

Education, language and politics of identity in the post-Soviet Tatarstan

1) Historical background

Tatarstan is an autonomous republic within the Russian Federation with predominantly Turkic-speaking Muslim population of Tatars and a large proportion of Slavic-speaking Orthodox Russians¹. It is located at the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers about 800 km east of Moscow with the capital city of Kazan. Tatars are the largest ethnic minority in the Russian Federation, and comprise about 3.8% of its population. They claim history of independent statehood which dates back to the Turkic states of Volga-Kama Bulgaria (9-14 cc.) and the Kazan Khanate (14-16 cc.) that were located on the territory of contemporary Tatarstan. In 1552 the Kazan Khanate was conquered by the Russian Tsar Ivan IV. This was followed by extensive resettlement of Slavic populations from the central parts of Russia to the Volga-Kama region. The Tatar population was expelled from the cities and settled largely in rural areas where it continued to maintain its culture and religion within the Muslim village communities.² At first, the Russian state introduced rigorous Christianizing policy trying to convert the Muslim population. A small part of the Tatar population, in fact, converted to Christianity and now represents a quasi ethno-confessional group named “Kryashen”. The assimilationist policy was later changed to a more tolerant policy that ensured the loyalty of Tatars to the Russian empire. The whole period since the conquest of the Kazan Khanate is regarded by contemporary Tatar intellectual and cultural elite as a period of Russian colonial domination during which Tatars were trying to preserve a distinct ethno-religious identity. As one commentator writes, the post-conquest Tatars were:

“an ethno-political formation consolidated on the basis of Islamic-Turkish tradition and memories of the Kazan Khanate. The Mid-Volga Basin was a battlefield of two traditions: Russian-Slavic and Tatar Islamic.” (Matsuzato 2001)

After the 1917 revolution and the formation of the USSR, Tatars were entitled to an autonomous republic (Tatar Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic – TASSR). The concrete border-drawing reflected a Soviet “divide and rule” policy and the fear of a Tatar domination of the middle Volga region: only one quarter of the Tatars in the Russian republic were included in the borders of the TASSR (Wertheim 2003). Autonomous republics were at the second place after the Union republics in the ethno-federal hierarchy of the Soviet Union.³ Soviet autonomy however was mostly

¹ According to the 2002 census the ethnic composition in Tatarstan is as follows: ~ 53 % - Tatars, ~ 40 % - Russians, and 7 % - other nationalities (Chuvash, Ukrainians, etc.).

² Later on Tatars that served Russian empire were allowed to settle in the cities where they formed separate Tatar quarters.

³ This ethno-federal hierarchy consisted of 15 Union republics, 20 autonomous republics, 20 autonomous *okrugs* (areas), 57 territories and *krais* each entity having differing degree of autonomy. For more on ethnofederalism in Soviet Union see Suny (1993).

a façade arrangement since almost all matters including cultural and educational affairs had to be approved by the center in Moscow. The breakaway with the pre-revolutionary Tatar tradition was exemplified by the switch of the Tatar language alphabet from traditional Arabic to first Latin (1927), and then to Cyrillic in 1939.¹

After the fall of the Soviet Union Tatarstan experienced a resurgence of Tatar nationalist mobilisation and in 1990 declared itself to be a sovereign state. The independence claims of Tatarstan and resulting political conflict with Moscow led to a compromise which gave it special status as a “sovereign state associated with the Russian Federation”². Since then Tatarstan is carrying out what observers have called “sovereignty project” (Graney 1999), namely a post-Soviet minority nation-building carried out within the Russian state.

2) Objectives of the project

Language and education policy are among the most important fields where Tatarstan is implementing its nationhood project, constructing and projecting new post-Soviet identity. My PhD project thus seeks to examine politics and practices of education and language in Tatarstan and its relation to identity building (ethnic, civic, religious identities) within the context of Tatarstan’s post-Soviet nation-building efforts.

The main site of investigation of this interrelationship will be schools. Schools are key agencies of socialization in the modern world and serve as important instruments of social reproduction (Brubaker 2006). As Brubaker has emphasized, different types of school systems reproduce different social orders. So, for example, an integrated, centralized school system “contributes to producing and reproducing “the nation” as a single unified citizenry by propagating national culture, inculcating nationalist attitudes and promoting linguistic standardization and assimilation” (Brubaker 2006, 270). In contrast, religiously or ethnically segmented school systems contribute to the production and reproduction of a segmented plural society.

