

Fallen Ill in Political Draughts

The Komi-Permyak Language

Indrek Jääts

Abstract In order to better understand the current state of the Komi-Permyak language, one must examine the factors that have affected it. In other words, the issue needs to be looked at from a historical perspective. The present chapter provides an overview of the change in Komi-Permyak's social status since the end of the 19th century, and analyzes the situation that the language currently finds itself in. The observation dwells on state authorities' policies on Komi-Permyak, and the Komi-Permyaks' feelings about their own language. These two factors have definitely become intertwined, yet language policy is of primary relevance.

Keywords Komi-Permyak language · Ethnic identity · Nationalities policy · Russia · Soviet Union

1 Introduction

The number of Komi-Permyaks living in Russia has dropped from 147,000 to 94,000 during the period of 1989–2010. The numbers reflecting the decline of the Komi-Permyak language are not so clear because of changes in census methods, but it is certainly a language in danger. The main reason behind these sad tendencies is the weakness of Komi-Permyak ethnic identity adjoining with ethnic nihilism. Many Komi-Permyaks, especially the urban people, are ashamed of their ethnic background and refuse to pass on their mother tongue to the next generation. Such attitudes have roots deep in history; they were shaped by nationalities and language policies of different regimes (Tsarist, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Russia). Pushing out the Komi-Permyak as a language of instruction started during the 1960s and by now it is taught only as one among the subjects at some schools in the countryside. Its official status is rather uncertain and its functioning as a literary language and language of public life is extremely limited. The ethnically aware fraction of small-size Komi-Permyak intelligentsia has tried to raise the ethnic self-esteem of their countrymen and to suggest them pride for their language and culture after the collapse of the Soviet

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Union, but their success has been quite limited. State power has been suspicious towards their activities and many of them are tired, disappointed and renounced by now. However, the situation is not entirely hopeless yet. The language is still transmitted from generation to generation in several villages, and there are a few active young Komi-Permyaks appreciating the language and culture of their ancestors. The state power has financed some ethnic activities (e.g. the Komi-Permyak newspaper) recently, but does not give up its ambition to control everything. Yet, there is no sign of a critical turn away from the assimilation process which has been lasting for decades, and the Komi-Permyaks and their language are still facing the danger of extinction during the coming generations.

Interviews with Komi-Permyaks, materials from the local press, policy documents, and census data are used as primary sources for the article. The author has visited the Komi-Permyak area on three occasions (2002, 2008, and 2012). He has made a documentary *The Komi-Permyak Autumn* (2009), dedicated to the current situation and the language issues of this ethnic minority.

2 A Peasant Vernacular Under Tsarist Rule

At the end of the 19th century, the Komi-Permyaks were a typical “non-dominant ethnic group” (Hroch 2000). At the time, they were a peasant people, relatively small in population, who lacked their own written culture and social elite.¹ In rare cases a Komi-Permyak of peasant origin may have obtained a higher social status by way of education, but at the same time this also meant assimilation (Russification). The territory of the Komi-Permyaks (the quondam *Perm’ Velikaya*) had been incorporated into Russia as early as the 16th century, and since then, the Komi-Permyaks have experienced the severe and multi-faceted impact of Russia (including Russian peasant colonization). At the end of the 19th century, the Komi-Permyaks lived in relative poverty and somewhat lagged behind their Russian neighbors in terms of socio-political development. The Komi-Permyaks were overwhelmingly illiterate.² The Permyaks’ penury evoked a disdainful attitude towards them among the local, overwhelmingly Russian officials, intelligentsia and even among Russian peasants. The relationship between the Komi-Permyaks and the Russians had evolved into a totally asymmetrical one. The Komi-Permyak language, folklore and traditions abounded with Russian loans. They had partly adopted the surrounding Russian population’s prejudicial and supercilious attitude towards their own ethnic group, language and culture, and thus, their ethnic self-esteem was rather low

¹ There were 104,691 Komi-Permyaks in Russia in 1897 according to census data. Only 0.3 % of them lived in towns. 99.8 % of Komi-Permyaks were peasants by estate (*soslovie*) and 97.9 % derived their main income from agriculture (Bauer et al. 1991, Vol. B, Tables 001, 043, 047).

² Only 7.7 % of the Komi-Permyaks over the age of 10 were able to read (in Russian) in 1897 and only 7 (0.01 %) of them were educated at a level higher than primary. The corresponding figures for Komi (Zyrians) were 17.9 % and 382 (0.36 %); for Russians 29.3 % and 934,852 (2.28 %) (Bauer et al. 1991, Vol. B, Table 041).

