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# RUSSIAN MINORITY LANGUAGES REPRESENTATION ON THE INTERNET AS THEIR SOCIAL STATUS REFLECTION

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### *Abstract*

The integration of languages in the sphere of computer information systems is becoming one of the priority areas in the field of preservation and development of culture, traditions and identity of small nations. The poor representation of the language on the Internet indicates its low online vitality and insufficient development of educational, cultural and recreational web-resources in this language. Among the small indigenous peoples of Russia, the leaders in the creation of national domains are Tatars, Bashkirs and, with some lag, the Chuvashs. The problem of representing Russian minority languages is considered in the article in three aspects: 1) features of ethnic language processes in the global information space; 2) the level of representation of languages of small peoples of Russia on the Internet (for example, the Tatar, Bashkir and Chuvash languages); 3) the ratio of the cyber status of the language with its social position in real life. Currently, the languages of small indigenous peoples of Russia are represented on the Internet to a limited extent. As reasons, the authors of the article single out: 1) the quantity and quality of measures taken by language activists; 2) the degree of attention to this problem from the state and the amount of state funding for Internet projects in ethnic languages; 3) the number of small peoples in the Russian Federation and the titular regions, namely the number of speakers of minority languages.

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**Keywords:** Minority languages of Russia, ethnic language processes, Internet, Tatar language, Bashkir language, Chuvash language.



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## 1. Introduction

In 2018, changes were made to the Federal Law "On Education in the Russian Federation", according to which school education is received in the native languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation and in the official languages of the republics of the Russian Federation through free choice on the basis of an application from parents of students. In fact, this innovation has led to the fact that the future of the languages of the peoples of Russia is no longer reduced to the question of the compulsory nature of their study in school. Such a turn in the national linguistic policy of the state brought out the problem of preserving the languages of small indigenous peoples Russia to a new level. Responsibility for the development of national languages is gradually shifting from the sphere of school education to other areas of the functioning of the language, including virtual reality constructed by the Internet space. In this regard, the issue of representing the languages of the peoples of Russia in information and communication technologies (primarily on the Internet) and providing them with computer support capabilities has become relevant.

Integration of languages into the field of computer information systems, their full presentation on the Internet (we are talking about the possibility of publishing news in the national language online, access to digitalized fiction and specialized literature in the national language, the ability to communicate in the native language by e-mail, instant messengers and chat rooms of social networks, etc.) behind the scenes it becomes a priority in the non-traditional sphere of preservation and development of culture, traditions and languages of small nations. Depending on how quickly computer culture is incorporated into modern national culture, a positive solution to the language problem depends.

Among the non-Russian peoples of Russia, the leaders in the creation of national domains are Tatars, Bashkirs, with some lag – Chuvashs, Crimean Tatars and Lezgins. The languages of these peoples are on the list of the content languages are used by less than 0.1% of the websites (Usage of content languages..., 2019). Tatar, Bashkir, Chuvash, Crimean Tatar languages are representatives of the Turkic language family, Lezgi belongs to the North Caucasian language family. Languages of the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic language family (Mari, Udmurt, Mordva) or, for example, the Mongolian branch of the Altai language family (Buryat, Kalmyk) are not in this list.

The poor representation of the language on the Internet indicates its low online vitality and insufficient development of educational, cultural and recreational web-resources in this language.

## 2. Problem Statement

If you compare the level of presence on the Internet of the languages of small indigenous peoples of Russia with Russian or English, the situation looks depressing. Russian, which is the state language of the Russian Federation and the main language of international communication in Central Eurasia, is used by 6.8% of all websites, and English, the most important international language, is used by 54.6% of all websites. In this situation, the prospects for the influence of the information revolution of the turn of the XX-XXI centuries on the development of the ethnic components of the Tatar, Bashkir and Chuvash cultures look very modest. It is even more doubtful whether the ethnic cultures of the Mari, Mordovians, Udmurts, Buryats, Kalmyks, Tuvans, Ossetians and other small Russian peoples can cope with the

informational challenge of our time, whose representation on the Internet in their native languages is close to minimal.