According to this distinction Tatarstan represents a mixed school system with both types of schools existing. Regular schools which make the majority have Russian as a language of instruction and a typical for secondary schools curriculum. Here children of all ethnic backgrounds study. Then there is a significant number of the so-called Tatar “ethno-national” schools (or Tatar gymnasiums) where language of instruction is mostly Tatar, or Tatar and Russian, and where children of Tatar ethnicity study. In the post-Soviet period there was also a significant development of religiously inspired education and today there are several religious Muslim schools as well as an Islamic university in Kazan.

¹ While the transfer to Latin alphabet was more or less a matter of discussion and initiated from within Tatarstan itself, the adoption of Cyrillic alphabet was ordered by Stalin.

² According to the 1994 Federal Treaty between the Republic of Tatarstan and the Russian Federation.

All these school types represent an interesting field for investigating the attempts by state and non-state actors to project and promote a specific vision of the nation. This can be seen, for example, in the introduction of a compulsory school subject “The basics of Orthodox religion” into the Russian school curriculum which was strongly opposed by the government of Tatarstan.

Tatar ethno-national schools where Tatar language is the medium of instruction are the sites where an alternative “Tatar” nationhood project is being implemented. The system of national schools was built with the aim to educate new generation of young Tatars with a strong national affiliation and commitment to Tatarstan. They are one of the most important institutions that reproduce Tatar identity and through the medium of instruction, official curriculum and extra-curricular activities play an important role in national socialization.

Though these ethno-national schools have an emphasis on socialization into Tatar culture they are part of a polycentric order of competing discourses and values and pupils here are confronted with different cultural reference systems. Here, values of European “modernization” and challenges of globalization have to be reconciled with traditional “Tatar” (which are themselves in a process of negotiation) and Muslim values. This, for example, can be seen in the linguistic policy of these schools: Tatar and Russian are the languages of instruction, while Arabic and English are taught in many of them as foreign languages. These schools were also primary sites where Latinisation – an initiative of the regional government to switch the alphabet of the Tatar language from Cyrillic to Latin script – had to be implemented¹. This reform plan to a certain extent represented an intention to distance itself from Russia and to “come closer” to Europe, without the intermediary of Russian language and culture which played this role for many centuries.

At the same time education in Tatarstan is a political issue and a site of struggles between the central and the regional government. One example for this is the recent initiative of the Russian government to close Tatar-Turkic lyceums, which are elite schools educating mostly Tatar children. These schools provided high level of training, especially in foreign languages, (Turkic, English, Arabic) and a good discipline. High quality of teaching attracted also non-Tatar parents to send their children to these schools. However, the fact that teachers from Turkey worked in these schools brought them to the closer attention of the federal authorities in Moscow that required to make changes in the teachers’ staff in order lyceums could function further.

One important aspect of attempts to implement a particular identity project is language policy. It is crucial for state consolidation efforts in many post-Soviet republics to “nationalize” schools and make national language the main medium of instruction. In Tatarstan majority of schools retain Russian as the medium of instruction however all pupils have to learn Tatar language as a

¹ This initiative was rejected by the Russian State Duma in 2004.

compulsory subject. This policy is a part of governments' policies to revitalize the Tatar language which was marginalized and seen as backward during Soviet times so that many Tatars ceased to speak and transmit it to their children.

Methods of research

In order to start with the ethnographic part of my research I need first to analyze post-Soviet politics of education on the political-administrative level and its dynamics. For this I intend to study relevant policy documents, legislative materials and other texts produced by state actors. However not only state actors have exerted influence on formation of post-Soviet education politics but also leaders of nationalist movement who were among the first to formulate concepts for a Tatar national education.

Through schooling certain values, attitudes and identities formulated within the concepts of education are to be inculcated. The main research questions in this regard are: How do pupils and parents respond to these projections and ideologies? Do they appropriate or resist it?