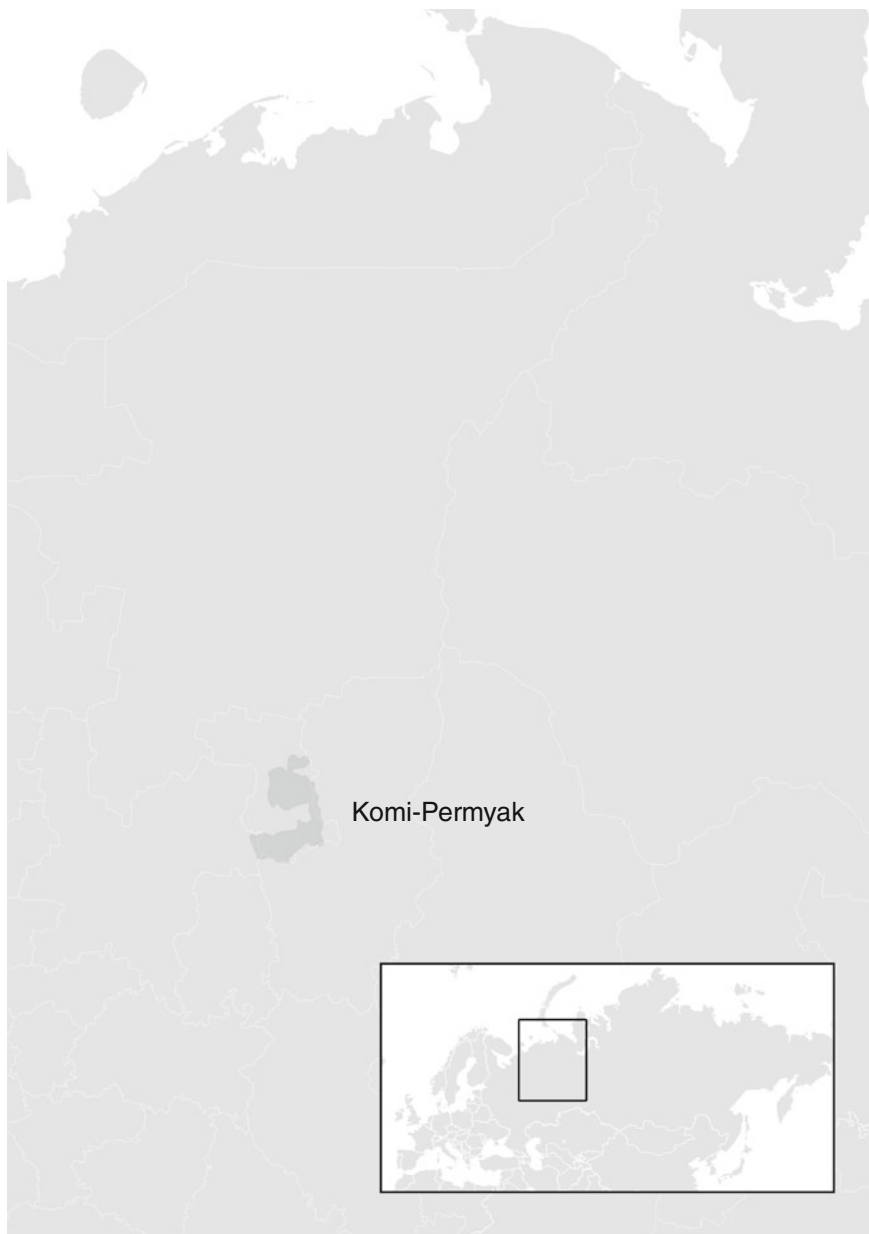


Fig. 1 Map showing the current geographic distribution of the Komi-Permyak language

(Derjabin and Šabaev 1997, 52). The Russian ethnographer Ivan Smirnov, who studied the Komi-Permyaks at the end of the 19th century, writes that in areas with a

mixed population, Russian peasants served as a role model for the Komi-Permyaks in every respect; everything Russian had a specific value in their eyes, and even everyday matters such as gait or clothing details were considered worthy of imitation. Russification, radiating outwards from the Russian-speaking factory settlements of Maikor and Požva, primarily concerned the centers of the Komi-Permyak rural municipalities (*volost*). The Permyaks there wanted to be seen as Russians. Only to the direct categorical question “Are you a Permyak?” would they answer grudgingly “There is no hiding, I am a Permyak.” Proficiency in Russian was already relatively widespread among the Komi-Permyaks during that period, especially among men (Smirnov 1891, 173,176). At the end of the 19th century, concurrently with the gradual development of school networks, the Russification of the Komi-Permyaks was promoted by Russian-language schools. Local dialects were sometimes used at schools as well, during the first years of education, as children usually did not know any Russian when beginning their schooling. Schooling then continued in Russian (Lallukka 2010, 85–86).

Before the 1917 revolution, about 30 different titles, mainly clerical literature and some textbooks, were published in two different Komi-Permyak dialects using the Cyrillic alphabet (Kon’šin and Nikitina 2008, 163; Sagidova 1997, 12–20).

In conclusion, one can say that despite some academic attention (e.g. from Nikolaj Rogov) and interest from missionaries (including the Il’minskii system), the Komi-Permyak language remained, until the end of the Tsarist era, simply one of the many languages spoken by peasants. There was no Komi-Permyak literary standard and the language lacked any official status. The Russian public held the view that the Komi-Permyaks would soon be Russified. This was considered both natural and desirable (Lallukka 2010, 56–63).

3 A Fluttering Takeoff—Increase in the Social Status of Komi-Permyak in the 1920s and 1930s

Soon after the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917, Soviet Russia began to build up a system of territorial autonomy throughout the country. Nationalistically-minded Komi-Zyrian communists began to demand the establishment of an autonomous Komi unit. They had assumed the idea of the Tsarist-era Komi-Zyrian intellectuals (namely Georgij Lytkin and others) of a unified Komi nation encompassing all of the Komi groups (including the Komi-Permyaks), and of a joint Komi language encompassing all of the different Komi dialects. Thus according to them, the Komi autonomy that would be established was supposed to include the territory of the Komi-Permyaks, and the small Komi-Permyak intelligentsia generally agreed with this. However, the administration of Perm, the provincial center, was overwhelmingly composed of Russians and was firmly against transferring the settlements of the Komi-Permyaks to Komi autonomy, and finally, Moscow also took their side. In 1921, the Autonomous Komi (Zyrian) *Oblast* (Province, Region) was formed (for

detailed information, see Jääts 2009), but the land of the Komi-Permyaks remained outside of its borders. Nonetheless, the Komi-Zyrian communists did not give up their demand of unifying all the Komi areas, but they ultimately failed to achieve it. The Bolshevik central authority did not accept the Komi-Zyrian communists' idea of a single Komi nation and an autonomous unit comprising all Komi groups. Perhaps Moscow feared that an unduly large and independent Komi autonomous territory might be inclined towards separatism. The lack of road connections and economic ties between the Zyrian and Permyak areas was emphasized as the main obstacle in uniting these two regions. As a kind of compromise, the decision of the central authorities envisaged the establishment of a Komi-Permyak National *Okrug* (district) in February 1925. As such, this was the first precedent of its kind (for details, see Jääts 2012). Within the peculiar hierarchical system of national territorial autonomies, established in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s, the extent of autonomy—of the autonomous units at different levels—was quite dissimilar. The place of each ethnic group in this system was determined by its number and alleged level of socio-political development. It was claimed that smaller and less-developed peoples were not ready for more extensive autonomy and could not realize this goal (due to a lack of qualified administrative personnel from the minority ethnicity). The autonomy attributed to the Komi-Permyaks (their national *okrug*) was significantly smaller than in the case of the autonomous *oblast'* that was regarded as appropriate for the Komi-Zyrians, not to speak of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSR) or Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) that larger and more modernized peoples could enjoy. The Komi-Permyak Autonomous *Okrug* was simply a local sub-unit of the newly created Ural *Oblast'*, with some ethnic color to it. The *okrug* had limited autonomy in cultural and educational issues, and was totally subordinate to *oblast'* authorities in other issues. The *okrug* lacked resources to develop local economic life and infrastructure (industry, railway), and the *oblast'* authorities did not contribute much to the development of the economy of the *okrug*. Thus, the Komi-Permyak Autonomous *Okrug* became the economic periphery of the Ural industrial region. Its role was to provide agricultural products and forest material.

