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THE INTERNATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS
OF RUSSIAN LANGUAGE
AND LITERATURE (MAPRYAL)
AND ITS ACTIVITY
IN THE BALTIC SEA STATES

The article offers general information about the International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature (MAPRYAL) and its main lines of activity. The authors focus on the activity of MAPRYAL in the Baltic Sea States offering a detailed description of the International Festival of Russian Language in the Baltic Sea States, and the events held by MAPRYAL in Germany, Poland, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark.

Key words: Baltic Region, Russian language, Russian language functioning, Russian language festivals, cultural and educational events

The International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature (MAPRYAL) was established on the initiative of international scholars as a non-governmental organisation at the inauguration conference in Paris (7-9 September 1967). It was the time when the academic community realised the necessity of a wider spread of the Russian language, its studying and teaching. In 1975, the association was granted category C consultative status with UNESCO. Today, MAPRYAL is a non-governmental organisation that aims at popularising, preserving, developing and studying Russian language and literature as part of world culture.

Today, the association brings together Russianists from more than 70 countries: theorists and practitioners, school and university teachers, translators, cultural studies scholars, and public figures. More than 200 of them are honoured with the highest MAPRYAL award – the Alexander Pushkin medal for the contribution to the spread and teaching of the Russian language.

The association has a membership of approximately 300 collective and individual members. In its activity, MAPRYAL relies on its collective members, mainly, national associations of Russianists. Due to fruitful work of those associations in a range of European, Asian, American, and African countries MAPRYAL can boast its achievements: the establishment of influential schools, training of highly qualified philologists, publishing of interesting and up-to-date textbooks, and exchange of ideas and experience in the framework of numerous conferences.

Annually, the association holds 25-30 research conferences around the world; every four years, it organises international congresses of teachers of Russian language and literature, every three years – international Russian language competitions for school students. In the 42 years of its existence, approximately 650 research conferences, symposia and congresses have been held around the world.

MAPRYAL periodicals play a significant role in the organisation and coordination of the activity of international Russianists. The association publishes the "MAPRYAL bulletin" and the "Russian Language Abroad" journal dedicated to research and methodological issues; the MAPRYAL website, which functions in the framework of the "Russkoye slovo" portal, is regularly updated (www.mapryal.org).

MAPRYAL pays special attention to the preservation of the Russian language and promoting Russian language teaching in the Baltic Sea States. The main priorities are the former USSR republics Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. A significant part of the population of these countries are native Russian speakers. Many Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians are fluent in Russian and often use it in communication. The younger generation – school and university students – is also interested in having a good command of Russian. At the same time, the authorities of these Baltic States conduct the policy aimed at 'pushing' Russian language out of the spheres of education and interethnic communication. Under such conditions, the role of MAPRYAL as a promoter of the Russian language in the above mentioned countries increases, its activities including research conferences, methodological workshops, and festivals of Russian language and culture.

One of the biggest events was the International festival of the Russian language in the Baltic States, which was held in December 2006. The principal goal of the festival was the popularisation of Russian. The festival offered a wide-range competition programme: the Best Command of Russian competition, which was aimed to

reveal the creative potential of participants, to give them a chance to show their knowledge and skills in using the richness and expressiveness of the Russian language.

The competition was meant for four groups of participants: 1) students of schools and vocational training institutions, native Russian speakers; 2) students of schools and vocational training institutions, foreign speakers; 3) university students, native Russian speakers, 4) university students, foreign speakers.

