



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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22 March 2004

### RUS42473.E

Russia: Treatment of ethnic Chuvash with particular comment on their treatment in the Republic of Bashkortostan; state protection

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The Chuvash or Bulgar (Bolgar) minority (*Ethnologue* 2000) is the fourth largest nationality in the Russian Federation (*Nationalities Papers* 2000, 696). Population estimates report nearly 1.8 million Chuvash living across Russia (*Ethnologue* 2000; NUPI n.d.a), which amounts to approximately one per cent of the national population (*Rossiyskiye Vesti* 14 Nov. 1997). Forming the titular nationality of Chuvashia Republic since the 1920s, the Centre for Russian Studies of the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI) reported that Chuvash made up 51 per cent of the region's inhabitants in 1989 (n.d.a). In 2001, *The Moscow Times* reported that the ethnic Chuvash constituted some 70 per cent of the region's 1.4 million inhabitants (*Moscow Times* 25 June 2001). According to 1989 data, over 100,000 ethnic Chuvash were found in Tatarstan (134,000 persons), Samara (118,000) and Ulyanovsk (117,000) (NUPI n.d.a). Approximately 120,000 Chuvash live in the Bashkortostan Republic (*ibid.*; RFE/RL 21 Sept. 2001), which amounts to three per cent of a regional population otherwise dominated by Russians (39 per cent), Tatars (28 per cent) and Bashkirs (22 per cent) (NUPI n.d.b).

The Chuvash speak a dialect of Turkish and are nominally Orthodox Christian (*Ethnologue* 2000; NUPI n.d.a), although there are some who practice pre-Christian Chuvash beliefs (*Nationalities Papers* 2000, 699) and Islam (Eurominority 17 Mar. 2004). According to the Imam of Cheboksary, the total number of Muslims in Chuvashia was about 50,000 persons in 1999 (Blagovest 17 June 1999).

### Treatment in Chuvashia and in the Broader Russian Federation

A *Nationalities Papers* article published in 2000 noted that since 1994, Chuvash President Nikolai Fyodorov (Federov) has had the goal to maintain ethnic harmony within Chuvashia and between the republic and the federal government (2000, 702). *The Moscow Times* credits Fyodorov with helping preserve the group's culture and noted that the national "language remains widely spoken" across the region (25 June 2001). Despite the availability of Chuvash-language publications in Chuvashia, the same report cited feelings among some members of the Chuvash community that their "language and culture are vanishing" (*The Moscow Times* 25 June 2001).

The Research Directorate found few comments on the treatment of members of the Chuvash minority among the sources consulted. According to its listing on the Organization for the European Minorities website, Eurominority.org, the Chuvash are a "minority in search of autonomy" although one not in conflict with the Russian Federation (17 Mar. 2004). Alexander Sokolov of the Russian NGO, Memorial, did not include the Chuvash among the most vulnerable groups in Russia in his 2001 analysis of human rights in Russia (MHG 2001). In his report entitled "The Status of the Most Vulnerable Groups and Violation of Their Rights: The Situation of Ethnic Minorities," Sokolov mentions the minority only twice: in relation to educational opportunities in Bashkortostan (see below) and in relation to media accounts of the minority (*ibid.*). In the latter, Sokolov cites, but does not specifically comment on a July 2001 *Moskovsky Komsomolets* article that claimed that "Chuvash people ... can also pass as Russians" (*ibid.*).

In 2001, several Russian human rights organizations indicated that there was both ethnic discrimination and restrictions on the freedom of speech in Bashkortostan (RFE/RL 8 Feb. 2001). The Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) report of the NGO claims did not specify the Chuvash as being victims of such discrimination (*ibid.*). According to the Chairman of the Bashkortostan People's Assembly, a parliamentary organization developed to facilitate ethnic relations, minorities in the republic "felt like natives, capable of self-realization" (ITAR-TASS 10 June 2001). Speakers at a 2001 Assembly meeting noted that there was "also great progress in the revival of religious and national cultures" (*ibid.*). In 2001, the Chuvash plenipotentiary representative to Bashkortostan was also of the opinion that the Chuvash minority had the support of the republic's leadership (RFE/RL 21 Sept. 2001).

With respect to cultural renewal, education in the Chuvash language is available in most schools in Chuvashia (ITAR-TASS 5 Feb. 2004) as well as many schools in Bashkortostan (RFE/RL 21 Sept. 2001; *ibid.* 14 Sept. 2001; Bashkir State University n.d.; MHC 2001). As of 2001, there were "more than 300 secondary schools in 14 republics and oblasts of Russia" including 93 secondary schools in Bashkortostan in which students study the Chuvash language (RFE/RL 14 Sept. 2001). For Bashkortostan, according to the Moscow Helsinki Group (MHG),

[t]he Russian-language public schools with a multi-ethnic mix of students have the "native languages" taught in small groups (Bashkir, Tatar, Chuvash, Marii, etc.) to cater to the students' interests, according to the curriculum for public schools of the Republic of Bashkortostan (2001).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

#### References

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Additional Sources Consulted

IRB Databases

**Internet sites, including:**

Amnesty International, Chuvashia.com, Committee for the Protection of Human Rights in Tatarstan, *Country Reports 2003*, European Country of Origin Information Network, *FSU Monitor*, Human Rights International, Johnson's Russia List, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).

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