the language, continue to identify themselves as a separate people with their own original language and culture. They express a great deal of anxiety and a sense of pity regarding the fate of the language. However, a state of collective self-betrayal is registered, because the language is repeatedly claimed to be in active use in families while it is common knowledge that this is not the case (Sarhimaa 1999; Pyöli 1996). Yet, there are some dedicated individuals who try to use Karelian as much as possible. Those university graduates, for instance, who learned the Karelian language, speak Karelian to their children.

On the other hand, national nihilism is a typical attitude among ethnic Karelians, often characteristic of people living in the countryside. The result of intensive ethnic and linguistic assimilation is clearly and frequently seen, where individuals of Karelian origin aged under 50 identify themselves not as Karelians, but as Russians. These people typically prefer the “global” Russian language and culture to the “backward” Karelian language and culture (Kovaleva 2006). In many aspects national nihilism only reflects the majority attitude towards minorities.

The attitude of the majority towards minorities and their languages is crucial for understanding language loss and assimilation among Karelians. During the Soviet era, majority attitudes were presented as tolerant, and indeed no ethnic conflicts involving Karelians have been reported nor has overt discrimination of Karelians been registered. At the same time, after the collapse of the Soviet Union researchers registered an explosive growth in xenophobia in the post-Soviet states (Markedonov 2007). In Russia, xenophobia is typically directed against the peoples of Caucasus and Central Asia, but also at non-Russians in general. Recent sociological research has discovered a high level of xenophobia amongst the youth in Karelia (Shabayev 2006) and showed that inter-ethnic conflicts and even pogroms like the one in the small town of Kondopoga by Lake Onega in 2006 (riots and violence ensuing from a pub fight between Russians and Chechens) can be easily provoked (Markedonov 2007). In order to overcome xenophobia and raise the interest in the autochthonous peoples in Karelia, the regional target programme “Harmonisation of National and Confessional Relations and Formation of Civil Accord in the Republic of Karelia in 2007-2011 («Karelia as the Territory of Accord»)” was accepted by the Government of the Republic of Karelia (January 25, 2007).

The attitude of the majority population of Karelia towards the Finnic languages is officially characterised as positive. It is reported that Karelian, Veps and Finnish language teaching at schools and institutes of higher education is also attended by children and youth of other nationalities. However, the Karelian language is not used as a vehicular language. The support of the titular Karelian language remains rather marginal in public debate. There is a relatively new tendency in Russian public discourse to undermine the issues of ethnicity and native languages in favour of the shared civil values.

### 3 Cultural Context

As in other minority republics, there are also so-called national cultural institutions of the Republic of Karelia, such as the Republic's National Theatre (sometimes called "Finnish", because it used to be the Finnish Dramatic Theatre), the Republic's National Library, the publishing house etc. In practice, these institutions are often only nominally national. For example, although the National Theatre works in Finnish, Karelian and Russian, plays in the Karelian language are only rarely put on the stage. According to official data, very few books are published annually in Karelian: between 1990–2000 in total only 25 books were published in Olonets Karelian and 9 books in Karelian Proper in Russia. They are mostly textbooks and supply materials, but include also fiction, poetry, dictionaries, religious texts etc.

There are organisations, associations and clubs using the Karelian language in their cultural activities. The ethno-cultural origins of the Karelians are maintained in oral and written forms of the Karelian language, folklore groups, folk choruses, traditional and new rural get-together festivals, new forms of professional art (ethno-folk festivities, ethno-folk marathons, ethno-disco, pop-groups, theatre and puppet-shows). The traditional seasonal festivals of Karelians are held, which often combine Christian traditions with pre-Christian beliefs.

These events and institutions are often systematically supported by local authorities but sometimes also by foreign institutions, most notably Finnish ones. Periodically, conflicts emerge around cultural institutions, such as several conflicts concerning the National Theatre in the last few years.