However, recent studies on the Internet representation of languages of small peoples of different countries, including Russia, indicate the ambiguity of the problem and the unpredictability of the impact of new technologies on minority languages (Gerrand, 2009; Yuan, 2012; Châteaureynaud, 2014; Colin, 2014; Orekhov, Krylova, Popov, Stepanova, & Zaydelman, 2016; Claridge & Xanthaki, 2016; Lebert, 2019; Irwin, 2019). On the one hand, the Internet, which is dominated by the English language, restricts the access of non-English-speaking users to online environments, and undermines the existence of minority languages in cyberspace. On the other hand, the Internet can expand the capacity of native speakers of minority languages, allowing them to communicate, bypassing geographical, social and political boundaries, develop their native languages, demonstrate their own lifestyles, express their concerns and problems (Sheyholislami, 2012).

Orekhov and Reshetnikov (2016), exploring the network activity of minority language communities using the example of representing the state languages of Russia on Wikipedia, put forward the hypothesis that active Internet communication, a significant amount and variety of texts posted on the Internet indicate the social prestige and multifunctionality of national languages. They posed the question whether those languages that in real life are involved in cultural, political, business and everyday practices are widely used on the Internet, and those languages that are marginalized in reality are used in cyberspace either sporadically or limitedly. This problem can be described as the correlation of the network image of the language with its actual social status.

In this regard, it seems to us important to identify how accurately the national segments of the Russian Internet reflect the social status of the languages of small peoples of Russia. The focus of our study is the languages of the peoples of the Middle Volga, namely, Tatar, Bashkir and Chuvash, which are included in the list of the content languages are used by less than 0.1% of the websites.

### **3. Research Questions**

The problem stated in our article is considered in three aspects: 1) features of ethnic language processes in the global information space; 2) the level of representation of languages of small peoples of Russia on the Internet (for example, the Tatar, Bashkir and Chuvash languages); 3) the ratio of the cyber status of the language with its social position in real life.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to analyze the level of representation of languages of small peoples of Russia on the Internet using the example of the Tatar, Bashkir and Chuvash languages. The network activity of these languages in cyberspace is considered in connection with their actual functioning and prestige in society, the activities of ethnic-language activists and real support from the state authorities of the titular region.

## 5. Research Methods

The study is based on the analysis of socio-philosophical, sociological, cultural and linguistic studies published in English and Russian over the past ten years and devoted to the problem of the representation of minority languages on the Internet. A generalization of the results made it possible to identify the specifics of ethnic language processes taking place in the global information space. In a comparative analysis of the quantitative and qualitative parameters of the representation of the Tatar, Bashkir and Chuvash languages on the Internet, we relied on a content analysis of thematic materials posted on various websites of the Russian Internet.

The ambiguity of the situation that develops around the online existence of minority languages has raised the question of the causes and conditions of the uneven representation of the languages of small indigenous peoples of Russia on the Internet. Is this connected with the level of the number of peoples, social prestige and the functionality of their languages, economic and political support from the state? These problems were addressed in various aspects by modern Russian researchers (Maximova, 2010; Alosi font & Tovar-García, 2014; Protasova, Alosi font, & Bulatova, 2014; Orekhov & Reshetnikov, 2016; Antropova, 2016; Cherevko & Gladkova, 2016).

Separately, we highlight the work of Sibgatullin "Tatar Internet" (2009), Orekhov and Gallyamov "Bashkir Internet: vocabulary and pragmatics in a quantitative aspect" (2012), Degtyarev and Alekseev (2010) "Problems of computerization of the Chuvash language". These studies have revealed the main trends in the development of ethnic segments of the Russian Internet related to the Internet activity of speakers of minority languages and the language policy of state authorities of ethnic regions.

