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**RUSSIAN, CHUVASH AND ENGLISH: MINORITY-LANGUAGE ACTIVISM, TOURISM
PROMOTION AND THE EVOLUTION OF MUNICIPAL ADVERTISEMENTS IN
SHUPASHKAR/CHEBOKSARY (2015–2018)**

В данной работе исследуются языковая активность и усиление деятельности администрации, нацеленной на развитие туристической сферы, которые возникли в столице Чувашии в середине 2010-х годов, и их последующее влияние на лингвистический ландшафт города. С этой целью, с одной стороны, изучаются ответы на жалобы активистов, данные муниципальными учреждениями и организациями, а также прокуратурой. С другой стороны, с помощью качественных и количественных методов, в статье анализируется эволюция муниципальных знаков на трех улицах в 2015–2018 годах. Результаты показывают некоторый рост использования английского и чувашского языков в контексте подавляющего превосходства русского языка, тем не менее следовало бы ожидать более быстрых изменений. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о слабом планировании со стороны властей и о недостаточной способности активистов изменить языковые предрассудки должностных лиц. Эти предрассудки мешают чиновникам придать чувашскому языку как информативную, так и экономическую ценность.

Тёпчевре 2010-мёш сұлсен сурринче туризм витёмне пула Чăваш тăрăхĕн тĕп хулинче чĕлхесемпе мĕнлерех усă курнине пăхса тухма палăртнă. Çавна май тĕпчевсĕ хастар сынсем вырăнти учрежденисемпе прокуратурăна тăратнă сăхав хуравĕсене пăхса тухнă. Çавăн пекех хисеп тата пахалăх меслетне тĕпе хурса 2015-мĕш сұлтан пусласа 2018-мĕш сұлченхи тапхăрта Шупашкарти виçĕ урамăн чĕлхе сăн-сăпачĕ мĕнлерех улшăнса пынине сўтсе явнă. Сăнавпа килĕшўллĕн, пĕр пĕтĕмĕшле вырăс чĕлхин талккăшĕнче акăлчанпа чăваш чĕлхине усă курасси пăртăк вайланни сисĕнет. Асăрханă тăрăх, ертўсĕсем чĕлхе саккунĕ тĕлĕшĕнчен начартарах ёслесĕ, асăннă йăлана тўрлетес тĕлĕшрен хастар сынсен вай-халĕ те сителĕксĕртерех. Чăваш чĕлхине хисеплесе ситерейменни унăн информаци хаклăхĕпе укçа-тенкĕ ёслесе илес хевтине катертет.

As in other places in the world, the number of posters, placards, banners, traffic signals and other signs in Russia's public space, and the relative weight of the languages in them is changing at a good pace. In the case of Chuvashia, which we analyse in this paper, the increase of signs is due to the proliferation of shops, service companies and shopping centres, as well as an increase in road, street and tourist signs and a broader institutional advertising on the streets. More important for us is a certain extension of the use of Chuvash and the practical appearance of English in the public space. While the increase of English, linked mainly, but not only, to a policy of tourism promotion, is not controversial, it is the case of Chuvash, whose use spreads with great difficulties in the context of a vigorous and contentious assertion of Russian as "the natural spiritual framework of our entire multinational country" (V. Putin as quoted in РИА Новости 2017).

Our main research questions are, firstly, to which extent the top-down linguistic landscape (Ben-Rafael et al. 2016: 10) of Chuvashia's capital city has been changing in the recent years, and, secondly, what is making it change in the way it does. We also presumed that Chuvash will be used almost exclusively for local and regional festivals (Chuvashia Day, City Day), and expected to confirm it. Nevertheless, we were also interested to know whether in the growing tourism promotion of the city the Chuvash language got a place in the context of a world which is "commodifying authenticity" (Heller, Pujolar, Duchêne 2014). As Pujolar (2006: 3) states: "Identity is important because it gives importance to authenticity, uniqueness and originality, insofar as it improves people's appreciation of the place and because it becomes a guarantee of quality tourism". The commodification of the minority languages in Russia has been described for Sakha in Yakutsk (Ferguson, Sidorova 2018) and Tatar in Tatarstan (Yusupova 2018), but in both places it emerges as a bottom-up trend, not as a top-down policy. We are interested to know whether such a policy is taking place in Chuvashia.

Undoubtedly, a factor of change in the language distribution in the city has been the linguistic activism carried out by organisations and individuals. This has led us to study the little

investigated field of the effect of citizens' complaints at the municipal level in a country considered by many scholars as "authoritarian" (Gel'man 2015; Cosgrove 2017), "illiberal" and "nationalising" (Yusupova 2018), an "electoral authoritarianism" (Goloso 2011; Ross 2011) or a "managed democracy" (Ljubownikow, Crotty 2017). For this purpose, after a brief presentation of Chuvashia, the previous studies about its linguistic landscape and the language legislation fixing rights and obligations for citizens and authorities, we study the linguistic activism on signage that arose between 2014 and 2017. With this context in mind, by combining both quantitative and qualitative research and data, next we present the results shown by monitoring the evolution of the municipal ads in three streets of Shupashkar/Cheboksary in the period 2015–2018. A final section discusses the data and concludes.

1. Chuvashia

Chuvashia is a relatively small republic of the Russian Federation situated some 700 km East of Moscow. It has 1.2 million inhabitants. According to the 2010 Russian census, 68% are Chuvash, 27% ethnic Russians and 3% Tatars. Its capital city is Shupashkar in Chuvash and Cheboksary in Russian. 63% of its 490,000 dwellers are Chuvash, many of them of rural origin. The Constitution of Chuvashia states that both Russian and Chuvash are the official languages of the Republic. Chuvash is a Turkic language, therefore it greatly differs from Russian in phonetics, morphology, syntax and core vocabulary. According to the census data, there are more than 1 million Chuvash-speakers in Russia, and 56% of the population of Chuvashia speak Chuvash. At least until 2015, the majority of the rural population had studied in Chuvash in primary school and had continued to study it as a subject during their whole schooling (Алос-и-Фонт 2015). Hence, a vast majority of the ethnic Chuvash population of rural origin are literate in standard Chuvash. Nonetheless, as a result of the transitional educational system (Baker 2011), it may be easier for some of them to read and write in Russian, especially for those who attended university, which is exclusively in Russian. In addition, between the mid-1990s and autumn 2017, Chuvash has been a compulsory subject throughout all schooling, so presumably the entire younger population has some knowledge of the language.

2. Previous research

Previous research on the linguistic landscape of Shupashkar/Cheboksary was carried out in 2014 and 2015. On the basis of observations backed by hundreds of photos, Алос-и-Фонт (2014) describes the use of Chuvash in the public space and the degree of its compliance with the linguistic legislation. Subsequently, the same author has made a quantitative analysis of 12,000 signs collected in 2015 in four Chuvash cities. Each city sample was divided in two subsamples: a general sample of any kind of signs and a smaller sample of government signs (Алос-и-Фонт 2019).

