

Third session

PROPOSALS FOR THE ADOPTION OF RUSSIAN AND
CHINESE AS WORKING LANGUAGES OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Report of the Fifth Committee

Rapporteur: Mr. O. P. MACHADO (Brazil)

1. In accordance with instructions given by the General Assembly on 4 April 1949, the Fifth Committee, at its 180th, 181st and 182nd meetings, considered the two proposals that Russian and Chinese respectively be adopted as working languages of the General Assembly. The Committee had before it, in addition to a note on the legal and procedural aspects of the matter (A/C.5/295), reports by the Secretary-General setting forth the financial and administrative implications of each proposal (A/C.5/291 and A/C.5/292). The view was expressed by the Secretary-General that the adoption of these proposals would involve, for a full year of operation, estimated additional net costs amounting to \$621,474 in the case of Russian, and \$1,083,043 in the case of Chinese - a total for the two languages of approximately \$1,700,000. It was pointed out in the reports, however, that a reduction on these estimates of \$250,000 could be made on the basis of deferred recruitment for the first year of implementation and that for subsequent years a reduction of approximately \$160,000 could be made in respect of non-recurring expenses. The Secretary-General was further of the opinion that an increase in the number of working languages would inevitably involve complications which could not readily be identified or expressed in terms of cost and which might seriously hamper the general efficiency of the Secretariat.

2. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, in its first report of 1949 (A/843), stated that, in its opinion, no new factors had arisen either from the administrative or financial standpoint which would warrant its making a different recommendation from that given in its third report of 1948 on the adoption of Spanish as one of the working languages of the General Assembly (A/657), in which the Committee had endorsed the opinion of the Secretary-General that, for reasons of financial stringency in particular, it would not be advisable to impose upon the

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Members of the United Nations the additional burden proposed. The Advisory Committee felt, however, that notwithstanding the difficulty of submitting exact estimates, there would in any case be scope for reducing the estimates as submitted by the Secretary-General by at least \$500,000 in the first year of operation. These conclusions were dissented from by two members of the Committee - one of whom recorded his opinion that there existed no serious budgetary or administrative obstacles to the adoption of Russian and Chinese as working languages of the General Assembly.

3. At the Committee's 180th meeting, it was proposed by the Chairman, and accepted by the Committee, that for purposes of general discussion the two proposals could be dealt with simultaneously, although after the general discussion had been concluded, each proposal would be taken up separately. In the course of this general discussion, in which some twenty-nine delegations took part, draft resolutions were introduced by the delegations of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and China to the effect that Russian and Chinese, respectively, be included among the working languages of the General Assembly and that rule 44 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly be amended accordingly.

4. Representatives supporting either or both the proposals before the Committee stressed the fact that, in their view, arguments which had been put forward on behalf of Spanish as a working language applied with equal if not greater force to Russian and Chinese. Furthermore, reasons which, during the first part of the session, had been advanced against the adoption of Spanish, had no current validity since, in spite of the negative recommendations of the Advisory Committee and of the Fifth Committee, Spanish had in fact been so adopted. Failure to accord the same status to Russian and Chinese could only be interpreted, therefore, as an act of discrimination not merely against the remaining two official languages of the United Nations as such, but against the 600-odd million people who spoke them. The number of people speaking and understanding Russian and Chinese, it was pointed out, was four times larger than the number speaking and understanding Spanish. Thus, knowledge of the United Nations and its proceedings would be infinitely more diffused if its current documentation were readily available in those languages. The Russian and Chinese people had made a major contribution towards the final victory, which alone had made the establishment of the United Nations possible. They had directed their best efforts to making the United Nations an effective instrument of peace and security and it was in keeping with these efforts that they now sought to have Russian and Chinese recognized as working languages of the General Assembly. If such recognition were not

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granted, the prestige and unity of the Organization would be bound to suffer. For these and other reasons, the question was not one which could or should be considered only from its budgetary or administrative aspects. Delegations who found it difficult to support the proposal to make Russian a working language because of its administrative and financial implications had found no such difficulty in supporting other controversial proposals involving much greater expenditure. In any event, it was claimed, the figures furnished by the Secretary-General greatly over-estimated the additional expenditure likely to be incurred since, in fact, neither the cost of Russian nor that of Chinese would exceed but, on the contrary, would probably be less than the cost of Spanish. In justification of this contention, the representative of the USSR and the representative of China each submitted a detailed criticism of the Secretary-General's estimates and the bases on which these estimates had been calculated.