The competition consisted of three rounds. The first one challenged nearly 2,000 participants with 25 tests designed for each category. The students were to show their command of phonetic, lexical, grammar and stylistic features of Russian language and culture. The winners of the first round (approximately 350 people) took part in the second round, which consisted in writing an essay on a set topic:

— for both categories of school students – "If people did not have language, it would be necessary to invent it";

— for both categories of university students – "The word is a bridge between a person and life"

To participate in the third - final - round, the winners of the second round – 10 students from Estonia, 12 from Latvia and 12 from Lithuania – were invited to Saint Petersburg. The main aim of that round was to demonstrate the skills of spontaneous oral speech. This demonstration took place at the final ceremony on December 8, 2006 at Saint Petersburg State University. Here are the names of the winners:

Rank	School students (native speakers)	School students (foreign speakers)	University students (native speakers)	University students (foreign speakers)
1st	Jekizaveta Lukjanova (Estonia)	Anna Skritnika (Latvia)	Alexandra Samunina (Estonia)	Ilze Pomerance (Latvia)
2nd	Olga Ivanova (Lithuania)	Anna Strezeva (Estonia)	Taisija Kovrigina (Lithuania)	Ilona Uleviciute (Lithuania)
3rd	Santa Kratule (Latvia)	Anna Belinska (Latvia)	Nikolaj Mamzeljov	Kristina Gavina (Lithuania)

In Saint Petersburg, the participants of the third round enjoyed an interesting social programme. The students got acquainted with the city, visited the Gold Rooms of the State Hermitage, the most famous museum of Russia. But the greatest achievement of the festival is that the participants got to learn each other and made friends. And, of course, they communicated in Russian. Another important consequence was the public attention to the event; it attracted much interest from the media in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia.

An important aspect of MAPRYAL activity is promoting the Russian language in Germany. In German comprehensive schools, Russian is taught as a compulsory subject (in particular, in most of Waldorf schools where this subject embraces the whole primary school programme), as an optional or elective subject. Russian is also studied at a wide range of universities. Moreover, today Germany is home to a significant number of ex-USSR citizens, who are interested in preserving Russian language in their families. Thus, MAPRYAL takes an active part in events held in Germany.

In 2007, declared to be the year of the Russian language by President Putin, MAPRYAL actively participated in the 20th "Expolingua" International Fair for Languages and Cultures at the Russian House of Science and Culture in Berlin. The concept of the Russian exposition was based on the understanding that the Russian language – the language of a great culture, science, influential education system, and rapidly developing business – is a powerful instrument of forming a positive image of Russia and enhancing its international standing. The Russian exposition was guided by the motto: "The Russian language is the key to mutual understanding and business partnership".

In 2008, MAPRYAL held a Festival of Russian Philology at the House of Russian Science and Culture in Berlin by way of preparation for the European Festival of the Russian Language. It included a creative competition for the winners of the first round of the festival. The participants from Russian families were given a task to deliver a monologue on the topic "What do Russian language and culture mean in my life abroad?"; the foreign speakers were to talk about their favourite Russian book. In addition, a Russian Song contest was held for them.

MAPRYAL and German associations of teachers of the Russian language support research and methodological conferences and workshops in Germany, for example, the "Teaching Russian Language in United Europe" conference (2008) and the methodological workshop in studying and teaching Russian as a foreign language (2009). These events arouse keen interest in the German teacher community.

Another important aspect of MAPRYAL activity in the Baltic Region is prompting Russian language in Poland. Up until 1990, the Russian language had been the principal foreign language in the country. Later, it lost its leading position to English and German languages. But, recently, Russian has been attracting increasing

interest. The application per place ratio at departments of Russian is one of the highest across the country. Under these conditions, the training and advanced training of Russian language teachers becomes necessary. In the last five years, MAPRYAL supported a number of large-scale conferences in different Polish cities, for instance, the "Person. Communication. Internet" conference in Warsaw (2008) and the "Contemporary Russian Studies in the Formation of United European Cultural and Information Space" conference in Lublin.

The cooperation of MAPRYAL with Russianists from other countries of the Baltic Region – Finland, Sweden, Denmark – is more limited than with the above mentioned countries, due to the fact that Russian is less popular there than in Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia. Nevertheless, there are national associations of Russian language teachers in Finland and Sweden. They are members of MAPRYAL requiring methodological support. Thus, MAPRYAL aims to develop contacts with Russianists from these countries, undertake co-operative activities, and increase their involvement in the events held in other Baltic Sea States.