

## INTRODUCTION THE DIVISION OF LINGUISTIC SPACE

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According to the all-Union Soviet census of 1989, over one hundred nationalities inhabited the USSR, and with some minor exceptions the majority of each of these groups claimed that their “native language” corresponded to their nationality. A relatively small proportion of non-Russians claimed to speak another language as their mother tongue, most commonly Russian. However, a much larger percentage claimed fluency in Russian as a non-native language. Altogether, the percentage of Soviet non-Russians claiming fluency in Russian as a first or second language in the USSR was about 62%; among the nationalities with their own union republics, the proportion ranged from only about 23% in Uzbekistan to about 80% in Belorussia.<sup>1</sup>

In some ways, these percentages reflected varying levels of Soviet government success in promoting Russian during the previous two decades. As the Brezhnev leadership had become increasingly aware of demographic and ethno-social changes in the 1970s, it promoted the idea of a “Soviet people.” This leadership apparently came to view the Russian language as a kind of “linguistic glue” which would help bind the many peoples of the Soviet Union more closely together. This idea was hardly a novel one; Stalin’s policies during the mid-1930s also attempted to use this same “adhesive.” However, during the 1970s the CPSU began to stress Russian more than it had in the preceding decades, and devoted enormous financial, personnel, and other resources to teach it to non-Russians.<sup>2</sup>

There was, of course, no analogous emphasis on teaching the non-Russian languages spoken in the USSR. Indeed, during the Brezhnev era, some Soviet scholars even began to imply that other languages had outlived much of their usefulness, and that they had very unclear prospects for survival.<sup>3</sup>

It is likely that one of the reasons for the increased stress on the Russian language as a bond in the Brezhnev era was the increasing irrelevance of communist ideology and Soviet patriotism based on the common Second World War victory. As Isabelle Kreindler has demonstrated, along with linguistic skills, the Soviet regime attempted to use Russian language classes to impart identification with a Russian-based culture among Russians and non-Russians alike.

The Soviet experience in promoting Russian as the language of “cross-national communication” and non-Russians’ “second mother tongue” illustrates some of the points about the role of language which Ernest Gellner makes in his work *Nations and Nationalism*. Gellner maintains that in the industrial era the state becomes the only effective keeper of what he terms the “national educational and communications

system;”<sup>4</sup> this in part derives from the fact that in an industrial society an educational system must provide its citizens with the same basic training. Such training, Gellner maintains, allows citizens to replace one another in different jobs and to communicate with a large number of others “with whom they frequently have no previous association, and with whom communication must be explicit, without relying on context.” In order for the citizens to communicate in an efficient fashion, it is necessary to have a shared and standardized linguistic medium and script.<sup>5</sup>

In the Brezhnev-era USSR, it was the Soviet state and the Communist Party in Moscow which set the broad policy for educational development and language policy. The basic elements of that educational communications system were uniform throughout the Soviet Union, and the content of education was also very similar throughout the country. Though it was never entirely fulfilled, the idea of a “Soviet homeland” implied that people of various nationalities and linguistic groups could be “at home” anywhere in the vast Soviet empire. In this scheme, Russian language was a critical element which allowed political, technical, and scientific elites to move from one area of the country to the other. Brezhnev-era propaganda tracts which recount the value of Russian often stressed its role in allowing geographic mobility.<sup>6</sup>

In describing the modern state, Gellner likens it to a terrarium that supports an atmosphere allowing the living things inside it to survive. Each terrarium has its own walls and its atmosphere is unique. Plants supported in one terrarium’s atmosphere are not generally suited to grow in another, and, by analogy, individuals trained in one modern state (with its own language, culture, and educational system) are not easily transplantable to others. The Russian language was clearly a critical element in the atmosphere of the “Soviet terrarium.” A Georgian or Moldavian’s ability to live and work in Central Asia, the Urals, or Estonia was to a considerable extent determined by his or her ability to communicate in Russian. A monolingual Georgian or Romanian speaker would have great difficulty, but for those with Russian skills, many opportunities existed.