5. Many delegations, while viewing the two proposals with appreciation and understanding, felt that the financial and administrative burden which their adoption would involve could not be sufficiently justified on grounds of practical necessity. The cultural heritage of the Russian and Chinese languages and the considerable contribution to victory made by the Russian and Chinese peoples were fully realized but, if such considerations were to be regarded as paramount, it might be argued with the same justification that still further languages be made working languages of the General Assembly. It was the consensus of opinion on the part of delegations opposing the proposals that the facilities now provided under existing rules of procedure and established practice were such as to make it highly questionable whether, in return for the additional expenditures and administrative burdens consequent on the adoption of Russian and Chinese as working languages, the United Nations would gain any commensurate practical advantages. Such a decision, moreover, apart from its financial consequences, would without doubt entail a serious delay in the distribution of Assembly documents, and would be directly opposed to current efforts to speed up the Assembly's work. Lastly, it would have the effect of causing the General Assembly to devote its efforts to the concordance of the texts in five different languages rather than to the substance of the draft resolutions or draft conventions the adoption of which was the object of the General Assembly's work. The decision to adopt Spanish as a working language could not, some delegations submitted, be invoked as a precedent since it was the mother tongue of almost one-third of the Members of the United Nations, which was not the case with Russian or Chinese. The number of

people speaking a given language, furthermore, could not be accepted as a valid reason for its use as a working language of the General Assembly, the official records and working documents of which were primarily for the use of its fifty-eight Member Governments and their representatives, whereas the best means of informing the general public was through an efficient department of public information. In the matter of costs, it was the opinion of a majority of delegations that the estimates presented by the Secretary-General, together with the conclusions of the Advisory Committee, had been carefully and impartially arrived at and were a reliable indication of the magnitude of the additional expenditures involved. The view was expressed by several delegations that time was needed to see the results of the experiment with Spanish before taking any decision with regard to Russian and Chinese.

6. At the conclusion of the general debate at its 182nd meeting, the Committee, after rejecting a motion to adjourn the debate under rule 105 of the rules of procedure, also took a negative decision on the following motion:

"The Fifth Committee recommends to the General Assembly that the further consideration of the proposal to include Russian among the working languages of the General Assembly be deferred, pending further study, until the fourth regular session of the General Assembly and that the item be included in the provisional agenda of the fourth regular session of the General Assembly."

At the request of several delegations the Chairman agreed to divide the motion into two parts; the first part ending with the words "pending further study". On being put to the vote, the first part was rejected by 20 votes to 14, with 11 abstentions, as a result of which the Chairman ruled that the motion as a whole lapsed.

7. Proposals to defer further consideration of the question before the Committee having thus been rejected, it was agreed to proceed to a roll-call vote on a draft resolution proposed by the USSR: "That the General Assembly resolves to include Russian among the working languages of the General Assembly and to amend accordingly rule 44 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly", with the following results:

In favour: Byelorussian SSR, China, Czechoslovakia, Mexico, Poland, Ukrainian SSR, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Yugoslavia.

Against: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Burma, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, France, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Iran,

Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, Sweden, Syria, Turkey, Union of South Africa, United Kingdom, United States of America.

Abstentions: Cuba, Egypt, Lebanon, Liberia, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Siam, Uruguay, Venezuela.

The proposal for the adoption of Russian as one of the working languages of the General Assembly was thus rejected by 28 votes to 8, with 9 abstentions.

The Committee next voted, by roll-call, on the Chinese draft resolution: "That the General Assembly resolves to include Chinese among the working languages of the General Assembly and to amend accordingly rule 44 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly", with the following results:

In favour: China, Czechoslovakia, Mexico, Poland, Ukrainian SSR, Yugoslavia.

Against: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Burma, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Dominican Republic, France, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Iran, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, Sweden, Syria, Turkey, Union of South Africa, United Kingdom, United States of America.

Abstentions: Byelorussian SSR, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Lebanon, Liberia, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Siam, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Uruguay, Venezuela.

The proposal for the adoption of Chinese as one of the working languages of the General Assembly was thus rejected by 27 votes to 6, with 12 abstentions.