Irrespective of the limits of achieved autonomy, the nationalistically minded communist elite of the Komi-Permyaks were initially enthusiastic about it and attempted to eliminate the “backwardness” of the Komi-Permyaks as quickly as possible. The Komi-Zyrian and Komi-Permyak dialects are relatively close and, to a large extent, mutually intelligible. A common written language could have been quite possible. However, Bolshevik Moscow continued to consider the Permyaks an individual ethnic unit and their dialects as a separate language. Thus, pursuant to the Soviet nationalities policy of the time, a literary language of their own was created for the Komi-Permyaks in the 1920s. The creators of the new standard were the Komi-Permyak intellectuals (teachers, cultural employees). In the beginning the so-called Molodtsov alphabet, based mainly on Cyrillic and borrowed from the Komi-Zyrians, was used. During the second half of the 1920s, the number of books that the Komi-Permyaks managed to publish was between 2 and 5 per year, mainly textbooks. The Komi-Permyak ethnic elite considered the establishment of a native-language school network one of their primary tasks. Gradually, the Komi-Permyak language began to

spread as the language of elementary education and by the late 1930s, the majority of Komi-Permyak children already obtained elementary education in their mother tongue (Lallukka 1999, 54).

Likewise, journalism in the Komi-Permyak language also came into being. Ten bilingual (Russian and Komi-Permyak) newspapers (i.e. *rajon* papers, the *okrug* newspaper and the urban newspaper) were issued in the *okrug* during the 1920s and 1930s. The *okrug* newspaper *Göris* ('The Plowman') and the newspaper of Kochevo *rajon* (a district smaller than an *okrug*) were issued in Komi-Permyak only (Aksënova n.d.; Solncev and Michal'čenko 2000, 224). All this was in accordance with the contemporary Soviet policy on nationalities and languages called *korenizacija* (indigenization). Local administration was also to be de-Russified, according to the prevailing communist approach.

At the beginning of 1927, an informal commission for Komization was formed in the *okrug*, headed by Feodor Tarakanov. Its main task was to introduce Komi-Permyak as the second state language in local administrative bodies. The Ural *oblast'* was against it, believing that such a low-level autonomy did not deserve its own local state language. The local executive authority and the *okrug's* party committee were reluctant, probably afraid of the reaction of the *oblast'*. However, the decision prepared by the commission, "On the leading role of the Komi-Permyak language", was adopted by the local party organization in November 1927. According to this document, there were to be two official languages—Komi-Permyak and Russian—within the *okrug*. As a response to this, the authorities of the Ural *oblast'* arranged a purge of the party in late 1928. A number of leading communists, including members of the Komization commission, but also top officials opposing its views, were accused of "national chauvinism" and incompetence and were forced to leave the *okrug*. Russians from elsewhere were appointed to their positions. The Komization process was stopped (Kon'shin and Derjabin 1992; Kon'shin 2006, 199–200, 206–209).

At the beginning of 1930, however, Komization was launched again, this time upon the initiative of the central committee of the Russian Communist Party, still following their line of *korenizacija*. The authorities of the Ural *Oblast'* were forced to restore the Komization commission, and the *okrug* top leadership was again replaced. In the course of further Komization, the Komi-Permyak language became the main language of public administration in all *okrug* authorities, and a command of Komi-Permyak, both spoken and written, was made compulsory for Permyak officials, and advisable for the others. Decisions were made under pressure from Moscow and Komization took the form of a sped-up campaign. The reality, however, often remained far behind, as there were not enough educated officials with a good command of written Komi-Permyak. When the policy of Moscow changed in the late 1930s, and the pressure from above disappeared, the *oblast'* authorities gave up the idea of Komization and it was stopped again (Kon'shin and Derjabin 1992; Lallukka 1999, 55–56; 2010, 92–93).

Successful Komization and the spread and reinforcement of the Komi-Permyak written language among the people was impeded by the Latinization campaign launched by the central government at the beginning of the 1930s. Due to the external pressure, the Molodtsov alphabet used so far had to be discarded and

replaced with a Latin one. People who had just recently obtained literacy in Komi-Permyak had to retrain for the new alphabet. School textbooks and other printed materials issued in the Molodtsov alphabet became useless and thousands of books were burnt. Teachers who had the courage to confront Latinization were accused of bourgeois nationalism and were dismissed from their posts (Kon'shin and Derjabin 1992; Lallukka 1999, 56).

4 Abrupt Setbacks and Steady Decline: 1937–1989

In 1937, the small Komi-Permyak intelligentsia was hit by political repressions. Altogether, more than 100 intellectuals, mainly teachers, became the victims of these repressions. Among those who perished were the most outstanding Komi-Permyak writers, Mikhail Likhachov and Andrei Zubov. As a rule, they were all accused of counter-revolutionary action, nationalism and separatism (Lallukka 1999, 56–57). The Komi-Permyak intelligentsia and cultural development were struck a blow from which they have not recovered to this day, according to some opinions. It was a real national trauma. Nationalism became a bad word, a means of intimidation. The Komi-Permyaks were terrified and they ceased to have the courage to speak up for their language and cultural development (Kon'shin and Derjabin 1992). This also denoted the beginning of the decades-long decline of the social status of the Komi-Permyak language.

By 1938, Moscow had set aside its dreams of global revolution and focused on “building socialism in one country”. Central authorities now stressed the role of the Russian nation and Russian language in the Soviet Union. All Soviet peoples were forced to consolidate around the Russians. Starting in 1938, the Russian language was an obligatory subject in all Soviet schools. In connection with the new policy, the Latin alphabet was seen as promoting divisions among Soviet nationalities. This, in turn brought about a new reform of orthography, conducted in the form of yet another campaign. This time, the Komi-Permyaks had to switch to Cyrillic. In order to better represent Komi-Permyak in writing, two new letters *i* and *ö* were added to the alphabet. Again, people had to retrain, and a number of printed editions, issued in the Latin alphabet, became wastepaper (Lallukka 1999, 56; Solncev and Michal'čenko 2000, 221).

One of the persistent problems affecting the Komi-Permyaks, which also largely determined the social status of their language and their ethnic self-esteem, was their relatively poor position in the hierarchy of Soviet national territorial autonomies. The Finno-Ugric neighbors of the Komi-Permyaks had indeed made progress in this regard. The Votyak Autonomous *Oblast'* had become the Udmurt Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) already in 1934, and the Komi (Zyrian) Autonomous *Oblast'* was made into the Komi Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936. The Komi-Permyaks had to be content with their national *okrug*. They perceived themselves as a small, insignificant and undeveloped people and this had a detrimental effect on their ethnic feelings of self-worth. The ASSRs had their own

constitution, legislative body, budget and government, whereas the highest local authority of the national *okrug* (as of 1977, autonomous *okrug*) was the soviet of working people's deputies, subordinated to the *oblast'*-level soviet of the same kind, and having a rather limited purview.

