

## FROM THE SOVIET UNION

### Introduction

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*Until Gorbachev's glasnost, Soviet treatment of nationalities problems within the USSR ranged from carefully worded ethnographic studies to utterly dishonest articles in the political press. Much of this has changed, and we are now able to read some revealing works in the pages of avant-garde Soviet publications. Among the latter, Vikukaar (Tallin) and its Russian Raduga edition (which is not the exact twin of its Estonian counterpart), are remarkable by their frankness.*

*It is for this reason that Nationalities Papers decided to publish a slightly abridged translation of two important articles taken from Vikukaar/Raduga. The articles by Maté Hint (in this issue) and Zenon Pozniak (in the next issue) deal with the sensitive issue of bilingualism, a problem formerly interpreted as learning the Russian language by non-Russians, the way immigrants to the United States acquire English in order to adapt themselves to their new homeland. Russian was assumed to be the lingua franca, not only as an instrument of communication, but as a device for integrating all the nations of the USSR into one "Soviet people."*

*This standard interpretation failed to take into consideration several built-in complications:*

*1) the one-way nature of Soviet bilingual policy, in which non-Russians are expected to learn Russian; Russians living in the non-Russian republics, however, were not required to learn the language of the local nationality;*

*2) the collapse of education in local languages, a phenomenon especially serious in Ukraine and Belorussia. There, Slavic languages are not only in the process of being replaced by Russian, but of becoming mixed with the latter into a kind of "pidgin English" for everyday use;*

*3) the fear of small nations (such as Estonians) of losing their national identity and for whom language constitutes the indispensable "glue," holding together all other components of such an identity;*

*4) the unexpressed realization that the "Soviet people, a new community of nations" is just a code name for Russian domination, and that sblizhenie (the drawing together) between the Russians and the smaller nations of the USSR means nothing less than linguistic russification and cultural absorption.*

*These preoccupations, and many others, are clearly and openly expressed by Hint and Pozniak.*

*Mati Hint, an Estonian linguist, has recently (January, 1989) risen to prominence in the Estonian national movement. He is the principal author of the Language Law, overwhelmingly approved by the Estonian legislature, making Estonian the primary language of the Republic.*