



# The Process of Revitalization of Culture and Indigenous Ethnic Identity: *The Case of the Vepsian people in Karelia*



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Master of Philosophy in Indigenous Studies  
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Spring 2007

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have enjoyed working on this master thesis and I am grateful for all the ideas and insights provided by many people who have worked with me and commented on the materials. First, the master students in Indigenous Studies program at the University of Tromsø have been sharing the classes with me during 2004-2006. Their discussions, questions, comments and some reflections on my proposals helped me to determine my personal interest and create the basis shape of my text.

Secondly, the academic and teaching staff of the faculties of Social Sciences and Humanities that provided assistance in the program courses. I especially want to thank Trond Thuen for effective dialogue, conversations about language and ethnic identity, and his guiding in the field of social anthropology with unlimited tolerance and patience.

Thanks to all my informants in Karelia, my 'small motherland', who challenged me to engage with Vepsian culture and ethnicity more seriously and respectfully and helped me to figure out their opinion on many questions. Special thanks to my fellow and friend Anna and her family, who managed to put me on the way, choose the topic, raise my research questions and helped to approach most of my informants.

Particular thanks go to the several partners from Russia working in the Committee on National Politics of the Republic of Karelia and Vepsian Cultural Society, to Svetlana Pasyukova and Natalia Antonova personally for their dedicated hard work and advice with materials.

I am thankful to the Sami Centre and the Faculty of Social Sciences which agreed to fund my fieldwork research.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for support and tolerance and also valued conversations. It has become possible to complete this paper because of their belief in me, and everything good that I have got in my life besides my university education I have got from my dearest parents.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is mainly focused on theoretical and methodological study of ethnicity and indigenesness, with some particular attention to language and politics. Some aspects of identity building and self-awareness among the Veps people living in Karelia (the northern district of the Russian Federation) will be in focus.

First of all, the research project is interdisciplinary and thus also methodologically plural though the primary approach to ethnic identity is based on idea that ethnicity is socially constructed image. The main organization, The Vepsian Cultural Society, and other actors of the movement are nowadays engaged in the creation of ethnic markers, such as a common group name (Veps), elements of common culture and a common history (or a myth of common origin and, hence, a myth of the Finno-Ugric world).

This project aims to discuss these issues related to history and general ethnopolitical development in Karelia (modern stage and historical course). The relations between the majority (Russians) and minorities (Finno-Ugric ethnic groups: Karelians, Veps and Finnish people) in Karelia will be of importance, as well as a discussion of definitions (firstly and mostly, ethnicity definition) and identification process.

The leading question is who are the Veps, and it will be in focus through the whole manuscript. What does ethnicity mean for the politicians, journalists, ethnic elites, intellectual workers and ordinary people in this regard? How do different national institutions and societies, politicians and mass-media tools make the Vepsian people aware of their ethnic identity within the Russian majority and how different actors of the revitalizing movement objectify ethnic identity?

Then I compare this to how the Vepsian people identify themselves and present their ethnic identity in everyday life, how important it is for them to show their ethnic belonging and how much they involve themselves in the process of revitalization of culture and, hence, language.

A discussion about different symbols of ethnicity which can be the tools of revitalizing work will lead to the conclusion that the most urgent issue for the Veps is to preserve their dying-out language. And consequently, the language is only one marker of their distinctive culture, ethnicity and group in general that has survived through the centuries of assimilation and can be the main claim in the struggle for cultural rights nowadays.

Thus, I mainly collected data about variations in language use (Vepsian, Russian and others), i.e. how and when the people use their mother tongue and thus articulate their ethnic identity. Today the number of the Veps is quite unchanged, but the number of the language speakers is rapidly decreasing even though the authorities and activists do everything to preserve and develop culture and language. Why is that? My hypothesis is based on the idea of a gap between the ordinary people, official authorities and, consequently, ethnic leaders in the building of a strong self-consciousness about identity that could resist the continued effect of the assimilation processes. This gap is quite significant in the area of language development work that will be of a primary importance in the thesis.

Also it is obvious that the ethnic self-identification by itself and attitude to it on the grass-root level has changed much in 21<sup>st</sup> century accepting different mixed forms and interpreting the relations between modernity, traditions and cultural exchange in new ways.

This investigation is based on the fieldwork data collection conducted in the Republic of Karelia, Russia, in June-August and November 2005.

**Keywords:** the Veps people, ethnic identity, revitalization movement, language, politics.

## Chapter I:

### *Introduction*

#### **1.1. Introduction to the theme**

The research project sets out to examine ethnic identity as an object in combating politicization, objectification, manufacturing, on the one hand, and – in self-determination, ethnic self-awareness and revitalization process at the grass-rooted level, on the other hand. The project will analyze ethnic identity from three different perspectives:

- ✓ Historical consequences (general background part);
- ✓ Content (chapters on theories of ethnic identity and being a Veps beyond political and scientific discourse); and hence,
- ✓ Ethnic management (chapters on constructed ethnicity and movement).

The project will mainly focus on political issues of the ethnic identity, especially in the area of linguistics, but some parts will also deal with grass-root level identification process.

The research project has three main strands: First, it will attempt to build up a coherent ethnic identity doctrine on social, biological and political content of it. Second, the project will review the approaches and mechanisms through which identity can in practice be used and marked in everyday life (discourse on language). Third, the project will analyze different frameworks from the point of view of the indigenous people by analyzing how scientific frameworks are reflected in the self-understanding and self-organization of the minority group.

As globalizing societies become ever more homogenous, Russia's new post-communist government has taken a new national political turn: it has declared Russia to be a multicultural plural-ethnic nation (The Constitution of the Russian Federation, ratified December 12, 1993, Preamble). While the escalation of local particularities has been a common paradoxical worldwide response to global trends, the Russian case is a priori the pairing of indigenous identity with the national/federal and local/regional ones. This is the main content of the politics of federalism, the system in which the power to govern is shared between the national and regional governments, that have taken place in the country since 1990s.

These three types of identity, individual, regional, federal, are very well blended with developed by Frederik Barth levels: micro, median, and macro (Barth, 1994, II: 16-17), where micro level is presented by individual identity, median – regional or local geographical (republican belonging in this case), and macro – federal or state (pan-Rossiyskaya<sup>1</sup>), consequently.

A new official Single List of the Indigenous Numerically Small Peoples was adopted by the federal government in 2000, and different national programs recognize indigenous groups as important actors in the national politics. But to the contrary to this legislation tendency, federal identity building and citizenship aspiration promotion have become of importance at federal level too as a part of building of a strong state identity. So far, it is worth to state that my research hypothesis is based on this “two-faced Janus” tendency in the Russian politics today.

## **1.2. Research hypothesis**

I hypothesize that as the Russian state incorporates the rapidly developing new national post-soviet/post-communist/democratic idea, it must inevitably tie indigenous ethnicity to the federal identity development, in addition to support of all indigenous movement issues. These two tendencies are not explicitly formulated as a state doctrine, but clearly recognized through several political actions and legal acts implementation. Meanwhile, some scientist such as Tishkov (1993, 1995), Guboglo (1995), have analyzed in detail these phenomena in Russia. In the given case of the Vepsian people, this connection between federal identity building and indigenous identity support and promotion face each other in controversial political actions such as discussion on alphabet for the Vepsian language. The *socially constructed* category of the "Veps" has very different meanings for the state, the ethno elite, and the individual indigenous people, especially in regard to discussion on language use issue. I propose to examine this reformulation of the relationship between the state and ethnic groups by studying Veps, because they are caught between the pressures of assimilating and a modern urban environment and reinventing themselves as a modern indigenous group to avail themselves of the economic, political and cultural opportunities now available.

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<sup>1</sup> This term “rossiyanizm” mainly applies to the sense of unity and nationalism experienced within ethnic groups under the domination of Russian culture.

The ethnicity is hence investigated in three already mentioned level perspectives:

- ✓ Building of national/federal identity: The nation-state is reforming itself through new discourses and practices of multicultural plural ethnic nationhood. This has two effects:
  - First, it brings ethnic identity more strongly into the national political sphere. As a result of this tendency the federal government intentionally tries to promote a distinctive Vepsian identity and to support the ethnic elite's claims.
  - Secondly, this indigenous identity contests the homogenizing power of federal policy forces, and the Veps people become inevitably the bearers of multiply identity.
- ✓ Ethnic Identity building: Three communities of Vepsians living in different districts of Russia have recently formed a cultural organization, the Vepsian Cultural Society, to mediate between them and the state, to obtain funding for development projects, and to provide a positive alternative vision for a modern Vepsian identity. I suggest this ongoing process of identity creation is strongly influenced by the state, and by nongovernmental development agencies who offer money for groups practicing ethno-development. As a result ethnic elite leaders try to resist this federal political pressure by promoting the symbols of ethnic identity which are supposed to create a continuity of the history and traditions of the Veps. In this situation they often apply to the myth of Finno-Ugric world that is hardly understood and supported at grass-root level.
- ✓ Individual Identity belonging: Indigenous descendants must negotiate multiple identities within this new (often urban) milieu, internalizing the national and regional development projects on some levels and resisting them on others. I suggest that for individual Veps, creating a "Vepsian" identity is *a series of situational choices*. For instance, many Vepsian parents decide not to teach their urban children to speak Vepsian to avoid the situation when "the language does not feed you", then – watch with both pride or sorrow as they become Russian-speaking "Russians" (in both meanings of the word as a Russian citizen and a Russian-identity bearer).

### **1.3. Some personal reflections on a research**

The Veps people are a small-in-number indigenous population living in the north-western part of the Russian Federation. I have chosen this ethnic group partly because I was born and grew up in Karelia living in the neighborhood of this indigenous people all my life. I also have some Vepsian ancestors, and my grandmother, the Veps by origin, could speak the Vepsian language that unfortunately got away from our family with her death some years ago.

Though, born in the Soviet Union and been an ordinary “Soviet child”, I had not been aware of my ethnic identity for many years. When I was about ten years old, the USSR was collapsing, and from then I have got a new identity as a Russian citizen. Significantly, I have started to be aware of my indigenous identity as well, as it was a logical process to find “my roots” and to identify myself in this new post-Soviet reality. Many people in the new Russia tried to make a hazy recollection of their ethnic identity that they had had before they became the Soviet people.

Meanwhile, my personal background is mainly a mixture of Russian, Vepsian, and Belorussian identities. But at the same time I have used to live in Karelia, and Karelian sub-identity has become a large part of my ethnic identity too. This mainly means that I speak a specific dialect of Russian language, the so called northern Russian language dialect (or even Karelian dialect) and bear a Karelian regional geographical identity.

All these facts inspired me to go deeper into the history of my own family and my personal biography and build a connection to my roots. I successfully involved many of my relatives, friends and former schoolmates into the research project which helped me much to collect my data.

Then this thesis is the logical result of two years studies in master program in Indigenous Studies at the University of Tromsø. I have tried to incorporate somehow my indigenous background and subjective personal attitude to this indigenous group with my knowledge that has been acquired and theorized both in Russian and western universities. My own lifestyle will be a good example of how indigenous people identify and present themselves in the modern urbanized society.

When I was a child, I realized that there had always been the people who were not Russians like my Russian-speaking parents and me. The most significant thing was that I could hear my grandmother’s speech that was a mixture of Russian and unknown words and sentences. Since then I have grown up and realized that the grammatically incorrect way of speaking and “macaronic” enunciation was a kind of

atavism of her mother tongue that my grandmother was not able to speak fluently any longer, but could not forget. I realized that my grandmother was not Russian by birth because she spoke *that* language.

My Russian-speaking relatives and other people around used to say something like “That is the way the Veps always do” or “She behaves like a real Veps”. And even though I was too small, I understood clearly that those applications to the mythic Veps-people (as I imagined them) had quite negative connotations. Quite often the people of different background made jokes on the Veps by saying “You are stupid as a Veps”, when labeling or even stigmatizing the Veps as persons that was supposed to be a “stupid, uneducated peasant”. These rare incidents and my own experience of being a half-indigenous (this is my own personal self-identification beyond any theory on that) in combination with experiences of other indigenous people will be an important source of data to which I will apply through the thesis.

#### **1.4. Research questions**

My main research question here is if the Veps have always been aware of their ethnicity, or if their ethno-political elites have promoted the issues of it recently; if they are in a process of transformation from local identity group into an ethnic group with a common identity.

The process of ethnic identity construction is based on social and political mobilization and connected to the processes of politicization, objectification and self-identification. Mainly, I will look upon the problem of blood and kinship relations affiliations in identity articulation. Simply saying, this thesis attempts to investigate the Vepsian people’s approach to their indigenous identity and examine how and to what extent people at the local level attach themselves to their ethnic movement, and how they identify themselves individually. In what respect do ordinary people consider themselves to be Veps, how do they identify themselves, and what do they mean when talking about their ethnic identity? And then the thesis will look upon how federal government and ethnic elite treat the concept “ethnicity” and make the indigenous people be aware of their threefold identity.

The discussion on ethnicity will lead to the discussion on culture, both in traditional and modern understanding ways. Traditional way in this regard is supposed to treat a culture as a number of fixed symbols such as costume, cuisine, language, oral traditions, etc. First, I will emphasize the fact that the Vepsian people consider

their own culture and mainly language as the most important aspect of the revitalization process and restoration of the strongly assimilated ethnic identity. And the traditional symbols of ethnic identity are widely involved into this process.

Secondly, I will focus on the fact that the Veps have the highest range of interethnic marriages and mostly live in big cities like St.-Petersburg and Petrozavodsk (the biggest proportion live here) adopting completely the manners and lifestyle of the majority urban society. Then we have to rethink the culture, its symbols and ethnic identity belonging itself.

These two facts lead us to the widespread opinion that the Vepsian ethnic identity and language are dying out (or even have already disappeared). Correspondingly, they make us look upon the problem of how much the Veps have changed and adapted to the modern way of life and the rules of the welfare state politics, and on the other hand, what makes them the bearers of a distinctive identity.

As far as the Veps do not seem to have any distinct features as an ethnic group except the language, the main goal of their cultural movement is to develop the endangered language and make it a mother tongue for the Vepsian people again. In the perspective of given research the question of Vepsian identity refers to the question of language use and its future. Language is main issue for the Veps, but different actors of the revitalizing movement deal with this issue differently in accordance to the goals they set themselves.

Summarizing everything that has been told above, this research will examine the following questions:

1. Why is "Vepsiness" (or indigenoussness) becoming important now when for centuries Veps have been marginalized or omitted in the actual political discourse?
2. How can it be combined with federal national identity aspiration and self-identification?
3. What does it mean to be Veps (historical and modern perspectives on the question) for different actors of the movement?
4. Is it important for Vepsian people to revitalize their language and culture?
5. Why does the language make such an important aspect of the revitalization of ethnicity? And to what extent does the literacy

transform a regional grouping identity into a common Vepsian “imagined community”?

### **1.5. The Vepsian people in academic discourse**

So far, it is impossible to find a complex and fundamental research on their ethnic identity before 1990s. So, this is a big challenge for me personally to rediscover the Veps people again, put them into academic research and discourse and create a valid image of their ethnicity and present situation, though it is a tough work to be a pioneer.

The Vepsian people (as other indigenous peoples in Russia and elsewhere in the world) had never been researched carefully as a distinct ethnic group before 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they have mainly been treated only in area of ethnography and history. The present situation, current issues, politicization of ethnicity and indigenous revitalization movement has never been an object of detailed fundamental academic research. They were still considered to be an exotic tribe that *lived* many centuries ago neighboring to the Slavic and Finnish people and described in terms of ethnography and physical anthropology only.

This ignorance or omission in the academic discourse is naturally understandable, because of the assimilation politics and other social circumstances which were an obstacle in research and analysis.

### **1.6. Significance of the Research**

The outcome of the research project is expected to be relevant to both national and local political decision making and historical writing affecting ethnic minorities.

My research on identity and development is innovative because it brings together analysis of national discourses about indigenous peoples with a study of the practices and choices of the individual Vepsians whose identities are at issue. I believe this research can be helpful to the nation, development agencies, and indigenous organizations as Russia works out what a multicultural identity will mean for its people. I am particularly committed to sharing the results of my analysis with the Vepsian people with whom I work, in the hope that my work will not just be an extraction of truths, but will give them information with which they can better control their lives and resources.

### **1.7. A few words about the structure of the thesis**

In accordance with my research priorities and questions the given thesis has the following structure:

The next chapter will give a brief overview of the Vepsian identity, general background, history of its strong assimilation in the context of the regional history that is closely related to the controversy between two strong states, Russia and Finland. The conclusive point in the chapter will state some historical consequences which determined rather weak self-aspiration among the Veps in the course of history and its latent character today. The main question to answer is whether the Veps have always been aware of their ethnicity?

The third chapter will focus on theoretical frameworks for my findings in area of ethnicity, culture, language and indigenous movement issues. The ethnic identity will be analyzed in focus of different approaches and theories like constructivism vs. primordialism and biology vs. culture. Consequently, these theoretical approaches will be compared with the grass-rooted level opinion on the matter of ethnicity that is in practice close and related to quasi kinship criteria. This chapter also intends to find out the symbols of Vepsian culture and will examine the definition of culture, approaches to it, its symbols and reference to traditions and modernity and to B. Anderson's theory of "imagined communities".