The population of the *okrug* increased during the 1950s, in connection with the development of the forestry sector and the concurrent inflow of a Russian-speaking labor force. After the forest resources were exhausted, part of the incoming workforce also left as the economy and the infrastructure in the *okrug* remained relatively underdeveloped and the local standard of living was comparatively low. During the period 1959–1989, the population of the *okrug* decreased from 234,200 to 158,500 (Kon'shin 2007, 58). The more ambitious Komi-Permyaks too began to leave the *okrug*. This was part of the general modernization and urbanization process. The problem was that the only city in the *okrug*, Kudymkar, was relatively small, having only about 30,000 inhabitants. It was primarily an administrative center, with no major industrial enterprises or educational institutions. Kudymkar was not attractive for the many rural people who headed to towns seeking a better life and further education opportunities. Instead, people went farther away, to Perm, Sverdlovsk, Moscow and other cities. Thus, they also left their ethnic and linguistic environment. During the period 1959–1989, the number of Komi-Permyaks living in the *okrug* decreased from 126,700 to 95,400 (Kon'shin 2007, 58) and, simultaneously, the percentage of the urban population among the Komi-Permyaks increased from 14 to 39.8 %. By 1989, only 64.8 % of Komi-Permyaks were living in the *okrug* (Nacional'nyj sostav 1991, 28–77). The rest had moved elsewhere, most of them to Perm *oblast'* and Sverdlovsk *oblast'*, and also to other areas of Russia, Kazakhstan and the Crimea.

The proportion of Komi-Permyaks within the population of the *okrug* was 77 % in 1926 and had dropped to 54.1 % by 1959. Over the following 30 years, the proportion of Komi-Permyaks even went up a little (to 60.2 %), as the Russians who had moved in were now more eager to leave the *okrug* than the Komi-Permyaks (Kon'shin 2007, 58).

Despite the relatively rapid urbanization after World War II, the Komi-Permyaks who had remained in the *okrug* were primarily a rural people. Traditionally, the Komi-Permyaks lived in relatively small villages, which could be relatively distant from each other. Such a settlement pattern was not appropriate for the arrangement of collective and state farms (*kolchoz* and *sovchoz*), and not compatible with the policy of the 1960s and 1970s of converging rural and urban life. The state could not afford to modernize scattered small villages and build relevant infrastructure (roads, schools, service institutions) and so this was considered inexpedient. The solution was seen in consolidating the population into larger central settlements. This was again done in the form of campaigns. In 1959, there were 1,280 rural settlements in the *okrug*; by 2002 the relevant figure had dropped to 706 (Kon'shin 2007, 59). As a rule, small villages had been ethnically homogeneous. The only language of everyday life therein was Komi-Permyak. Larger central settlements, however, were generally multi-ethnic, and the language of inter-ethnic communication was Russian. Likewise, mixed marriages, favored in official rhetoric as a sign of conversion and friendship of peoples, were more frequent in multi-ethnic settlements (let alone cities). As a rule,

the language that mixed families chose was Russian, of much greater prestige than Komi-Permyak, and children grew up as speakers of Russian. All this contributed to the (linguistic) assimilation of the Komi-Permyaks.

The share of those Komi-Permyaks who, during the census, had claimed Komi-Permyak as their mother tongue declined during 1959–1989 from 87.8 to 71.1 % (Itogi 1963, Table 53 ; Nacional'nyj sostav 1991, 28–33). In reality, linguistic assimilation could be even more extensive as those Komi-Permyaks who had already switched to Russian in their everyday life and more or less forgotten Komi-Permyak, could still claim that their “mother tongue” was Komi-Permyak simply because of the peculiarities of the Soviet nationalities policy and census practice. Soviet people tended to understand the question about their “mother tongue” as another question about their ethnicity (*nacional'nost'*), which was fixed in their internal passports. “Mother tongue” was understood in the census context as merely a symbol of ethnic identity or as the language of one's childhood home, not the primary language of one's everyday life in the present (cf. Tiškov 2003, 209–222).

The educational reform conducted during Khrushchev's era, in 1958–1959, was a retreat from the principle that a child needs to obtain at least primary education in his or her mother tongue. The reform stipulated that the language of instruction in schools was now to be decided by the parents. What happened in the case of smaller ethnic groups, who had a low status in the hierarchy of Soviet national autonomies, and among whom bilingualism was already widespread, was that their mother tongue was gradually pushed out of schools and Russian became the language of instruction (Silver 1974; Kreindler 1982; Anderson and Silver 1984).

The keywords of the nationalities policy during the Khrushchev era were the mutual conversion (*sbliženie*) and later merger (*slijanie*) of Soviet peoples. During the time of Brezhnev, a new idea of the *soveckij narod* ('Soviet nation') with Russian as the common language was launched.

The changeover of schools (including elementary schools) that had Komi-Permyak as a language of instruction to Russian commenced in the mid 1960s (Neroznak 2002, 178; Malcev 2000, 148–147). By the beginning of the 1970s, Komi-Permyak as a language of instruction was only maintained in grades 1–3, and by the middle of the 1980s, Komi-Permyak ceased to function as a language of instruction in schools. On the one hand, this had to do with the nationalities policy of the authorities, but on the other hand, it was the consequence of choices made by Komi-Permyak parents. Russian was seen as the language of social advancement and a large number of people preferred to put their children in Russian-language classes, even if the children could not speak any Russian before entering school, so that they would acquire fluent Russian (Lallukka 1999, 58). Likewise, many Komi-Permyak parents, especially those living in Kudymkar or outside the *okrug*, decided to communicate with their children at home in Russian, not in Komi-Permyak. For many, the Komi-Permyak language was associated with the past and something to get rid of, while Russian was connected with modernity and the future.

Likewise, the role of the Komi-Permyak language in printed media also began to decline in the 1950s. The *okrug* newspaper *Göris* began to be published in Russian already in 1951. Still, some *rajon* newspapers in the Komi-Permyak language con-

tinued to exist until the end of the 1960s (Malcev 2000, 147; Neroznak 2002, 178; Aksënova n.d.).