The link which the CPSU leadership apparently saw between Russian language and mobility was not confined to an appreciation of language as instrument. Communist Party ideologists also stressed that the Russian language was also supposed to help bind diverse nationalities *spiritually* into a “Soviet people.” This was reflected, for example in a speech given by Uzbekistan Communist Party first secretary Sharaf Rashidov in 1975. In Rashidov’s words, the Russian language bound together the “fates and aspirations” of the diverse peoples, “providing some with access to the spiritual treasures of others, strengthening their ideological unity, and enriching their cultures and bringing them closer together....”<sup>7</sup> Thus, people linked in this way were not only more able to move about in a large Soviet “terrarium”; they were also supposed to be coming closer together thanks to the increasingly similar nutrients from the same atmosphere.

To extend Gellner’s analogy a bit further, we might consider the collapse of the Soviet Union as the beginning of a process in which less porous dividers began to

be erected in the large “Soviet terrarium.” It is still unclear how far this process will proceed, and to what extent it might even be reversible. (Some of the divisions might turn out to be temporary, especially if, for example, a union of the three Slavic states should reemerge.) Nevertheless, depending on the permeability of the new walls and the kinds of developments within each of the divisions of the former single terrarium, this process has the potential to make it much more difficult for individuals from other sub-divisions to survive in the new national atmosphere elsewhere. Just as the Russian language was part of the atmosphere in the “Soviet terrarium” which once facilitated movement around the USSR, language policies are at work today which, if pursued, will make it more difficult for individuals to move around, live, and work in other independent states.

As a last ditch effort to preserve the common “Russian linguistic space,” the Soviet Union adopted its first language law in April 1990.<sup>8</sup> By that time, however, various republics were already asserting sovereignty in numerous policy areas, and there were signs that the USSR itself was already disintegrating. Language was one of the most important areas in which claims for sovereignty were manifest. By the end of January 1990, all republics except Turkmenistan (and those whose constitutions already provided for a state language) had adopted laws raising the status of the language of the republic titular nationality. (Turkmenistan adopted its law only in late May 1990.) In some cases the laws’ titles referred to only one language, *i.e.*, a law on language (singular), whereas in others (Latvia, Moldavia, Belorussia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan) laws on languages (plural) were adopted. In all cases, however, they signified a rise in the status of the republic titular nationality language and a corresponding decline for Russian.<sup>9</sup>

The republic language laws were not detailed documents, but rather broad outlines of goals to be achieved. In many cases the nuts and bolts of implementation were provided in language programs, which indicated particular organizations that were responsible for certain tasks relevant to implementation and the time frames for carrying these out. Such “programs” were created not only in republics adopting language laws, but also, for example, in Georgia, where the constitution already explicitly referred to a state language.

This special issue of *Nationalities Papers* contains five articles devoted to the examination of language change mandated in language laws and programs. Four of the five are in fact devoted to implementation of language “laws.” These are contributions by Toivo Raun on language law implementation in Estonia, Dominique Arel on Ukraine, Eugene Huskey on Kyrgyzstan, and William Fierman on Uzbekistan. The fifth article, by Stephen Jones, examines Georgia. Because no analogous “language law” was passed in Georgia, Jones considers implementation of the language program. The processes described in these articles can be viewed as a critical part of the attempts by groups in the individual republics to construct walls around their own terrarium space and thus to demarcate it from other territories.

Following the five articles, this issue contains an appendix with the Russian-

language texts of the Republic laws (and program) represented here. Although providing these texts in English would have made them accessible to a broader audience, the available English translations are of uneven quality; moreover, they are translated by different individuals who rendered identical Russian words or phrases with different words. Thus, the Russian texts are more suitable for comparative study. In addition to the Russian texts, the volume does carry (as part of Toivo Raun's contribution on Estonia) an English-language translation of the very first language law adopted in the Gorbachev era. (This translation was made directly from Estonian into English.) This is an especially important document because many of the formulators of the later language laws were familiar with those adopted earlier in the Baltic.