Gradually researching different symbols or emblems of culture like group name, land issues, traditional occupations, costumes, anthem, flag and so on, I will conclude in the chapter that the language is considered to be the most important symbol in the process of revitalizing the identity. The Vepsian identity does not have any other distinguishing features that have been transmitted into modernity without changes, except language. This chapter examines the language and ethnic identity, and their relevance to each other. As a theoretical source I will use J. Fishman's book (Fishman, 1999).

The next chapter will describe in detail my fieldwork experiences and findings, and will emphasize 4 main perspectives to look upon: ethnicity itself, relations between culture and ethnicity, language as a symbol of ethnicity and mobilized through political work ethnicity<sup>2</sup>. The leading questions so far are what

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to state that this thesis does not aim to invent or discover new definitions and terms in area of ethnicity. I have a plural approach to all terms and definitions, will use them freely and

different people, politicians, journalists, etc. mean when they talk about ethnicity, and what it means to be a Veps for ordinary people beyond the scientific discourse and political struggle.

The practical part of the thesis contains the presentation of the fieldwork study and language situation and emergence of the ethno-political movements in Karelia. I also used a data from the All-Russian population census of 2002. In the following chapters I will touch more or less the following questions on modern ways to objectify ethnicity, its constructed and visualized symbols: Vepsian flag, passports and nationality, history, myth about Finno-Ugric world. Culture is presented as a process of restoration traditions, and free choice of its symbols. The ethno-political movement today, its achievements, tasks, results, people and problems (gap between the different actors, controversy to federal identity building) will be of importance.

In the conclusive chapter I will draw together my findings and relate them to my initial problem presentation.

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substitute easily. However, later on I will try to explain what are mobilized, objectified, politicized, instrumentalized, institutionalized, constructed and primordial ethnicities.

## Chapter II:

### *General background*

#### **2.1. General historical context:**

There have been many different processes and changes among the indigenous people in Russia since the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the establishment of the Russian Federation. But the Veps has got the official recognition and status of small in number Indigenous peoples of the North, Far East and Siberia in Russia just recently, only since 2000.

The Veps live dispersed along the Northern part of Russia and even in Siberia, but the majority of them live in the Republic of Karelia, Vologda and Leningrad districts (*oblasti* in Russian)<sup>3</sup>. Very recently, their language has got a legal position in the educational system, though it has not become a language of instruction in the school. Mainly, today it is taught as a hobby school subject or as a second foreign language twice a week. Among the Veps, there are three different spoken language dialects corresponding to the geographical locations where Vepsian groups live, but the activists and linguists try to create the single Vepsian language on the basis of the northern dialect. The language dialects are mutually understandable, and because of an emergent sense of ethnic awareness, a mutual feeling of belonging to one ethnic group on the basis of language use is growing constantly.

The Veps living in the North of Russia speak the northern dialect; in the area of Leningrad oblast live the central group of the Veps and they speak their own central dialect; the last group is the southern Veps and they correspondingly speak the southern dialect of the Vepsian language.

Though the Veps live in different districts, they have some kinship affiliations all along the regions of inhabitation. However, sometimes they look upon themselves as having some specificities, customs and variations in culture within each group. That is why the common first-meeting communication practice among the Veps is to ask where the Vepsian person is from.

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<sup>3</sup> Leningrad Oblast is a federal subject of Russia, and its territory surrounds Saint-Petersburg, formerly known as Leningrad (1924-1991). Leningrad Oblast retained its name after the fall of the Soviet Union in spite of the renaming of its namesake city. See the map in appendix.

These people are currently undergoing a culture and language revitalization process. Since the establishment of their cultural movement in 1980s the leaders and elites argue that all three groups are culturally quite homogenous and have a collective ethnic identity that had been strongly affected by the assimilation policy. Moreover, the cultural specificities of this ethnic identity are directly related to Finno-Ugric and Baltic-Finnish identities, common for the so-called Baltic Finno-Ugric people such as Karelians, Saami, Estonians, Hungarians and Finns. This image of Finno-Ugric common identity emphasizes the historical, linguistic and cultural *continuity* and *unity* of Vepsian identity to the larger ethnic community, makes the Vepsian people more significant in the course of history, maps a large territory of their original inhabitation and unifies them with the European community.

But today this indigenous identity building process and revitalizing movement is just a reverse side of the medal. The Kremlin politicians explicitly and mostly implicitly attempted to formulate and transmit some kind of a federal national idea for the new independent Russian State and post-soviet Russian society. This essentially implicit ideological course demonstrates the practical implementations of the federalism policy in Russia. In this regard, the government tried to formulate a new Rossiyskaya national identity based on the strong citizenship identification, while at the same time a plural approach to ethnic belonging within the multinational Russia is a primary principle of the new national ideology. These two main tendencies in the politics have met each other in several contexts and create the controversial relations between the national and ethnic identities. The course to provide all freedoms and rights of the indigenous peoples on their distinctive cultures and languages labeled by cultural revival faces building of a strong federal identity related to homogeneity in society and, hence, a sort of assimilation policy. This fact, for example, can explain many phenomena in the modern Russian society, such as nihilism and low level of self-identification as the indigenous population among the Veps or multiply identity feeling and choice.

In fact, the aims of the ethnic movement and federal government are quite similar and oriented on to rebuild and restore the traditions and culture, especially in field of the Vepsian language use and promotion. The ethnic elites use all strategies and mechanisms in ethnic identity building which are available in nation identity building. According to Benedict Anderson (1991), a nation is an “imagined community”, because of its economic relations, nationalistic ideology, printed

language, and modern technological progress. Vepsian ethnic identity has been instrumentalized and politicized on the basis of this model with special focus on creation a common written language. The questions of poverty, oppression, marginalization, and mainly rights to land and natural resources which usually go with civil rights have not been activated by the Vepsian ethnic elite, because their prime attention was focused on cultural and language revitalization. This fact helped them to create a mild relationship with the federal authorities and gain much support. Significantly, indigenous activism has taken different forms in Russia within different counties and republics. One of them, the Tatarstan, has a strong tendency to claim complete sovereignty within the Russian Federation with its own President, Constitution, land and recourses use rights control. Tatars' ethnic elites and local authorities mainly struggle for land and natural resources and division of power and ethnic domination, and all conflicts in such republics are mainly about the politics (Jenkins, 1997: 121). The Veps, on the contrary, do not claim their land rights and complete sovereignty within the Russian Federation that makes their ethnic movement be less politicized and develop their challenged smoothly, but under the federative supporting programs. The activists of the movement have quite friendly relations with the federative authorities and are often integrated into different federative power structures such as Committee on national politics, the government of the Republic of Karelia, etc.

However, the Vepsian ethnic elite intensively try to strength their position in the power structures by promoting the myth of Finno-Ugric world. This let them make their claims hot and bring the Veps case into political agenda of the country, Finno-Ugric community (mainly the countries such as Estonia, Finland, Hungaria, Norway and Sweden, where Finno-Ugric speking people live) and Europe.

## **2.2. Karelia between the West and the East**

The first chapter attempted to point at very significant historical circumstance that has determined the ethno political development and politicization process among the Veps. This circumstance is related to the geographical location of the region. Karelia is located in the west-northern part of the Russian Federation bordering with

Finland and surrounded by Murmansk, Vologda, Arkhangelsk and Leningrad districts (oblast') in Russia<sup>4</sup>, simply saying, between the West and the East.

Territory and land occupation has always been a significant factor in ethnic building in regard to any other historical preconditions in traditional studies of ethnicity. Sven Tagil, for example, argues for that each ethnic group may be “linked to a certain geographical area”, and we can always distinguish some “historical regions”, each with its own institutions and identities (Tagil, 1995:3).

Karelia in this sense is undoubtedly “historical region”. The earliest societies in the region were naturally based on common descent or biological kinship and related to the Finno-Ugric population. The first state nation in the region – Russia – emerged here approximately in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and Russian dominance has always taken a leading role since then.

Ethnically and culturally Slavic newcomers and already settled Finno-Ugric population were not related that might have caused political and military confrontation between them. However, later the region was marked, firstly, with religious homogeneity – the Eastern Orthodox Church influence – and language homogeneity, as the Veps have gradually become bilingual.

Further historical struggle for hegemony in Karelia had different outcomes at different times, but in general the significant point is that the Veps have always possessed quite low ethnic self-awareness and self-identification during the whole course of the history. The low level of ethnic self-identification (or let say ethnic identity latency<sup>5</sup>) can be demonstrated by the many border changes in connection with the wars between Russia and Sweden/Finland. The same process had been observed and historically proved, for example, among the Saami living on the Kola Peninsula (Tagil, 1995: 4). Changes in nationalities, religion, languages and forms of citizenship could have consequently followed border reorganizations in the case of the Veps as it happened with the Saami (Sergeeva, 1995).

In addition to low ethnic affiliation as a result of border changes, the fact of controversy between the West and East determined the specific and very unique combination of Slavic and Finno-Ugric cultures and multiply cultural exchange transactions on the territory. Historically the Veps people have adopted many Slavic traditions and become culturally close to the Russian population lived in Zaonezhj'e

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<sup>4</sup> See the maps in Appendix 2, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Later on I will discuss definition of active and latent identities.

area and around the White Sea. Every time when the territory became a part of Sweden according to many peace treaties between two countries, the Veps people started moving across the new-constructed border to the Russian side (Petukhov, 1995).

Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Karelia obtained the fixed border and in 1923 – formal autonomy within the USSR. However, Karelia was the only one Soviet republic that was "demoted" from the Sovetskaya Socialisticheskaya Respublika (the Soviet Socialist Republic) to the Avtonomnaya Sovetskaya Socialisticheskaya Respublika (the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic). Unlike autonomous republics, Soviet republics had the constitutional right to secede, so with the collapse of the USSR the republics, such as Armyanskaya or Litovskaya, got independancy as the sovereign states. This did not happen to the Republic of Karelia. The possible fear of secession, as well as the Russian ethnic majority in Karelia might have resulted in its "demolition." Later in 1991 the Republic of Karelia was created out of the ASSR and became a subject of the Russian Federation<sup>6</sup>.

### **2. 3. Introduction to Vepsian identity**

Who are the Veps and what makes them to be a distinctive ethnic group? What does it mean to be a Veps? The questions like these can be asked as long as ethnic belonging definition is a very complex and sophisticated thing. This chapter attempts to look upon the essence and nature of Vepsian identity in the course of history.

Traditionally, ethnicity emphasizes *cultural differentiation*, and identity is always a dialectic thing between similarity and differences (Barth, 1994, II). What are the specificities of Vepsian ethnic identity in regard to their cultural differentiation?

The Veps are a Finno-Ugric minority, settled mainly on the southern coast of the Onega Lake, and the main feature that determines the historical and cultural peculiarity of their ethnic identity is their land border position. Karelia, as a culturally original region of Northern Europe, appeared as a result of the interaction and synthesis of the Baltic-Finnish and the Eastern Slavic tribes and cultures in the North. So far, the Veps, for example, became converted into Orthodox Christianity (the same belief with the other Slavic people), while they were staying Finno-Ugric speaking folk.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karelia>

The present day habitat of the Veps is between the lakes of Ladoga, Onega and the White Sea, where they live in three separate groups<sup>7</sup>. There are both geographical and linguistic differences between the groups.

The Veps can be the descendants of the half-legendary tribe *Ves'* or, probably, the descendants of the historic (half-legendary too) group named "chud' beloglazaya" (white-eyed chud', where chud' was consequently the common name for all Finno-Ugric peoples given by the Slavs). The origin of the names is unclear and still is the matter of deep historical analysis. My personal suggestion is that anthropologically the Veps belong to the White-Sea Baltic type. Occidental features like light hair and grey eyes (white-eyed people) are dominant although slight Mongoloid elements are occasionally represented. This could be a reason why the Veps have been called as chud' beloglazaya. The origin of the word "chud'" was given to me by one of my informants:

*I have never practiced negative attitude to the Veps people from the Russians or anyone else. Of course, the Veps people historically were labeled by different nicknames such as "chuhar'" or "chud'". Many people today consider them offensive and even stigmatizing, but I think they are just a result of historic development. "Chuhar'" or "chud'" in Russian may mean the "stranger (alien, outsider, other's). The other meaning of the word may relate to "chudnoj" (strange, odd in Russian), because the Veps spoke completely different language and the Slavics could not understand them. But this name has never had any negative connotation, and today no one uses to call the Veps this way (interview from 17.06.2005).*

In the beginning of the 20th century, the Veps had called themselves the Lyudinikad and Tyagalazhet, and only the southern Veps had used the known as the most ancient name *Veps* which has come back by now and become a common group name<sup>8</sup>. The origin of the word *Veps* is still unclear and needs more detailed investigation.

The Veps had always been involved in agriculture and a lot of ethnographic sources state that they practiced agriculture before the Slavic invasion of their territory. Speaking in agricultural terms, for a long time the Veps practiced the three-field system, a method of agricultural organization introduced in Europe. One field

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<sup>7</sup> Historically, they might have occupied the whole territory between these three basins, but by the 11<sup>th</sup> century and further their area of inhabitancy had been split with a large range of Slavic settlements.

<sup>8</sup> However, the number of the group names can be wider and varied in accordance to different dialect pronunciation.

was devoted to winter crops, another to summer crops, and a third lying fallow each year.

Mattock-hewing agriculture was also largely widespread being the most ancient form of crop-growing on the Veps territory. Cattle-breeding was not less important in the Veps life, and local brands of animals were widespread since antiquity, such as hornless cows yielding up to two liters of milk a day.

Hunting and fishing were essential, as the bodies of water in Veps lands were abundant in fish and the forests were full of game.

As the only one of the ancient Veps crafts, pottery has survived to the present day. The rest of the Veps traditional occupations live only in memory. The Veps were always famous as the best craftsmen, making carpentry and stoves. Especially famous were the Vepsian stone-cutters<sup>9</sup>. Today, unfortunately, the Veps are hardly involved in this traditional occupation although unique sites of stones and minerals are located on their territory.

It is possible to find a lot of materials which provide the history of forcible Christianization of the Veps and conversion into the Orthodoxy Christianity. However, many other sources state that the process of Christianization was led by the Slavic people peacefully and unpretentiously. One way or another, I support the idea that the process of Christianization of indigenous peoples in Kievan Rus' (Kiev Russia)<sup>10</sup> had been extremely different from the similar processes in Europe, the USA and etc. When the Prince Vladimir the Bright Sun carefully considered a number of available faiths and decided upon Greek Orthodoxy and the process of Christianization of the whole Russia started in 9-10<sup>th</sup> century, the Veps and Slavic peoples' tribes were conversed into it simultaneously. The "colonizers" (consequently the Slavic people) and the people who were supposed to be colonised (the Veps) adopted a new belief system at the same time. And the process was inevitably related to the struggle with the pagan practices among both ethnic groups for a long time and was partly unsuccessful because both still practice pagan beliefs today. At that time neither the Veps nor the Slavs had their own strong and independent statehood construction and sense of belonging to it, although the Christianization consequently

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<sup>9</sup> The Veps //www.eki.ee/books/redbook/veps.shtml 21.08.2004

<sup>10</sup> This is the name of the first statehood construction on the territory of modern Russia and some other states that had existed approximately until 14<sup>th</sup> century.

determined the process of uniting the tribes and ethnic groups and constructing the common national state.

The folk religion of the Veps has relics of the ancient worshipping of animals, birds and fishes. Similarly to other peoples, they had the cult of the bear; a complex of beliefs was connected with the adoring of the pike<sup>11</sup>.

Summarizing the main points of this chapter, it is possible to notice that traditional symbols of the Vepsian culture and identity such as beliefs, handicrafts, agricultural activities, etc. have hardly survived (or even been lost) through the course of history.

#### **2.4. The brief history of assimilation**

**We will bring them culture  
And will educate them.  
We will turn the lights on in their houses  
And the Veps will be glad!**<sup>12</sup>

Assimilation campaigns mainly started under the tsars in the 19th century and continued under the Soviet government. These campaigns, together with in-migration of large numbers of ethnic Russians and other peoples into the Veps area, have led to a significant assimilation into the larger Russian society. The process of assimilation mainly had the most negative impact upon Vepsian culture and identity in Soviet time.

Soviet authorities *nominally* provided support to indigenous peoples: they created autonomous ethno-territorial republics, promoted indigenous elites, sponsored the standardization of indigenous languages, and promoted native-language education and publishing. The authority commitment to promoting national cultures and national autonomy was based in part on a pragmatic decision that “this policy would gain support of the national minorities of the Former Russian Empire” (Spickard, 2005: 262). Along with pragmatic goals, the policy had implicit ideological underpinnings:

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<sup>11</sup> Veps Tumuli //heninen.net/vasina/english.htm 24.08.2004

<sup>12</sup> “My im kul'turu prinesem / I prochitaem mnogo lekcij // V zhilyh domah my svet zazhzhem / I ochen' rady budut vepsy”, - these are the words of the short Soviet folk song, chastooshka, about “acculturation” of the Veps. It was told by famous Russian poetess Rimma Kazakova (b. 1931) to Vepsian journalist Nikolay Abramov. She mentioned when she was a student at the university, she had heard it somewhere. It was her acquaintance of the Veps and first knowledge about them.