5 A New Beginning? 1989–2012

The processes (*glasnost*, *perestroika*, various socio-political and national movements) that shook the entire Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, were also reflected in the Komi-Permyak Autonomous *Okrug*. A society for preserving the Komi-Permyak language and culture, Jugör ('Lutsh') was founded in 1989. The local press began to publish articles by Komi-Permyak intellectuals that dealt with Komi-Permyak history in a new, national spirit and sought opportunities for the rebirth of Komi-Permyak language and culture (cf. Kon'shin and Derjabin 1992). All kinds of meetings, debates and conferences were held where nationalistically-minded intellectuals could discuss matters that they had so far kept silent about. Still, all this was limited to a relatively narrow circle of people, while the majority of the Komi-Permyaks remained passive, and moreover, some of them even had a hostile attitude towards national endeavors ("nationalism"), discredited during the Soviet period.

In March 1992, the Komi-Permyak Autonomous *Okrug*, together with every other autonomous *okrug*, became a subject of the Russian Federation with expanded autonomy. Now, the *okrug* had its own legislative body, budget, government and direct representation in Moscow. At the same time, the *okrug* still remained a part of the Perm *Oblast'*. Such a schizophrenic situation in constitutional law caused problems, and attempts were made to solve them through various bipartite and tripartite agreements. In the economic sense, the *okrug* remained weak. The demand for forest material decreased abruptly, in connection with the collapse of the Soviet economy, and the agricultural sector entered a deep crisis. The budget of the *okrug* consisted overwhelmingly of subsidies received from Moscow, and the relatively low living standard at the time dropped even further. The income of inhabitants of the *okrug* in 2004 was approximately 3 times smaller than the Russian average. Local salaries were about half the size of the salaries in Perm *Oblast'* (Kon'shin 2007, 56–61).

5.1 Demography

During the period 1989–2010, the number of Komi-Permyaks living in Russia dropped from 147,269 to 94,456 (regarding the data of 2010, see FSGS 2010, volume 4, Table 1; for the data of 1989, see Nacional'nyj sostav 1991, 28–33). The reasons for this were, on one hand, the demographic crisis that had hit post-Soviet Russia as a whole, and on the other hand, the process of assimilation.

The population of the *okrug* had declined from 158,500 to 136,100 and the number of Komi-Permyaks living in the *okrug* from 95,400 to 80,300 during the period

1989–2002.³ The percentage of the Komi-Permyaks in the population of the *okrug* remained relatively stable, from 60.2 to 59 % (cf. Nacional’nyj sostav 1991, 28–77; FSGS 2004, volume 4, Table 3). Such a large proportion of the titular ethnic group within the population of an autonomous unit is rare in Russia. The Komi-Permyaks form the majority population in the countryside of the *okrug* (except in the villages of the Jurla *rajon* and Gainy *rajon* where Russians predominate). It is noteworthy that in Kudymkar (population 30,162), the only city in the *okrug*, Komi-Permyaks constitute about 53 % of the population. Indeed, this is also a rare indicator among the non-Russians of Russia. To this day, the Komi-Permyaks have remained a rural people first of all and are experiencing all the intrinsic problems characteristic of rural Russia, namely poverty, social depression and alcoholism.⁴

The Komi-Permyaks’ level of education is relatively poor. According to the data of 2010, only 10.4 % of Komi-Permyaks have a higher education. The relevant indicator among the Russians was 24.3⁵ (FSGS 2010, volume 4, Table 13). Among the Komi-Permyaks, the number of those studying at an institution of higher education was 68 per 10,000 inhabitants. The respective all-Russian average was 448 (Kon’sin 2007, 56–61). This means that the Komi-Permyak intelligentsia is relatively small and few are from the younger generations. Furthermore, a large portion of educated Komi-Permyaks live outside the *okrug*.

5.2 *Ethnic Identity*

The attitudes of the Komi-Permyaks with regard to their language are closely connected to their ethnic identity. The language is the main ethnic marker for the Komi-Permyaks, the most significant collective social feature distinguishing them from Russians. There are no specific ways of life, religious beliefs or racial peculiarities distinguishing Komi-Permyaks from Russians. This means that the Komi-Permyaks as an ethnic unit will probably disappear if the Komi-Permyak language dies out. On the other hand, it means that assimilation (Russification) is relatively easy for the Komi-Permyaks: just forget your language and nothing stops you from assimilating!

³ The Komi-Permyak *okrug* had a population of 114,839 in 2012 according to the Russian Federal State Statistics Service.

⁴ The share of urban population has even slightly decreased after 1989 and was 36.8 % in 2010 (cf. Volume 4, Tab 1 in FSGS 2010). It seems that assimilation of the Komi-Permyaks is faster in towns.

⁵ The data refers to people 15 years of age and older. Higher education means completed higher education and degree studies (*poslevuzovskaja*).

The ethnic identity of the Komi-Permyaks is relatively weak. They tend to adopt negative stereotypes that Russians have about them, and are not too willing to identify themselves with their ethnic group. This is particularly true in the case of more ambitious urban residents and younger people. A large proportion of the Komi-Permyaks find a way out by considering themselves as partially Russians (justifying this by e.g. having some Russians in the family as is quite common due to the relatively long-term and widespread habit of ethnically mixed marriages), or emphasizing that they are citizens of Russia (*rossijane*) (Šabaev and Konakov 1997, 104).

The ethnic identity of the Komi-Permyaks is very closely related to rural life, yet this sector has been experiencing severe recession in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and its prestige is rather low. The majority of Komi-Permyaks living in Kudymkar were born in villages, and the Komi-Permyak language and identity become relevant for them only if they visit their home village (Šabaev and Konakov 1997, 104). Being Komi-Permyak and speaking the language is not relevant for the urban environment, according to their understanding, and are left behind in one's home village along with rubber boots and oilcloth.

Negative ethnic self-stereotypes, widespread among the Komi-Permyaks (including even educated people) who have left the *okrug*, depict the Komi-Permyaks primarily as uneducated bumpkins, drunkards who cannot cope with their lives and suffer in poverty. Those who have left do not want to identify themselves with such people and when talking about Komi-Permyaks, the pronoun "they" is used (Šabaev and Konakov 1997, 104–105).

90 % of the Komi-Permyaks have relatives outside the *okrug*, and those who have moved elsewhere have a relatively substantial impact on the ones who have stayed put. As a rule, the living standard of the people who have moved away is higher and they act as mediators between the (Russian) center and the (Komi-Permyak) periphery (Šabaev and Derjabin 1997, 106–107).

