

## Russian Language in the Post-Soviet Space

### Out of Sight, Not Quite Out of Mind

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In the two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union and advent of non-Russian successor states, the issue of Russian language and Russian-speaking minorities living abroad has followed a complex trajectory, encapsulating social, cultural, and political dimensions. The diffusion of Russian language is a result of complex historical events including the preference of Russian as the language of governance under the USSR, and the long-standing Soviet relocation program to move ethnic Russians to the outskirts of the empire to build infrastructure, manage local bureaucracies, and educate native populations. As a result, when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, 25 million Russian speakers suddenly found themselves living outside of the Russian Federation in foreign countries.

The consequences of this “Russian Diaspora” in language policy have varied from state to state. Some governments have maintained Russian as an official state language. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are home to substantial ethnic Russian minorities, comprising approximately 30% and 12.5% of each state’s population, respectively [1] and both have retained Russian as a state language. In Uzbekistan, a state which denounced Russian as an official language in 1995 but which has sought rapprochement with Moscow in the wake of the 2005 Andijan revolt, education policy has sought to reemphasize Russian in schools and develop necessary language skills in the emerging global economy. [2] To the West in Belarus, ethnic Russians account for approximately 11.4% of the population while Russian remains an official language spoken by nearly two-thirds of the population. Belarus has historically been a key Russian ally, despite a string of diplomatic disputes over energy and trade.

On the other hand, some former Soviet states have pursued vigorous derussification policies, adamantly rejecting the Russian language in government and school curricula. The former Baltic SSR’s of Estonia and Latvia, which had been the most prosperous breadwinners of the Soviet Union, have emphatically and vocally broken free from Moscow’s orbit, joining the European Union and largely U.S.-influenced NATO defense alliance in 2004. In Estonia, approximately 25.6% of the population are ethnic Russians and nearly 30% Russian speakers. Latvia is comprised of approximately 27.8% ethnic Russians and 37.5% Russian speakers. Unlike Ukraine and Belarus, however, which are linguistically very similar to Russian and where substantial Russian minorities have existed for centuries, the Russophone minorities in Estonia and Latvia are a much more recent Soviet legacy resulting from internal migration and relocation. As was often the case during Soviet times, the onus was placed on these native populations to adapt and

speak Russian. When these two states seceded from the Soviet Union, they proclaimed their respective native language as the sole official language and, additionally, a necessary language for citizenship. Russian speakers, who for the most part had remained monolingual as opposed to their native bilingual counterparts, found themselves particularly disadvantaged. In February 2004, the Latvian parliament passed a law mandating 60% of all classes in minority (Russian) high schools be taught in Latvian, prompting significant backlash from the large Russian-speaking population.

Another example of controversial Russian language rights is in Ukraine, where the situation of the Russian minority is much more deeply imbedded. Russians have long been present in southern and eastern Ukraine, and since Tsarist times, the “russification” of Ukraine contributed to the large Russian population. During much of the Soviet era, Russian dominated public life in Ukraine while Ukrainian was left spoken in the home. Even then, despite the geographic split between Russians in the east and ethnic Ukrainians to the west, the close linguistic proximity of the two languages never made communication between the two communities very difficult.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the switch from Russian to Ukrainian as the official state language would have a dramatic effect on domestic politics and bilateral relations with Moscow. The 2004 Orange Revolution galvanized the language issue as Viktor Yanukovich, the pro-Russian Party of Regions candidate and supporter of Russian as an official language, squared off against Viktor Yushchenko, the Ukrainian nationalist and anti-Russian. In the race, voter turnout saw a strong correlation between political affiliation and language identity, with Yanukovich supporters largely voting to ensure Russian speakers remained a dominant force and Yushchenko supporters hoping to push Russian out of the public sphere. Certainly Ukraine’s bilateral relations with Russia are complicated, with Russia’s Black Sea Fleet based in Sevastopol, the continued dispute over the Crimea region, geopolitics of oil and gas pipelines to the EU, and Ukrainian goals for stronger ties with the EU all contributing to a multi-tiered relationship. Language and minority rights also still resonate strongly in Ukraine and continue to play a significant role in domestic affairs.

For the Kremlin, safeguarding the linguistic rights of the nearly 25 million ethnic Russians and Russian speakers living in post-Soviet states has been a salient foreign policy objective, one that has raised concerns over state sovereignty and the tradeoff between legitimacy and governance. It is a stated objective in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation to “promote and propagate, in foreign states, Russian language,” as well as “to protect rights and legitimate interests of the Russian citizens and compatriots living abroad... including for expanding and strengthening the space of the Russian language and culture.” For many successor states, Russia’s stated interest in linguistic rights are viewed as further continuation of Soviet influence and an attempt at interfering with state authority to govern.

Indeed, for many non-Russian successor states economically dependent on Moscow, language rights are seen as little more than a smokescreen for further imperial domination. And yet it would be disingenuous to trivialize Russia’s concerns for the



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language rights of its 25 million “compatriots abroad,” who found themselves faced with the unique situation of becoming an expatriate minority group overnight. Language is often viewed as an indissoluble aspect of culture, and for those Russian speakers now confronted with learning new languages, the right to speak one’s own language strikes a particularly resonant chord that is difficult to downplay.

[1] All percentages come from CIA World Factbook, accessed January 20 2011

[2] Uzbekistan’s Russian Language Conundrum, Yunus Khalikov Eurasianet