“the soviets insisted that all nations, no matter how poor or “backward”, were equal and equally capable of progress” (ibid., 262, emphasis mine).

The Veps people have had different periods in history, but the worst time was after the World War II. The Veps national rayons (districts), co-operatives (households and productions) and the like were liquidated. When Soviet authorities launched the industrialization program for the northern regions and decided the “liquidation of non prospective rural villages”, Vepsian communities were forced to resettle in industrial towns. Many young Veps and their children migrated to towns and started new life. The feeling of ethnic identity ran low and hopes to keep their culture and language for the future were nil.

As a result of all these changes, from the 1930s the official number of Veps in Karelia increasingly decreased. There were 35,000 Veps in 1917, but since then the numbers have been declining. The Stalinist terror campaign against the Veps was publicly admitted only under Gorbachov's administration in 1980s. In the course of carrying out the population census of 1970 and 1979 local officials were instructed to register Veps as “Russian”. The same practice was used also upon the issue of new passports, and the Vepsian nationality was actually erased from the official list of Soviet nationalities. The nationality of the Veps did not officially exist in identification documents and house registers of the village (PIKVN, 1989: 21). The motivation had to do with the wishes of higher authority, but it was also partly the Veps' fear or false shame at admitting themselves to be Veps. The census in 1989 recorded 12.500 Veps in the Soviet Union, and there were less than 200 pure Vepsian families (with both parents being Veps).

While in practice Veps became a “small-numbered people”, they were not even included in the Single List of Numerically Small Peoples of 1994 (applied to groups residing in the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation) and thus did not benefit from the special allocations granted to this category until 2000.

## **2.5. Summary**

Karelia is undoubtedly “historical region” and relatively has been attributed to the cultural development of both ethnic strands on its territory: Slavic and Finno-Ugric. The Finno-Ugric people living in the area naturally and gradually have

absorbed into the dominant Russian culture in a slow process of mainly cultural assimilation.

The Veps people's self-consciousness had always been quite low or latent since the beginning of formation of ethnic group boundaries on the territory. The image the Veps as a single distinctive ethnic group appears in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the political and scientific work. Their diverse and scattered groups did not have common land of inhabitancy, single group name, any common government or multitribal confederation, though they spoke specific language dialects<sup>13</sup>. What Eriksson writes about the Saami, can be easily applied to the Veps people: there is a great internal diversity within the Vepsian population, and in terms of language, religion, and livelihoods, they can be divided into several subethnic communities (Eriksson, 2002: 241). Moreover, many border changes made several shifts in nationality, language and religion affiliation among the Veps.

Under Soviet repressions they had also become small-in-number minority invisible on their land, and their ethnicity has become extremely latent and silent as a result of shame feeling, fear and strong language assimilation.

Many traditional symbols of the Vepsian culture and identity such as beliefs, handicrafts, agricultural activities, etc. have hardly survived (or even been mostly lost) through the course of history.

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<sup>13</sup> This situation is much alike as described Saami history in Eriksson, 2002: 241.

## Chapter III

### *In the labyrinths of ethnic identity: theoretical frameworks*

#### **3. 1. Theories of ethnicity: Ethnicity as either primordial or constructed**

This chapter will focus on discussing of different theories on ethnicity that I intend to make use of in the analysis of my data. However, academic defining of ethnic identity will not be the main task in this thesis as I am personally interested in learning the Vepsian people's opinion. I mainly intend to look upon ethnicity from indigenous people's point of view, and I try to demonstrate how and to what extent the Veps people identify and present themselves as indigenous beyond any academic or political discussions.

This theoretical frame will be put in the perspective of the relationship between the Vepsian movement at the local level, federative programs and the individual identity aspiration that is still often influenced by kinship- and community-based identification grounds.

What criterion should be taken in consideration when we talk about ethnicity: blood, ancestors, land, language, culture in general? Is it possible to mix two and more identities and how this mixed ethnic identity is manifested? This chapter aims to answer the questions.

The title of this chapter "In the labyrinths of ethnic identity" should express the idea that phenomenon of ethnicity is complicated or, at least, complex. The title can mark the multiply approach to definition of ethnicity, and hence, many ways of identification. Or may be these "labyrinths" reflect well the situation when modern urbanized Veps living in the Russian Federation have to deal with different kinds of identity: individual, regional and federal, and there is a multiply way of identifying themselves.

Historically the word "ethnic" originates from the Greek noun *ethnos*, which meant *foreign people or nations*. The use of the term "ethnic" in the modern sense began in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup>, though it is not completely clear today. The Encyclopaedia Britannica also gives the definition of ethnic group as:

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<sup>14</sup> Ethnicity in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnicity> 23.11.04

*Ethnic group, a social group or category of the population that, in a larger society, is set apart and bound together by common ties of race, language, nationality, or culture (The New Encyclopædia Britannica, 2002: 4: 582, emphasis mine).*

Definitions of ethnicity have always been changed, not only academically speaking, but also and not least politically and ideologically, depending on the historic and social conditions that have guided governments in their varying policies towards their ethnic minorities. As far as most of the societies were more or less homogenous in the past, the traditional criteria of common group name, origin, territory, culture and language could have been a key to divide people into different ethnic groups. Meanwhile, attitude to these criteria has extremely changed in modernity, as they can not characterize the modern societies any longer. Or at least, these criteria can not be taken into consideration when we talk about Vepsian identity.

There is a great amount of literature on ethnic problems written in different languages all over the world that introduces other approaches to the ethnicity. Following Marcus Banks it is possible to introduce, at least, two the most significant approaches to the study of ethnicity which can make use of in my data analysis:

- Fredrik Barth's and his colleagues, and
- The Soviet ethnos theorists (Banks, 1996: 11).

This thesis intends to look in detail upon Barth's and Soviet ideas as far as these two main academic views perfectly present opposition primordialist vs. rationalist. One version of the constructivist approach could also be labeled rationalist.

Primordialist views "hold that ethnic affiliations reflect *non-rational sentiments* which foster powerful *emotional attachments* to collective identities" with accent on kinship and heredity. While rationalist views "hold that ethnic affiliations reflect *voluntary allegiances chosen* and/or created by rational, calculating individuals to advance their *interests* relative to opportunities present in the environment"<sup>15</sup> (emphasis mine).

The essential difference between these two approaches is that primordial one namely means biological or "blood" belonging to a special group, and there is no chance to change ethnicity. Unlike this approach, instrumental one, simply saying,

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<sup>15</sup> <http://sociweb.tamu.edu/faculty/fossett/courses/&317/ethnic2.nat>

means ethnicity as the group of people which use some characteristics as instruments to construct and mobilise ethnic identity.

A primordialist point of view deals mainly with cultural patterns which determinate behaviour, mental life and everyday habits and can not be repudiated or nullified because of biological application and “inertia” of traditions. These cultural patterns, such as language, race, religion and etc. are acquired as inherited from generation to generation and adopted without conscious choice in early socialization.

However, a rationalist point of view paradoxically deals with cultural patterns which must become familiar in early socialization too. But the main argument against primordialist approach is that children, for example, know who they are, in large part, as a result that they were told or taught by others. Ethnicity is something that was taught, learnt, acquired in the social environment and not “given by birth”. A constructivist approach deals mainly with constructed and reinvented identities. Further discussion will show that both approaches have their limits to define ethnic identity and can not be absolute and undoubted.

If we look upon Vepsian ethnicity that refers to those aspects of personhood that are presumed to be stable and unchanging as “blood ties”, common land, and etc, we observe the following picture. The Veps are a rather small community, where kinship background may prevail in everyday life and self-identification. And this situation had been observed among the Veps during fieldwork, as they did pay much attention to my own ethnic background and accepted me in the community because of my own indigenous ancestry. In this regard, I was identified by the Veps as R. Kipling’s hero Mowgli’s: “We are of one blood, you and me”. But even then it was reasonable for me to ask in this situation how much portion of Vepsian blood a person should have to be a Veps? Should he/she have both Vepsian mother and father or it is enough to have only one parent? Or even one grandparent as it is set for the Saami people in Norway?

Moreover, today ethnic endogamy is not preferable (at least, among the Veps), and the rate of interethnic relations and marriages is high. Consequently, the question about ethnic identity of the children born in interethnic marriages becomes actualised. Simply saying, a child born in interethnic marriage initially gets “by birth” double genetics. What shall we take in consideration of his/her ethnic identity then?

Physical anthropological features could have been an “inescapable” requirement before, but do not work in the case of the Veps any longer. Visible

phenotypical differences for ethnic classification can hardly be a part of our vocabulary for describing the Veps today<sup>16</sup>. The Veps belong to so-called Baltic Finno-Ugric phenotype that makes them have almost the same physical features with other Europeans (speaking in terms of racial and physical anthropological differentiation). In practice it is possible to meet a person of Vepsian identity and even not to be able to distinguish him from a person of Russian or other Slavic identity as far as characteristics of shape of the face, skin pigmentation, height, and colour of hair, and even the choice of clothing, way of talking, walking and eating are not the distinguishing features for them. Moreover, I can state, that physical anthropological similarity between the Slavs and Veps, in addition to well known peaceful character and deep nature of adapting of the Veps, could have been a possible ground of rapid assimilation. It was easy “to escape ethnicity” and “to absorb in the large majority society”<sup>17</sup> for the Veps, when it was a danger or fear of shame and joking. During the politics of assimilation and ethnocide it was quite possible for the Veps to pass as Russians.

Common territory is not a condition to exist as a distinct group, and of course, it is always possible to preserve your group features living outside the community geographical location. The Veps people, for instance, have a split territory of habitation, but still can be a distinct ethnic group.

Existence of a common group name itself does not necessarily mean belonging to a distinctive ethnic group and not to a sub-ethnic group. For example, two sub-ethnic Russian groups, the Pomors and the Kazaks, have a common group name that is different from Russian, but ethnically, culturally, physically and historically they present a variation within the Russians. Or for example, although, as an official name Veps has been introduced for all people, many of them keep identifying themselves with Ludinik, Vepsaine, Chuharid, Bepsaized, Ludikeled and etc.

Occupation could be an important criterion, but is nowadays closely connected to the conditions of living in the modern society. For instance, reindeer herding does not identify one as a Sami; there is no direct connection between occupation and

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<sup>16</sup> Although it might be a criterion in attitude to other indigenous peoples in Russia who have some racial distinguishing features.

<sup>17</sup> That, for instance, has never happened with the indigenous people in Siberia, which anthropologically have had occidental features. However, we also have to keep in mind that the Slavs could not assimilate the Veps completely, that happened with the other Finno-Ugric tribes such as *Merya* and *Muroma* which disappeared as distinctive groups and their names were erased from the modern history.

ethnicity. One can be a teacher or sportsman keeping his Sami ethnic identity. Moreover, people with different ethnic identity can be involved into reindeer herding management, for example, in Finland and Russia.

The most abstract and unclear concept surely is self-consciousness. How can we identify self-consciousness? It is a way of thinking and social behaviour, collective memory, ethnic character and a number of psychological features.

As it has been considered above, many cultural and biological features can not be absolute symbols of ethnic identity. Barth states that ethnic identity must be treated as a matter of social reality and communication and emergent properties of everyday life (Barth, 1994, II). In this sense ethnicity is more or less something that can be practiced in the society through behaviour, and it is relational.

His model's elements are as follows:

1. *Ethnicity emphasizes cultural differentiation, although identity is always a dialectic between similarity and differences;*
2. *Ethnicity is cultural – based in shared meanings – but it is produced and reproduced in social interaction;*
3. *Ethnicity is to some extent variable and manipulable, not definitely fixed or unchanging;*
4. *Ethnicity as a social identity is both collective and individual, externalised and internalised (Jenkins, 1997: 40, emphasis mine).*

Barth's ideas about ethnicity as it is produced in social interaction, variable, changing, situational and etc. can shed some light on why primordial criteria of ethnic identity are not absolute. The problem with understanding ethnic identity is that itself it may not necessarily be stable and fixed. Ethnic identity can be something that people can change to suit the needs of the moment. A person can possess two or more identities at the same time, but some conditions or behaviours can be latent rather than active in certain situations. In the modern society the notion of ethnicity may sound even more ambivalent as, for instance, the all Veps are Russians<sup>18</sup> (citizenship) and Karelians (federally regional identity), in other words, they initially possess a few different identities.

Even if one says that he is a so-called “citizen of the world” and has no state, national or ethnic identity, anyway some ethnic features will be presented in his everyday behaviour and mainly language. It is not possible to have “zero” or “neutral”

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<sup>18</sup> This meaning is covered by the recently revived politically correct term *Rossiyanin* (Россиянин, plural *Rossiyanе*), because *Russians* refers to citizens of Russia, regardless of their ethnicity.

ethnicity or lack of ethnicity at all; ethnic identity may always be presented in behaviour and through communication with the other people. Ethnicity formalizes itself in the process of socialization and through social activities, it is a social thing, and most often it will appear through language. Moreover, one can combine the features of the different ethnic groups, thus, languages, and behave in accordance to environmental conditions and consequences. The person can change behaviour (not ethnic belonging itself) in different situations accordingly to his knowledge how to behave in this particular situation. Ethnic identity as any other identity, then, can be “best thought of as a stable feature of persons that exist prior to any particular situation, but also as a dynamic and situated accomplishment, enacted through talk, changing from one occasion to the next” (K. Tracy, 2002: 17, emphasis mine).

Cultural characteristics that bind a particular group or groups of people together have a *relational* character. The concept of ethnicity is rooted in the idea of societal groups, and depending on circumstances one can switch on/off different symbols and characteristics of his ethnic identity in everyday life. To some extent ethnic identity characteristics can be latent and silent or articulated and manifested through relations with others.

Ethnicity is also something that is patterned by behavior expectations as to how one should behave according to ethnic prescriptions. Culture in a way is a system of such expectations and prescriptions that shapes people’s everyday interaction practices. Traditionally, if someone gets to know you as a Veps, he expects you behave as a Veps that means to speak the Vepsian language, to live in the Vepsian national district, etc. Traditional primordial criteria should always be taken into consideration when the people categorize each other (themselves and others) according to their concepts of ethnic identity.

Ethnicity is rather imagined, because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communication” (Anderson, 1991).

Term “imagined communities” mainly refers to invented or socially constructed identities which, however, can be based on the primordial ideas of common past, history, land and culture. For example, racial ideas are not necessarily related to the blood belonging and heredity, but they are linked to the belief in blood relationship. When I arrived at the national Vepsian district, nobody was going to make a blood test to find out my “real” heredity and blood belonging. Vepsian people

asked me about my relatives, surname, names, and they did *believe* in my fellowship, because my ancestors had lived on Vepsian land and had the Vepsian family name. The ethnic groups are often distinguished by a number of cultural traits, but self-identification by an individual and *acceptance by a community* will always be taken into consideration. Kinship and blood ties are not a necessity, but a *challenge* that makes blood belonging to be not real in sense of objectivity, but rather to be affiliation to follow the old genetics (Jones, 1997: 67, emphasis mine).

There are usually a number of signs that signify ethnic identity and can be involved into politics and identity building. When the central dimensions of ethnic identity such as “a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific “homeland”, and finally, a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population <...>” are involved into political work and discussion, they are constructed as a mean for specific interests and purposes of the small group of people (Smith, 1991: 21, cited from Ryymin 2001: 52). For instance, when it comes to invention of the flag for the Veps, this issue becomes quite politicised.

Today the Vepsian flag is made after the Scandinavian model and contains the Scandinavian Lutheran-Catholic yellow-blue cross on a green background. The history of the flag model is quite unclear and the choice of it for the Veps seems to be very odd. At least, the fact that it is made after the Scandinavian model and looks like national flags in Norway or Finland with the variations in colours is the choice of the ethnic elite and reflects their interests in the area of ethnic identity building. And their interest are clearly oriented on the Finno-Ugric identity belonging and fellowship.

However, many of the cultural symbols do not create the boundaries between the ethnic groups in the modern world any longer. Modern people wear jeans, listen to modern pop and rock music, eat in the Burger-kings and do not pay too much attention to national flag or traditional handicrafts. Ethnicity itself (indigenous, majority, immigrant) has become very silent in the modern society, and it is very difficult to visualise it through manifestation of traditional symbols. The next chapter will analyse changing nature of culture and reinvention of cultural images.

Finally, both approaches, primordial and constructivist, can be criticized. Ethnicity as a matter of blood belonging and heredity, “in addition to its segmentary and fluid character, itself is a variable and its silence changes in different contexts

depending upon whether it is a meaningful element in the structuring of social interaction” (Jones, 1997: 76). However, constructivist approach that is often reduced to the mobilization and politicization of culture may lead to the idea “that ethnic categories provide an “empty vessel” into which various aspects of culture may be poured” (Jones, 1997: 77).