The two papers show clear differences between the public and private sectors. According to the 2015 data, in Shupashkar/Cheboksary Chuvash is present in 3.3% of the signs, and foreign languages in 9.7%,¹ but if we take into account only the signs and advertisements of governmental agencies on different administrative levels, Chuvash reaches 21.3% and foreign languages drop to 3.1%. The use of Chuvash is practically confined to the names of the streets and bus stops, nameplates with the official names of the institutions and, to a lesser extent, opening hours signs. Chuvash signs are always accompanied by equivalent Russian texts, with very few exceptions (for instance, some information signs in the Chuvash National Theatre where plays in Chuvash are performed). The data also clearly show that federal agencies use Chuvash to a lesser extent than regional or municipal ones. An extreme case of federal agency is the police, whose stations do not even have the mandatory nameplate in Chuvash despite the

¹ The given study considers that a sign containing words in Roman script is written, at least partially, in a foreign language. This means that practically all the indications about the use of credit cards (with words such as "Visa" or "MasterCard"), as well as many advertisements with trademarks in Roman script, are considered to be written, at least partly, in a foreign language.

almost total renewal of the signs done a few years ago when its name was changed from “militia” to “police”. It is worth mentioning that, although the Chuvash language is almost absent in information panels, both in the public and the private sectors, Chuvash symbols, ornaments and colours are very present in fences, lampposts and in the supports of the Russian-language information signs (Picture 1). Thus, the lack of use of the Chuvash language does not seem to be due to a weak assertion of the Chuvash-ness of the region, but this lack of assertiveness is rather limited to the language.



Picture 1: Russian information panel with Chuvash-style support (author’s photo, August 2018).

Contrary to Chuvash, foreign languages were largely confined to the private sector, although at the time of the 2015 fieldwork the European Athletics Team Championships were about to be held and there was an unusual high number of advertisements in English throughout the city about the event. The use of foreign languages in the private sector is closely linked to advertisements with foreign trademarks and information on payment systems (admission of credit cards), as well as to the names of some establishments (above all, restaurants and clothing shops). Chuvash names of shops or restaurants are rare, even in villages, showing that commodification of Chuvash is almost non-existent.¹ There is almost no information for foreign clients, for example the opening hours of commercial establishments.

Both studies also show that errors in Chuvash are not uncommon, even those obvious for someone with an elementary knowledge of the language. In addition, they can stay very long. For example, for more than one year, the bus stop “New Bus Station”, near the main bus station in the city, had the name “Їёне автовокзалё” instead of “Їёнё автовокзал”. Incidentally, the Chuvash letters *ă, ě, ŷ* and *ç* are from time to time incorrectly written in signs. The most blatant place where this issue is found is a big street sign at the main entrance of the city hall “Республика тўремё 1”, with *ŷ* instead of *ŷ*. This shows disregard among municipal officials about the quality of Chuvash in public signage.

All these facts reveal that the use of Chuvash is linked to the strict compliance with the legal

¹ This is not the case of Tatar in Tatar villages in South Chuvashia, where greengrocer’s and other shops often have names in Tatar.

minimum (although there are many violations of the law) and has no informative value: for example, there are no Chuvash informative signs inside the administrative buildings, and seldom in schools (at best, on the doors of classrooms). This is also the case with foreign languages, which basically are used for associating the company with values such as modernity, quality or exoticism.

However, these trends may be gradually changing since the mid-2010s. On the one hand, the promotion of tourism is leading the authorities to increase the use of English, and the pressure of activists (see below) to add Chuvash. On the other hand, some Russian and multinational companies have begun to install bilingual signs in Russian and Chuvash in their establishments. In this case it is not about anything specific for Chuvashia, but a company policy that is also applied in other republics, such as Tatarstan and Udmurtia. The hypermarkets Lenta and Metro started first, and after them the Pyatërochka supermarkets and the Shawarma No. 1 chain joined in 2018. Sberbank offices have also installed bilingual information signs, but to a lesser extent (just one information panel per office near the front door).

3. Legislation

Language legislation in Chuvashia is mainly regulated by federal laws, such as the Law “On the State Language of the Russian Federation”¹ and the Law “On the Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation”², as well as republican laws, such as the Law “On the Languages in the Chuvash Republic”³. The State Language Law implements the declaration of Russian as the official language of Russia stated in the Constitution and makes its use mandatory on multiple occasions. The Law on the Languages confirms the right of the republics to legislate on linguistic matters in given areas. In particular, art. 23 allows the republics to write place names in the official languages of the republic (as long as they are written also in Russian) and to use these languages in inscriptions, road and other signs, along with Russian. On the contrary, other federal laws limit the ability of regional parliaments to regulate certain linguistic aspects, even seemingly minor ones. For example, article 8.2 of the Law “On the Protection of Consumer Rights”⁴ obliges the seller or the service provider to inform customers about service hours in Russian and restricts at his or her discretion the addition or not of the same information in other languages, including the official languages of the republics, thus implicitly impeding the legislative capacity of the republics in this matter. Regarding foreign languages, the GOST R 52290-2004 Standard is especially relevant, as it requires the use of English, along with Russian, in road signs indicating places of tourist interest (cf. point 4.20).

As for the republican legislation, the Chuvash Language Law implements the declaration of Chuvash and Russian as the official languages of Chuvashia, included in the Constitution of the Republic, but mainly by granting the right to use the Chuvash language on multiple occasions. The compulsory use of Chuvash is limited to very few cases: the publication of the laws of the Republic (art. 9) and the laws submitted to referendum (art. 10.3), answering letters in Chuvash sent by citizens to official bodies or organisations (art. 11.5),⁵ and writing the names of official bodies and organisations in nameplates, forms and stamps (art. 12.2) as well as “names of geographical objects and (...) inscriptions, road and other signs” (art. 20.1). It should be noted that several terms are unclear, for instance “geographical objects” or “other signs” (“иные указатели”), leaving the door open to different interpretations.⁶ Moreover, often neither the

¹ Law No. 53-FZ, 1 June 2005 (as amended on 1.7.2014).

² Law No. 1807-I, 25 October 1991 (as amended on 12.3.2014).

³ Law No. 36, 25 November 2003 (as amended on 29.12.2015).

⁴ Law No. 2300-1, 7 December 1992 (as amended on 18.4.2018).

⁵ Except “in case of impossibility” (“в случае невозможности”).

⁶ Different interpretations of generic provisions of the law also arise. For instance, the Prosecutor’s Office in a response, dated 1 December 2015, to a complaint of Irëklëh (see below) considered that there should be equal

legislation, nor the regulations that develop it specify sanctions that must be applied in case of non-compliance with the linguistic obligations, as it is the case of names of geographic objects or road signs (Турагин 2010).¹ Consequently, it is logical to question the effectiveness of the current legislation to ensure the use of the first language of the majority of the population of the republic.

The practice shows that the authorities' interpretation of legal linguistic obligations is that street names and public transport stops must be in both official languages. In public buildings the only legal obligation is the existence of a small plaque with the full official name of the institution in both Russian and Chuvash, and usually this is the only thing written in Chuvash there (it may be accompanied by twin plaque with partially bilingual public service hours). However, many street name signs are written only in Russian, particularly in schools and nurseries (Алос-и-Фонт 2019). In the villages, the use of Chuvash in street name signs is extremely rare (even where the spoken language is always Chuvash). Bilingual public transport stops are limited to the biggest cities, and bilingual bus stops on the roads are a minority. A bit surprisingly, even though the legislation seems quite explicit about it, traffic signals are almost always in Russian: they are always so in cities (even direction signs with street names), while on roads the name of the villages can be found in both official languages,² except in federal roads, where there are no place names written in Chuvash (but there are English transcriptions of Russian place names). It is worth adding that direction signs have multiplied in Shupashkar/Cheboksary during the period 2015–2018 (Picture 2).