In their new locations, the Komi-Permyaks do not function as a diaspora. For instance, in Perm, where there are thousands of them, Komi-Permyaks have not set up their own schools or ethnic organizations as many other ethnic groups have done. They do not communicate on ethnic grounds, but instead they are ashamed of their ethnicity and try to hide it.

The Komi-Permyaks' relationship with the Russians is still totally asymmetrical. The Komi-Permyaks regard themselves as a provincial people and act accordingly. For them, the Russian language is a window to the big world, and everything which is Russian is prestigious and associated with wealth and success, mediated by glossy magazines, the film and music industries, or television. The majority of the Komi-Permyaks are oriented toward the Russian professional and mass culture as, in their opinion, their own little ethnic culture has little to offer. At present, the Komi-Permyaks are only on the verge of discovering how to render value to an ancestral culture and ecological way of life, in their contemporary western meaning. However, these values would probably never attract the majority of Komi-Permyaks.

A fraction of the Komi-Permyak intelligentsia, more or less ethnically aware, has tried to do something for raising Komi-Permyaks' ethnic self-esteem and for preserving and developing their language, but their success has remained limited.

It is still rather common that the children of the Komi-Permyak cultural and political elite do not speak the Komi-Permyak language. It seems that a large part of the national elite tends toward assimilation (Lobanova 2006).

5.3 *The Legal Status of the Language*

The expansion of the political autonomy of the Komi-Permyak Autonomous *Okrug* did not bring about a substantial improvement in the social status of the Komi-Permyak language. It would appear that the local, largely ethnically Komi-Permyak political elite were not greatly interested in linguistic or cultural issues. In June 1992, a proposal was made to the congress of the peoples deputies of the *okrug* from all levels, to once again grant the Komi-Permyak language official status, but this was not supported by the delegates, even though the majority of them were Komi-Permyaks. Pursuant to the Constitution of the Russian Federation (Article 68), valid since 1993, the official language in Russia is the Russian language. Only republics (e.g. the Komi Republic, Republic of Udmurtia, or Republic of Mari El) are entitled to establish their own official languages that can be used together with Russian. Nevertheless, the Komi-Permyak language did indeed obtain a certain official status as the language of the *okrug*'s titular ethnic group (*titul'nyi jazyk* 'titular language'). As the Charter (*Ustav*) of the Komi-Permyak Autonomous *Okrug*, adopted in December 1994, stipulates:

The official language within the territory of the Komi-Permyak Autonomous *Okrug* is the Russian language. In official communication it is permitted to use also the Komi-Permyak language side by side with the Russian language. (cit. Solncev and Michal'čenko 2000, 222; cf. also Neroznak 2002, 177)

Several autonomous *okrugs* have been abolished in Russia on the initiative of central authorities in the new millennium. These *okrugs*, subjects of the Russian Federation, were formerly parts of other subjects (i.e. *oblast'* and *kraj*), their economies were weak and their budget heavily dependent on subsidies from Moscow. The Komi-Permyak Autonomous *Okrug* was the first to lose its political autonomy (its own local parliament, budget and direct representation in Moscow) and was joined with Perm *Oblast'* (2005) after a referendum conducted in 2003. Komi-Permyaks voted for unification mainly because they hoped to improve the local economy by joining the relatively wealthy Perm *Oblast'*. They were not especially concerned about the fate of their language or culture. Besides, Perm as well as Moscow had promised that the preservation of Komi-Permyak language and culture was guaranteed. Indeed, according to Article 42 of the Charter (*Ustav*) of the Perm *Kraj* (a subject of the Russian Federation born after the merger of the Komi-Permyak AO and Perm *Oblast'*), the Komi-Permyak language retained principally the same rights as it had before unification. The Komi-Permyak language could be used in official communication, alongside Russian (*Ustav Permskogo kraja*). However, the Komi-Permyaks no longer have practically any legislative power to protect and develop

their language. Their area—still an *okrug*, but no longer autonomous—has only 2 seats out of 60 in the regional parliament of the Perm *Kraj*. The local executive—the head of the *okrug*—is at the same time a member of the cabinet of ministers of the *kraj*.

5.4 *Fields of Use*

There are two main styles in the Komi-Permyak language—the everyday spoken language and the literary language (Neroznak 2002, 178). The fact is that the Komi-Permyak language has remained, first and foremost, a spoken language and its use as a written language is extremely limited. Russian is overwhelmingly used in written contexts instead. Active Komi-Permyak literacy is not widespread. There are more people who can read in Komi-Permyak, but many of them still prefer to read in Russian, as they are simply more used to it. Indeed, there is not much to read in Komi-Permyak. The amount of printed material is very scarce, for there is no relevant demand, and there is no demand because there is no reading habit—there is no habit as there is nothing to read. At the same time, a command of the Russian language is quite general—the Russian-language schools have ensured this.

The main language of public life in the Komi-Permyak *okrug* is Russian. The Komi-Permyak language is used sparingly in local administration (at the level of the *okrug* and *rajon*), and only as a spoken language, but not when speaking publicly. In courts, interpretation into Komi-Permyak is provided, if necessary, at least theoretically. In the agricultural sphere, the Komi-Permyak language is used quite widely, but in forestry, the dominant language is Russian as workers are usually multi-ethnic. In trade and advertising, product descriptions and manuals, the Komi-Permyak language is used very rarely. Likewise, Komi-Permyak is practically not used in the Orthodox Church, though a couple of enthusiasts have translated some ecclesiastical literature into Komi-Permyak (Solncev and Michal'čenko 2000, 222–228; Aksënova n.d.).

Today, Komi-Permyak is used as the language of communication only in some rural kindergartens. As a subject, the language is studied in the so-called ethnic (*nacional'nye*) schools from grades 1 to 11 (Solncev and Michal'čenko 2000, 223–225, 230).

During the academic year 1993/1994, there were 196 public schools in the *okrug*, 88 of them so-called ethnic schools where the Komi-Permyak language was taught as a subject. Altogether, 6,950 children learned Komi-Permyak, i.e. 27 % of the pupils in the *okrug*. As Komi-Permyaks form around 60 % of the population in the *okrug*, one can state that approximately half of the Komi-Permyak pupils studied their mother tongue at school (Lallukka 1999, 58–59). The share of the schoolchildren learning Komi-Permyak did increase slightly during the late 1990s, but began to decline again later. The reason is that small rural schools, where Komi-Permyak was taught, have been closed down in large numbers. This probably does not imply a policy targeted directly against teaching the Komi-Permyak language; rather, the authorities simply wish to optimize the school network, make it more efficient. In the Komi-Permyak

okrug, such a process nonetheless has a certain ethnic tinge to it, but the authorities have so far ignored this.