### 3.2. Some thoughts on culture

Lash and Featherstone describe culture as

*“which was assumed to possess a coherence and order, to enable it to act as the grounds for the formation of stable identities, no longer seems to be able to perform this task adequately. This can be linked to the process of globalization which, as has been pointed out many times, does not result in the homogenization and unification of culture, but rather in the provision of new spaces for the clashing of cultures. The clashing and mixing of culture occurs not only across the boundaries of nation-state societies, but within them too.<...> It is no longer adequate to conceptualized culture as an integrated whole”* (Featherstone, Lash, 1999: 1).

When we talk about culture, we inevitably talk about the modern lifestyle that is dependent on the cultural mixing of people, fashions, models of behavior, signs, and it has become as a more cosmopolitan multicultural dialogue that we can observe in the crowded city street life every day. People of different nationalities can like to go to the Chinese or Italian food restaurants, wear American cowboy style clothes, listen to African music and so on.

Featherstone and Lash write about two phenomena in the modern society: *multiculturalism*, “where societies are seen as being composed of a set of multiply cultures”; and *interculturalism*, “where cultures are seen as clashing or in dialogue” (ibid., 10).

The authors follow Wolfgang Welsch, that “it is no longer realistic today to conceive cultures as either homogenous or separate” (cited from Featherstone, Lash, 1999: 10). Today you can go to the folk rock music concert and meet a lot of people wearing jeans, drinking beer, but all of them may be of different nationalities and ethnic identities, even though they live the same lifestyle and behave the same social way. Today cultures are internally differentiated and complex, but externally they hardly ascertain any boundaries (ibid., 10, emphasis mine). Hybridization of culture or its transculturality leads to a third space on the borderline between cultures and creates the “double consciousness” and “double identity”.

Any “hybridity may well be a form of identity, and cultures may well travel and move around the world, but ethnicity is still about traditional social boundaries” (ibid., 121). Fredrik Barth writes in his book that “culture is nothing, but a way to describe human behavior”, and ethnicity is still societal and relational (Barth, 1994, II: 9).

In this case “social movements create a context in which the traditions carried through art become actualized, reinvented and revitalized”, and “this is how the past comes to the present”, although traditions can contain utopian images (ibid., 121). The Vepsian ethnic movement, for example, reinvented some traditions and created some utopian images as it has happened with the Finno-Ugric identity image.

However, understanding of tradition as a literally invention designed to serve contemporary purposes varying in accordance to who does the inventing is very narrow. Allan Hanson says that the image of culture constructed in the main by scholars might incline one to the pessimistic view that the reality of traditional culture and history is just a imported fabric hardly sufficient to objectivity (Hanson, 1989: 897). The key point of symbol construction is that they must be accepted by indigeneous people themselves “as authentic to their heritage” (ibid, 897). For example, traditional dress (sarafan), balalaika, matreshka and even Cyrillic alphabet symbolize Russian identity; gahti and lawwu symbolize Saami identity; etc. These symbols, which we may call emblems, are usually easy to recognize, resemble and they always are associated with the national culture and accepted by indigenous people themselves.

### **3.3. Language is a “time machine”<sup>19</sup>: relations between language and identity**

It has been told before that language is not necessarily a symbol of ethnic identity. And we can find a lot of examples all over the world, when language does not display ethnic belonging<sup>20</sup>. But at the same time language behaviour is the best way to manifest your ethnic identity as any other identities. Moreover, “the idea of language has always been a major constructive element of ethnic boundaries” (Haarmann, 1998: 63). And even “taught” and school learnt language competence will

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<sup>19</sup> This definition was created by Levi-Strauss, quoted from Giddens, 1991: 23.

<sup>20</sup> People in Scotland, England and Ireland (I am not talking about dialects and accents) speak the same language – English, in Serbia and Montenegro – Serbian, in Ukrain – Russian, etc. But all these nationalities anyway keep the sense of belonging to different ethnic groups.

always have a tie to “semi-identity”, because “the language always takes on extralinguistic characteristics beyond the need to communicate” (Haarmann, 1998: 116).

Karen Tracy in her book “Everyday talk: building and reflecting identities” (Tracy, 2002) looks upon how language refers to identity in general. Language is “a part of communication and a way how to express who we are and, that is moreover, who we want to be and how we want to make relationships with the rest of the world” (Tracy, 2002: 6).

Language is a way to perform your identity and is a social fact that can be “easily displayed in everyday life and as a historical product at the same time” (Joseph, 2004). Language is a perfect tool to construct ethnic identity, because it is beyond the cultural changes. In a way, language, as Levi-Strauss says, is a time machine, which permits the re-enactment of social practices across the generations, while also making possible the differentiation of past, present and future (cited from Giddens, 1991: 23).

Language practices can manifest identity that is relatively invisible, and for example, switching from Russian to Vepsian is a way for a person to make visible his/her ethnic identity. So, actual relationships between language and ethnic identity are based on language behaviour or language use in every day life.

Summarising everything, it is possible to state that language can perform ethnic identity working as:

- Communication and abstract code;
- Social interaction;
- Shared thing;
- “Visible” (or visualised) and manifested in the reality thing;
- Everyday practicing symbol;
- Stable and fixed in history symbol;<sup>21</sup>
- Appealing to both, history and modernity.

When characteristics of racial and cultural differences and social differentiation do not work, language barriers only can organise the boundary between two ethnic groups.

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<sup>21</sup> As a symbol of distinctive culture, but not as a linguistic matter itself, because language can develop and change on its own.

Even when it comes to imagined communities associated with the belief in belonging to this particular group, one can not say that he does believe in speaking this language. Language is something materialised in the reality: you either speak or not (Fenton, 2003).

### 3.4. Summary

In basis, “the instrumental and primordial perspectives concentrate on potentially complementary aspects of ethnicity” (Jones, 1997: 80) and can be set up as an integrated theoretical approach. During my fieldwork data collection I observed that when it comes to ethnicity defying both dimensions, biological-psychological and socially constructed, are involved. Some people define ethnicity in terms of biology, but the others involve more social interactions.

For instance, McKay’s model “leads to the formulation of a typology of different types of ethnic behavior, involving varying degrees of primordial and instrumental factors” (McKay, 1982: 403-407, cited from Jones, 1997: 80). This model means that some ethnic groups have primordial or material interests as more silent (the Jew); some groups have interests as both very prominent (Basque); some whose primordial and material interests are both low (ibid. 80).

I suggest that such group as the Veps has a primordial orientation as a very prominent challenge, but the cultural features and emblematic symbols of their assimilated identity and lost symbols of culture have been involved into construction or reinvention of a modern Vepsian identity by the elites.

However, modern institutions differ from all preceding forms of social order, and they mainly undercut traditional habits and customs:

*The emergence and construction of new mechanisms and symbols of ethnic self-identity are shaped by and within modern conditions of life (Giddens, 1991).*

*One of the most obvious characteristics separating the modern era from any other period preceding it is modernity’s extreme dynamism: the modern world is a “runaway world”(ibid., 16).*

*However, all cultures, of course, have possessed modes of time-reckoning of one form or another. But modern social life is characterized by processes of the reorganization of time and space (ibid., 2).*

New understanding and attitude to modernity directly influences new understanding of the self in a global milieu. In practice, it is impossible to transfer the same things from generation to generation.

“Modernity is essentially a post-traditional order”, that is why all attempts of the elites to promote the past and traditions are initially failure to launch. Abstract and utopian systems of symbols become involved in the institutional order of modernity but also in the formation and continuity of the self (Giddens, 1991: 33). But offered by elites symbols based on traditional settings could not form a continuity of the self any longer.

In the modern world cultures are internally differentiated and complex, but externally they hardly ascertain any boundaries. That is why when characteristics of primordial racial and cultural differences and social differentiation do not work, language barriers only can organise the boundary between two ethnic groups. The ancestral language connects a people to “its heritage in ways that there is simply no substitute for” (Fishman, 1999: 39), though ancestral lifestyle is replaced with the effects of modernity.

Another problem with understanding ethnic identity is that itself it may not necessarily be stable and fixed. Ethnic identity can be something that people can change to suit the needs of the moment. However, a necessary precondition is that this self-presentation is accepted by the person’s social environment. Any identity, then, “is best thought of as a stable feature of persons that exist prior to any particular situation, but also as a dynamic and situated accomplishment, enacted through talk, changing from one occasion to the next” (K. Tracy, 2002: 17, emphasis mine). Ethnic identities can be resilient through linguistic anchored identity.

That is why I have chosen the language behaviour of the Veps as a main task to look upon. Language is the most significant and highly manifested in everyday life cultural trait; it presents ethnicity as social, relational and situational thing.

Significantly, many young Veps themselves regard language as an important feature of ethnicity.

And language is obviously always accepted by indigenous community as a symbol of ethnic identity.

## Chapter IV

### *Coming back to fieldwork: Methods and data*

#### **4.1. The fieldwork**

Coming back to my fieldwork I would like to underline some aspects of the observations that construct the main hypothesis of the research. In accordance to my research questions, in my fieldwork study I made an attempt to investigate the mutual coexistence of the modern self-aspiration as Veps at the local level and the traditional feelings which are promoted by the movement activists at the regional and national levels. My particular attention was a language development as it is the only one symbol of culture that has survived through the course of history and can present ethnicity in everyday life through enacted talk.

I collected data about different language reforms such as, for example, shift in alphabet systems from Cyrillic to Latin in Vepsian language and a federal law “On national languages of the Russian Federation” that demonstrates the a monolingual stream in federative politics. But I also collected a data about Vepsian language use in everyday life.

I had chosen to make my investigation in two different locations where I could find different outcomes for my thesis: Petrozavodsk, a local city center, and Sheltozero, the Vepsian national district center. Consequently, I collected my data in the city and rural area. The entire period was about 2 months. By the 3<sup>d</sup> week of my fieldwork I narrowed my interests to the primary research questions. I was staying in Petrozavodsk for 4 weeks writing intensive field notes, interviewing “informants”, conducting censuses, collecting empirical and theoretical data. By the 8<sup>th</sup> week I went to Sheltozero, the national Vepsian district, and stayed there for some time too. Mostly I spoke with ordinary people of different ethnic identities both in the city and village in addition to the activists of the movement.

The final weeks I spent analyzing the data and theoretical materials.

In addition to the fieldwork, I attended the International conference «The problems of endangered native languages’ teaching: theory of and practice in creating textbooks and teaching materials of new generation» from 6 to 9 November 2005 in Petrozavodsk, Karelia. This gave me a chance to approach many of my informants,

politicians, teachers of the Vepsian language; to talk to them; to hear their discussions about language future and reforms and etc.

#### **4.2. Methods: Interviews and observation**

Mostly, I used the method of participant observation in cultural and every-day life practices, events and activities among the Veps. Through observations it was possible to obtain some empirical extra information that was not said during the interviews. It was mostly observation of social behavior in addition to what people told. Essentially, I tried to observe the situations when, how often, by what reason Russian and Vepsian languages were shifted.

During my pre-fieldwork period I made outlines and questionnaires of different half-structured interviews, but mostly I practiced unstructured face-to-face interviewing. But my fieldwork research questions were mostly open-ended and finally shaped during my interviews when I approached people. Additional questions appeared all the time, however interviews were held within the points such as ethnicity-culture-language-revitalizing movement. So, the questions can be divided into following areas to look upon:

1. Ethnicity itself
2. Culture and ethnicity
3. Language and ethnicity
4. Mobilized and constructed ethnicity and movement

These four areas will be corner stones further in the manuscript.

All my interviews can be divided into official and non-official depending on what person and in what situation I approached. Conversations lasted not longer that 1 hour, however some people I met several times.

#### **4.3. Informants**

During my fieldwork, I had made a sufficient amount of interviews, though many of them are not included into the final manuscript version.

Mostly the community representatives were willing to cooperate and provide necessary data, because they might believe that my research initiative would contribute a lot to their ethnicity knowledge and positive image. The fact that I have some indigenous roots myself made the Veps rather willing to share their knowledge and opinion on the research questions with me. First of all, it was important to reveal

my own ethnic identity and I was constantly asked about it, but further I was being received warmly everywhere. Moreover, people who got to know about my indigenous background tried to help me to make new contacts and advised me about some other relevant material to read or to learn. This fact could be significant in the sense that the Veps treat others who are and are not the Veps themselves differently; they clearly identify themselves as the Veps, even those who do not speak the language; they distinguish themselves from others, etc.

As informants mostly I got in touch with persons with Karelian and Russian identity, in addition to Veps persons, who naturally were my main informants. I also approached persons who were engaged in the ethno-political movement for interviews. The experts that I have interviewed are:

- *Politicians (local, republican, federal) and municipal authorities.* I visited the State Committee of the Republic of Karelia on National Politics and talked to the head of it - Evgeny Shorohov, to major a specialist on indigenous issues - Svetlana Pasjukova, and to the head of the department on the relations with mass media representatives - Natalia Antonova.
- *Teachers and intelligentsia (well-educated people).* I visited the branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in the Republic of Karelia (Petrozavodsk) and talked to Evgeniy Klement'ev, major research officer. I visited also the Petrozavodsk State University, the Faculty of Baltic and Finnish Philology and Culture and talked to the teacher of Vepsian language – Ol'ga Ershova.
- *Leaders and organizers of the national organizations and societies (public, governmental, international).* I met with the head of the Vepsian cultural society - Zinaida Strogal'schikova, the member of the permanent Forum of Indigenous Peoples. Also I spoke with the head of Youth Information and Legal Center of indigenous people "Nevond - Evgenia Shustova. I also visited the lecture with misses Strogal'schikova. It was arranged by the Youth Information and Legal Center "Nevond". The topic of the lecture was the Law on guarantees of the the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Russia and amendments to it.
- *Representatives of mass media.* I visited the offices of the newspapers "Kodima" (met with the journalist, Vepsian poet and translator - Nikolay

Abramov, journalist Nikolay Fomin), "Vienan viesti", "Kipina", and "Carelia".

I always tried to make my conversations with ordinary people more informal and told them clearly and openly about my project and personal inclination to it. Also I felt myself comfortable being in the community that I have known since my childhood, especially while staying in Petrozavodsk. Most of the journalists and politicians have got used to talk to people from outside and talked to me consciously and clearly.

All of my informants stressed the significance of the given research and were interested in sharing their ideas with me and knowing my opinion.

Certainly, I spoke only Russian to my informants, so I could not really observe how easily the Veps switch on/off the language. I could not estimate their language competence and proficiency. The situations when the Veps changed the language from Russian to Vepsian were rare and led more to demonstration that they can speak their mother tongue rather to exclude me from the conversation.

#### **4.4. Other sources**

I used a number of biographical narratives in Russian as the source for this work such as "In own land, in own belief..." by Sudakov (1995) and "The Veps" by Petukhov (1995).

Also I tried to analyze some empirical information through the newspapers, TV and radio broadcasts, and the results of the All-Russian population census of 2002. Data collection includes several documents such as the statements of different indigenous organizations, federal and local laws (on national languages; on guarantee of the indigenous peoples' rights), newspapers, which will be introduced in the paper when they seem to be relevant.

The biggest part of my master thesis is also based on analysis of theoretical literature about two main approaches to ethnic identity in the academic discourse. It creates a logical and academic framework of data collection and leads to academic argumentation.

#### **4.5. Problems faced**

Only few of my interviews were recorded, and the biggest amount of them was written down as ordinary field notes. People mostly were unwilling to talk to me while recording was making. The tape recorder fear made them be rather suspicious and silent and feel uncomfortable as they often told me. So, I have to confirm that my notes may have a selective character and personal perception. However, I tried to avoid these problems through observations and additional sources of information such as my informants' publications where they could state their ideas clear, in addition to the newspapers, TV and radio programs interviews and etc.

Also during my interviews I often experienced the situation when my informants suddenly changed a topic and turned it to another subject. It seems to be a natural conversational situation, but I had to lead the conversation all the time and sometimes even forced my informants to turn back to the topic.

Of course, all my interviews were recorded and written in Russian, and later – translated into English that could affect some parts of meaning. However, I tried to keep the original meaning and connotations as much as I could.

## Chapter V:

### *The situation in Karelia*

#### **5.1. The Veps in the mirror of the All-Russian population census of 2002**

What is common and different between the Veps today and their ancestors? Is it important to manifest your ethnic belonging, how and why? This chapter aims to answer the questions like these.

There are two officially recognized Indigenous groups in Karelia, the Karelians<sup>22</sup> and the Veps, and one minority group, the Finns, which have the same rights to determine their claims on indigenous culture and language.

However, the demographic situation of the population of Karelia is much more heterogeneous, and within the Russian majority quite big number of Ukrainians, Byelorussians and others living in Karelia nowadays that is presented in the following table:

Population of Karelia by Nationality, 1939, 1989<sup>23</sup>, 2002

Nationality	1939 (%)	1989 (%)	2002 (%)
Russians	63.2	73.6	76.6
Belorussians	0.9	7.0	5,3
Ukrainians	4.4	3.6	2,7
Karelians	23.2	10.0	9,2
Finns	1.8	2.3	2,0
Veps	2.0	0.8	0,7
Others	4.4	2.7	
Total	100	100	100 <sup>24</sup>

This table shows that the number of the Veps had been decreasing between 1939 and 1989, and the process was a result of assimilation policy under the Soviet ruling. Then we can observe that the number started increasing in 1989, when the indigenous people got recognition and opportunity to develop their culture and traditions. However, the number of Veps has decreased again since 1989, although the federal government and ethnic elite activists still keep the revitalization process on.