Picture 2: New monolingual direction sign in front of the railway station (author's photo, August 2018).

4. Language activism on signage

Despite the few obligations that the state has assumed in relation to the Chuvash language, in recent years some activists and non-governmental organisations have submitted complaints to the public administration about linguistic issues. The plaintiffs often appeal generically to the fact that Chuvash is an official language of the republic, that a majority of the population belongs to the Chuvash ethnic group, or that the law explicitly allows the use of Chuvash in spheres such as transport and customer service, although it usually does not make its use mandatory. These complaints are the result of the appearance in the first half of the 2010s of small new non-governmental organisations for which the revitalisation of the Chuvash language is a primary target, but it is likely that two specific facts made its use in the urban space a topic of special importance for them.

In December 2013 the Chuvash State University changed the front sign in the façade of its

oral and written information in Chuvash and Russian in trolleybuses according to articles 16 (rightful use of Chuvash and Russian in the spheres of industry, communications, transport and energy) and 17 (no discrimination on language basis) of the Chuvash language law.

¹ This issue has been discussed several times in the Chuvash Parliament since 2014 (Ирĕклĕ сĕмах 2016), but, in August 2018, the legal limbo remains.

² In Tatar and Mordvin villages in Chuvashia local names are never used in road signs, except in the case of Şıġırdan, whose official name is in Tatar.

main building. This was one of the very few front signs of public institutions written only in Chuvash, and it was replaced by a bilingual one. This was done by a public institution whose faculties almost always have their front signs only in Russian, and where Chuvash has almost no place in halls, corridors and classrooms. Obviously, the activists saw the move as a new loss of position for the Chuvash language (Ирӗклӗ сӑмах 2013). More than four years later, no front sign of any faculty has been bilingualised, showing that the activists were right and the change had nothing to do with language equity.¹

Ten months later, in the morning of 7 October 2014, two days before the visit of President Putin to Shupashkar/Cheboksary on the occasion of an international forum, the central streets of the city appeared with all the names of the bus stops written only in Russian (Ирӗклӗ сӑмах 2014a). This was astonishing not only because of the number of stops that were changed within a very short time (seemingly, one night), but also because the bilingual signs with the names of the stops and the streets are the most visible element of bilingualism in the urban space. Apparently, someone in the administration believed that President Putin would feel uncomfortable if he saw bilingual signs in a regional language in the streets, so all the stops between the airport and the city centre were changed (Picture 3).² A few weeks later, after a wave of protests, the changes were reverted, and Chuvash was restored along with Russian.



Picture 3: Bus stop in the city centre of Shupashkar/Cheboksary with a Russian-only name (with an orthographic mistake) and English-only advertisements. The mistake was corrected after a few days (author's photo, 7 October 2014).

In April 2014, a bilingual Chuvash-Russian photo blog named *Pӗrtanlӑh* (in Chuvash, “equality”)³ was created. According to its creators, “the purpose of this initiative is to increase

¹ The opposite has happened. The front sign of the Faculty of Economics was in Russian but contained the bilingual university shield. It was renewed by a new Russian-only signal, in which the shield was replaced by a new monolingual logotype.

² In Picture 3, it should be noticed that the advertisements in English have not been removed to put Russian equivalents.

³ pertanlah.livejournal.com

attention to the unequal use of the two state languages of the Chuvash Republic and, on the basis of concrete examples, to promote the implementation of the principle of bilingualism in the public space” (O журнале 2014). The blog was updated until May 2016. The site contains 1777 posts with a total of 3397 photos, classified according to more than 60 tags. For instance, 1421 posts are labelled with the tag “lack of bilingualism”, 636 with “violation of the legislation”, and 179 with “good practice”.

In February and March 2015, shortly after the launch of the website *Narodnii Kontrol'* (in Russian, “people’s control”),¹ promoted by the Chuvash government for citizens to lodge their complaints, an activist deposited more than 200 denunciations about the lack of signs in Chuvash on streets and roads all around the republic.² All of them contained photos, and the majority, if not all, were taken from the blog Pěrtanläh. Shupashkar/Cheboksary alone received around 140 complaints. All the municipal administrations had to give an answer through the site. In the case of denial, the response had to be motivated. No detailed analysis of the responses has been published to date, but most of them were positive. Nevertheless, positive responses sometimes contained just a promise of fulfilment without any deadline³, or the given deadlines have not been further fulfilled⁴. Incidentally, although all complaints were written in Chuvash, all answers were given in Russian without any explicit motivation (thus, contravening legislation). In any case, this action gave a clear indication to the authorities, particularly to Shupashkar officials, that the linguistic issue in signage was becoming an important matter for activists.

To have an idea of the effectiveness of the complaints in *Narodnii Kontrol'*, we controlled the 12 complaints deposited for violations of the linguistic legislation in Marx and Lenin streets in Shupashkar/Cheboksary.⁵ These are 12 street name signs, 8 monolingual in Russian and 4 with mistakes in Chuvash. In all cases it was promised that the problems would be corrected before 1 May 2015. In August 2018, in 10 cases an action has been taken, but not always it solved the problem. In one case, when adding the name in Chuvash, it was written with a mistake. In another case, a bilingual sign was added alongside the monolingual one. In a third case, the bilingual sign replacing a monolingual one has the name in Russian written in bold.⁶ This anomaly may indicate discontent on the part of the owner (a hotel). In a fourth case the owner has chosen to remove the name of the street and keep only the number (possibly, a cheaper option since the plaque is smaller). As for the two street signs that remained unchanged and still contain errors in Chuvash despite the promises in the *Narodnii Kontrol'* web site, one is located on a residential building, while the other is on an office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The revision of these 12 signs has also shown that activists did not undertake an exhaustive control of the signs: there are at least 9 other monolingual street signs or signs containing errors in the two given streets, including one on a nursery, one on a vocational training school and a third one on a faculty.

Soon after the activity at *Narodnii Kontrol'* website, a new major actor appeared on the scene. The newly registered organisation *Irëklëh* (in Chuvash, “freedom”)⁷ began to send legally

¹ nk.cap.ru/ (The Russian name matches the rest of the website, which is only in Russian too.)

² The first ones are dated 31 January (e.g. cap.ru/?id=10124), while the last ones are dated 23 March (e.g. nk.cap.ru/?id=10411).

³ For instance, complaint No. 10411 (nk.cap.ru/?id=10411).

⁴ For instance, complaint No. 10197 (nk.cap.ru/?id=10197) about 13 monolingual street name signs in village Işley/Ishlei received the promise that the problem would be solved during the first semester 2015. Nevertheless, in August 2018, these signs are still written in Russian.

