

**Statement prepared for the European Regional Forum on Education, Language and the Human Rights of Minorities, 6-7 May 2019, European Parliament, Brussels**

**Panel 4: Resources and management for the effective implementation of human rights obligations**

**Ms. Sofia Melikova, Former OHCHR Fellow, Founding Member of the Tsakhur National and Cultural Autonomy, Civil Activist, Documentary Photographer**

Since my yesterday's statement I've been getting a number of questions about the origins of my community and the roots of the language. Therefore I've decided to start my today's speech with a brief explanation. The Tsakhur language belongs to the Lezgin group of Nakh-Dagestaian branch of the East-Caucasian languages and is spoken in the Northern Azerbaijan, and in the Southern Dagestan in the Russian Federation in total by approximately 30 000 people nowadays. The Tsakhur language is one of the most ancient Caucasian languages used in the Caucasian Albania until the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1934, the writing system for the Tsakhur language based on the Latin script was created and started to be taught in schools. However, after four years, teaching and publication of books in the Tsakhur language stopped. And only in 1990, Tsakhur writing was revived on the basis of the Cyrillic alphabet in the Russian Federation, and on the basis of the Latin alphabet in Azerbaijan.

In my today's speech I would like to draw your attention to the situation of the Tsakhur language in Dagestan, one of the federal subjects of the Russian Federation. In terms of legislative framework, it has to be noted that according to the Resolution No. 191 of the State Council of the Republic of Dagestan of October 18, 2000, the Tsakhurs were included into the list of the 14 officially recognized indigenous communities on the territory of the Republic. In addition to this, the Article 11 of the 2003 Constitution of Dagestan "guarantees the right to preserve the native language, to create the conditions for its study and development" for all the peoples living on the territory of the Republic. "Preservation and development of ethno-cultural diversity" is one of the main goals present in the "Strategy on State Ethnic Policy of the Russian Federation for the period until 2025" adopted in December 2012.

As to the practical side, the Tsakhur language is being taught two hours a week from the 1st until the 11th grades in nine schools of the Rutul district (namely, Jinykh, Mishlesh, Muslakh, Tsakhur, Gelmetz, Kurdul, Mukhakh, Atdal, Sogyut) and three schools of the Babayurt district (namely, Kalyal, Novomuslakh, Kambulat) in Dagestan. Study materials for the primary school children are provided in all the above mentioned schools.

At the same time, it has to be admitted that there are certain difficulties in matters concerning education. Two universities of the republic ((Dagestan State University (DGU) and Dagestan State Pedagogical University (DSPU)) train specialists in the Tsakhur language and literature.

However, due to the lack of decent conditions at schools and poor infrastructure in rural areas there are not enough qualified specialists willing to work as native language teachers at schools. Study materials for the secondary school children are not provided.

Moreover, the issue of emigration has to be taken into consideration. Over the last five years three Tsakhur villages (namely, Kalel, Korsh and Khiyakh) have been completely abandoned by people. Schools in these villages were subsequently closed. If the emigration process will not be stopped, we will end up with more than half of the Tsakhur villages closed in the region in the upcoming years.

Furthermore, in a number of cases, school accessibility in remote mountainous areas is a serious issue. It becomes a challenge for children to safely reach a school, particularly during winter periods in the mountainous areas.

In addition, as the representative of Human Rights Center “Memorial” mentioned yesterday, new legislation that makes studying minority languages voluntary in Russian schools comes as a warning sign in terms of preservation and protection of regional minority and indigenous languages.

Considering all the said above, we urge the United Nations (particularly, UNICEF, UNESCO), Special Rapporteur on National Minorities, the Council of Europe, OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities, and the government of the Russian Federation to take measures to:

- 1) ensure that all children from the Tsakhur and other indigenous minority communities residing in the mountainous rural areas have an access to general school education and to native language classes;
- 2) improve infrastructure in rural areas and, where necessary, provide free public transportation to schools for children residing in remote mountainous areas;
- 3) provide financial support for the elaboration of teaching and study materials not only for primary, but for secondary school children as well;
- 4) adopt corresponding legislation protecting the teaching of minority languages.

To conclude, I would like to thank the organizers for giving us an opportunity to be present here today and to speak on behalf of our communities, as well as all the speakers for their valuable contributions.