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<sup>22</sup> The Karelians inhabit the Republic of Karelia. They are an indigenous population speaking one of the Finno-Ugric language, Karelian. Although their ethnic group name was appointed as a republic's name – the Republic of Karelia – under the Soviets, the number of Karelians living in the region is quite small – about 9%.

<sup>23</sup> The table is taken from the web-page <http://cc.joensuu.fi/~alma/joksa/ch5tb51.htm>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.gov.karelia.ru/gov/Leader/Days/040817.html> 29.08.2005

What has become a reason for this irreversible changes and why Vepsian language is still a peripheral language among other languages in Karelia? Is it because people do not want to learn and speak it or because of still continuing assimilation process?

Partly, the reason might be a decreasing number of total population of Russia, including all nationalities (and the number of ethnic Russians as well). The other reason seems to be connected to identity crisis when the people choose preferably citizenship identity – Russian. By year 2002 many Veps had lost their mother tongues and started identifying themselves as Russians. The poet Nikolay Abramov in one interview to me mentioned that he knows many Veps who had registered themselves as Russians under the last population census. The explanation was very simple: we live in Russia, we speak Russian language, and consequently we are Russians now.

But I argue that the reason of cultural and language nihilism in Karelia is only about low Vepsian self-awareness. My hypothesis is also that there are three main reasons why the Vepsian language is quite unpopular and Russian citizenship identity is preferable. The first and most, due to federative ideological stream to build a strong national Rossiyskaya identity, a monolingual and monocultural tendency takes place in the Russian society nowadays. The attempts of the ethnic elites create a wider Finno-Ugric identity to gain an international support and to create a feeling of historical continuity are failure symbol to launch as this category is abstract and has no support on the grass-rooted level. So, the other reason is a gap between ethnic leaders and activists and ordinary people in constructing a solid ethnic identity awareness. The third reason is caused because of many young people mainly consider that ethnic belonging identification has lost its relevance in modernity as far as all societies (at least, in Europe) have been becoming more homogenous since global changes on the Earth such as global trade communications, global fashion tendencies, modern urban way of life and etc.

The competent research on the Vepsian language conducted by the scientists of the Russian Academy of Sciences confirms that all Veps are bilingual, however 58% speak the Vepsian language fluently and 36,6% can read and write in Vepsian. Only 7% of the Veps do not know the Vepsian language, and this number in some extent does not seem to be very impressive. My own opinion is that danger of language complete death is middle, and it is too early to say that the Vepsian language has disappeared or died as many people think today.

Of course, 90,5% who knows the language very well are the people over 50 years old and they were mainly taught it in the family. And this fact shows that the speakers of the language are becoming older and older day by day. This process can lead to disappearing of the language. 54,2% of the Veps knows Russian language better than Vepsian; 38% say that they know both languages equally; and only 7,9% knows Vepsian better. More than 50% of the Veps consider the Vepsian language be a mother tongue and a distinctive feature of their ethnic identity. The Veps people with a lower education such as a secondary school education and vocational training school education who know the language very well make 71%; people with a high school education know the language worse (only 27,6%). 66% of the Veps have never used the language in the working places, but 49% say that they speak the language with the neighbors and village mates<sup>25</sup>.

## **5.2. Language use in everyday life: “Northern Sanscrit”<sup>26</sup> or pocket language?**

When I studied linguistics at the university level, it was obligatory to know some Latin and Ancient Greek languages, though being a successful student I have never used them in communication with others. These languages are supposed to be out of everyday use. Now I experience the same situation in some extent with the Vepsian language: it is hardly used and heard in the public domains and has limited functional opportunities. Evgeny Klement'ev emphasized in his interview that:

*The modern situation of the Vepsian language is quite complicated. And this fact is connected to the social phenomenon when the number of the Veps who do not speak the language is decreasing slower than the number of the Veps who speak the language. Meanwhile, the total number of the Veps is quite static. So, finally we can say that the number of the Veps who speak the language is decreasing drastically. However the number of people who do not speak the language is more or less stable. That means the Veps do identify themselves as indigenous, but do not speak their language. Their ethnic identity awareness is high, but language learning motivation is low. The number of the speakers is less than in time of strong assimilation and oppression in the USSR (Evgeny Klement'ev, 15.06.05).*

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<sup>25</sup> [http://www.eawarn.ru/pub/EthnoCensus/WebHomePutPerepis/put\\_perepis08.htm](http://www.eawarn.ru/pub/EthnoCensus/WebHomePutPerepis/put_perepis08.htm) 31.08.2005 (my translation)

<sup>26</sup> The Vepsian language has symbolically been called like this by the linguists such as Elias Lennrot, because is supposed to be the most ancient Finno-Ugric language.

The students learn Vepsian, but do not speak it even if they have quite high level of personal competency and fluency. Although this language is used for a range of functions (school books, dictionaries, radio and TV presentations, and etc.), it is not used for all available situations such as, for example, road signboards, shop boards, different institutions' names, local authority communicative tool and so on. If you travel to the National Vepsian district, you will hardly find any road signboard in Vepsian as it is possible in Kautukeino area in Norway. In this situation, the Vepsian language has transferred increasingly from one of the most ancient language among other Finno-Ugric languages (Northern Sanscrit) to pocket language, a language that one may know, bear in mind, have it as an additional knowledge and competence and unique worldview system, but never use in everyday life. It is like a dictionary in the pocket: one can have a range of the words in Vepsian, but they are useless before he takes the dictionary out of the pocket.

During collecting of my data I tried to observe the situation with the language practice and competence, although it was quite difficult, because I do not speak Vepsian myself. My informants with Vepsian identity confirmed that all of them – 100% (40 persons) – speak Russian fluently. Although more than the half of my informants, while always being bilingual, speak Vepsian fluently as well. They were mostly taught the language in the family and considered it as a mother tongue. All of my informants stressed a necessity to learn the language and the fact that language can be the most important symbol of Vepsian identity and only one distinctive feature in the modern world.

Many of my informants, for instance, also stressed that the language speakers who had been taught Vepsian at the school are considered to be a sort of “semi-speakers” as long as they have not acquired their ancestral mother tongue to the point of full fluency. At this point the taught Vepsian language is meant to be the language with the lack of feeling of continuity and roots; however, learning the language back can also mean building a connection to the past and strength ethnic identity awareness. Of course, this number of the informants mainly belong to the middle-age and older age-groups living in the rural area. But all of them shared with me interesting fact: when it was forbidden to learn the language in the school (most of them attended it approximately in 1950-60s), they still practiced Vepsian in any informal situations: at home, during the class breaks, etc. That let them keep language competence alive while they were becoming bilingual in practice through educational

process. Many of them try to develop scientific base for the language today, create a new lexicon and write the short stories and books.

The big proportion among the Veps who know the language very well is the people of age of 30, because they were taught the language at the school at the beginning of the 1980s, when the ethno-political movement started language propaganda and promotion work. All of them also confirmed that they spoke the language at home in childhood, but, unfortunately, do not speak Vepsian with their kids at home now. The one reason is interethnic marriages; the other is the lack of possibility to use the language in everyday life and public sphere, because of the lack of the books, artistic movies, etc. in Vepsian.

The young people who currently learn the language at the school (and this is only one way to obtain the Vepsian language today, because it is hardly practiced in the families) use it mainly as a written language and hobby subject language, even if their personal language competence is very high. At this point the Vepsian language is meant to be one more foreign language in schooling system that is practically not equal to other subjects like English or Finish.

As far as the Veps are bilingual, the use of language is more conscious, situational and manipulable. Switching on and off of the language can have a specific connotation – a possibility to interact outside Russian speaking community and to demonstrate cultural opposition to it. However, in general, the situation in Karelia looks like this:

*Typically, in the language shift situation a dominant language is acquired perfectly, while the minority language is used less and less and is gradually forgotten: its vocabulary decreases, and the speakers have to insert into their speech words and phrases from the dominant language. This is the situation with the Vepsian language.*

*Only the oldest speakers preserve the language to full extent; the next age group (40 - 70 years old) have limited command of the language, or they can understand it but do not speak it; only very few people under 40 know their parents' language. At the same time all the Veps have a perfect command of Russian.*

*During the interviews conducted in Russian, all informants can speak Russian without switching to Vepsian.*

*On the other hand, the attempts of the middle generation to use "as much Vepsian as possible" during the interview with a researcher confirms that they are conscious of the insufficiency of their language competence<sup>27</sup>.*

The culture and language revitalization issues related also to the attitude to the language in general and might be viewed both from two sides where the first point of view is related to the terms of rationality and globalization and the second – to preservation of a unique ethnic identity. Moreover, motivations to learn Vepsian language are viewed from the position of advantages and usefulness both among the Russians and Veps people. And it is understandable that the language use can be a matter of prestige in life: if you want to gain a good job, education, any social services, you have to speak Russian first of all and mostly.

In last years another tendency is taking place in the society: people have more often started asking why our efforts do not aim to promote the foreign languages such as English to make our kids able to travel around the world and to speak with others. These are comments I have heard on different occasions from people with different ethnic identity backgrounds.

From another point of view, it is argued that the Vepsian language is dying out and all efforts to keep it are useless. The language itself is not strongly connected to identity for the Vepsian people, though all of them point out the connection between these two categories. According to my informants, they accept the fact that loss of the language harms the perception as the Veps person, but does not nullify ethnic identity belonging. Feeling of belonging to Vepsian community is wider and more important than knowledge of the language, and one can be accepted by the community even if he does not know the Vepsian language (as it happened with me). However, the language must be learnt back as it is only one way to preserve Vepsian ethnic identity alive and distinctive. Vladimir Mugachev, the teacher from the settlement Ozery, who came for the conference to Petrozavodsk said:

*I am a Veps myself. And my wife is a Veps too. I have three daughters and made them learn our mother tongue. The Veps people must know their language. Otherwise, they will not identify themselves as the Veps and will loose their ethnic identity (07.11.05, round-table discussion in the Petrozavodsk Finno-Ugric school).*

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.ling.helsinki.fi/sky/tapahtumat/el/endabs.htm> 01.02.2006

The similar thing has been told me by the teacher of Vepsian language Lyudmila Alekseeva:

*I did not identify clearly myself as a Veps for a long time, when I was the young lady. I had not spoken my mother tongue by the time I left my family to marry my husband. And I did not teach my children to speak. But one day I realized that I lost a part of myself. It was like awaking. Unfortunately, I awoke up only at the age of 40. But I have worked a lot to train myself again and recollect the Vepsian language in my mind. I revived my knowledge and then started to teach too. I did not teach my own children to speak this language. But now I can talk to my granddaughter. She is small now and already started to learn English in the school. But I can see that English is difficult to learn for her. At the same time, she learns Vepsian quickly. I think that is because this language is in her blood. She got an inherited ability to learn Vepsian easily (interview held on 09.11.05).*

Today Vepsian is being taught in a few schools mostly as an optional or hobby subject and, in a way, it is indirectly prohibited in public sphere as far as monolingual tendency occurs in the Russian society. Many linguists deny the necessity of creating a new specialized terminology in the native language, and this explains the poverty of the Vepsian vocabulary, concerning the social-political life or computer system operating, for example. In the federative subjects and republics all correspondence and official business is done in Russian, and there are small pieces of visible presence of other cultures and languages in the public domains (at least, in Karelia). The Vepsian language is not heard in the streets, shops or in public transport of the capital city of the Republic of Karelia where the biggest amount of the Veps live today. Therefore it is difficult to speak about real equality of languages so far, even though legally they have equal rights and status<sup>28</sup>.

Today Russian language is acquired to be more proper language to be successful in life. Moreover, many of literature pieces in Vepsian are often more interesting for specialist in language such as journalists, teachers and scholars than for common speakers of the Vepsian language. The ordinary people would prefer pieces of fiction or of various genres, social, political, probably popular scientific literature without which the existence of the language is hardly possible. The lack or insufficient amount of such kind of literature, for instance, provides no motivation for

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<sup>28</sup> The case of Russian Saami is quite similar. Read more in Jernsletten, Regnor (1998): The Saami Movement of Norway: Idea and Strategy 1900-1940. Center for Saami Studies, University of Tromsø, p.176.

continuous learning of the language and discourages the students (Interview with M. Diatchkov, 07.11.2005).

There is also another problem concerned with the Finnish language. Finnish was appointed as a school language for the Veps in Karelia in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>29</sup>. The Finnish influence was quite strong in the Republic until 1990s, and it circulated even as a second state language. It was a language of education, television, signboards and etc. At present the traditions to study Finnish in the schools are not lost, and this language is still popular among the population. Karelia has always had good business connections with Finland, so today many Finnish companies have their activities on the territory of the republic. The parents preferably want their children to learn this language because of its higher social prestige and an opportunity to find a job abroad, in Finland. Many young people (of different ethnic identities) prefer to work at Finnish enterprises, where it is good to know the language. So, children in the town prefer to study Finnish rather than their own native language in addition to Russian and English.

Many of my informants confirmed that they had studied Finnish language in a certain period of life. Myself, I attended the class of Finnish on my 5<sup>th</sup> grade at the secondary school, because it was usual practice to learn the language at that time (1990-1991). All official documents such as passport, birth certificate were made both in Russian and Finnish. Today, Finnish language is appointed as an additional specialization on the faculty of Vepsian language at the State University of Petrozavodsk due to reason to motivate the students to get this education and additional qualification.

There are also some problems with the language in the National Vepsian District. The ethnic distribution of the population there in 1994 was as follows: 41,6% - Vepsians, 58,4% - other nationalities (mostly Russians). Intensive language work has resulted in full attendance in Vepsian lessons in the primary classes (1-4<sup>th</sup> grades), irrespective of ethnic origin of the pupils and the fact that these lessons are officially optional.

However, real troubles usually occur on the secondary level, and in general, a dramatic reduction of students in senior classes of the secondary school can be

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<sup>29</sup> Minorities in North-west Russia //www.PRIO.no 15.07.2004

observed. The main reason is the complete lack of text-books and books for free reading is mentioned by the teachers and students (interview with M. Dyatchkov).

Summarizing up, today the priority of the school education, according to needs of the time, is directed to the learning of computer sciences and English language, which means cutting down other classes and courses in curriculum. It may be harmful for the national languages, because the schoolchildren will first learn Russian, then English, which are a basic content of general secondary school education in Russia. It seems that the Vepsian language “occupies” only the third (or even fourth after popular Finnish language) position in the “hierarchy of languages” and most likely is taught as hobby language. I can conclude that this educational system leads to the situation when Vepsian identity that has only language as a very significant feature is appointed to be a “hobby ethnic identity”, and does not really revitalize it.

### **5.3. “Fading out” ethnicity: folk without language**

The number of Veps has not changed noticeable during the past decades, but the use of the Vepsian language has, however, declined. Some scientists (interview with E. Klement’ev, M. Djachkov) in their interviews emphasized this fact and concluded that finally the Veps experience the situation when more people identify themselves as the Veps, but do not speak the language.

“Why should the Veps learn their language?” – this question has become very actual nowadays. What is the future of Vepsian language?

My friend 25-years old Vepsian girl Varvara asked me if it is really useful to know the language:

*Why do we need to talk so much about different ethnic identities? Is it really so important? Does ethnicity play a significant role nowadays? I can understand that people, for instance, tried to hide or fake their Jewish origin during the Second World War. Because it was dangerous to be a Jew. And ethnicity played a significant role. But today it is not so important to identify yourself as a Veps or someone else. Let say, you know that you are the Veps, and what is in it for me and you? Does this idea warm you or cold you or give you some advantages? Do you feel yourself better or much differently? One day my parents told me that I am the Veps, but nothing has changed in my life since that day. How and why should I change myself? I need not to do that. Many people around me surely have different identities like Russian, Ukrainian and so on. But this fact does not change my attitude to them, my relations with them. I know*

*that I am a Veps, but there is nothing more behind (interview held on 25.06.05).*

Ethnicity itself surely has become very silent in the modern society, and it is very difficult to visualise it through manifestation of traditional symbols. It is more difficult to understand and explain why we should preserve these traditional symbols such as the Vepsian language. In globalizing world, we acquire quite similar lifestyles and modes of social behavior, we learn English language to be able to travel around the world, and we read “Cosmopolitan”.

Krauss, for example, points out “that language loss is part of greater process of loss of cultural and intellectual diversity (cited from Satta, 2005: 17).

People’s attitude to this can be divided into two different types. First of them is presented mostly by elder people over 50 years old, which know the language very well, but they are very skeptical about the future of it. My informants think that this language is not of use and there is no point to learn it.

However, the other group, mostly 30-years old people, who do not know the language very well or have not be taught it in the family, think that it must be preserved and taught in the school. Interestingly to notice, that these informants mentioned that they do not speak the language in the family as a mother tongue, but they want their kids to learn it anyway.

The first group considers that the language is valuable and something that must be kept. It is something that shaped your ethnic belonging and way of thinking, it is a symbol of your ethnicity and specific perception of the world around.