Ethnographic fieldwork will be conducted primarily at schools (comprehensive schools from the 1st to 11th grade) in Kazan, though some fieldwork in other large cities such as Naberezhnye Chelny (which is regarded as the most "nationalist" in Tatarstan) would be also useful. I would like to work on different types of schools: regular ones with Russian as the medium of instruction, Tatar national schools and religious schools (*medrese*).¹ However, my main work will be within Tatar national schools in Kazan where Tatar is fully or partially the language of instruction. There are 36 of them in Kazan and I intend to work closely with about 3-4 of them. I also intend to work in one Turkic-Tatar lyceum (there are four of them in Kazan) and one religious school. Studying various types of school – regular, "ethno-national", and religious ones – will allow to trace the differences between school politics and differences in pupils' self-understandings and beliefs.

I discern two levels of ethnographic study within schools. The first one is the local school politics by which I mean curriculum (what subjects are taught at school and in what languages), extra-curricular activities in which children are involved (clubs, societies, school museums, etc.), organisation of everyday school life, school events and celebrations. My guiding questions will be: What are the values and reference systems around which the school life is organised? What local discourses are produced within the school? The ethnographic study of this field includes participant observation of everyday school life, extra-curricular activities, celebrations, etc. It also includes interviews with teachers and school principals who shape local school discourses while channeling the larger state education politics.

¹ *Medrese* in Tatarstan is understood as a religious school which gives secondary and higher religious education.

Another field of ethnographic inquiry is the individual level of those involved in the study process – primarily pupils, but also teachers and parents. My fieldwork will be organised around the study of their identities, everyday interactions and behaviour strategies, their attitudes to language, religion, ethnicity, and relation to the ethnic “other”. For this I intend to conduct unstructured interviews with pupils. I do not want to accentuate on observations of ethnic identity only since other types of identity – civic, religious, or regional can occupy important places in the structure of self-understanding.

Another focus of the fieldwork on this level is observation of language use and behaviour. My guiding question here will be the following: what languages, and when, are used within and outside the classroom? Participant observation during the classes or breaks will give me insights into the patterns of language use as well as into everyday interactions between children, children and teachers. Interesting data could be obtained from interviews with parents about the question of school choices. What are the factors which define parents’ choices to send their children to this or that type of school in the post-Soviet plurality of education options?

Thanks to my previous research on language policy in the post-Soviet Tatarstan (for my MA thesis) I have collected a considerable part of data on post-Soviet Tatarstan’s language and education policy. For the same research I have conducted an ethnographic study in two regular and two “national” schools in Kazan and received experience in negotiating with school administration. I expect little difficulties for negotiating entry and regular fieldwork at schools (particularly to be present at classes since teachers might think of this as a sort of control by the education department) if I will be able to ensure school administrations about the scientific purpose of the research. For Tatar ethno-national schools proficiency in Tatar is an important factor and in this respect I have an advantage of speaking Tatar fluently. A good point of access to schoolchildren as well as a source of primary information on schools may be parents. In this respect social networks that I have in Kazan will facilitate my search of informants. On the other side they can limit or bias the choice of informants and I will have to be cautious in this respect.

4) State of research and relevance for Europe-Asia research program

Though there are many works published in western academia on post-Soviet Tatarstan most of them are written by political scientists such as Gorenburg (2003), Graney (1999), Matsuzato (2001), sociologists (Dauce 2003), historians (Bilz 2005, Rorlich 2000).¹ Among works on Tatarstan written by anthropologist I could mention one on language ideologies in the post-Soviet Tatarstan (Wertheim 2003) and one on the place of Kazan city in the Tatar nation-building (Faller 2002). The aforementioned works provide interesting insights into the political and ideological transformations

¹ This is not a full list of publications in the western academia on Tatarstan.

in the post-Soviet Tatarstan. However there are no yet academic works which would explore the relationship between education, language and identity building in the post-Soviet Tatarstan from anthropological perspective nor in local nor in western scholarship. Among scholars from Tatarstan I could mention the works by Iskhakov (1998), Khakimov (2001) and Mukhariamova (2005) which deal closely with the issues of identity and education. However Tatarstan's local scholarship on this issue is mostly quantitative, lacks theoretical framework and conceptualization having more emphasis on factual material.