According to the data of 2007, the number of schools remaining in the *okrug* was 99, with 15,529 pupils. The number of so-called ethnic schools was 38, with 3,525 students, i.e. 22.7 % of the pupils in the *okrug*. Out of 148 kindergartens, 53 were ethnic ones, attended by 845 children, i.e. 14.3 % of preschool-age children. In Kudymkar, the capital city, there are no kindergartens or public schools where Komi-Permyak is taught. The teachers of the Komi-Permyak language for elementary and secondary schools are trained in the Kudymkar Pedagogical College, as well as at the Perm State Pedagogical University (Kon'šin and Nikitina 2008, 172–173; Aksënova n.d.).

It is still quite common among the Komi-Permyaks, particularly in Kudymkar, that parents try to speak to their children only in Russian, even if they themselves communicate with each other in Komi-Permyak.

With us, you know, our mother and father communicated with each other in Komi-Permyak, but with the children they spoke Russian. They didn't scold us when we sometimes said some words in Komi-Permyak, they just didn't communicate with us in Komi-Permyak. Nonetheless, we, the children, know a little Komi-Permyak.⁶

The prestige of the Komi-Permyak language is low, a command of this language is considered useless at best, or even harmful—the Komi-Permyak accent tends to be seen as a social disability and parents are afraid that even a slightly weaker command of Russian would impede their children's further educational and career opportunities.

In the past, and even still today, people used to say that one needed Komi-Permyak only as far as Rakšino,⁷ that in real life it is only a hindrance, an obstacle in passing the national standardized exams. This was even discussed in newspapers quite recently.⁸

Even in the so-called ethnic schools, instruction in one's mother tongue takes place only on a voluntary basis.

If the parents do not want this, their child does not have to learn the language and is exempted from Komi-Permyak classes. Naturally, this also depends on how educated the parent is, whether s/he understands the importance of the language.⁹

Thus, in the regional centers of Jusva and Kočëvo, the teaching of Komi-Permyak has already been abolished. Alevtina Lobanova, the head of the Institute of the Komi-Permyak language, history, and traditional culture refers to occasions when parents came to school and demonstratively threw down, tore up or stepped on Komi-Permyak language textbooks, and shouted that they do not need this language, that

⁶ Kolčurina, Svetlana (Interview with the tutor of the youth organization *Roza vetrov* on September 9, 2008).

⁷ Rakšino is a village at the southern border of the Komi-Permyak territory.

⁸ Klimov, Vasilij (Interview with a Komi-Permyak author on September 15, 2008).

⁹ Ermakova, Tat'jana (Interview with a teacher of the Komi-Permyak language at Ošyb secondary school on September 13, 2008).

their children would not start learning it, and wanted this subject removed from the curriculum (Lobanova 2006).

The state of Komi-Permyak printed media is rather sad. At the beginning of 2007, 2 *okrug*-wide newspapers (the daily *Parma* and the weekly *Parma-Novosti*) were issued along with five *rajon* newspapers. All of these publications were in Russian. In addition, the *okrug* is covered by the federal and regional Russian-language press. Twice a month, a Komi-Permyak page *Komi govk* ('The Komi Echo') was published as a supplement to *Parma* (the former *Po leninskomu puti/Göris*'). Materials in the Komi-Permyak language have sometimes also been published in *rajon* papers (e.g. Kudymkar *rajon* newspaper *Invenskij kraj*).¹⁰ A Komi-Permyak and Russian-language bilingual children's magazine, *Sil'kan* ('Bellflower') has been issued since 1993, but has constantly struggled with financial difficulties.¹¹ The magazines *In'va* and *Bitširok*, have been published irregularly. A newspaper in Komi-Permyak, *Kama kytšyn* ('Upper Kama') began to be issued in 2010, financed by the *kraj* government. A Komi-Permyak newspaper will hopefully disseminate reading habits in the language and have a positive impact on Komi-Permyak's prestige. A new bilingual (Komi-Permyak and Russian) magazine *Sizimok* was also initiated in 2010 with *kraj* support to popularize the Komi-Permyak language and culture among children.

The position of the Komi-Permyak language in the local broadcast media has significantly improved following the collapse of the Soviet Union. A local television station was established in autumn 1995. Programs in Komi-Permyak have been broadcast since the spring of 1996 and initially formed 10 % of the entire broadcast volume. The total amount of Komi-Permyak radio programs in 1995 was approximately 40 hours (45 minutes a week, approximately 11 % of local programming). The archive of the local state-owned television and radio company (now the department of the Perm GTRK) contains sound recordings and film tapes in the Komi-Permyak language, which once in a while are aired (Solncev and Michal'čenko 2000, 225–226; Aksénova n.d.).

In 2007, the local department of the Perm GTRK produced 262 hours of television programs and 296 hours of radio broadcasts. About a third of these programs were in the Komi-Permyak language (Kon'šin and Nikitina 2008, 180). The obstacles in increasing the share of Komi-Permyak programs are the lack of funding, limited staff with a proper command of the language and a lack of Komi-Permyak neologisms for many modern phenomena. On weekdays, Komi-Permyak programs air for 6 minutes in the morning and 25 minutes in the evening, mainly local news and cultural programs. Local officials of Komi-Permyak origin, who can speak the language in their everyday life, refuse to give interviews in the Komi-Permyak language as they are not able to talk about their official affairs in Komi-Permyak; they lack the necessary vocabulary. Thus, they explain their subject matters in Russian, the way

¹⁰ Kon'šina, Elena (Interview with the editor-in-chief of *Invenskij kraj*, the newspaper of Kudymkar *rajon* on September 10, 2008); Kon'šin and Nikitina (cf. also 2008, 180–181), Neroznak (2002, 178), and Aksénova (n.d.).

¹¹ Voilokova, Ljudmila (Interview with the editor-in-chief of children's magazine *Sil'kan* on September 10, 2008).

they are accustomed to. For the time being, there are no funds for subtitling in the Komi-Permyak language.¹² There is no actual need for the subtitles as the majority of the audience would understand Russian perfectly well, but Komi-Permyak subtitles would help to create reading habits in this language and raise its prestige. Now, the local news program in Komi-Permyak actually looks very much like Russian. A positive sign is that the private radio companies broadcasting in the region have started to pay some attention to their Komi-Permyak-speaking audience. Naturally, the inhabitants of the Komi-Permyak *Okrug* do have the possibility of listening to and watching the various nationwide and regional Russian radio and television stations.