Others think in terms of pragmatic issues that there is no need to learn the language as far as it is impossible to use in public sphere or, let say, abroad. This language use is geographically limited, and in global way of thinking is useless. Many of my informants showed quite high rate of pessimism and nihilism, though all of them would like to preserve the language anyway. Interestingly, the people of other ethnic identities such as Russians pointed that if the Veps want to keep their language, there is no need to prohibit or to demolish it. All my informants presented quite loyal attitude to learning of the Vepsian language and pointed that to learn this language is a personal business that the state must respect and support.

None of my informants mentioned that they felt ashamed or frightened to be a Veps and speak the language as it had happened in 1930-1980s. On the contrary, they

say that they will speak it more often, if there are more movies, books, events held in Vepsian in everyday life. In practice, the Vepsian language has become written text language, but not spoken. It is a “language-in- itself” (Anderson, 1991: 39). So, many Veps see its future in positive way, if it has a wider range of social functions.

#### **5.4. Language and politics: historical context**

First, we have to ask why and how language can be involved in processes of ethnic identity management and building even if it is not necessarily its major marker.

The first question –why – is more or less understandable. There are so many reasons to use language as an ethnic marker which have been discussed in the chapter on ethnic identity and language relationship. In brief, the main points are:

- ✓ Language is a vehicle of interaction, medium of unifying and marker of lifestyle within multinational nationhood.
- ✓ A common language may lead to common national identity; it can be a symbol with high potency to construct, mobilize, objectify, and materialize ethnic identity.
- ✓ This potency is based on ability of language to be a symbol of the past and modernity at the same time, to present continuity and be used in everyday life.
- ✓ It is visualized in its written form. It is a matter of everyday social behavior and shared/accepted by all members of the community.

Language as any other symbol of culture can be very ideological in its nature and form of expression. For instance today, in some former Soviet countries, Russian language may symbolize political oppression and assimilation during the Soviet era. That is why many areas have changed their official language recently and erased Russian language from schooling system and public sphere. It has happened, for example, in Estonia, where a large portion of population is still Russian-speaking.

The language issues have always been very politicized in Karelia. The period from 1917 up to now can be called a period of fluctuations in linguistic policy in regard to the Vepsian language (interview with M. Diatchkov). To the most significant ones belong changes in alphabets from Latin to Cyrillic and then again to Latin in Vepsian language. In Karelia there were several changes:

- ✓ *1910s: First steps in introduction of Latin-based graphic and in the indigenous languages;*
- ✓ *1920s: Introduction of the Finnish language as a language of common use along with Russian;*
- ✓ *1940s: Attempts to introduce Cyrillic graphic;*
- ✓ *1990s: Repeated attempts to standardize the Vepsian language with a Latin-based script.*

The brief history of policy towards the Vepsian language should be presented now. The Vepsian language was officially neglected before 1917, alphabetized in the 1920s, abandoned in 1930s and; finally, is being revived nowadays. After the 1991 events and the adoption on a new “Act on Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation” which for the first time in the history of Russia legally stated that “the languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation are historical and cultural heritage to be protected by the State”<sup>30</sup>.

In 1920s the official Soviet national policy started to support indigenous culture and language, schools of Vepsian language were founded, and a Veps written language was created on the basis of the central dialect and Latin alphabet.

But in 1930s the Soviet authorities changed the national politics and attitude to the Veps thinking that the Vepsian language was not developed enough to be taught in the schools. Finnish language was appointed as a schooling language for the Veps and as an official state second language in Karelia. As far as initially, the Veps did not understand Finnish language and could not speak it, they tried to protest learning it in the schools. But after two years of controversy with the authorities, the government could implement Finnish language into the system of schooling (PIKVN, 1989: 21; Strogal’schikova, 2000).

At the same time the Vepsian language for the other Veps living in Vologda and Leningrad districts was adopted on the basis of Cyrillic alphabet.

This more or less happy period of development and promotion for the Vepsian language at least in Vologda and Leningrad districts was short however, and the policy of violent oppression began in 1937. All national cultural activities were stopped, the Vepsian schools were closed, and the language was prohibited.

In 1989 Vepsian language on the basis of Latin alphabet came back to the schools and institutions, texts and books were published, and a new era of the language development started.

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla63/63diam.htm>

In 1995 the government of the Republic of Karelia adopted the ‘Program for the Rebirth of the Karelian, the Vepsian and the Finnish languages and cultures in the Republic of Karelia’. But the language situation within the republic is still quite complicated.

### **5.5. Tendency towards linguistic Rossiyanization**

It is necessary stress again that today the official Kremlin authorities on the federal level sometimes explicitly, but mostly implicitly attempt to formulate and transmit some kind of a federal national idea for the new independent Russian State and post-soviet Russian society. This essentially implicit ideological course should support policy of federalism in Russia. In this regard, the government tried to formulate a new Rossiyskaya national identity based on the strong citizenship affiliation, while a plural approach to ethnic belonging within the multinational Russia is a primary principle of the new national ideology. It is clear that state identity building is based on dominating ethnic identity and its symbols, in given case – Russian identity.

In accordance to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, section I, chapter 3, article 68:

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

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

*3. The Russian Federation shall guarantee to all of its peoples the right to preserve their native language and to create conditions for its study and development<sup>31</sup>.*

The Article guarantees to support the languages in the regions equally and gives a perfect ground for minority language revitalization work. This article means that in practice a person with Vepsian identity is simply legally allowed to speak and to develop Russian (state) and Vepsian (native) languages, because they are stated in the Constitution.

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-04.htm>

However, in the reality Russian language substitutes other language options as a state language and communicative mean. In general, federal politics towards minority languages in Russia can be characterized as “tended towards monolingualism”.

Joshua Fishman divides all countries mainly into groups in attitude to the different languages as tolerant and monolingual. In Russia there is a mainstream monolingual program, perhaps with some foreign language teaching, but the last one is mostly poor, presented by some lessons a week. Usually only one foreign language is taught as subject for a few hours per a week in Russia.

Fishman writes that the best teaching, for instance, is in the Nordic countries that can give a solid basis for multilingualism if it is combined with travel or use of the language in daily intercourse and mass media (Fishman, 1999: 47).

Monolingualism and monoculturalism in Russia can be proved by the fact that the Vepsian language is not used as the main medium of education and child care. As a minority language it is considered to be a foreign second language taught a couple of hours per a week too. The use of it is indirectly prohibited in daily intercourse, because there are no road signs, commercials, shop signboards in Vepsian. In practice the Veps people have to deal with official state monolingualism that leads to monoculturalism and intolerance to the languages and cultures in the majority society and nihilism/apathy among the Veps.

This state monolingual program is also well presented in the federal law on national languages which should be written using Cyrillic alphabet. Russian news agencies reported that in November 2002 the Duma (federal government) passed an amendment to the Law on the Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation, making the Cyrillic alphabet mandatory<sup>32</sup>.

Many of Russia's numerous republics and countless ethnic minorities are logically unhappy about this law. Due to it, only Cyrillic alphabet may have official status in regions of the Russian Federation, and all ethnic languages are indirectly obliged to be written in Cyrillic with no regard to their language family belonging or other linguistic conditions.

## **5. 6. Alphabet as a symbol of culture: Latin vs. Cyrillic**

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<sup>32</sup> The text of the law can be found on <http://duma.consultant.ru/doc.asp?ID=15173&PSC=1&PT=1&Page=1> (only in Russian)

In May 1999 the local newspaper “Karelia” published two articles with very provoking titles: “No – to Latin alphabet” (“Net – latinskomu alfavitu” in Russian) and “Passion for alphabet” (“Strasti po alfavitu” in Russian, my translation)<sup>33</sup>. The first article intentionally presents opinion of the political movement “The Vepsian People’s unity” (Narodnoe edinstvo vepsov) that considered Cyrillic alphabet as the most adaptable and historically achieved for the Vepsian language.

The other article written by Nina Zayceva and Maria Mullonen, both the teachers and scholars of the Vepsian, is an answer that states sufficiency in Latin alphabet. What happened in Karelia in 1999 and why the discourse around alphabet issue became so burning hot?

Practically, argumentation against Latin letters was based on the fact that it is more difficult for children and elders over 50 years to read and write Vepsian texts<sup>34</sup>.

The language and its writing system can represent some additional social, ideological and political connotations. If the Vepsian elites and activists have chosen the Latin alphabet, it can have some ideological underpins. Moreover, Latin alphabet may demonstrate ethnic elites’ orientation on Finno-Ugric world and identity and creation of opposition to majority Slavic identity. In a way, this policy towards creation of collective Vepsian identity much different than Russian is a reaction on a strong continuing effect of assimilation and federal identity building process.

The following table showing the languages as symbols of ethnic identity can present some political and ideological issues and aspirations of the federal government and ethnic elite policy:

<b>Language</b>	<b>Modern connotations</b>	<b>Additional connotations</b>
Russin	A state federal language, official status, a language of instruction, education, business, government, mass media, etc.	Federalism, citizenship identity, centralization, pan-Russian influence, monolingualism, monoculturalism, assimilation
English	A primary foreign language, a school subject language, a language of interaction with others, business, trade, world fashion, world music, etc.	Cosmopolitan identity, ethnic plurality, internationalization, globalization, multiculturalism, multilingualism, no state borders and ethnic boundaries

<sup>33</sup> Karelija, 1999, #24 ot 27-go maja; Karelija, 1999, # 21 ot 6-go maja.

<sup>34</sup> The same demands were discussed for Russian Saami (Sergeeva, 1995: 178).

Finnish	A second or third foreign language, a prestigious language, language of business, schooling, interaction with the others	The European union, European identity, Finno-Ugric identity, cultural opposition to the citizenship identity, local geographical identity
Karelian	A local regional language intending to get a status as a second state language in the region	Federalism, local geographical identity, the Republic of Karelia, “historical region”
Vepsian	A local minority language, “hobby” language, limited range of functions, out of public use, “dying out” language	Vepsian identity, individual identification, ethnic consciousness, awareness, cultural distinctiveness

This table displays a range of available languages in Karelia and their possible symbolic ideological and political meanings. The Russian language is obligated to learn in the school, and there is no chance to leave the secondary school without proficient knowledge of the language. It is an official state language, the language of legislation, communication and even national identity. Unfortunately, this table shows hierarchy and language inequality, though legally all languages in the Russian Federation have the same rights according to the Constitution. In fact, if Russian is taught as an obligatory language, Karelian and Vepsian are mostly hobby languages. Vepsian symbolizes hobby, individual, unpopular, useless in public sphere language then.

Cyrillic alphabet of the Russian language is supposed to be an historic achievement passed through the centuries and a specific feature of Russian culture, because it is practiced in limited areas, mainly in the Eastern Europe. The Vepsian ethnic elites, scholars and activists have started a polemical controversy about use of Latin alphabet in opposition to Cyrillic.

First of all, writing is undoubtedly a cultural achievement rather than a universal property, and Vepsian writing system is a very recent achievement which emerged late in cultural and societal history. Graphization, alphabeization and standardization of the language are the steps in the development of unwritten languages and a part of politics (Coulmas, 1991).

The Vepsian language alphabet is more a product of ethnic political decision-making work and of conscious choice. It is not a traditional symbol of Vepsian identity as long as it does not present a continuity of traditions, because the Vepsian

language had not been written until 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is, in a way, a constructed and reinvented symbol of culture satisfied some political interests.

Florian Coulmas states that writing is an objectified, visual form of language and culture in general; it is a recognizable visualized symbol that the members of the community can share and mutually understand (Coulmas, 1991). And the members of other communities can also recognize these writing systems as distinctive.

The signs themselves, while being produced artificially, had no linguistic reference in history, and graphic system was only linguistic mediator between speakers. It is a mean to communicate visually (ibid., 18). The similar alphabetic writing systems may be used for writing several different languages. Roman alphabet, for example, is used to write different western European languages.

But at the same time, writing can exhibit the typical features of culture: for instance, Chinese characters, writing in India (the Devanagari-type syllabic system, the Bengali system, Gurmukhi script and etc.) having the traditional patterns design an image of the society. In this case, the script identifies the language as a text, and by providing a language with a stable and visible form, also acquires great symbolic importance.

For instance, the Cyrillic alphabet according to the amendments to the federal law on national languages acquires the pan-Russian status.

The problem of script selection is seemed to be more political and ideological than linguistic itself (Coulmas, 1991). The choice of alphabet for Vepsian language and meanings of Latin and Cyrillic alphabets in the sense of ethnicity marking carries with it a special connotation presenting the West-East divide and myth of Finno-Ugric world.

The ethnic elite as a group of active representatives or leaders of ethnic movement obviously have the ideal and material interests. All these people have to be situated in the social structure of society and within different governmental and non-governmental institutions. And they have an access to articulate their claims in the public sphere and, hence, to influence the public opinion. The leaders and activists are in charge to construct the proper symbols aimed to mobilize the people and they always look upon the most significant and visualized features of the culture.

Vepsian language had no written form until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And even then it was difficult to reach an agreement on the question of what kind of alphabet should be used. Latin letters were chosen, but a suggestion favoring the use

of the Cyrillic alphabet still exists today. However, it is necessary to keep in mind one important thing: these arguments circulate on the scientific linguistic level and don't settle accounts to the ordinary people's opinion.

Some schoolteachers in Karelia still think that the Cyrillic alphabet is easier to learn for children and to use in every-day life. Moreover, many elders who had not learnt the foreign languages before can not read the texts written in Latin system of signs. The most important is that the elder people are the majority of the speakers and readers of Vepsian. And the children are supposed to be a target group for revitalizing movement. So, their needs must be taken in consideration, though it has not happened in Karelia.

The Latin alphabet is used, with some modifications, mostly in the European Union, the Americas, Subsaharan Africa, and the islands of the Pacific Ocean. It spread from Italy with the Latin language to the lands that were expanded of the Roman Empire, and originally was opposite to the eastern half of the Roman Empire including, for instance, Greece. With the spread of western Christianity the Latin alphabet spread to the peoples of northern Europe who spoke Germanic languages, displacing their earlier Runic alphabets. When some west Slavic people adopted Roman Catholicism, the Latin alphabet came into use among them also. In 15<sup>th</sup> century the controversy between the Latin alphabet limited to the languages spoken in western, northern and central Europe and the Cyrillic alphabet mostly used in Eastern Europe was obvious. The contrast of meanings and additional connotations between the two alphabets can be presented in the table below:

<b>Latin alphabet</b>	<b>Cyrillic alphabet</b>
Roman Empire, Western Europe, The European union, Latin language, Germanic languages Finno-Ugric languages Western culture, Western Christian church	Ancient Greece, Byzantium Empire, Eastern Europe, Slavic world, Russia, Slavic languages, Pan-Russian status Eastern Orthodox Christianity

This table can make clear, that today Cyrillic alphabet symbolizes mainly the Slavic/Russian world, Russian language and Orthodox Christianity. In this regard, the choice to use the Latin alphabet marks the interest and ideological claim to belong to the west European and Finno-Ugric cultural areas, which Vepsian elites attempt to reach.

### **5.7. Summary**

In accordance to the census of 2002, many people don not speak the language, but still identify themselves as the Veps. The Veps are bilingual, and their language choice and shift in different languages is supposed to be more conscious. However, in practice all of them speak mostly Russian, as far as monolingual and monocultural tendencies take place in the Russian Federation today.

This monolingual stream aims to build a strong federative identity as a rossiyandin and can be exemplified by the law on the Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation, making the Cyrillic alphabet mandatory.

The opposite tendency from the ethnic elite's side is to promote Finno-Ugric identity and world, where Latin alphabet becomes a main tool and symbol for struggle.

I do not minimize the fact that the alphabet and choice of writing system is mainly the matter of linguistic competence. The choice of alphabet depends on the rules of the language and its phonologic system. But at the same time we have to take into consideration that the alphabet for the Vepsian language was implemented in 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been changed several times. And all this time the Veps people could adopt their language to a new alphabetic system.

Ethnic elite attempted to implement a Latin alphabet as a symbol of unity with the Finno-Ugric world, the European Union and a symbol of opposition to the pan-Russian policy towards minorities that in fact means continuing assimilation tendencies in the society.

## Chapter VI:

### *Indigenous revitalizing movement in Karelia: linguistic and political controversy*

#### **6.1. General characteristics**

Before 2000 the Veps had not been officially recognized and included in the list of “Small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East”, and an area of their location was confirmed as an autonomous national region – the Vepsian Volost<sup>35</sup>.

The main organization, The Vepsian Cultural Society, and other actors of the movement is nowadays engaged in the creation of ethnic markers, such as a common proper name (Veps), elements of common culture and a common history (or a myth of common origin and, hence, a myth of the Finno-Ugric world<sup>36</sup>).

The initial question of the thesis is what ethnicity means for the politicians, journalists, ethnic elites, intellectual workers and ordinary people? How different national institutions and societies, politicians and mass-media tools make the Vepsian people aware of their ethnic identity within the Russian majority and how different actors of the revitalizing movement objectify the ethnicity?

The Vepsian revitalizing movement has mainly inspired the development of a new collective self-understanding and participation in the political organization of the Veps<sup>37</sup>. The process of restoration of traditions and careful choice of symbols are the main issues of the movement. Culture becomes objectified as much as it is used in struggle for specific rights and advantages. Flag, group name, national song, passport notion, and etc., traditional symbols of culture in primordial sense, have become a recent achievement of the movement and constructed or reinvented features of Vepsian modern culture.