## 6. Findings

Ethnic-language processes in the global information space are very controversial. On the one hand, in the era of globalization, a serious challenge for minority languages is intensive interethnic contacts, including those mediated by modern means of mass communication (mobile media, the Internet, satellite television). A single information space and standardization of life are beneficial for the development of civilization (modernization of public administration, the global economy, industry, transport, trade, technology), but not for a culture whose existence requires a variety of languages and traditions.

The struggle against ethno-phallo-phono-logocentrism, which leads to the "death of a person", which is advocated by postmodernists and consonant with the Internet era, actually denies the existence of a traditional natural-historical person. Kutyrev (2006) emphasizes that "the struggle against ethnocentrism is a struggle against anthropocentrism, the denial of man as a cultural and historical being" (p. 33). Ethnicity, one of the main markers of which is language, acts as a real form of human being and expresses its cultural and biological diversity and universality, and that is why it conflicts with virtual (postbiological, computer) form of human existence in the information society. The distance and mediation of electronic communication, the inability to fully exchange non-verbal information lead to "social anonymity and depersonalization of participants in virtual communication" (Maximova, 2010, p. 78), which results in the construction of a new, virtual linguistic identity that is not burdened with ethnic characteristics.

On the other hand, ethnic phenomena in the era of new information technologies cannot be considered in isolation from sociocultural, political, and economic processes. People and ethnic groups are involved in many informational and social interactions. The role of the national Internet sector is not to form, but to stimulate the traditional mentality and language of the population by filling in the gaps that exist in direct ethnic communication, ethnic education and the activities of ethnically oriented media. The Internet, along with the media, provides information and communication support for relaying the ethnic language and culture, the effectiveness of which is determined by the integrity of the country's information space and the features of the content and form of the distributed media texts.

Alekseeva (2004) notes the danger of losing cultural and national identity for countries and peoples that are behind in the information technology race. In the information society, those nations that do not have their ethnic sector in their native language on the Internet are automatically considered weak and unpromising. Such peoples are deprived of the opportunity to develop in the global economic, political and managerial context, are excluded from the cultural and educational space of the world community, because they are not represented in cyberspace – they simply do not exist in virtual reality. If we turn to the first three languages of the small peoples of Russia, which are represented in the world list of the content languages are used by less than 0.1% of the websites, you can see that Tatar is in the 48th line, Bashkir in the 54th, Chuvash – 85th (Usage of content languages..., 2019). Their position is incomparably lower than the status of English, Russian and other European languages that are actively used on websites.

The dynamics of the use of certain languages on the Internet is influenced by many factors: the penetration of the Internet into the daily life of the region's population, the level of education of global network users, the degree of real urbanization and post-industrialization of ethnic communities. It is these indicators that make their adjustments and cause strong imbalances in the online existence of languages. For example, there are much more sites in Russian (6.7%) than in Spanish (5.1%), although the proportion of Hispanics in the world is at least twice that of Russian-speakers. The share of sites in Chinese (2.0%) in 2017 was almost identical to their share in Polish (1.7%), although there are almost 40 times more English speakers in the world than Poles (Historical trends..., 2018).

Tatar, Bashkir, Chuvash are included in the first group of minority languages of the Russian Federation – in the group of languages of national minorities, the number of which exceeds one million people. All three languages are state languages in their titular regions (the Republic of Tatarstan, the Republic of Bashkortostan, the Chuvash Republic), are characterized by the presence of language teaching traditions, and also linguistic support sufficient to expand the social functions of the language. In addition, there is a social prospect for using these languages in different areas of communication and the desire of a considerable part of native speakers to use their native language more widely. Factors that adversely affect the functional development of these languages are common to all minority languages of Russia: 1) the languages of small nations do not function well in the field of public administration and socio-political activity, and are limitedly used in education and mass communication; 2) in the bulk of native speakers, especially urban ones, there is "linguistic nihilism", manifested in ignorance and often unwillingness to know one's ethnic language because of its "social prestige".