⁵ Complaints No. 10138, 10147, 10232, 10233, 10246, 10247, 10275, 10278, 10313, 10316, 10318 and 10319.

⁶ However, graphical differences between the two languages are very uncommon: in the two streets there is only a single street sign with graphical differences between the languages, that of the Prosecutor’s Office building, on which, for some reason, the name of the street in Russian is visibly greater than the name in Chuvash,

⁷ Irëklëh had many problems to register legally as an organisation. Its case reached the Supreme Court of Chuvashia (Ирëклë сăмах 2014b).

motivated complaints on linguistic issues to public bodies, including the Prosecutor's Office. Many of them, and especially the official responses, have been published in Irëklëh's account in the social network VKontakte.¹ This facilitates tracking its activity, while it also allows the analysis of the received responses. However, it is not always easy to understand whether the complaints have been accepted. Some of the responses are sibylline, for instance the one dated 26 December 2015 on a requirement to bilingualise a panel with the evacuation plan of the Red Square (Picture 1) that had recently been installed. The city council writes that "errors will be fixed soon", but does not specify whether, in its opinion, there are errors or not. In August 2018 the panel remains unchanged.

We will limit ourselves here to the analysis of some of the official complaints presented to public administration by Irëklëh in relation to the use of Chuvash in signs belonging to public bodies located in Shupashkar/Cheboksary. We leave aside complaints, such as street name signs or the lack of nameplates with the official name of the institution in Chuvash or with errors in them, since they are similar to the ones in Narodnii Kontrol'. It is worth mentioning a few issues not specific about signage, such as those that allowed the introduction of the use of Chuvash in the announcement of departures at the main suburban bus station (December 2015), the arrivals and departures at the airport (December 2016), the extension of the use of Chuvash in trolleybuses to announce the stops (December 2015)² or the failed introduction of Chuvash in this type of announcements in minibuses (also December 2015)³. In any case, it must be taken into account that in 2015 different municipal departments and companies began to receive an unaccustomed number of complaints on linguistic issues and, moreover, often through the Prosecutor's Office. Besides, Irëklëh not only complained, but actively promoted Chuvash-language signs. It created and distributed in shops stickers with the text "Here we also speak Chuvash" (written in Chuvash), as well as Chuvash-language standard-format information signs with indications such as "entrance", "exit", "emergency exit", "push", "pull", etc.

Towards the beginning of 2015, commercial kiosks that also serve as bus stops appeared at some stops in Shupashkar/Cheboksary. The point is that this new type of bus shelters usually bore the name exclusively in Russian. Irëklëh presented a complaint, and in July 2015 at two stops new signs with the Chuvash and Russian name were added. But the larger original label in Russian remained, so Chuvash was ostensibly in a position of inferiority in relation to Russian (Picture 4). However, nothing in the legislation obliges that in the bilingual signage the two languages have a similar weight. At the same time (April 2015), in one of these stops, another commercial bus shelter was built on the opposite side of the street. In this case, the name of the stop was written both in Chuvash and Russian, but in Chuvash it was wrongly written "Гражданский урамё" instead of "Граждан урамё". The error was corrected erasing the last letters of the word "Гражданский" and leaving a large gap between the two words, which, of course, does not exist between the words of the Russian name next to the Chuvash (Picture 5). This kind of gaps can be found in several stops and street name signs, but are not perceived by the authorities as an undervaluation of the Chuvash language.

¹ vk.com/irekleh

² The response of the Prosecutor's Office, dated 1 December 2015, siding Irëklëh's complaint, also points out that the terms of use of the trolleybuses must be translated into Chuvash, but, in August 2018, this has not been carried out yet.

³ The response of the municipal Department of Transport and Communication, dated 18 December 2015, rejected the complaint adducing that the information system in minibuses about stops is new and is still in the testing phase. In summer 2018, most minibuses are not using yet the automatic announcement of stops, which continues to be only in Russian.



Picture 4: Commercial bus shelter at the “Граждан урамё/Улица гражданская” bus stop, north side of the street (author’s photo, August 2018)



Picture 5: Front sign of the commercial bus shelter at the “Граждан [дар] урамё/Улица гражданская” bus stop, south side of the street (author’s photo, August 2018)

Another novelty were the electronic schedule boards at bus stops that began to be installed in 2013. These boards have the name of the stop written (non-electronically) on them, and in all cases it is only in Russian. In an answer dated 19 January 2016 to a complaint from Irëklëh, the municipality states: “Electronic information boards are an integral part of the bus shelters. Since the names of stops on the bus shelters are specified both in Russian and Chuvash, there is no need to indicate in Chuvash the names of stops on the electronic boards”. Irëklëh filed a second complaint in relation to the text messages on the board, displayed in a horizontally moving news ticker style, because they are always written in Russian. In this case, dated 13 April 2016, the municipality responded that “federal and regional legislation does not provide for the translation of the information content of electronic boards into regional languages”.

In June 2015 the European Athletics Team Championships were held in Shupashkar/Cheboksary. On the occasion of these championships, about 10 tourist maps and signs with images of historical figures related to the city and to Chuvashia were installed in different places of the city.¹ The signs were written in Russian and English.² They were the first tourist information posters in the city, if we do not take into account those previously installed in a few places of interest, and they were also among the first signpostings in a foreign language. In a response dated 29 June 2015 to a complaint from Irëklëh, the municipal advertising office, Gorodskaya Reklama, accepted the use of Chuvash in future signs of this type “taking into account the interests of the local population”. But, in a response dated 17 July 2015 to a new complaint from Irëklëh in this regard, the Prosecutor’s Office backed Irëklëh, and ruled that the maps contravened the mandatory use of Chuvash in place names. Consequently, Gorodskaya Reklama was forced to change all of them, which it did in the autumn of the same year. Currently they use at the same level Russian, Chuvash and English (in this order).³

However, a year later, new bilingual tourist direction signs, with a different format appeared

¹ A previous move for “constructing” a tourist city was the placement of street name signs in the centre of the city. They have a special format and contain the current and old name of the street, both exclusively in Russian (which indicates a lack of interest in foreign tourists at this time). Activists do not seem to have complained about them.

² pertanlah.livejournal.com/2015/06/16/

³ pertanlah.livejournal.com/405155.html

in Russian and English, which led to the filing of a new complaint by Irëklëh. In its response, dated 8 August 2016, the Department of Tourist Development informed that there were 14 bilingual Russian-English traffic signals (“знаки дорожной навигации”) and, in its defence, added that it followed the norms of the GOST standards. Nevertheless, it undertook to change them, which it did. It must be said that some of these signs contain errors in both English and Chuvash versions. Still, in a letter to Irëklëh dated 4 May 2017 another municipal department, the Department of Housing and Communal Services and Improvement, informed that they were not sure of the legality of adding Chuvash to tourist information signs and that they were studying the matter. The letter includes the minutes of a meeting of six officials and specialists held in February exclusively on this issue.

Again, in the beginning 2018 new tourist direction signs of the 2016 type appeared bilingually in Russian and English, so the city council had to change them once more to add Chuvash. But this time, the order of Chuvash and English have been inverted: Chuvash stays in the third place, after Russian and English.

