Kalmykia: Language Promotion Against All Odds

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NATION-BUILDING, ETHNICITY AND LANGUAGE POLITICS IN TRANSITION COUNTRIES

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Helen M. Faller is a Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology at the University of Michigan. Her dissertation, entitled "Repossessing Kazan: Nation-Building After Socialism in Tatarstan, Russia" examines the social effects of Tatarstan’s political movement for sovereignty. In particular, it demonstrates that increasing the domains of use of the Tatar language in Kazan has resulted in a divergence in the world views of the linguistic communities living there. Her publications so far argue for attention to linguistic practices in shaping the worlds people occupy. In addition to the political economy of languages and nationalisms, Faller’s research interests include post-socialist gender relations and variation in models for creating racial difference.

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INTRODUCTION

Kalmykia may be described as a nation back from the brink. Until a recent past, when the personality of an eccentric leader generated media attention, the Kalmyks were known essentially for one reason: they were one of the peoples deported under Stalin, and permitted to return in the wake of Khrushchev's famous speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956.

However, Kalmykia deserves attention for reasons other than its highly original cultural, religious and linguistic traits. Recent developments in these areas indicate a remarkably modern (some would say post-modern) perspective on identity, bearing witness to the resilience of a people that has been confronted with particularly severe hardship through most of the twentieth century. This chapter provides an account of this process, with particular emphasis on Kalmykia's new language legislation.

In Section 1, I present some general background information about the history and current economic situation of Kalmykia. Section 2 discusses recent political and institutional developments and describes the current position of the Kalmyk language. Section 3 is devoted to key issues addressed in the October 1999 Language Act of the Republic of Kalmykia. Section 4 proposes an assessment of the significance and potential effects of the Kalmyk Language Act.

1. KALMYKIA: ESSENTIAL FACTS AND FIGURES

There is very little published scholarly work on Kalmykia, and it is useful to begin by recalling basic information.

Kalmykia is one of the member republics of the Russian Federation. It is located in a region of dry steppe between the Black and the Caspian seas, south of the Volga and north of

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