An important feature of construction work is that it is often necessarily to create an image that makes it most possibly and easily recognized visual image. It is

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<sup>35</sup> Veps National Volost is a municipal autonomy of North Veps located in Prionezhsky district of the Republic of Karelia. The autonomy was established in 1994. its territorial center is the village of Sheltozero with volost population 3, 166 where Vepsian population is 1, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Further, the term “myth” is discussed as a wide, but false belief in something and labeling story that can the traditional asynchrony symbol of culture make to work as an actual political issue.

<sup>37</sup> The same processes are described among the Sami people in (Eidheim, 1997), Pacific peoples (Keesing, 1989).

in some sort of intention to create the paradoxical and asynchronous images or emblematic symbols of culture, because they are rooted in the past. The living museum gaze often does not associate indigenous people with the ordinary modern way of life and mostly intends to create the image of noble savages living in the past (Olsen, 2003: 7). This actually makes all ethnic elite's attempts be initially unpopular and unable to gain much support on the grass-rooted level.

## 6.2. Who are the actors of the movement?

There are a lot of governmental programs and projects that aim to create a strong Vepsian self-awareness. The main dilemma about this is why Vepsian self-consciousness is still low. Why the national and regional programs do not meet the requirements of the ordinary people? What kind of relations between the officials, leaders of the movement and the Veps? Do they have a constructive dialogue? Or do they have symmetrical or asymmetrical relations<sup>38</sup>?

The organizations and institutions which provide the Vepsian peoples' rights are:

<p>➤ <b>State (on the Republican level):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The Legislative Assembly</li> <li>○ Body (Chamber) of deputies</li> <li>○ The Committee on state order, self-governments and national policy</li> <li>○ The Republican Government</li> <li>○ The State Committee of the Republic of Karelia on National Politics<sup>39</sup></li> <li>○ Ministry on culture and public relations</li> <li>○ Ministry on education</li> <li>○ The self-government of the Vepsian National District and municipal authorities</li> </ul>
<p>➤ <b>Non-governmental:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Vepsian cultural society</li> <li>○ Union of Vepsian Youth of Karelia "Vepsian vezad"</li> <li>○ Legal and Information Centre of indigenous people "Nevond"</li> <li>○ The Karelian center of folk art</li> <li>○ The Republic center of national cultures</li> </ul>

<sup>38</sup> The term is taken from Thuen, Trond (1995): Cultural protection or self-determination: Incongruent imageries? In Thuen, T. *Quest for Equity. Norway and the Saami Challenge*. St. John's: ISER Books.

<sup>38</sup>i Barth, Frederik (1994): Enduring and emerging issues in the study of ethnicity in Vermeulen, H. and C. Govers (eds.), *The Anthropology of ethnicity: Beyond "Ethnic groups and boundaries"*. Amsterdam: het Spinhuis, p.16.

<sup>39</sup> At the moment this institution is canceled and its authority has been transferred to the Ministry on National politics and work with religious affairs.

However, to this list it is necessary to add the schools, kindergartens, libraries, museums and academic research institutions, newspapers "Kodima", "Vienan viesti", "Kipina", "Carelia" and The State Television and Radio Company "Karelia" as non-governmental by nature, but supported by governmental programs and finances.

These two groups of organizations have different functions and aims. In the table it is possible to notice that state or governmental organizations and institutions are mostly political and legislative; non-governmental organizations are mainly cultural and enlighten-oriented. That means they have different access to the power and making decisions on the political agenda. And of course, if the first group, state, is oriented on the federal national policy to create a *Rossyskaya* identity, the second one, non-governmental, - on creating a contrastive ethnic identity and culture.

The aspiration towards a revival and determination to assert the rights of their peoples is only manifested and articulated by a narrow stratum of the *intelligentsia* (traditionally, well-educated people working in culture and science fields), who are the most active members of the national-democratic movement and organization.

Unfortunately, Vepsian identity has not become a factor of mass consciousness yet, and among industrial workers, technical staff and office employees, indeed, the predominant condition of mind is ethnic nihilism and apathy.

Xenophont Sanukov, professor in regional history at the Mari State University, mentioned that the officials, with some exceptions, only “pursue a collaborationist policy, since they are not concerned about the fate of the native people, but about a quick promotion in their career and for this they have to be so-called “internationalists”<sup>40</sup>.

The Russian scientists Kovalev and Shabaev distinguish three types of ethno-political elite:

1. “Radical nationalists” (who promote the ideas of cultural and physical ethno-genocide and special particular rights on self-determination of minority ethnic group);
2. “Ethno-nomenclature” (mostly local leaders in the regions who are integrated into the governmental institutions or closely interact with the official state authorities);
3. “Liberal democrats” (a new sort of leaders who try to make a dialogue with the government, local authorities and indigenous peoples themselves) (Kovalev, Shabaev, 2004: 128)<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Sanukov, X. Human rights problems in Russia: the situation of non-Russian peoples  
[//www.suri.ee/congress/sanukov.html](http://www.suri.ee/congress/sanukov.html) 04.02.2005

<sup>41</sup> All these terms are quite questionable and were translated from Russian.

My own observation of the situation with the elite is that mainly the leaders of the movement are some sort of “ethno-nomenclature” and try to integrate into the political system of the state. This means that they prefer a dialogue with the federal government instead of the talk to ordinary people.

During my fieldwork data collection I heard a lot from the people in the countryside that, for instance, the representative of the Veps in the Republican Parliament rarely visit the National district and talk to the people. At the same time, the head of the National district permanently lives in the city and he is not indigenous by birth.

This is a big moral dilemma that all indigenous organizations are located and act in the city and have their offices far from the national Vepsian villages. There is a logical question how they can protect the indigenous interests living separately from the indigenous peoples and rarely have the connection with them. They make different projects in field of tourism or language about how to improve the life in the rural villages and how to promote indigenous culture, but they do not really know what the indigenous peoples want. There is always a risk that the leaders of different organizations and associations try to promote their own interests as well and to make themselves the careers more, than ordinary people interests.

### **6.3. The language development**

The development of the Veps language is a primary task and feature of revitalization movement nowadays, because it is only one significant symbol of the culture. Significantly, language issue is a “boom” issue in creation of citizenship identity on the federal level too.

The revitalization of the language first of all marks an awakening of the ethnic self-consciousness and a rising of the movement. Ten years ago the Veps lacked official recognition, hence, they had no national schools, radio and TV-broadcasting, magazines, etc., and the Veps language was on the verge of dying out.

The Veps are bilingual, all of them speak Russian. During the last 10-15 years it has been done a lot for development of the Vepsian ethnic culture.

Today all the pupils of the 3 Vepsian schools functioning in the Volost study Vepsian language from the 2nd up to the 9th grade. One Finno-Ugric school was also opened in Petrozavodsk (capital city of the Republic of Karelia). Teachers for Vepsian

schools and pre-school institutions are trained at the Karelian Pedagogical University (where there are departments of Karelian and Vepsian languages), at Petrozavodsk State university (faculty of Baltic-Finnish philology and culture), at Petrozavodsk Conservatory and Finno-Ugric Academy.

Textbooks and books in general are published in Vepsian language, while radio and TV programs are being broadcast regularly in Karelian, Vepsian and Finnish. A number of newspapers have been published since 1991.

Folkloric festivals are organized regularly and in the administrative centre of the Volost – the village of Sheltozersky – an ethnographic museum was created, where there are regular performances by a Vepsian chorus.

In June of 1987 in the Leningrad oblast the first Vepsian national festival ‘Tree of life’ and the scientific conference ‘Problems of the Vepsian culture and language preservation’ were held.

In 1988 Vepsian activists established the ‘Vepsian Cultural Society’ and started to convey to the Russian government and the authorities of Leningrad and Vologda oblast and of the Republic of Karelia how the situation in the Vepsian area might be improved and developed.

The Veps have gained some specific rights on education and advantages to enter the universities and to get some additional scholarships. This was a way to inspire them and motivate to learn the indigenous languages and culture. Last year the administration of the Petrozavodsk State University decided that it is not required longer to know even basic Vepsian for the students who enter the faculty of Vepsian language. This decision depends on the fact that many young Veps do not know the language, but would like to learn it at the university level. On the other hand, people with different ethnic identities got a chance to enter the program as well. The number of the students who decided to study at the faculty increased last year<sup>42</sup>.

Although many programs and projects aimed to protect the Vepsian language and culture, many of them seem to be an evidence that there is no constructive

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<sup>42</sup> It is also interesting to notice that in schooling system language and ethnic identity are separate from each other, because learning the Vepsian language in the secondary schools and at the university has no regard to ethnic belonging. In some extent, it can be a positive tendency towards pluralism and tolerance in the society, especially its majority part. But on the other hand, this tendency destroys essential and almost mystery connection between these two categories: Vepsian language is the only one marker of ethnic boundaries and cultural distinctiveness. It is supposed to be rooted to the ethnic identity affiliation, because only when it can be involved into creation of a strong ethnic self-awareness.

dialogue between all actors of the process of revitalization. As it has been told before, the national movement among the Veps leaders is quite weak, supported mostly by well-educated activists and scholars.

In general, indigenous activism has taken a form oriented on the Finno-Ugric and, hence, European (Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian) models of shaping ethnic identity. These ideas are not popular among the ordinary people and did not meet requirements on the grass-root level. The next chapter makes an attempt to explain why it has happened.

#### **6.4. Myth about Finno-Ugric world and identity**

The Finno-Ugric category is widely criticized, although the leaders of the movement still try to promote it as a shared identity for the Veps, Karelians and Finns in the area. This is an attempt to construct a contrastive ethnic identity against the Slavic one. However the term “Finno-Ugric” is a purely linguistic and scientific invention and essentially a metaphor that was created on the basis of similarities and common origin of Finno-Ugric languages<sup>43</sup>, while being quite abstract and meaningless for the ordinary people definition. Simply saying, unpopularity of this category can be demonstrated by similar destiny of the European Union identity: there is no common ethnic identity in Europe. This image is purely invented and has a mythical potency as false image. The term “Finno-Ugric” is used in linguistic discourse and does not mean anything for the people who are not engaged in linguistics or politics.

Moreover, it is meaningless because its content is widely abstract: term “Finno-Ugric world” unites 12 different peoples and nations which are not similar or even close to each other in political, cultural, historic and even linguistic development. There is no common identity between pastoral and hunting communities in Siberia and, let say, farming or highly urbanized well-fared nations like the Finns, Estonians or Karelians in the European part.

These ethnic groups are geographically and politically (living in different countries) located far away from each other. Some of them have their own national statehood like Finland and Hungary; others are minorities in their countries. So, there

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<sup>43</sup> In the table in appendix it is possible to observe where Finno-Ugric speaking people live and how they are distributed in Europe and Asia.

is no unity of the minds between different nations and ethnic groups that assist the process of constructing a common Finno-Ugric identity and strong self-identification. Only Vepsian ethno-elite and scientists realize this linguistic and cultural connection between different groups and try to make it as a main point of constructing of the contrastive identity. The ordinary people are not so sensitive about this definition and do not understand its meaning; they do not accept this purely constructed and invented symbol of their culture.

This process seems to be much similar to those that B. Anderson describes in his book “Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism”(1991). Anderson wrote how the convergence of capitalism and print technology (and all modern high technologies, I suppose) on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community (Anderson, 1991). He refers this process to the modern nations:

*The potential stretch of these communities was inherently limited, and, at the same time, bore none but the most fortuitous relationship to existing political boundaries* (Anderson, 1991:46, emphasis mine)<sup>44</sup>.

In the Vepsian case, the lack of hot political claims, like the rights on land, full autonomy and independency within the Russian Federation, traditional occupations, etc., made the stretch of the community claims pretty much limited. But geographical location as a “historic region” determined the significance of the region on the political agenda and emergence of the movement related to the movements in Europe.

All these Finno-Ugric nations (I include different ethnic groups, not only state-nations) have print-language, but in others only a tiny fraction of the population “uses” this language in conversation and on paper, or, precisely saying, in everyday life. Vepsian language seems to have status as written (and there is a large work to make it written has been done in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), but not spoken. Ironically, initially oral language in practice has become vernacular language, language-in-itself (Anderson, 1991: 39).

The ethnic elite imagined a new ethnicity through the language that was supposed to be opposite to “only-language-of-state” (in this case, Russian language based on Cyrillic system alphabet). The process had several stages like: unification, stabilization and domination. First, the language was unified below Russian, but

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<sup>44</sup> I consider Anderson’s “potential stretch” as a duration of existence as distinctive and number of significant symbols of the ethnic group.

above the spoken dialects. Then it was stabilized and got fixity, because written and printed language kept a permanent form. Domination of final form means creation the language-of-power on the basis of one dominant dialect (Anderson, 1991: 43-44). The leaders of non-governmental organizations tried to oppose the process of monolingualism to creating of sovereign writing system based on Latin graphics.

Kovalev and Shabaev (2004) try to analyze ethnic and nationalistic movements in the Finno-Ugric regions of the Russian Federation and criticize the myth of the Finno-Ugric world and identity. They write that as far as the leaders were not able to create a movement because they had no any experience, were not initially educated in field of political decision-making, they tried to adapt their ideas and claims to the agenda of other ethnic movements in Europe.

At the beginning the leaders even did not have clear and straight ideas what they wanted to achieve and they adopted the ideas from the others partners of the Finno-Ugric world, such as Estonians and Finns (Kovalev, Shabaev, 2004: 126; Shabaev, 1998: 120, my translation). Such symbols of identity as common land, traditional occupations, etc. have never been in the focus of Karelian politicians, because they could not gain much support as asynchrony in the modernity.

The ideology was oriented on the movements in Europe and followed European ideas and tools how to create a new Vepsian identity. Of course, the leaders of the movement have gained a support of European organizations, mainly the European Union through the institutions in Finland (*ibid.*, 130), but did not involve a grass-root level into the movement because of scepticism of mythic Finno-Ugric identity.

Declaration of relationship between the Finno-Ugric peoples was an attempt to make a group of support or solidarity as large as possible and to get assistance abroad. The ordinary people did not support too much this propaganda of common identity and culture (*ibid.*, 128). This image was purely invented, because all Finno-Ugric people have different cultural features, involved into different activities, have different status in the subject of the Russian Federation and so on. But this project was originally failure to launch as it “was for example, not possible to create a superordinated Soviet identity in the multinational Soviet Union, not even in the case

of the Russian population which constituted the majority in the Russian republic” (Tagil, 1995: 22)<sup>45</sup>.

### 6.5. Problems of the movement

The main issue here is to investigate whether there is a sense of a mutual communication, “symmetrical” relationship between the grassroots and the urban indigenous leaders of the movement. Simply saying, whether the new constructed concept and definition of indigenusness has a deep understanding among the Veps alongside of their kinship-based identification feeling.

When I asked many people who are involved in movement why their attempts to promote the language are quite unsuccessful, they replied openly. The main reason is contradictions in area of legislation. There are a number of laws on indigenous issues in Russia, but they do not work well. I had a precious opportunity to visit the lecture that was held by Zinaida Strogalschikova in summer 2004. Her lecture was about the Law on Guarantees of Indigenous Peoples’ Rights in Russia:

*The authorities were not ready to approve and sign up this law before 1993. Only in 1993 the law was ratified. However, it still did not satisfy the claims of indigenous peoples. The first contradictive thing was a term of “small-in-number indigenous peoples”. In accordance to it, all indigenous peoples in Russia were divided in small-in-number and just indigenous themselves. The small-in-number indigenous peoples are considered to be less than 50,000 people in number. This is, of course, contradictive to all international norms and instruments. And no one knows why the number should be 50,000 and less. We have just mechanic and quantitative criterion in the basis how to identify different groups of indigenous peoples.*

*The list of indigenous peoples was created on basis of “The Red Book of languages in Russia”. So, in principle criterion to identify indigenous peoples was language. The procedure to include the group into the list is based on application of regional authorities to the federal government. The local authorities should apply for status of indigenous peoples. But, for instance, the Vologda region municipalities did not apply for status of indigenous to the government, and the Veps who live in the region were not included into list. This is pretty much ridiculous. On the paper and in the Constitution the Veps people have equal rights, but in reality Vologda Veps are not even on the official list. This is an example of*

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<sup>45</sup> Some other empirical examples of how ethnic elite has tried to promote the Finno-Ugric ethnic identity can be found in implementation of, for instance, Vepsian flag too. This flag was created after Scandinavian model with Lutheran-Catholic cross (Petukhov, 1995: 136, my translation).