In reading about the implementation of language laws and programs, it should be kept in mind that the tasks involved in each case differ tremendously in different regions within *the same republic* or country. Obviously, the brevity of the articles contained in this issue precludes their adequate illumination of this dimension. However, it must be remembered that each republic or country examined here contains some regions where the overwhelming majority of inhabitants belong to the titular nationality; likewise, there are also areas where the titular nationality is a small minority. The problems of implementing any given law vary accordingly.

One of the common features of all of the laws and programs is that they were all adopted under Soviet power. The earliest was passed in Estonia, in January 1989; this was only months before the others described in this volume, adopted language policies in the fall of the same year. Some of the more nationalistically-minded supporters of the state language laws undoubtedly dreamt of independence, but the texts of the laws indicate that their writers saw them operating in a Soviet context. Most did not expect that their countries would become (at least legally) independent political units in such short order as actually happened.

Related to this is the fact that the authors of the laws and programs could hardly have imagined the dramatic political, economic, and military events which would shake their republics/countries in the subsequent four or five years. Because language processes and policy are closely tied to extra-linguistic phenomena, these have had a tremendous but very complex impact on the implementation process. Economic crises, for example, have repeatedly drawn the resources of the newly independent countries of the former Soviet Union to more immediate tasks. Consequently, long term needs of language change have often been overlooked. This has been true everywhere, from war-torn Georgia to peaceful Estonia. It seems safe to say that the linguistic nationalists of the 1980s far underestimated the complexity of implementing language laws and programs.

Although language laws are in one sense the result of political struggles, from the contributions which follow it is also clear that they were used by individual political leaders to enhance their own standing in their respective republics. True, there were "costs" in terms of the reaction from other nationalities and even members of the

titular nationality—those with weak skills in the new “advantaged” language. Nevertheless, on the whole, support for language laws was politically expedient for leaders attempting to enhance their legitimacy. As the Soviet Union collapsed and the realities of independence set in, new kinds of compromises became necessary. However, just as in the period of law and program writing, in the implementation process, too, support for language regulation (or opposition to it) has been utilized by “ethnic entrepreneurs” seeking to attract followers and increase their political capital.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the former Soviet Union the implementation of language laws and programs has been complicated by questions of minority rights. Higher status for titular nationality languages has often been perceived as a threat to the status of other languages. Russians and other ethnic groups’ attitudes toward the titular republic languages varied considerably from republic to republic. In the Baltic, where Russians associated the local language with a life style that they sometimes perceived as more advanced than Russia’s, more of them probably held it in higher esteem; in Central Asia, by contrast, where Russians were more likely to look condescendingly at the indigenous peoples, more of them were scornful of the local language. Nevertheless, unfavorable attitudes toward the language laws and fear about their consequences are a common ingredient shaping the implementation of language law throughout the former Soviet Union.

Of course each case of implementing language change is unique, and for the most part it is best to allow each of the following articles to speak for itself. By way of introduction, however, a few important dissimilarities might be pointed out. One concerns the variation of ethnic composition of the newly independent countries’ minorities. In Estonia, for example, by far the greatest ethnic minority is the Russians, who in 1989 constituted over three-fourths of Estonia’s non-ethnic Estonians. An analogous picture holds for Ukraine. This is very unlike the situation in Kyrgyzstan, where Russians, though the most numerous minority group, constituted less than half of the non-Kyrgyz. The contrast of the Ukrainian and Estonian cases is even greater with Uzbekistan, where Russians constituted less than a third of the non-Uzbeks, and Georgia, where Russians accounted for less than a quarter of the non-Georgians. As Stephen Jones notes, even in Georgia many of the non-Russian minorities have received much of their education in Russian. Nevertheless, the linguistic map there is much more complex than in a country like Estonia.

Another important distinction is that the *de facto* status of the non-Russian languages of the USSR in the late Gorbachev era, even among union republic titular nationalities, was extremely diverse. At one end of the spectrum were such languages as Estonian and Georgian, which were widely used in higher education and which, therefore, had relatively well developed and standardized sets of terminology in many technical, scientific, and scholarly fields. Kyrgyz, on the other hand, which was relatively “underdeveloped,” was used in fewer spheres of public activity.