In 2017, new tourist direction signs for pedestrians appeared, as well as larger posters explaining historical events or legends. This time, both kinds of signs were made from the beginning in Russian, Chuvash and English (in this order), however Russian is preponderant, with a larger letter size and/or bold letters. In the direction signs, not all indications in Russian are translated into Chuvash, but they are available in English. A similar type of signs is found on some roads outside the city, where they are, at least, impractical because the texts in Chuvash and English are almost illegible from a moving vehicle. It seems more important to enhance the supremacy of Russian than to have functional multilingual signals.

Similarly, at the end of 2017 parking meters appeared in several places in the city. The instructions for use are in Russian and Chuvash, at the initiative of the mayor’s office (once again, without any intervention of Irëklëh). The problem is that they are on two plaques, one behind the other. From the side where the user pays, only the instructions in Russian can be read. Thus, the instructions in Chuvash are practically useless.¹

A particularly relevant issue for our study is the complaint presented by Irëklëh in November 2015 about the installation of only few New Year posters in Chuvash in comparison to many in Russian. In its response, dated 8 December 2015, the city council admitted the use of many drawings from the Soviet period in Russian, but pointed out that there were also posters in Chuvash and attached nine photos of large-format posters allegedly in Chuvash (according to our observations, they seem to be all the large-format New Year posters distributed throughout the municipal territory by the city council). It is worth noting that these posters combined Russian and Chuvash. At the top they stated in Russian “The Cheboksary City Council congratulates”, and in the centre, with larger letters, “Happy New Year, my Shupashkar!” in Chuvash (Picture 6). The letter of the city council finished asking for “gratuitous support” (“безвозмездная поддержка”) on behalf of Irëklëh to translate texts into Chuvash, implying that the city council of the capital of Chuvashia does not have people trained in one of the two official languages, in which, by law, it has the duty to attend to the citizens.² (Similar petitions of help from the city council to Irëklëh for translations are found in other letters.) As a result, Irëklëh began to translate texts for posters sent by Gorodskaya Reklama, but Gorodskaya

¹ A few months before, foringual information panels were put on in the city for the first time. This was in front of some markets that threatened street vendors with fines. In this case, the target audience are clearly peasants, so the use of Chuvash, exclusively in this type of information panels, reinforces the prejudice that it is not an urban language, but only rural.

² Actually, as a rule, Irëklëh has been using Chuvash in its correspondence with public bodies, but most of the time received answers in Russian. Several times Irëklëh presented complains about it. For instance, the Prosecutor’s Office of the Lenin district in Shupashkar/Cheboksary, in a response dated 6 July 2015, written in Russian too, claimed it did not have fonts for Chuvash (although they are freely available in a governmental web site); and the Chuvash Ministry of Justice, in a response dated 13 February 2018, justifies the use of Russian in its response “due to the absence of a professional translator with knowledge of the official Chuvash language in the staff of the Ministry”.

Reklama sent texts intermittently. Moreover, most of the posters on bus shelters are the responsibility of other municipal bodies, such as the Department of Culture, that continue to make them only in Russian.



Picture 6: New Year poster allegedly in Chuvash: “Cheboksary City Council congratulates” (in Russian), “Happy New Year, my Shupashkar!” (in Chuvash). (Source: City Council of Shupashkar/Cheboksary, December 2015).

Other organisations and individuals have also contributed to the pressure on the authorities to increase the use of Chuvash. An example are some statements by the writer Valerii Turkey that appeared in the press in May 2017:

In Cheboksary, when preparing the city for the May holidays, it was decided to avoid Chuvash. On 1 May I travelled all over the city and did not find a single poster in Chuvash. I expressed my indignation about it to the leadership of the Chuvash National Congress and asked to draw the attention of the mayor to this. And on 9 May, at some bus shelters, greeting posters appeared, but from the linguistic point of view they represented an abracadabra, they could not correctly write even the date in Chuvash. (Белов 2017).

It is unlikely that a paragovernmental organisation such as the Chuvash National Congress would file a formal complaint to the mayor about the lack of use of Chuvash in the advertisements of 1 May (a recurring event for this festival and many others both before and after 2017) and it is even less likely that this had led to inclusion of more Chuvash in the 9 May posters (in fact, Chuvash was less used on 9 May 2017 than on 9 May 2015 and 2016). However, it seems likely that Turkey’s statements made Gorodskaya Reklama send an email to Irëklëh on 14 June asking to translate texts for Chuvashia Day posters (interesting enough, they did not send them to the putatively plaintiff Chuvash National Congress). These posters were already at the bus stops on the 17th, and, altogether, there were significantly more posters in Chuvash on the streets than the previous year for the Chuvash national holiday.

If we analyse the chronology, the above account of activities shows that activist mobilisation in relation to signage mostly took place in 2014, 2015 and the first half 2016. From 2017 it has plummeted. This may be due, for example, to a change in the priorities of the activist groups, the tiredness of particular activists or some type of pressure to reduce or cease mobilisation. The first reason would be credible, thinking that the mobilisation had moved to other areas, such as language teaching in schools, which has undoubtedly become the most contentious issue for the activists of the minoritised languages of Russia starting from the Prosecutor’s Office “cavalry charge” (Ksenia Sobchak, as quoted in Алпайт 2017) on schools in autumn 2017 to eradicate compulsory teaching of the co-official languages of the republics (and probably also the non-compulsory). However, the activity in Përtanläh, Narodnii Kontrol’ and the complaints filed to the authorities by Irëklëh had already fallen down before this date. Therefore, any of the two other causes, or a combination of them, seems more plausible.

On the other side, all this shows a lack of planning on language issues by the authorities, particularly on the use of both Chuvash and English. Dozens of new plaques and posters have been remade year after year at the expense of taxpayers. It is surprising that some signs have

an order of languages different than others; in some a language is highlighted and in others it is not; in some signs English is used, and in others it is absent (as in the “historical” streets of the centre or in the parking meters), etc. This lack of planning includes the lack of foresight of trained personnel in one of the official languages of the republic, making this officiality fictitious, as seen in the language of the responses to Chuvash-language complaints.

4. Evolution of the linguistic landscape

To better understand some of these apparent contradictions, we followed the evolution of the linguistic landscape during a year in the main artery of the city. This is Karl Marx Street (including the Republic Square) and Lenin Avenue, which consecutively connect the Red Square, situated on the banks of the Volga, with the railway station across 4 km. During 2015 we made notes and photographed the municipal posters in them on the days around the public holidays: New Year, Defender of the Fatherland Day (23 February), Women’s Day (8 March), Labour Day (1 May), Victory Day (9 May), Russia Day (12 June), Chuvashia Day (24 June), Shupashkar/Cheboksary Day (3rd Sunday of August) and Unity Day (4 November). The inspection was also done for several other events, like the European Athletics Team Championships (20–21 June), the elections for the Head of the Republic (13 September) and the celebration of the Year of Konstantin Ivanov (a Chuvash literature classic).

