Regional Consultative meeting for Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Global Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032

Linguistic diversity in the Region

My comments on the linguistic diversity of Eastern Europe and Central Asia are based on my experience as general editor of the 3rd edition of the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger, and my subsequent work collaborating on the project for the forthcoming World Atlas of Languages, which is an integral part of the plan for the International Decade, as it will aim to truthfully reflect the situation of indigenous languages across the region – and all other regions.

‘Eastern Europe’ as a concept is no longer a political one, more of a geographical entity, and ‘Central Asia’ is no longer a centrally directed part of a larger political unit, but a set of independent states. Therefore indigenous languages in this region are subject everywhere to independent government policies, as well as demographic factors. Information about the current state of these languages will be shown in the forthcoming World Language Report, which is based on a detailed survey questionnaire distributed to expert linguists in every member state of UNESCO throughout the world.

Characteristic of both Europe and Central Asia are long traditions of states with relatively strong infrastructures and long traditions of literacy. This means more standardisation generally, and less prominent multilingualism, but conversely it can also mean very strong marginalisation for small minority languages from a highly influential official or literary language. But the data we are collecting isn’t just concerned with written language: it’s concerned with spoken vernaculars and signed languages. Languages that have been marginalised are therefore going to be equally prominently represented along with majority languages in our UNESCO work for the coming decade.

‘Indigenous’ is not the same as ‘endangered’. But the atlas of languages in danger did flag up the danger signs of indigenous languages throughout the region. So much for the general background; now a few words about the situation for specific languages and countries.

Although there are some cases of very closely related languages in the region that are sometimes lumped together under a single name, such as Erzya and Moksha Mordvin in Russia, and the Saami varieties spoken across several countries, the question of language versus dialect is not all that marked in the region. Two more examples in eastern Europe are Kashubian in Poland and Latgalian in Latvia, which have strong claims to be identified as languages in their own right, but their national governments treat them as dialects or regional varieties of the state language. Mutual intelligibility is the usual criterion given for the distinction between language and dialect, but that is relative, and has to be measured in terms of percentages. Here I am mentioning examples that have some degree of endangerment, but there are also cases of strong national languages in Eastern Europe that are artificially separated by political boundaries: just consider the cases of Serbian and Croatian, and for that matter Bosnian – or Macedonian and Bulgarian. So the question of what to classify as a language is a sensitive delicate one, with a political dimension. ‘Politics’
and ‘policies’ are related concepts, and the language policies of one nation may strengthen the position of one language and weaken another, unlike those of its neighbour.

When we were mapping the languages of Eastern Europe for the UNESCO Atlas, we came upon the problem of non-territorial languages, which are spoken ‘nowhere in particular’ – that is, they have no territory of their own, no state, and hardly any centres or hubs: yet they have long regional traditions. I am thinking here of Romany and Yiddish. Our mapping of these was only of a token presence – but now we are collecting data for an atlas that is not merely geographical: this documentation doesn’t depend on maps alone, but is a comprehensive set of data about each language.

Turning now to Central Asia, you will know that two large language families are represented there, at least at the western end of Central Asia (and omitting the Caucasus region): namely the Iranian-Pamiri languages, and the Turkic language family. Each of the states of Central Asia has a national language, which is a vehicle of public interaction, education and the media: all other languages, spoken by much smaller numbers, are subsumed under them. In these mountainous regions, geography has been at least partly on the side of preserving the indigenous languages and cultures. Some languages, like Shughni in the Pamir region of Tajikistan, even serve as a regional lingua franca for speakers of smaller languages. In the Turkic-speaking countries, such as Uzbekistan, Turkic languages predominate, and it is the speakers of Iranian languages who suffer endangerment. Russian continues to be an important language of wider communication for the peoples of the Central Asian countries.

So that is a brief summary of the general language situation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.