

Russian in the post-Soviet sphere or: why some languages are more equal than others

Recent events in Ukraine have once again shown the need to recognize language minorities, highlighting the deficits of post-Soviet nation building and the simplified image of local Russian speakers as politically backward impersonations of a failed empire. The initiative adopted by the Ukrainian parliament to repeal the official status of Russian and other local minority languages in regions with at least ten percent of speakers in February this year came as no surprise, yet it contributed to the disintegration of the country and the alienation of the Russian-speaking population. Although policymakers in Kiev realized that this was no smart move at all and did not implement it, it shows the conflicting nature of the equation of national languages and cultural identity in societies that are in fact multilingual. Multilingualism and Russian in particular did not come by chance to most former Soviet Republics and those who speak it often do so because they or their ancestors migrated from other parts of the former USSR.

Other nation states face similar challenges. Especially the Baltic Republics, which as member states of the European Union have to do more to integrate their Russian-speaking minorities and recognize them as part of their civil societies. It is true that as speakers of a lingua franca they often lacked incentive to learn local languages, but we also know that at no time in the history of the Soviet Union were either Estonian, Latvian nor Lithuanian endangered, rendering a presumed language shift from those local languages towards Russian largely a myth propagated by some Eastern European linguists. A first step in the right direction for them and the post-Soviet sphere in general would be to protect and promote all languages and speakers' rights to use their first language in all societal domains.

Russian language and culture in the Baltic Republics and the post-Soviet sphere as a whole are not expressions of political occupation

and suppression and some might argue they have never been. Instead, they have to be acknowledged as integral parts of local identity constructions. It cannot be in the interest of a democratic Europe if large cities and regions in Estonia or Latvia are predominantly Russian-speaking, yet local policies effectively disadvantage those speakers for reasons solely grounded in past memories of oppression that easily turn into national chauvinism and show rather odd tendencies towards the revision of history. This is true not only for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, but also for Moldova and Ukraine. Holding up the ideal of the monolingual nation state as the cornerstone of national identity and pride inevitably alienates large shares of the population, denies speakers' rights in education and political representation, misses out on economic opportunities and allows for excuses for political involvement by outside actors.

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One of the many brand new busses in Transnistria, with the words в будущее вместе с Россией, "In the future together with Russia".