In 2016 we systematically noted down all the non-permanent signs like posters, banners, etc., placed by the city council on these holidays in the two given streets, particularly at bus stops and municipal hoardings, but not only.¹ Basically, we noted the type of the sign (shelter, hoarding, totem, etc.), its topic (public holiday, event, public service ad, etc.) and its languages (only Russian, only Chuvash, only English, bilingual with more Russian than Chuvash, bilingual with more Chuvash than Russian, etc.). To be able to compare with non-holiday days, we performed the same task on other days. From 19 days of data we extrapolated how advertisements were distributed throughout the year, taking into account that the ones about festivities are exposed fewer days than those of other types, such as public service ads. Even so, it is possible that the calculated figures somewhat overestimate the number of holiday advertisements. What is clear is that for the year as a whole this kind of advertising is very remarkable because in several festivities (notably for New Year and 9 May) the number of signs installed by the municipality multiplies. For increasing the sample and facilitating statistical analysis, we added the stretch of Moscow Avenue from its beginning (the Opera and Ballet Theatre) to the Šešpël/Sespel’ bus stop (2.5 km). This includes the advertisements of the Opera Theatre, a cultural centre and two sets of municipal hoardings. The data have not shown statistically significant differences in the use of languages between the main artery and Moscow Avenue. It must be taken into account that the sample is not necessarily significant for the whole city because in smaller streets there are fewer bus stops, electronic boards, hoardings, etc., and the relative distribution of the ones in relation to the others is not the same as in the main streets. In any case, we are not so interested in whether Russian occupies, say, 92% or 98% of the municipal ads, but mostly in the distribution of languages across types and topics, and the trends in the distribution of languages.

In 2017 we took some notes and photos, like in 2015, but much less systematically. In 2018 we have repeated the work of 2016 for 7 public holidays. The sample size for 2016 is 1886 items, and for 2018 it is 670.

¹ As usually done in quantitative linguistic landscape studies, we follow only *static* signs, as *mobile* signs are difficult to count. Consequently, we do not take into account greetings in every trolic transport although they are an important part of the signs in the days before and sometimes after festivities (in the case of 9 May, these greetings may be placed one month before and stay long after, even several months). Greetings in public transport are always in Russian. Another issue are small format posters (typically, A4) hooked to the doors of commercial establishments in some festivals. In most cases this is the programme of activities and is clearly distributed by the city council. It is always in Russian. The problem is that it is not always easy to attribute the authorship of all the festival posters in commercial establishments, especially on 9 May, so we preferred not to include them in the sample.

It should be said that bus shelters were renovated in the centre of the city around 2013. They have a glass side in which an advertisement is placed on each side.¹ Surprisingly, they do not contain commercial advertisements, but only those from governmental agencies. The same goes for a significant number of hoardings, which formally do not differ in anything from commercial hoardings, but always contain ads from official bodies. In 2016 and part of 2017 some commercial ads were included into shelter displays at the bus stops, but they always contained the legend “with the support of the City Council of Cheboksary” (in Russian) or half of the poster contained a municipal ad. This practice was relatively short-term and disappeared at the end of 2017, when new supports for medium-sized commercial advertisements appeared on the streets (with the label “Afisha Cheboksar” in Russian).

The analysis of the 2016 quantitative data gives a picture of how municipal ads cover a good deal of the public space. For simplicity, we consider signs with some use of any other language than Russian as written in this language (there are no trilingual signs). Despite this overvaluation of minority languages, the data shows that 94% of the items are in Russian, 5% in Chuvash and 1% in English.

If we analyse the topics of municipal ads (see Table 1), we can see that besides public holidays, other celebrations are often announced. This may be about matters the year is devoted to, e.g. 2015 was declared the Year of Literature in Russia and the Year of Konstantin Ivanov in Chuvashia, and 2016 the Year of Russian Cinema in Russia and Worker’s Year in Chuvashia. There are also myriads of days dedicated to specific causes or groups, which are advertised. For instance, at the time of Unity Day 2016 we registered even more signs on Day of Law Enforcement Officers of the Russian Federation (10 November, 6 items) than on Unity Day itself (5 items). Events like conferences and expositions received a large space: 21% of the sample, or 27% if we add sports events (hockey and basketball matches). Public service ads constituted 30%. This includes anti-tobacco and anti-drug advertisements, pleadings to pay taxes, recommendations to be careful when crossing the street, etc. Surprisingly enough, there was not a single poster in bus shelters or hoardings informing about the elections to the Russian Duma and the Chuvash Parliament, held in September, or calling to participate in them (the same happened in 2015 for the election of the Head of Chuvashia, and in the 2018 Presidential elections). Throughout 2016 there were many posters of political parties and individual candidates, including some in bus shelters and hoardings intended for municipal announcements (in this case, only for United Russia), but in our sample there are none. All the political advertising was only in Russian, which follows the trend in party offices and MP’s electorate offices, irrespective of the party. In these places all signs are only in Russian (even in the so-called “Centre for the Protection of Citizens’ Rights”, belonging to Just Russia, showing that the party leaders do not consider language rights when referring to citizens’ rights).

Table 1. Distribution of municipal ads by topics and language (2016)

	Total (vertical %)	Language (horizontal %)			
		Russian	Chuvash	English	Other
Public holidays	35,7%	88,7%	11,3%		
Other celebrations	7,4%	100,0%			
Events	20,7%	91,4%	3,9%	4,4%	0,3%
Sports events	6,4%	100,0%			
Public service ads	24,4%	100,0%			
Public service ads + commercial ads	5,4%	100,0%			
Total	100,0%	94,2%	4,9%	0,9%	0,1%

¹ Advertisements in the back of the shelters, as shown in Picture 3, are extremely rare, and were not used in the 2016–2018 period.

Four languages have appeared in the 2016 data: Russian, Chuvash, English and a single poster announcing a Holi (sic, in the Roman script) festival. English was used in a few posters in hoardings for ads concerning one concert (in the Opera and Ballet Theatre) and one exposition (in the cultural centre). In all cases English came together with Russian, but in a less prominent place. Chuvash was used only for public holidays and for two single events (Table 1).¹ It appeared half the times alone, and the other half together with Russian. When Russian was used too, it was usually more prominent. That is what happened for most of the intended Chuvash signs on 9 May. In them the date, written in a large script and often in red letters, was the centre of attention. But for some reason it was written in Russian, making non-attentive observers consider these signs to be written fully in Russian (Picture 8). Additional information, such as “70 years from the victory” or “City Council of Cheboksary”, were also in Russian. Besides dates, typical Russian-language elements in Chuvash posters are references to the City Council in congratulations or in statements of support rendered to events (Pictures 6 and 7), as well as festival slogans (Pictures 9 and 10).²



Picture 7: Poster intended to be symmetrically bilingual with a Russian monolingual header of the city council (author's photo, October 2016).



Picture 8: Totem allegedly in Chuvash with the date in Russian (author's photo, May 2016).

¹ This was a folk festival and a Chuvash film festival. While in the first, Chuvash had a clearly secondary position, in the second Chuvash would have been at the level of Russian if the city council had not advertised its support in large size and only in Russian (Picture 7). It should be added that the bilingual text was an initiative of the organisers: not by chance the festival has a name in Chuvash, *Asam* (“witchcraft, magic”). Instead, there is a bigger annual film festival organised in the city that has always been announced exclusively in Russian (although it is claimed to be international). A similar case of intended symmetrically bilingual poster in Chuvash and Russian made by event organisers, but partially “russified” by officials, is the one of the 2016 Language Festival. In this case a City Council header and a hashtag, both monolingual, were added. Since the organisers of this yearly festival are Esperantists, the poster included the name of the event also in Esperanto (but it did not fall in our sample because it was not found in the days the data were collected).