*bureaucratic attitude to the problems and indigenous peoples in general  
(extracts from the lecture held on 23.06.05).*

Summarizing up and taking into consideration other historical circumstances, which has been described before, the problems or obstacles to revitalize the Vepsian ethnic identity in general can be divided into two groups:

- External:
  - Global influence and tendency to cosmopolitan ideas: no local national identities; tendency to homogeneity, to be a “citizen of the world”;
  - Domination of state national politics and doctrine; tendency to construct a strong national identity that naturally enters into controversy with local sovereign identities, monoculturalism, monolingualism;
  - Historical trauma of assimilation;
  - Contradictions in the area of legislation; No chance to use and practice the language outside of the system of schooling.
- Internal:
  - Three different regions of inhabitation, Karelia is a historic region, changes in borders and nationalities, latent ethnicity in the course of history;
  - Movement is split; ruled by the federal government; Contradictive relations between different ethnic organizations within the movement located in different places where the Veps inhabit;
  - No clear program, no clear or hot claims such as land right claim; promoting the abstract symbols of Finno-Ugric world and museum culture; initial weakness: no land claims, natural resources.
  - Gap between the actors of the revitalizing movement as authorities, ethnic elites and ordinary people;

Some essential paradoxes characterize the Vepsian situation such as for example, acceptance and determination of the minorities by the federal government and monocultural policy stream; a wish to preserve a distinctive culture and cosmopolitanism of many young Veps. Language education and language use has no clue to ethnicity itself, because all schoolchildren regardless to their ethnic belonging should learn the language at the school in the national district (Kleerova, 2000: 173).

## **6.6. Summary**

The conclusion might be that ethnicity in modern world is politicized, but it is not only about politics. It might be a self-identification process without political purposes, where people can combine different identities and behave in accordance to circumstances.

Above all, language seems to be the only hot issue for the Veps instead of land rights, autonomy, traditional occupations, etc. however, in practice the Vepsian language is not a language of local authorities, education (as a tool, not as a subject), commerce, wider communication and etc. that can lead to the disappearing of it.

All ethnic conflicts are not about ethnicity itself and its symbols, but more or less about the politics of ethnic domination and power (Jenkins, 1997: 121). It should not be thought that everyday life is somehow free from ideology (Jenkins, 1997: 160).

The future of Vepsian language is related to the question why the Veps should learn their dying out language. Why the loss of Vepsian language can be a serious “catastrophic destruction” (cited from Satta, 2005: 18)? Each language reflects a unique world view system and complex set of cultural symbols which are associated with a specific dealing with the world and formulated a distinctive way of thinking and understanding of the main values and images in the world (ibid., 18).

The minority characteristic today is bilingualism. But bilingualism as a social phenomenon could be a characteristic of modernity, because many people get used to speak several languages like national, English, neighboring territories’ and etc. Now it is almost strongly requested to know English language all over the world as an additional language skill and advantage to gain a better job. To be a bilingual or multilingual is a necessity of nowadays. So, indigenous people and the Veps particularly can acquire different languages as it is a mainstream social phenomenon today. Majority children learning minority language become bilingual and tolerant to other cultures and people. That is a positive side of the coin. But some school subjects should be taught in minority language for minority children only.

Today, ethnic identity mostly survives in the countryside, that’s why the main part of this research is based on data collected there in spite of the fact, that the rural population is mostly socially and politically apathetic. Young people show little interest in the activities of national organizations. The stereotype in the consciousness of the younger generation is as follows: the transition to the Russian cultural and linguistic environment helps towards a more successful career and less moral and psychological discomfort; and adherence to the language and ethnic cultural traditions of their parents plays no positive role in everyday life<sup>46</sup>. This social phenomenon is

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<sup>46</sup> Vepsian Renaissance //www.veps.de/Tapahtuu/Renaissance/renaissance.htm 02.03.2005

quite widespread, and it is possible to find the similarities with other indigenous people all over the world<sup>47</sup>.

However, the gap between the federal authorities' issues, indigenous elites' claims and individual peoples' approach to Vepsian identity may be an obstacle in creation of a strong self-awareness among the Veps.

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<sup>47</sup> It is possible to find the resemblance between the Veps and assimilated Saami, for instance.

## Chapter VII:

### ***Conclusion: Being a Veps beyond political and academic discourse***

The Veps people's self-consciousness had always been quite low or latent since the beginning of formation of ethnic group boundaries on the territory. The image the Veps as a single distinctive ethnic group appears in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the political and scientific work. Their diverse and scattered groups did not have common land of inhabitancy, single group name, any common government or multitribal confederation, though they spoke specific language dialects. There is a great internal diversity within the Vepsian population, and in terms of language, religion, and livelihoods, they can be divided into several subethnic communities.

Moreover, many border changes made several shifts in nationality, language and religion affiliation among the Veps.

Under Soviet repressions they had also become small-in-number minority invisible on their land, and their ethnicity has become extremely latent and silent as a result of shame feeling, fear and strong language assimilation.

Many traditional symbols of the Vepsian culture and identity such as beliefs, handicrafts, agricultural activities, etc. have hardly survived (or even been mostly lost) through the course of history.

The problem with understanding ethnic identity is that itself it may not necessarily be stable and fixed. Ethnic identity can be something that people can change to suit the needs of the moment. A person can possess two or more identities at the same time, but some conditions or behaviours can be latent rather than active in certain situations. In the modern society the notion of ethnicity may sound even more ambivalent as, for instance, the all Veps are Russians<sup>48</sup> (citizenship) and Karelians (federally regional identity), in other words, they initially possess a few different identities.

Due to transition the traditions to the modernity, many of the cultural symbols do not create the boundaries between the ethnic groups in the modern world any longer. Modern people wear jeans, listen to modern pop and rock music, eat in the

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<sup>48</sup> This meaning is covered by the recently revived politically correct term *Rossiyanin* (Россиянин, plural *Rossiyanе*), because *Russians* refers to citizens of Russia, regardless of their ethnicity.

Burger-kings and do not pay too much attention to national flag or traditional handicrafts.

In basis, “the instrumental and primordial perspectives concentrate on potentially complementary aspects of ethnicity” (Jones, 1997: 80) and can be set up as an integrated theoretical approach. During my fieldwork data collection I observed that when it comes to ethnicity defying both dimensions, biological-psychological and socially constructed, are involved. Some people define ethnicity in terms of biology, but the others involve more social interactions.

The Vepsian communities still intent to preserve the traditional self-identification characteristics such as blood relationship and kinship maintenance or belief in common origin. However, only language can make the cultural boundaries between the ethnic groups.

Barth writes that “the features that are taken into account are not the sum of “objective” differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant” (Barth, 1994, II: 14). This thesis tries to show that language is the main criterion of Vepsian identity, however different actors of the movement use it as a challenge in different ways.

Cultural blending in the Vepsian society has been accompanied by fluid physical and cultural markers and “the absence of legalized barriers to equality or “legalized” stigmatization in both the public and private spheres” (Spickard, 2005). Because “Vepsness” is invisible in terms of biology and being Veps is understood as not demonstrating distinct ethnic identity.

In this case language becomes the most significant label of the ethnicity and its contrastive nature. Although ethnic practices that are relatively invisible are perceived as a matter of choice. The Veps people who are bilingual can choose to display or hide their identity from situation to situation. The ideal model is when Russian language is associated with work, school and public matters, whereas Vepsian is the language of home and informality. Switching to another language can be seen as the small moments of challenging the personal identity.

Interestingly, not only is language use linked to identity, but so too is a person’s attitude about the issue of language (K. Tracy, 2002: 109). Whether a person is for or against to revitalize dying out language will be taken as an indicator of his attitude. And this attitude can be designed by politicians and mass media tools. But in fact the Veps prefer to stick themselves to speaking the Russian language.

The Veps people consider the relations between language and ethnic identity as significant. On the other hand paradoxically, today many Vepsian people are sure that to know perfectly the language and to speak it doesn't consequently mean to be a "real" Veps. Answering the question, can one really be a member of ethnic group without speaking the language, leads to the debate between authentic and imagined communities (Haarmann, 1998: 268). But the link between language and ethnic identity differs according to the traditions of a given ethnic group and political and cultural conditions in which it lives.

The Veps people consider the language to be an important symbol of their ethnic identity, though they are rather tolerant to the members of the community who do not speak Vepsian.

Olga Zhukova, a teacher of Vepsian language at the university and Veps by origin, shared her opinion with me:

*Of course, self-consciousness has been increasing last years, but it is still low. Urban people do not think about their ethnic identity at all. In the case of the Veps situation is much more complicated. This ethnic identity was oppressed for many years. Now people have to recall their memories about the ancestors, land and traditions. Today it is not only necessary to learn language; but it is important to recall your roots in the mind. And this work is very hard and long.*

*Of course, the main aspect of ethnicity is language, especially in the case of the Veps. For instance, common land can not be a criterion for them, because they live in different regions and geographically divided. On the other hand, we all are the bearers of local or regional identity. When I visit my fellows and friends in Leningrad or Vologda regions, they call me as Karelian. It is not because I am Karelian by origin. This emphasizes that I came from Karelia. The place of inhabitation is not necessarily a sign of ethnicity. The language is the main criterion of ethnicity.*

*The other thing is the way of everyday living and family relations. The Veps have many distinctive traditions how to arrange family life. They have specific traditions how to baptize the children, to cure, to bury or to take care of the new-born babies. This knowledge is transported from generation to generation and available only for the Veps. Sometimes the Veps people do not know why they do many things like this or like that. They do them, because their parents and grandparents did the same. It is unconscious thing, something out of rational mind (Olga Zhukova, interview held on 16.06.05).*

Unfortunately, statistics and observation of present situation among the Veps say that today identity is in crisis and the efforts of the movement to promote and develop high self-consciousness are unsuccessful.

One reason, to my mind, might be a cultural trauma that “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander ... [et al.], 2004: 1). In this sense “a horrendous event” means the years when the Veps people had been erased from the official list of the Soviet nationalities and should hide their ethnic belonging. This cultural trauma caused the idea that this identity can not let you live in the larger society of majority and not give you “a bread to eat” (or let you earn your money).

But I argue that the reason of cultural and language nihilism in Karelia is only about personal low Vepsian self-awareness. My hypothesis is also that there are three main reasons why the Vepsian language is quite unpopular and Russian citizenship identity is preferable.

The first and most, due to federative ideological stream to build a strong national Rossiyskaya identity, a monolingual and monocultural tendency takes place in the Russian society nowadays.

The attempts of the ethnic elites create a wider Finno-Ugric identity to gain an international support and to create a feeling of historical continuity are failure symbol to launch as this category is abstract and has no support on the grass-rooted level. So, the other reason is a gap between ethnic leaders and activists and ordinary people in constructing a solid ethnic identity awareness.

The third reason is caused because of many young people mainly consider that ethnic belonging identification has lost its relevance in modernity as far as all societies (at least, in Europe) have been becoming more homogenous since global changes on the Earth such as global trade communications, global fashion tendencies, modern urban way of life and etc.

Today the priority of the school education, according to needs of the time, is directed to the learning of computer sciences and English language, which means cutting down other classes and courses in curriculum. It may be harmful for the national languages, because the schoolchildren will first learn Russian, then English, which are a basic content of general secondary school education in Russia. It seems

that the Vepsian language “occupies” only the third (or even fourth after popular Finnish language) position in the “hierarchy of languages” and most likely is taught as hobby language.

I can conclude that this educational system leads to the situation when Vepsian identity that has only language as a very significant feature is appointed to be a “hobby ethnic identity”, and does not really revitalize it.

Moreover, in the reality Russian language substitutes other language options as a state language and communicative mean. In general, federal politics towards minority languages in Russia can be characterized as “tended towards monolingualism” – rossiyanization.

Russia today is a federative state, and this type of state is most likely based itself on a long historical claim and has been prior to the development of ethno-national identification within it (Tagil, 1995). Political federalism itself is a precondition to a twofold tendency in national politics. First, it tends to make the subjects of the federation independent actors who can support multinational and multicultural frameworks within the whole state, but it also tends to a creation of a strong unifying federal identity, close to a sense of national or/and regional citizenship aspirations. Simply saying, today there is a twofold process ongoing in Russia: revitalizing indigenous distinctive identities and constructing citizenship identity when we naturally get a “Russian Saami”, “Russian Jew”, “Russian Veps” or “Karelian Russian” (a Russian living in Karelia), Karelian Veps (a Veps living in Karelia) and so on.

In accordance to philosophy of federalism, ethnicity is a priori a range of different identities which are *socially constructed* and *situationally defined* (Jenkins, 1997).

The language and its writing system can represent some additional social, ideological and political connotations. If the Vepsian elites and activists have chosen the Latin alphabet, it can have some ideological underpins. Moreover, Latin alphabet may demonstrate ethnic elites’ orientation on Finno-Ugric world and identity and creation of opposition to majority Slavic identity. In a way, this policy towards creation of collective Vepsian identity much different than Russian is a reaction on a strong continuing effect of assimilation and federal identity building process.

Arguments about alphabets circulate on the scientific linguistic level and don’t settle accounts to the ordinary people’s opinion. The gap between the federal

authorities' issues, indigenous elites' claims and individual peoples' approach to Vepsian identity may be an obstacle in creation of a strong self-awareness among the Veps.

Moreover, indigenous activism has taken a form oriented on the Finno-Ugric and European models, and the ethnic elite put the Vepsian case into European agenda through creation of a mythic single Finno-Ugric world. This image was copied in some extent from other well known unities and multinational images such as the EU, the Barents region, and etc. If Finno-Ugric identity as a single people's image could be a widespread popular identification, there would be no opposition and reluctance against it. And "this experience can be compared with the Scandinavian reluctance to EU integration, which is partly explained by a weak European popular identity" (Eriksson, 2002: 247).

And it comes to situation of "no obvious claims" from the elites. There is nothing to struggle for, if it is not the language. The Vepsian indigenous movement becomes paradoxically the movement without hot issues and claims in this situation.

As a general conclusion we can state that there is a gap between Veps identity as promoted by the elite and the benefits and opportunities associated with it among ordinary people. And, in addition, the idea of a common Finno-Ugric identity is abstract plus it is often also associated with Finnish expansionist ideas.

A very interesting thing is that the federal government and the ethnopolitical elite seem to have the same interest in supporting the Vepsian language. In fact, the situation seems to be that there is a kind of "alliance" between these two parts on an issue (the language) that the majority of the Veps people does not seem to be so interested in at all.

What is the future of the Vepsian language today? The minority characteristic nowadays is bilingualism. But bilingualism as a social phenomenon could be a characteristic of modernity, because many people get used to speak several languages like national, English, neighboring territories' and etc. Now it is almost strongly requested to know English language all over the world as an additional language skill and advantage to gain a better job. To be a bilingual or multilingual is a necessity of nowadays. So, indigenous people and the Veps particularly can acquire different languages as it is a mainstream social phenomenon today.

Majority children learning minority language become bilingual and tolerant to other cultures and people. That is a positive side of the coin. But some school subjects should be taught in minority language for minority children only. Then learning the Vepsian language will make a turn from a hobby school subject to mother tongue learning, and the language will be strongly associated with Vepsian identity.

As an ideal model, it should be a sociolinguistic situation in which two very different languages are both used in a society, but in different situations. Typically, one is used in more formal or literary situations such as formal writing, university lectures and it is learned and encouraged in school. The other is used in conversation, informal television situations, folk literature, etc., and is preferred at home. But this is only a big challenge for the Vepsian people now, that hopefully will come true one day.

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## **Appendix 1: Some interview themes and questions:**

### **1. Ethnicity and identity**

- What is ethnicity and what is your personal ethnic belonging?
- What does it mean to be a Veps? What criterion should be taken in consideration when we talk about ethnicity (blood, ancestors, land, language, culture in general, and etc.)? Do you know the people who have lived among indigenous people for a long time and started to present themselves as the Veps? Speak language, let say.
- What is common and different between the Veps today and their ancestors?
- Is it important to manifest your ethnic belonging and why?
- Do you know about definition of "Finno-Ugric world"? And what does it mean? Do you identify yourself Finno-Ugric person rather than Slavic and why? And how is it articulated in everyday life?
- Is it possible to mix two and more identities and how does it manifest?
- Do you change your behaviour when you behave as Veps or as Russian, how does it manifest itself? When and where do you feel most Veps/Russian and why?

### **2. Language**

- Do you speak your mother tongue? How well do you speak? Where and when did you learn it? Where and when do you use it?
- Is it important to know and to learn the Vepsian language today and why? Do you speak any other languages? When and why did you learn them? When do you use them?

### **3. Culture**

- What is culture? What is Vepsian culture? Is it different or similar to other cultures and why, how much and what criteria?
- How does culture relate to modernity and traditions?
- Who tries to preserve Vepsian culture, how and why?

- Do you see that the young people are interested to learn their culture? Who (parents, leaders, politicians, mass media tools, etc.), how and why motivates them?

#### **4. Movement and politics**

- Has your ethnic belonging ever made an obstacle or advantage to you to achieve some goals? When and why?
- Does the ethno-political exist today? What does it do?
- Who leads it and why, their goals and tools?
- What kind of relations between different actors of the movement?

## Appendix 2: Karelia on the map of Europe<sup>49</sup>



## Appendix 3: Karelia on the map of Russia



<sup>49</sup> The maps are taken from the web-site of the government of Karelia, <http://gov.karelia.ru/>

Appendix 4: Approximate geographical distribution of Finno-Ugric languages<sup>50</sup>



<sup>50</sup> The map can be found on the web-page [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Finno\\_Ugric\\_Languages.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Finno_Ugric_Languages.png)