The Geopolitics of Russophonia: The Problems and Prospects of Post-Soviet “Global Russian”

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Abstract: Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian language has flagged in usage across much of the world, particularly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This dramatic contraction belies the overall health of Russian as a global idiom, particularly as the language is expanding in a number of new locales, including Israel and Cyprus, while continuing to serve as an important lingua franca in a number of post-Soviet countries and farther afield. Combining geolinguistics and geopolitics, this essay explores the historical development and contemporary status of the Russian language in the global era, and seeks to locate the nebulous space of Russophonia, that is, the realm—territorial, virtual, and otherwise—of the some 275 million Russian-speakers worldwide.

Keyword: Russian language; geolinguistics; post-imperialism; globalization; language policy; international relations; geopolitics

1 A Google search of Francophonie will return over 16,500,000 web pages, while the query “English-speaking world” produces 284,000,000 pages. Yet, one when one searches for “Russophonia,” i.e., the community of Russian-speakers, the world’s most popular search engine, which—not unimportantly—was co-founded by the Russian-born Sergey Brin, one instead receives a list of pages dedicated to “Russophobia” or the ‘fear of Russians.’ Despite this rather unfortunate state of affairs, Russian is a global language (though this assertion requires some qualification), and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Paraphrasing Mark Twain’s famous quip, the reports of the language’s death (qua a lingua franca) are greatly exaggerated, though certainly Russian’s use has abated in dozens of countries around the world since the late 1980s. However, Russophonia has also expanded into areas where the largest of the East Slavic languages was almost completely absent a few decades ago. In order to understand this complex state of affairs, it is necessary to interrogate the historical peculiarities of growth of the Russian language from its original linguistic ecumene in European Russia.

The Historical Geopolitics of the Russian Language

2 According to Ethnologue (Lewis 2009, Russian—spoken in some 33 countries by approximately 144 million native speakers (though other estimates put the number as high as 160 million [Nikonov 2011])—is the eighth-most spoken native language in the world. This puts the language just below Bengali and Portuguese and slightly above Japanese and German. Estimates of the total number of speakers range upwards of 275 million (Babich 2007), thus ranking Russian as the fifth-most spoken language worldwide, trailing only English, Chinese, Spanish, and Hindi (though some estimates rank Arabic higher than Russian). Russian is also one the most commonly used languages in cyberspace, consistently ranking in the top ten among Internet languages (IWS 2013), with nearly 60 million Russian-speakers accessing the web per month and poised for steady growth in new users over the next five to ten years (Economist 2012; Minenko 2012). As with most of the world’s great languages, Russian expanded its geographic reach and total number of speakers via imperialism, a fact marked by the list of countries where it remains in high level of daily use (see Appendix 1). Like English, French, and Spanish, Russian was spoken in a relatively small area of the...
world some 500 years ago, and by a miniscule number of people when compared to its current linguistic population. Over several centuries, Russian became the de facto language of the Romanov Empire, and thereafter, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Expanding outwards from a historical core around Moscow, Russian—both as a native tongue and a language of “interethnic communication” (Fierman 2009)—marched in lockstep with Russian colonists (and later Soviet administrators), ultimately making its way as far west as the Pacific Rim of North America, south to the Karakum Desert and the Pamir Mountains, north to the islands of the Arctic Ocean, and as far west as the Carpathian Mountains of Central Europe (see Map 1). In the words of one author, Russian—a language younger than Armenian or Georgian—spread out in “all directions and at all levels: as a written language, a business and commercial language, a scientific language, a legal language, a literary language in the strict sense, a naval and military language, a language of the steppe and mountains” (Medvedev 2007, 19). Adding to this laudable list of achievements, we should also remember that the first words uttered by any human being in outer space were spoken in Russian (Lomsadze 2012).

Map 1: Russophones as a percentage of the population

During the early Soviet period, the Kremlin extended the reach of the Russian language through public education and a vast bureaucratic apparatus, ensuring that, even in the most remote corners of the USSR, Russian would be understood and spoken (somewhat paradoxically, Russian fluency grew alongside the introduction of formalized, written variants of local languages across Eurasia such as Evenki and Khakas, which also enjoyed promotion through the new Soviet education system). The acclaimed Kyrgyz author Chyngyz Aitmatov cheered this development, describing the Russian language as:

[A] bridge that for the first time in the history of belles-lettres linked peoples who were not aware of each other’s existence shortly before and lived at considerable distance from each other in terms of the level of civilization, cultural and social experience, observed disparate customs and tradition, and spoke different languages…. The Russian language was able to motivate people to adopt a collective style of thinking, fostered the political and cultural identity and exposed them to civilizations of the rest of the world. Therein lies the principal unifying significance of the Russian language culture (Aitmatov 2008, 128-9).