² On City Day 2015 the City Council launched the slogan “The city of YOUR victories” (“Город ТВОИХ побед”), on City Day 2016 this was “The city where WE are” (“Город в котором есть МЫ”), on New Year 2017 “For those who believe in magic” (“Для тех, кто верит в волшебство”) and on City Day 2018 “City day – pride day” (“День города – день гордости”, “Хула кунё – ма́наслăх кунё”). Only the latter slogan has been translated into Chuvash (although catastrophically, see later).

The comparison between the 2016 and 2018 data shows a sharp fall of festival ads and a proportional increase of public service ones. For instance, in the beginning of January 2018 there were 8 New Year posters in the bus shelters of Marx and Lenin streets, instead of 23 in 2016; on 23 February 2018 there was a single holiday poster, but there were 13 in 2016; on 1 May 2018 there were 6 posters instead of 15 in 2016; on City Day 2018 there were 2 instead of 16 in 2016. For some reason the city council is advertising public holidays in 2018 to a lesser degree than in 2016.

A relevant change has happened on Chuvashia Day: the number of Chuvash-language posters has not changed significantly (there were just 4 posters in Chuvash instead of 3 in 2016), but there were 3 different models: one greeting poster, as more or less usual on holidays, and two advertisements for two events. Chuvash-language advertisements for events (concerts, expositions, races, matches, fairs, fireworks, etc.) in a holiday appeared for the first time on 2017 Chuvashia Day (after Turkey's statements in the press), and until today (August 2018) have been limited to three posters in two events: one poster on Chuvashia Day in 2017 and another two on Chuvashia Day in 2018. Seemingly only Chuvashia Day events may be announced in Chuvash... but not many. It is worth adding that the single 23 February 2018 poster and two of the three types of 2018 City Day posters in Marx and Lenin streets have been only in Chuvash,¹ thus breaking the rule that Chuvash may be used as much as or less than Russian, but never more. Despite these specific cases, the growing number of (Russian-only) public service posters in 2018 at the expense of (bilingual or Chuvash-only) holiday ones causes an increase in the use of Russian compared to 2016.

If we analyse the types of municipal ads (see Table 2), bus shelters contain most of the advertising (40%), followed by hoardings (28%). Electronic boards, at which there is information about emergency services, weather or congratulations on holidays are also an important source in our sample (10%). A characteristic element of the main holidays are congratulatory banners hanging from the supports of the trolleybus cables (further, "cable banners"). They can be seen in the streets only a few weeks a year, but on these occasions, there are a lot of them. Another characteristic element of Victory Day (which in 2016 was also used on City Day) are "totems" placed near avenues (Picture 8). "Other types" are temporary elements, also related to festivities, for example posters under Christmas trees in which "Happy New Year" is written (often both in Russian and Chuvash under municipal Christmas trees, but never under those pitched by companies).

Table 2. Distribution of municipal ads by types and language (2016)

	Total (vertical %)	Language (horizontal %)			
		Russian	Chuvash	English	Other
Bus shelters	40,4%	94,3%	5,5%		0,1%
Hoardings	27,8%	93,9%	2,8%	3,3%	
Electronic boards	10,3%	100,0%			
Cable banners	15,0%	100,0%			
Totems	2,9%	67,9%	32,1%		
Others	3,6%	74,5%	25,5%		
Total	100,0%	94,2%	4,9%	0,9%	0,1%

1 In the 2018 Chuvashia Day Chuvash got a tiny majority of bus shelter posters related to the festivity (3 to 1), but it was again overwhelmed by Russian because of 26 other bus shelter posters (mostly public service ads), hoarding posters, announcements in electronic boards and public transport greetings (this year cable banners were not hanged for this specific festival, so Chuvash got 10% of the 2018 Chuvashia Day sample instead of 5% in the 2016 one – see further).

If we analyse the distribution of languages by type of advertisement, we see that Russian is monopolistic in electronic boards and cable banners. English is only used in a few hoardings. Chuvash is typically associated with bus stops, although it also appears in some advertisement types found around holidays. In hoardings, which display larger posters than bus shelters, its presence is less frequent (but the use of Chuvash in bus shelters began in 2016: in 2015 we did not notice any Chuvash-language poster in bus shelters). It is worth adding that, although 2016 data show the use of Chuvash in totems, and indeed it was used on 2015 and 2016 Victory Day (but not in City Day totems), it was not present in 2017 and 2018 totems.

A more detailed analysis on the distribution by topics shows big differences between festivals. On 1 May, 12 June and 4 November 2016 no Chuvash at all was used.¹ On City Day it was almost absent (1% of usage). On Chuvashia Day (24 June) it took 5%², 15% on 9 May and 20% on New Year. If on 23 February and 8 March Chuvash reached respectively 40% and 60%, that is because there were advertisements only in bus shelters, and also because Irëklëh's collaboration with Gorodskaya Reklama had just begun: in 2015 there was not a single sign in Chuvash for any of these two holidays in any type of advertisement. In addition, Irëklëh's translations improved the quality of Chuvash in posters.³ Nevertheless, mistakes in Chuvash-language posters continue to appear: we noticed them on 9 May 2015, 4 November 2015, New Year 2017 and City Day 2018. The errors in the posters dedicated to City Day 2018 were especially shameful because in the four words of the festival slogan Gorodskaya Reklama managed to make three mistakes.⁴ It is worth noting that this was the first attempt in the analysed period to have a Chuvash version of a holiday slogan. On City Day 2015 and 2016, as well as on New Year 2017, the slogans were only in Russian (Picture 9). Nevertheless, on the main and largest municipal hoarding, placed in Republic Square, in front of the city hall, the slogan and the whole poster was written only in Russian (Picture 10).



Picture 9: Poster allegedly in Chuvash: “[Chuvash] The City Council of Shupashkar congratulates: [Chuvash with an orthographic mistake] Happy New Year! 2017. [Russian] For those who believe in magic” (author’s photo, December 2016).

¹ On 4 November 2015 there were a couple of bilingual banners in Lenin Avenue.

² There were just 5 posters in bus shelters, 3 of them in Chuvash, which were completely surrounded by Russian-language signs, including 55 cable banners.

³ In 2015 Chuvash was used on New Year, 9 May, Chuvashia Day and City Day. Dates were in Russian on 9 May and City Day, and in Chuvash on Chuvashia Day. In 2016 dates were written in Chuvash on 23 February, 8 March and 24 June, and in Russian on 9 May. Chuvash-language posters began to have “Shupashkar City Council” in Chuvash, but not on 9 May. Moreover, Chuvash posters on 9 May 2016 contained additional Russian words, making it clear that these posters had nothing to do with the rest of Chuvash posters of the year.

⁴ “Хула куне – маґнаґлаґхĕ куне” instead of “Хула кунĕ – маґнаґлаґх кунĕ” (“City day – pride day”).