The researchers recognise the significance of cultural symbols and activities for Karelian identity. Differences in the perception of cultural symbols and characteristics occur between majority assumptions and minority understanding of, in particular, different forms of spiritual culture. Publicly known cultural symbols that were generally used to characterise and demarcate Karelians are folklore, arts and crafts (weaving, embroidery, carving and wood painting), cuisine, dances, music, clothes, and family rites. The national flag of the Karelian people is recognised, but does not have any official status. However, national clothes, cuisine and other visual symbols are no longer significant for ethnic identification. The Karelians mostly carry on those cultural symbols that are directly connected to the traditional forms of living. The creation of new modernised cultural symbols is connected to development of professional forms of culture, including amateur theatre performances, puppet-shows, vocal and instrumental music as well as pop-groups that use ethnic musical traditions and the language.

As a rule, Karelians are Orthodox Christians. However, only occasionally are some parishes services held in the Karelian language. The early adoption of the Orthodox religion has probably contributed to the rapid assimilation of the Karelians. In fact, religion and religious symbols do not make a distinction between Karelians and the surrounding Russian-speaking majority, as both are Orthodox. In the family rites of northern Karelians, such as weddings and funeral ceremonies, some elements of pre-Christian beliefs are still preserved.

## 4 Language

### *4.1 General description of the language*

The Karelian language belongs to the Finnic subgroup of the Finno-Ugric/Uralic language family and is most closely related to its Finnic neighbours, Finnish and Veps. Over the centuries, Karelian has developed as a result of intensive contacts with Russian, an East Slavic (Indo-European) language; although the languages are not mutually intelligible, there are traces of mutual influences at all levels of the language. Especially in the northern dialects, Russian phonology and syntax has been influenced to some extent by the Finnic languages, including Karelian (Mikhaylova 2004: 148-149).

As with the other Finno-Ugric languages in Russia, Karelian is stigmatised as a minority language, and is often perceived both by the majority and minority population as a language difficult to learn. The language contact situation is a complex one due to the presence of the Finnish language, which is closely related to the Karelian language, but has a higher status than the latter. As a result, some Karelians prefer to learn and to use Finnish.

Linguists in Russia usually distinguish between three main branches of the Karelian language: Karelian Proper, Lude and Olonets Karelian, while in Finland researchers usually divide Karelian Proper further into North Karelian (Viena/White Sea), South Karelian, and the dialects of Tver oblast and other language enclaves. All Karelian varieties have a common lexicon and grammatical basis, but the differences are so significant that even mutual intelligibility may be questioned.

Standardisation has been a significant issue in the language planning of Karelian (Anttikoski 2000). Historically Russian and Finnish used to be the literary languages that were applied in the Republic of Karelia. During the first attempt of language revival in the 1920s and the debate concerning language planning in Karelia, the Karelian language was officially considered as a dialect of Finnish. However, the struggle for the recognition of Karelian continued and there was an attempt to create a standard language for all Karelians in the 1930s. Since then, throughout the Soviet era, there have not been

any attempts to create just one common literary language for all Karelians. The efforts to create a literary standard resumed in the late 1980s and today the possibility of a common Karelian standard language is being discussed again. So far, however, competing Karelian Proper and Olonets literary languages are being developed. There are differences between the literary languages and a lot of diversity within the major dialects. Consequently, language users may feel estranged by the difference between the written standard language(s) (which educated Karelians acquire by way of formal instruction) and the spoken dialect(s) (typically used by less educated rural speakers).

## ***4.2 Language contact and multilingualism***

At the beginning of the 20th century, many Karelians were monolinguals, despite increasing exposure to the Russian language. The social and political changes during the 20th century launched a massive spread of bilingualism among Karelian speakers that was followed by an accelerating language shift to Russian.