Orekhov (Nevmenandr, 2017) provides interesting results of a study of sites and national online communities that post texts in small languages of the peoples of Russia on the Internet. We will pay attention to the Tatar, Bashkir and Chuvash languages, which are the subject of our study. The number of sites (domain names) that falls on the Bashkir language is 74 (this is the first place in the list), Tatar is 59 (second place), Chuvash is 20 (seventh place). Bashkirs are ahead of the Tatars at this point, and this may be due with the fact that there are a lot of Bashkir communities on social networks on the Internet – more than you would expect from a language with so many speakers.

The ratio of the number of sites supported by either private individuals or government organizations is interesting: Bashkir – 28 and 36, respectively, Tatar – 16 and 25, Chuvash – 7 and 7. Here we see that the Bashkir language is not only better than Tatar and Chuvash on the Internet, but also more than that – it is better supported by state organizations. Although, we note that in terms of numbers in the Russian Federation the Bashkirs are noticeably (3.3 times) inferior to the Tatars and only slightly (1.1 times) ahead of the Chuvash.

Consider some of the achievements of the Tatar, Bashkir, Chuvash languages in cyber space.

The *Tatar Internet* (abbreviated as Tatnet) has existed since 1994. Tatnet refers to the totality of Internet information resources created in the state languages of the Republic of Tatarstan (Tatar and / or Russian), as well as other languages and telling about Tatarstan and / or the Tatar people (Sibgatullin, 2009). Now there are about 10 thousand Tatar sites, publics, blogs on the Internet (Tatarskij Internet..., 2018).

At present, Tatar activists believe that in order to preserve the Tatar language and expand the scope of its use, it is necessary to design the websites of all state organizations in Tatarstan in two state languages – Tatar and Russian. In addition, a multiple increase in the number of high-quality Tatar language videos on the Youtube channel and other video services is necessary, as the audience of TV channels is gradually being moved to Youtube. Preservation of Tatnet's audience is primarily associated with the expansion of the scope of the use of the Tatar language in the family, school and public space, as well as with the energetic activity of language activists.

Under the *Bashkir Internet* (abbreviated – Bashnet) refers to the totality of available on the Internet text documents written in the Bashkir language. At the end of January 2012, the volume of the Bashkir segment was 66199 pages, and this value is not linearly dependent on the number of speakers of the Bashkir language (Orekhov & Gallyamov, 2012). Recently, thanks to the efforts of language activists, Bashnet has been expanding its open spaces, and the Bashkir Wikipedia is developing particularly actively. In 2019, the website of the National Bashkir Language Corps, which is the result of gratuitous cooperation between computer linguistics specialists and language activists of the Bashkir Projects community, started operating on the world network.

Another innovation is the neural network, which writes poetry in the Bashkir language This unusual digital experiment showed that the Bashkir language is prestigious, modern and worthy to exist in the digital era. Poems in the Bashkir language created by the neural network are the first such project among the languages of the peoples of Russia, which is aimed primarily at supporting the social capital of the language, not poetry. The innovative project was implemented by language activists, without support from the regional administration, and this allows us to draw the following conclusion: where language

activism is strong, interested in promoting its own culture and language in real life and cyberspace, the situation with the online existence of a minority language is better, even if the people are small.

The *Chuvash Internet* (the Chuvash name is Chävashtet) is the Chuvash-speaking sphere on the Internet, which has existed since 1996, when the Internet portal of the Presidential Administration of Chuvashia was created [www.cap.ru](http://www.cap.ru) (Chuvashskij Internet, 2019). The domain name "Chuvash.ru" was registered in 2006. The first Chuvash Internet community was formed in 2005 on the forums of the "Chuvash People's Site". Currently, this community brings together active figures of the Chuvash Internet and simultaneously uses several means of communication, including Skype, GoogleTalk, and e-mail.

Among the reasons for the insufficient development of the Chuvash Internet, language activists indicate: a decrease in the number of Chuvash speakers, crowding out the Chuvash language from everyday communication, poor promotion of the Chuvash language in a new communication environment, and the socio-economic decline in the republic in the post-Soviet era (Chuvashskij Internet, 2019). Degtyarev and Alekseev (2010) emphasizes the need for state support: "In order for the Chuvash language to correspond to current realities, the national-language policy should be aimed at ensuring its status as the working language of computers and the Internet, and creating an appropriate cultural and educational environment in the global network , information resources" (p. 396).