The linguistic distance between Russian and the individual republic languages is

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also undoubtedly an important factor affecting implementation. Monolingual Russian and Ukrainian speakers can communicate to a considerable extent without special study of each others' language. Consequently, from a linguistic perspective, passive use of the new state language is relatively easy for most Russians of Ukraine. It is quite another matter, however, for non-Kyrgyz-speaking Russians in Kyrgyzstan.

Although there have been serious economic and political crises throughout the former USSR, their nature and manifestations are diverse. Thus, although all of the case studies here share the common elements of uncertainty and hardship linked to independence, the environment for language law implementation in each case is unique.

As noted above, implementation of language law has often been constrained by more immediate burning problems, and in most if not all of the countries represented in this issue, at the moment it has taken a "back seat" to more immediate crises. It is, perhaps, natural that language problems were brought to the forefront precisely at the time that non-Russian leaders were attempting to assert republic sovereignty over their own territories. Some of the local political leaders were slow to appreciate that their own political survival was linked to a process which entailed constructing new terrarium dividers and beginning the process of producing their own national atmosphere. Nevertheless, in all cases language problems remain a critical element linked to independence. In the coming years the issues addressed in the language laws will still need to be addressed. Although the hopes of the most ardent linguistic nationalists will not be fulfilled, it does not appear likely that in the foreseeable future the positions of the non-Russian languages will deteriorate to the level of the Brezhnev era. The challenge for the new governments, however, is to alter the composition of the gaseous mixture in their terraria in such a way as to satisfy demands of their titular nationalities, and at the same time to reassure other nationalities (and especially members who do not know the "state" language) that their interests are not threatened. It appears that the time of transition, when the state attempts to alter the mixture of air inside its own walls, is fraught with special dangers. The following articles shed considerable light on the problems of this attempted transition.

## NOTES

1. *Vestnik statistiki*, No. 10, 1990, pp. 69–76; No. 11, 1990, pp. 73, 77; No. 12, 1990, p. 70; No. 1, 1991, pp. 63, 67, 70, 72, 76; No. 4, 1991, p. 76; No. 5, 1991, pp. 74, 78; No. 6, 1991, pp. 72, 76.
2. For a discussion of the role of the Russian language in the Brezhnev era view of the Soviet people, see Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy Toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 313–33.
3. One author writing in 1971 stressed that "the right of all languages to unimpeded development does not mean that all languages without exception...must certainly develop..." (O. P. Sunik, "Nekotorye problemy iazykovogo stroitel'stva v SSSR," *Voprosy iazykoznanii*, No. 6, 1971,

p. 23). (I would like to thank Isabelle Kreindler for bringing this passage to my attention.) In a similar vein, almost a decade later, the Uzbek linguist K. Kh. Khanazarov claimed some small groups had “learned from their own experience that the creation of a writing system and publication of various kinds of literature in their languages did not correspond to their true national aspirations and interests...” (*Reshenie natsional'no-iazykovoï problemy v SSSR* [Moscow, 1981], p. 97, cited in A. S. Kalmyrzaev, *Natsiia i obshchestvennoe soznanie* [Alma-Ata: Kazakhstan, 1984] p. 194). On a more personal level, I recall that when I was conducting research in Tashkent in 1977, the Deputy Head of the *Uzbek* Language Department at Tashkent State University (Ghulam Sharipov) told me in approving fashion, “It won’t take more than one five-year plan for there to be just one language in the USSR.”

4. Ernest Gellner *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 51–52.
5. Gellner, p.35.
6. See, for example, I. B. Dzhafarov, *Russkii iazyk—iazyk druzhby i bratstva* (Baku: Azerneshr, 1982), pp. 52–53.
7. *Pravda Vostoka* 23 October 1975.
8. See Isabelle Kreindler, “A Second Missed Opportunity: Russian in Retreat as a Global Language,” *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1993), p. 266.
9. For an overview of the laws see Nina Borisovna Mechkovskaia, “Status i funktsii russkogo iazyka v poslednikh sovetskikh zakonakh o iazyke,” *Russian Linguistics* 16 (1992), pp. 79–95.
10. This term was used by Valerii Tyshkov in a paper presented in Tel Aviv in October, 1993.