At present, Russian is used as a vehicular language in all population groups, whereas vernacular Karelian is used rarely, mostly by the elderly and in informal situations. Practically all Karelians know Russian, and the majority of bilingual Karelians are Russian-dominant. The bi- and multilingualism of modern Karelians has given rise to frequent code-switching and the development of new mixed codes (Sarhimaa 1999). In today's Karelian, numerous morphosyntactic innovations due to Russian influences (for instance, in case government and expressions of possession) can be observed.

The linguistic situation is further blurred by the fact that in addition to Karelian and Russian many Karelians have a knowledge of the Finnish language. The overall perception of the language situation is the favoring of Russian monolingualism.

## ***4.3 Language use and maintenance***

Currently, the Karelian language is typically used in private communication in some families mostly in the countryside. Usually it is used by the elderly in mutual communication, more rarely with younger generations and, as a rule, only occasionally between young parents and their children. The intergenerational transmission of language is largely interrupted.

Sociological surveys on language use by different age groups show that the dominant type of bilingualism among the young Karelian population is passive bilingualism. Children understand Karelian speech, but even if parents speak Karelian to them, children typically answer in Russian. It is reported that children are typically socialised in Russian and speak Russian as their first language,

communicate in Russian in kindergarten and school and even those children who attend Karelian language classes speak Russian during breaks and free time (Kovaleva 2009). However, there is no systematic research into the actual language skills of children and on structural erosion and lexical loss.

In addition to the private sphere, the Karelian language has been used in educational institutions such as kindergartens, schools, professional and higher education institutions, and language courses during past two decades. However, this is not enough to ensure language maintenance and use. In pre-school education, Karelian is used in a very restricted manner, and in no school Karelian is used as a medium of instruction. In the conditions of lacking intergenerational language transmission, the 1-2 weekly hours of Karelian language teaching at school will not suffice to provide the children with an active command of Karelian.

There are both rural and urban schools in Karelia teaching the Karelian language both as a compulsory and optional subject. The proportion of the national schools in the total number of schools in the Republic of Karelia has remained stable, but researchers report a decrease in number of students of Karelian since 2002. There are textbooks and supply materials for teaching Karelian, and teachers of Karelian are trained in several professional and higher education institutions in the Republic of Karelia. Despite the relative permanence in the language-in-education policy, the right to learn the heritage language is enjoyed in practice by only about a quarter of ethnic Karelian schoolchildren in the Republic of Karelia (26.7% in 2002).

Karelian is also occasionally used in cultural domains such as mass media, science and literature. The length of broadcasting time dedicated to regional issues in Karelian is about 50 minutes per week on radio, whereas the length of television broadcasts is about 30-40 minutes per month consisting mostly of news programmes and few thematic programmes. There are three newspapers in Karelian and two magazines with material in Karelian. In addition to that, there are Karelian pages in several municipal newspapers. As regards modern digital media, there are some web pages and internet resources that apply Karelian language varieties.

In the 1990s minority organisations suggested, amongst other steps towards language revival, to immediately initiate the creation of the Karelian written language, to introduce the Karelian language as a subject in primary school in areas of high Karelian population density, the foundation of a terminology and orthography commission, to increase television and radio broadcasts in the Karelian language etc. Efforts of activists (researchers, teachers, cultural activists, journalists) resulted in the re-introduction of the Karelian written language, the beginning of the Karelian language teaching in schools, elaboration of teaching and methodological materials. Many steps for language revival were

taken as the basis for the language policy of the Republic of Karelia and accomplished as measures of the state support by the local authorities. It is expected that, in the case of continuous state support, language use in several public domains should sustain the language vitality of Karelian, but the broadening of the social functions of the language is evaluated as hardly possible.

There is a lack of evaluation on how efforts to revitalise the Karelian language have influenced language practices and language use. More research is needed on the attitudes of the majority towards the minorities and their languages in the Karelian context. In particular, the importance of the level of education and language use of Karelian in regions other than Karelia are missing. In order to evaluate the perspectives of language maintenance, there is a need to collect the data on the actual language situation.

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