Picture 10: Russian-language poster in Republic Square on City Day 2018 (author's photo, August 2018).

The situation with English at festivals and events is very different from the one with Chuvash. English is not used for any public holiday, but for a few events. Indeed, it has been quite widely used only for two of them: the international forum “Russia – Country of Sports” in October 2014 (Picture 3), and the European Athletics Team Championships in June 2015. In both cases, especially in the first one, there was a wide use of English both in posters and public transport (several trolleybuses and minibuses were fully covered by English-language ads over months). Actually, four months before the start of the European Athletics Championships, advertising in English began to appear, and a similar situation had previously taken place during the international sports forum. This is confusing because it is very unlikely that these ads were really aimed at practically non-existent foreign tourists and yet advertising, especially for such a long period of time, has economic costs. In our opinion, it is more about authorities’ propaganda operations directed to the local population to heighten the significance of the events and to emphasise their (real or fictitious) internationality through English. English, therefore, did not have in these cases an essentially communicative function for foreign visitors, as we can assume it is supposed to have in the tourist signs discussed above. On the contrary, for the 2018 FIFA World Cup there were quite a lot of posters in bus shelters and hoardings, but they all were in Russian. Shupashkar/Cheboksary was not one of the host cities of the championship, but there were fans who stayed in the city and travelled to the nearby Kazan and Nizhny Novgorod. Obviously, they were not the target of the ads.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In light of these data, we analyse below the three research questions.

Firstly, although there is a correlation, it is untrue that Chuvash is only associated with local and regional events. If we take the situation in 2015, before the irruption of Irëklëh, Chuvash was also used on New Year, 9 May and Unity Day. Since 2016 this has occurred on Defender of the Fatherland Day and Women’s Day too, but Chuvash has not been used on 1 May and Russia Day. New Year’s use of the language surprises a bit in a city where there is not a single word in Chuvash at any playground. Apparently, the wishes of a happy new year in Chuvash are more directed to the adult population. As for 9 May, it is interesting to understand why in Chuvash signs the date is still written in Russian, whereas on other festivities dates are already written in Chuvash. We suspect that the date of 9 May has been fetishised, as shown by its size and centrality in posters, and that the authorities (apparently, monolingual russophones or russified Chuvash-speakers) do not seem to understand that one can have the same feelings for it in Chuvash as well as in Russian.

While Chuvash may appear in all-Russia holiday posters, it may be ignored in Chuvash ones. During the Year of Konstantin Ivanov most of the signs were only in Russian (for instance, six

Russian-only flags hoisted several months in Leningrad Street).¹ Posters on Akatuy, the main Chuvash folk holiday, have been regularly written only in Russian.² It is especially relevant that on City Day, Russian has been overwhelmingly used in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. As other elements show in the visual space of the city, as well as in the lack of officials with sufficient knowledge of Chuvash in the city council, the prejudice, spread in Soviet times, persists that the natural language of the cities is *the* “language of interethnic communication”, i.e. Russian.

Secondly, the fieldwork revealed a rapid pace of change in the linguistic landscape. The main factor of change, at least in regard to official signage, are tourist information signs. There have also been numerous new direction signs for drivers. While the former has practically introduced English into the linguistic landscape of the city (where previously foreign languages were practically absent, except for a few names of shops and commercial brands in ads) and has also increased the use of Chuvash, the latter has maintained the traditional Russian monolingualism in traffic signs.

As for Chuvash, its use in tourist signs, as well as in some others such as parking meters and in front of the markets, has somewhat increased its visibility and informative value. However, as shown by the case of parking meters and the repeated new tourist posters without Chuvash, the informative value of the language does not seem to be recognised by the authorities. Rather, its use is due to pressure from activists. In general, it seems that for the municipal authorities, Chuvash just has a symbolic function. This is apparent by its absence in public service ads and almost all the event posters. Sometimes, its inclusion seems to be a benevolent concession towards a language with a status felt as clearly inferior to Russian and that does not deserve special attention. This feeling arises when looking at the reiterated use of additions in Russian in posters intended to be Chuvash or symmetrically bilingual, and at the spelling mistakes in Chuvash that can be maintained for months or years (while the misspellings on the Russian nameplates of October 2014 were corrected within days). A part of the establishment seems even to have the need to stress the higher status of Russian, either by eliminating Chuvash at bus stops (as in October 2014) or graphically demonstrating the preponderance of Russian in multilingual signs, even if this supremacy is more than obvious wherever you look.³

Thirdly, as we have just shown, the certain degree of increase in the use of Chuvash seems only due to the tenacity of the activists, particularly Irëklëh. However, it is not sure that the two municipal offices that have reacted the most to their demands, Gorodskaya Reklama and the Department of Tourist Development, have internalised as a routine the use of Chuvash, as evidenced by the appearance of new tourist signs in 2017 and again in 2018 without it or the lesser use of Chuvash on May 9, particularly its elimination from the totems.

The data show a lack of planning at these two and other municipal entities, as well as their little level of responsibility regarding the expenses arising due to the need to remake posters and information signs, dismantle the old ones and put the new ones. If we limit ourselves only to tourist promotion, it is surprising that dozens of new direction signs are placed with the name of the streets exclusively in Russian when it seems already well established that the absence of Chuvash in street names is illegal. Even more: while, on the one hand, the city council is trying to make a tourist-friendlier city, on the other hand, it is wasting the opportunity to include the transcription of the name of the streets in the Roman script. It is only a matter of time that it will have to remake all these new direction signs, maybe once to include one language and then the other.

¹ pertanlah.livejournal.com/339090.html

² Akatuy is mainly organised by the paragovernmental Chuvash National Congress and is heavily oriented to folk music, regional costumes, etc.

³ The receptivity of the authorities is also a fundamental factor and depends on the political climate. When new linguistic complaints were submitted to Narodnii Kontrol' in October 2018, most were rejected (e.g. nos. 12182, 12184, 12205, 12206, 12207, 12214). The explanation that is given is that the municipal administration does not have the capacity to sanction the offenders, which, as has been seen, has always been the case.

A crucial question is that no dialogue between activists and officials seems to have been established. The activists saw that presenting complaints in certain channels was productive and they seized the opportunity, but the system works only for specific cases. In Narodnii Kontrol', for example, one can file a complaint for a street sign, or a specific set of them, and officials will treat exactly those signs and not other monolingual or bilingual ones with mistakes located nearby. In addition, if it is just about complying with the letter of the law, it suffices, for example, to add a smaller Chuvash plaque, or to accompany a monolingual plaque with a bilingual one, or to put a patch to cover a Russian termination in a Chuvash sign. Nothing indicates that the activists have been able to break some of the officials' preconceptions on languages, in particular, to associate the Chuvash language with the tourist project developed by the city council. This association is totally alien to the mayor's office, which nevertheless displays a multitude of Chuvash elements in the street furniture. We would welcome future works that would explain why Chuvash, a vividly used language in oral communication, taught in every school, enjoying public founded press, radio, television, theatres and a research centre, and considered an official language of Chuvashia, is an element to be hidden, while other indicators of nationality are widely exhibited.

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