The meeting place and the site of interaction between two traditions, namely Slavic-Orthodox and Turkic-Muslim, the history of Russian colonial domination along with the post-Soviet resurgence of Tatar nationalism, pan-Turkic identification and Islamic religious observance makes Tatarstan a particularly interesting location for the study of encounters and exchanges between Asia and Europe. The focus of my research – education and identity politics in Tatarstan – are informed by different ideologies, which combine European and local discourses that are not only ethnic in nature but include pan-Turkic and Eurasian ideologies. The writings of Gumilev revived in the post-Soviet years became a basis for the political project of Eurasianism (*Evracijstvo*) which exerts high influence on the concepts of education. At the same time Tatar nationhood project is in many respects informed by the European concepts of the nation united by the language, territory, the system of mass education (Gellner 1983, Hobsbawm 1990) and printed mass media (Anderson 1991). The intrinsic link between language and nation within the Tatar national discourse echoes the writings of Herder and Fichte that saw language an essential defining characteristic and an expression of the “spirit” of nation (Barbour 2000).

5) Theoretical approaches

One approach of particular relevance for this study is post-colonial theory. Within the Tatar national discourse the period since the conquest of the Kazan Khanate in 1552 is often interpreted as the period of Russian colonialism. The same is relevant for the Soviet Union which according to Bhavna Dave can be characterized as a “hybrid entity, combining elements of a centralized empire and a high modernist state” (Dave 2007, 15). As scholars such as Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1991) and Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee 1993) have argued colonial powers justify their rule by highlighting progressive, modernizing role they played in societies they colonized. This progressive role of colonizers was expressed among others through the cultural supremacy, which dominated relationships between center and periphery. This was the case in the Soviet Union where the cultures and languages of minority groups such as the Tatar were arranged within a hierarchy of the more developed and modernized Russian or Russian-speaking culture, and the less developed and vernacular non-Russian cultures. The linguistic Russification of ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union was based on an ideology and institutional practice which made Russian language the language of

social advancement, culture, technology and science. In these conditions representatives of ethnic minorities switched to Russian language to advance socially and obtain better career perspectives to the degree that they ceased to use their ethnic languages and did not teach it to their children.

Colonial domination included hegemonic processes – processes of permeation throughout society of a system of values, attitudes, beliefs that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations (Gramsci 1971). Hegemony in this sense might be defined as an “organising principle” that is diffused by the process of socialisation into every area of daily life – as a result certain ideologies appear as natural order of things (Boggs 1976). This process took place in the Soviet Union in different fields including language and education. Hegemonic patterns in language policy were expressed in that Russian was “normal”, “unmarked” language that could be used in all functional domains, while Tatar usage was “marked”, “limited” and “particularized” (Wertheim 2003). Russian became the main language of instruction in the majority of schools in Tatarstan¹ and Tatar was studied only as optional subject. Russian was the language of higher education where Tatar was almost non-present. Curriculum also took part in reproduction of hegemonic patterns in that for example literature lessons included only works of Russian writers with no regard to numerous Tatar ones.²

In this sense the system of Tatarstan’s national education with the Tatar-language schooling at the core can be interpreted as a postcolonial response to the Russian cultural domination of the Soviet colonial era. It is as an attempt to overthrow the cultural dominance, to resist Russian assimilation and reassert own distinct identity. This counter-hegemonic process is undertaken in Tatarstan by introducing Tatar as the language of instruction in Tatar national schools, by establishing special curriculum, which includes the study of Tatar literature and history, as well as by extra-curricular activities. The project of national education in Tatarstan can be thus interpreted as an attempt to undo Sovietization and “mankurtization” of the Soviet era and to resist Russian assimilation trends.³ The ambiguity and the difficulty of such resistance can be seen in the Latinisation reform.⁴ On the one hand the switch from Cyrillic to Latin alphabet is an attempt to distance from Russian, on the other hand Cyrillic is a part of the Tatar cultural heritage as a whole generation of Tatars was educated by means of this alphabet and many Tatar books were written in Cyrillic.

¹ In 1960s. A small number of Tatar schools remained in the villages.

² The only exception is the department of Tatar philology at the Kazan state university where some classes are conducted in Tatar.

³ This expression comes from the famous novel of Chingiz Aitmatov “The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years” which tells the story of a *mankurt* – a young man who has forgotten who he is and where he comes from. This expression became common in Soviet Union for people that are disconnected from their native culture – for example for Tatars who cannot speak Tatar.

