

## Karelians

### Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 93,344 Karelians in the Russian Federation. Karelians are Finns who adopted Eastern Orthodoxy. The Karelian language is primarily a Russified form of Finnish. The majority of Karelians live in the Karelian Republic (pop. 716,000: Karelians 10 per cent, Russians 73.6 per cent, 2.3 per cent Finns, 0.8 Veps, others 13.3 per cent). The Karelian population in Russia has been steadily declining since the turn of the century due to assimilation by Russians and migration to Finland.

### Historical context

The Karelian Republic had a variety of administrative designations and was the subject of a dispute between the Soviet Union and Finland from the time it was created. The Karelian Labour Commune was established in June 1920 and became the Karelian ASSR in July 1923. In March 1940 the status of Karelia was upgraded to that of the Karelo-Finnish SSR in connection with Soviet plans to incorporate Finland into the Soviet Union. The region's status was reduced in July 1956. Karelia was the first ASSR to declare sovereignty in 1990. Although Finland renounced any claims to the territory of Karelia in December 1991, the Karelian Association in Karelia continues to campaign for unification with Finland.

In November 1992 the First World Congress of Finno-Ugric peoples took place in the Komi Republic. Delegates called for self-determination for all indigenous peoples and national minorities and condemned 'Russian imperialism'. The Second Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples was held in July 1995 to demand new rights, including property rights in their traditional areas of settlement and language privileges. Karelia is also home to a small population of Veps, a related Finno-Ugric people.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union Karelia has experienced increased contact with neighbouring Finland, which, together with economic decline and Russian cultural influence has further encouraged the decline of the ethnic Karelian population through the assimilation of Karelians into a Finnish cultural identity.

Increased contact with Finland also reinvigorated debates regarding the transfer of various parts of Finland to Soviet jurisdiction in the treaty ending the 1939-40 'Winter War' between Finland and the USSR. The Karelian population of these territories was forcibly resettled to Finland. In 1999 representatives of this population and its descendants formed an organization named ProKarelia with the aim of campaigning for the peaceful return of those territories to Finnish sovereignty. The Government of Finland does not support these claims.

### Current issues

In February 2005 a European Union-financed joint Russo-Finnish project was launched to improve the standard of teaching of the Finnish language in Karelia was launched. The project reflects the increasing

demand for Finnish in Karelia due to increased ties with neighbouring Finland, despite the demographic decline of the Karelian minority in Karelia. As well as Finnish, Veps, another Finno-Ugric language, is also taught in Karelian schools.

In March 2005 Karelian President Sergey Katanandov reiterated the rejection of calls for parts of Karelia annexed by the Soviet Union after the 1939-40 Russo-Finnish War to be returned to Finland. The statement was a response to the publication of a book in Finland advocating the return of the territories. The Finnish government has repeatedly affirmed that it has no territorial claims on Karelia.

According to Russian newspaper reports in April 2005 the reorganization of the All-Russian State Television and Radio Company led to a reduction in non-Russian language programming, including Karelian. According to reports, the reorganization led to a six-fold reduction in the amount of non-Russian language television programme in Karelia.