A separate discussion is the Russian online media in the languages of ethnic groups. Currently, online media in the languages of small peoples is actively developing, and this is due to the growth of the Internet audience in Russia, an increase in the confidence of Russians in the Internet as a source of relevant information and a decrease in the digital divide in various regions of Russia (Cherevko & Gladkova, 2016). However, the number of online media is unevenly distributed across the republics. Tatarstan (20 online media) is the clear leader in this matter, Bashkortostan (11 online media) is in second place, and Chuvashia (4 online media) is in sixth place. Among the reasons for this heterogeneity, the researchers indicate: 1) the penetration rate of the Internet in the republics (the farther from the central region, the lower the penetration rate of the Internet and, accordingly, the lower the number of websites and official Internet media); 2) the population of the republics (in most republics, the number of electronic media is proportional to the population of the region).

The proportion of sites whose content is presented in ethnic languages is small – less than 10% of the total number of online media. Electronic media in the languages of small nations are also represented unevenly across the republics: the leader in terms of the number of sites in the national language is Tatarstan (11 sites in Tatar), at the time of the study, 3 sites in Bashkir were officially registered in Bashkortostan, and one site in Chuvash in Chuvashia. Online media outlets are reluctant to administer versions of sites in the national language, because for private media projects the translation of materials into the national language is commercially unprofitable. Against this background, online media containing content in the languages of small peoples of Russia become the prerogative of state-owned media companies, and the results of the development of online media in the minority languages of Russia directly depend on the level of state support.

## 7. Conclusion

Ethnic-language processes in the global information space are contradictory – as contradictory as reality itself is contradictory. The virtual world is a reflection of real life in many ways. It makes no sense to look for a threat to ethnicity on the Internet itself, which is only a high-tech means of transmitting information. Ethnic-language problems in cyberspace are associated with real political, sociocultural and economic processes taking place in a particular state and region.

In addition to the information function, cyberspace today serves as an influential platform for satisfying the educational, cultural and recreational needs of society. In this sense, information technology has a positive impact on ethnic culture. Participants in online communities create a more comfortable form of sociocultural reality, because "the network structure of the Internet (as opposed to hierarchical) implies the status of equal participation of communication participants and the possibility of democratic communication on equal terms" (Maksimova, 2010, p. 78). Thanks to the Internet, the technical and creative capabilities of ethnically oriented media have been expanded to disseminate in society the traditional values, ideas and ideals of the small peoples of Russia that are correlated with world values.

We emphasize that at present, the languages of small peoples of Russia are represented on the Internet to a limited extent. Three factors can be identified as reasons: 1) the number and quality of measures taken by language activists; 2) the degree of attention to this problem on the part of the state and, as a result, the degree of state financing of Internet projects in ethnic languages; 3) the number of small peoples, namely the number of speakers of minority languages, in the Russian Federation and in ethnic regions. We have set these reasons in the order in which, judging by the results of our analysis of the level of presence of the Tatar, Bashkir and Chuvash languages on the Internet, they affect the completeness of the representation of minority languages of Russia on the Internet.

The problems of mastering the Internet space are the same for all minority languages, and they must be addressed comprehensively and in stages. This requires the training of qualified specialists who could work on creating information resources on the Internet, standardized fonts for national languages, dictionaries, information search tools, etc. (Kuzmin & Plys, 2008). The solution of these tasks is impossible without government intervention in the form of financial and political support from regional ministries or departments of communications and information.

The development of multilingualism in cyberspace is very relevant, since the creation of Internet resources in national languages not only contributes to the preservation of identity and culture of small nations, but also gives an impulse to their development. But in order for the Internet to serve these goals, active joint work of state, public and private structures is necessary.

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