The total number of titles in the Komi-Permyak language is approximately 450, mainly textbooks and propagandistic literature from the Soviet era, but also around 90 books of poetry, 50 plays, seven novels, plus several folklore collections (Solncev and Michal'čenko 2000, 222–224).

In recent years, the local publishing house has annually put out 2–3 titles in Komi-Permyak (or bilingual, Komi-Permyak and Russian). For instance, in 2007, the Komi-Permyak state publishing house issued 9 publications, including 1 in Komi-Permyak and 3 bilingual ones (Kon'šin and Nikitina 2008, 179). The publication of books is commissioned and paid for by the *okrug* or *kraj* government. Nonetheless, there is a wide selection of books in Russian. In any event, the overwhelming majority prefers to read in Russian. The fact that Komi-Permyak is not functioning as a written language has already been discussed above. A professional theater, founded in Kudymkar already in 1931, is still operating, despite problems with the new building that have gone on for years. Since its foundation, more than 650 productions have been staged, including approximately 20 in the Komi-Permyak language (Solncev and Michal'čenko 2000, 226; Aksënova n.d.). The Komi-Permyaks are fairly proud of their theater, and one would think that there would be an audience for a larger number of Komi-Permyak productions, as a poor command of written Komi-Permyak would not be an obstacle in watching the performance. Still, the scarcity of Komi-Permyak playwrights, as well as actors with good command of Komi-Permyak remains a problem.

6 Concluding Remarks

The main obstacle in preserving and developing the Komi-Permyak language is the weakness of the Komi-Permyaks' ethnic identity, even their ethnic nihilism, and the related belittling attitude towards their own language. This is the result of various historical factors, and to a large extent that of the nationalities policy of the state. The homeland of the Komi-Permyaks has been a relatively poor area for centuries, lagging behind its neighbors socially and economically. It is a classical example of a periphery ethnically different from the center. The local people haven't found much

¹² Kleščin, Evgenij (Interview with the deputy director of the Perm branch of the State Tele-Radio Company on September 15, 2008).

to be proud of. Many ambitious and educated persons of Komi-Permyak origin have managed to leave this backwater, assimilating voluntarily. This has been relatively easy as the language is the main characteristic distinguishing Komi-Permyaks from Russians. The Komi-Permyaks' own ethnic elite (teachers, officials, etc.) evolved relatively late and remained few. They undertook a serious endeavor to improve the socioeconomic situation of their people in the 1920s and 1930s. A certain "national awakening" occurred, but the process was oppressed by the limited autonomy they received. Their relatively poor standing in the hierarchy of Soviet national autonomies lowered the Komi-Permyaks' ethnic self-esteem. Heavy repressions devastating the Komi-Permyak national intelligentsia in the late 1930s created an atmosphere of fear which to this day is not forgotten.

Present-day Komi-Permyak intellectuals may have a possibility to enhance the self-image of the Komi-Permyaks, and increase the prestige of being a Komi-Permyak and speaking the language. However, this necessitates earnest intention and self-sacrificing work, perhaps even a readiness to antagonize the representatives of power in Perm and Moscow. In general, the Komi-Permyak intelligentsia is weak and has, to a great extent, relinquished the idea of preserving their ethnic group and language, although there are some exceptions. Thus, a citizens' movement, Komi-Permiatskii Narod was registered in 2000, aiming at contributing to the preservation and development of the Komi-Permyak language and culture (Kon'shin and Nikitina 2008, 181–182). At the same time, it can be said that local ethnic organizations have become somewhat stagnant. Their members are disappointed and tired, and are afraid to have a louder say for the protection of their language and culture as they are scared of repercussions from the authorities (mainly losing their job).

However, the situation of the Komi-Permyaks and their language is not so bad at all when one compares it with the Votians, Izhorians, Vepsians, Karelians or the "small-numbered indigenous people of the North". Tens of thousands of Komi-Permyaks are still living compactly in their villages in the north-western corner of Perm *Kraj*. There are thousands of children who speak Komi-Permyak as their first language, and this language is even taught at local schools to some degree. A literary language exists and a certain amount of Komi-Permyak literature has accumulated over the decades. It is not too late yet to work for preservation and development of the Komi-Permyak language, but one cannot wait either. Today one cannot hope that a language will persist spontaneously for generations, like in Tsarist times. The role of language in society has been changed in the process of modernization. In the era of general literacy, compulsory education, mass media and mass culture, language plays a different role than before.

However, not every language.

It is delightful that there are young Komi-Permyaks who are ready to do something for their people and language, and who seem to be relatively free of the fear that constrains the older generations.¹³ It is also a pleasing sign that the Komi-Permyak language is finding its way to local youth culture. Several bands have started to

¹³ Choroševa, Elena (Interview with a young activist on September 16, 2008); Vyčikin, Vitalij (Interview with a young activist on September 16, 2008).

perform songs in Komi-Permyak, and though for the time being this is merely a curiosity, it is an exception from the rule that songs are always in Russian.

No one has played such youth rock in the Komi-Permyak language. Maybe older people also used to have some rock songs in Komi-Permyak? Whether young people have done anything? ...not much. These songs are better accepted than the Russian ones. It is interesting and unusual for the audience. They like it better than in Russian. While many of them don't understand what the songs are about, they are pleased.¹⁴

One possibility to reinterpret being a Komi-Permyak and the local rural life in positive way is, in my opinion, to spread the ideas of green consciousness, ecological lifestyle, organic agriculture, etc, which are widely disseminated in the West. To a great extent, the Komi-Permyaks already have all this, but they simply do not know how to render value to these things in the contemporary sense. Targeted grants could be used to support the development of Komi-Permyak media and literature (including plays).

External interest in how the Komi-Permyaks and their language are faring is also important, as are the diverse contacts that the Komi-Permyaks have with the wider world. Outside interest would raise prestige of the Komi-Permyak language and force the central and local authorities of Russia to pay more attention to this people and contribute to the development of their culture and language. Indeed, Russia wishes to leave an impression to the world of being a civilized multi-ethnic country where the preservation and development of minority languages and cultures is guaranteed by law.¹⁵

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¹⁴ Interview with students of the Kudymkar branch of the Udmurt State University on September 17, 2008.

¹⁵ See Articles 19/2, 26/2, 29/2, 68/3 in the Russian Constitution (*Konstitucija Rossijskoj Federacii*) from 1992.

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