⁴ This reform was undertaken in the 1999 however in 2004 it was suspended by the federal law on alphabet base of languages of the Russian Federation.

For the analysis of identity politics in the post-Soviet period I will use theoretical approaches rooted in a “constructivist” understanding of the relation between social reality, political processes and identity formation. It proceeds from the assumption of a constructed and multiple nature of identities and affiliations.¹ Identification is relational, situational and flexible and each person carries a number of potential identities only a few of which become socially significant making difference in everyday life (Eriksen 2001, Barth 1994). As Eriksen further asserts the Barthian view of ethnicity as a system of mutually exclusive self-ascriptions must be slightly modified: the ascriptions undertaken by others may also contribute to creating ethnicity. Thus, people may be forced to take on an ethnic identity even if they would have preferred not to (Eriksen 1993). In this sense identity can be an arena of struggle between competing agents and discourses for more influence on identity building. Identities are not kernels that are waiting to be “revealed” but rather “labels that are fought over by state agents and non-state entrepreneurs” (Arel 2006). Education is one of the fields where this struggle for identity is being carried out. The stronger control the Russian government for example seeks to exert on education in regions as well as an introduction of lessons on Orthodox religion attests to the importance of education for state efforts at identity building.

Another approach which can be useful for this study is an institutionalist one. Schools are important institutions that reproduce social order; they shape social relations which then carry over into private life and other institutional sectors (Brubaker 2006). In the context of Tatarstan national schools are essential to the reproduction of Tatar ethnicity helping to sustain and transmit language and culture. However, Russian institutions also take part in the reproduction of Tatar ethnicity. It is, for example, not possible to make one’s whole education in Tatar; to achieve higher education at some point one has to enter a Russian-language university. There are no yet parallel Tatar and Russian institutions but they are entangled and interconnected ones. Institutions are an important factor in identity building and mobilization. On the example of several Russian autonomous republics, including Tatarstan, Gorenburg (Gorenburg 2003) found that the saliency of ethnic identity closely correlates with having received native-language education. He further showed in his study of ethnic mobilisation in the Russian Federation that institutions structure the extent and the form of ethnic mobilization as well as identity categories on which such mobilization is based.

¹ Contrary to the essentialist view which sees ethnic identity as given and unchangeable defined by “cultural staff” the constructivist view emphasizes that ethnicity is an aspect of social relationship. See: Barth, Frederik (1994) and Jenkins (1997)

6) Preliminary table of contents (to be elaborated)

Introduction

Part 1. Dynamics of education and language politics since 1990

In this part I will highlight the main tendencies in the development of education in post-Soviet Tatarstan. How does it correlate with politics on the all-Russian level? What kinds of identity representations are being projected? What ideologies inform education politics (nationalist, pan-Turkic, European, Eurasian etc.)?

Part 2. Practice of education

In this part based on ethnographic fieldwork I will study local school politics and local school discourses. What cultural reference systems, what values and ideologies shape the local school politics? How certain values, ideologies and identities are inculcated through school politics?

Part 3. Identity and everyday interaction within schools

This part based on ethnographic will study the individual level of personal identifications, values and beliefs. How projected discourses and identities are appropriated/resisted by children and parents? What shapes self-identifications and everyday interactions of the pupils? What are the patterns of language use within the school?

Part 4: Analysis. In this part I will try to connect the first with the second and the third part of my research and create a larger picture of the interrelationship between education, language and identity on the political and individual levels.

Conclusion

7) Timetable:

From September 2008 for one semester (till beginning of 2009) I will be involved in a research program (Forschungsaufenthalt) at the University of Fribourg/Freiburg where I will work on the aforementioned topic. There I will be able to start and dedicate my time for the elaboration of the theoretical part of my dissertation and will build up the theoretical knowledge needed for conceptualization of my empirical material. In these circumstances I intend to shorten the time of my PhD and try to finish it within 2,5 years.

My preliminary time-table looks the following way:

September 2008 – January 2009 (Research stay at Fribourg)	Elaboration of the theoretical part
February 2009 – August 2009 (Research program at Zurich)	
September 2009 – April 2010	Fieldwork in Kazan
May 2010 – December 2010/January 2011	Writing up the dissertation text

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