

Mari

Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 604,298 Mari in the Russian Federation. Mari are distinct from other Finnic peoples of the Middle Volga area because they never fully converted to Christianity, and retain their shamanist-animist beliefs. The majority live in the Mari-El Republic, formerly the Mari ASSR, where they account for approximately 43 per cent of the population.

Historical context

The Mari literary language was formed using the Cyrillic script by the Eastern Orthodox Church in the early to mid-nineteenth century in an unsuccessful attempt to convert the population to Christianity.

Mari nationalism since the nineteenth century has been directed towards preserving their religion. The region was established as an AO in November 1920 and became the Mari ASSR in December 1936. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, Mari lost nearly all of their ethnic privileges; in the 1960s language teaching was banned. Sovereignty was declared in October 1990 and the name of the republic was changed to Mari-El.

In November 1992 the First World Congress of Finno-Ugrian 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.

Current issues

Interethnic relations in Mari-El deteriorated significantly in 2005 due to allegations of the repression of Mari identity and ethnic Maris associated with the republican presidency of Leonid Markelov, and a spate of attacks on activists involved in Mari ethnic organizations.

In May 2005, the European Parliament adopted a resolution criticizing Russia for violating the cultural and political rights of the Mari. The resolution cited the difficulties the Mari people face in being educated in their first language, political interference by the local administration in Mari cultural institutions, the limited representation of ethnic Maris in administrative posts in the Republic and tolerance of attacks on representatives of Mari national associations. The resolution also lamented the lack of a free press in the Republic and mentioned the severe beating in February 2005 of Vladimir Kozlov, editor-in-chief of the international Finno-Ugric newspaper Kudo+Kodu and director of Merkanash, a national public organization of Mari in Russia. European parliamentarians linked the repression of Mari culture and associations with Markelov's presidency, and alleged the firing of large numbers of ethnic Maris from public sector posts in regions that had voted against him in elections in autumn 2004. Representatives of Mari ethnic associations are concerned regarding the state of Mari

language teaching in the republic's national schools, amid reports suggesting that only 20 per cent of Mari children in Mari-El enjoy native language tuition.

In July 2005 Professor Yurii Anduganov, the president of the Tenth International Congress of Finno-Ugric Studies, was killed in a car accident which subsequently became the subject of political speculation. Anduganov had a history of conflict with President Markelov's administration and had been forced to temporarily leave the republic three years previously after criticizing the president. According to reports of foreign scholars attending the Congress and the Tallinn-based Information Centre of Finno-Ugric Peoples, the republican authorities impeded contact between Congress delegates and members of the Mari national movement Marii Ushem.

In August the ethnic Mari association Mari Ushem staged an unauthorized demonstration in Yoshkar Ola against President Markelov. On 27 August unidentified assailants attacked Vasilii Petrov, chair of the Youth Organization of Finno-Ugric Peoples; he was hospitalized with head injuries and a broken jaw and arm. In September the son of the chief pagan priest of the Mari-El Yoshkar Ola traditional religious community was arrested on charges of organizing a group rape. The father of the accused, Vitalii Tanakov, alleged that the charges against his son were part of a campaign by local authorities to intimidate the Mari national intelligentsia. Tanakov had been a vocal critic of the Mari-El republican administration in the preceding months.