Despite Aitmatov’s rosy notions about the universality of Russian, the goal of complete bilingualism (or monolingualism in the case of most ethnic Russians) of Russian across the USSR, a stated goal of the Soviet regime in the late 1970s, never came to pass (Solchanyk 1982). Yet, the language did enjoy a certain patina of “internationalism” (Fierman 2009), allowing its speakers comparative mobility within the vastness of Soviet space as the capital cities of the various republics teemed with Russian speakers and the sounds of Russian could be heard in nearly every classroom and on media outlets across 10 time zones.

During the Cold War, Russian functioned as a lingua franca among Moscow’s various allies (particularly those within the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance or COMECON), thus gaining millions of speakers across East-Central Europe and Mongolia, as well as more distant countries such as Vietnam, Cuba, and Syria. Following its peak as an international language in the 1980s, Russian began a rather precipitous decline in status beyond the borders of the USSR, brought on by the changing political foci of the Kremlin and trends in global affairs. The flowering of nationalism in the Eastern Bloc diminished the position of Russian in countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia, while Moscow’s eroding politico-economic status resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.
in less fervor for the study of Russian in allied countries overseas (this shift ultimately impacted study of the language in enemy states as well, as interest in and government funding for regional studies program languished following the end of the Cold War). Thurston 

German, a so-called “brotherly language” within the Eastern Bloc and one with a long history in the region, already enjoyed significant numbers of speakers between the Baltic and Black Seas; with the coming realization of increased openness to Western Europe, German saw a surge in the late 1980s and particularly during the 1990s. English, meanwhile, emerged as a popular choice for foreign language learners in Poland, Hungary, and other Central European states, reflecting its status as “the language of modernity, of new technologies and of communication in the broad sense of the word” (Fodor and Pelua 2013, 94). Within Soviet space, the twinned policies of perestroika (‘restructuring’) and glasnost (‘transparency’) opened the door for centrifugal nationalisms in the Baltics and Georgia (which had been railing against linguistic Russification since the late 1970s [Solchanyk 1982]), while the effects of korenizatsia (‘nativization’) bore fruit in the Central Asian republics, sapping Russian of its once unassailable status as the only practical language of education, high culture, science, construction, transportation, industry, medicine, technology, and commerce (Mikhalechenko and Trushkova 2003).

With the denouement of the USSR in late 1991, the fourteen non-Russian republics gained independence with nationalist elites quickly employing their new-found freedoms to enact linguistic policies that would steadily deplete the Russian language of millions of speakers over the next two decades. According to most estimates, the total number of native Russian-speakers reached its zenith around 1994 at 188 million (Rudensky 1994). Consequently, there has been a contraction of 44 million over the past two decades. A portion of this shrinkage is attributable to a calamitous fall in life-expectancy rates among Russian citizens during the first decade of independence (as well as analogous declines among Russophones living in the Newly Independent States, particular in conflict zones such as Moldova, Georgia, and Tajikistan) alongside extremely low birth rates among Russophones, and ethnic Russians in particular (Atnashev 2011). However, it should be noted that recent trends in Russia suggest a stabilization of the population growth rates (Clover 2012). Looking beyond demographic factors, the lion’s share of the decline is the predictable byproduct of late and post-Soviet linguistic policies put in place by “nationalizing states” (Brubaker 1996), particularly in the Baltics, the Central Asian republics, Moldova, and Ukraine, where Russian bilingualism—once a reality of Soviet cities, factories, and institutions of higher education—began to flag as Latvian, Romanian, Tajik, and other “titular” languages became required for social and economic advancement in their respective nation-states. Furthermore, the drop in total number of Russophones reflects the reduction in Russia’s global power following the end of the Cold War (Singer 1998) and the failing authority of Moscow across post-socialist space (Kolossov and Treivish 2009), though it should be stated that the “lingua franca” status of Russia in East-Central Europe in the post-World War II era was often exaggerated (Mikhalechenko and Trushkova 2003).

Russian—once the only gateway to higher education within the USSR—quickly became supplanted by the formerly titular—now national—languages in the Newly Independent States. Simultaneously, English, German, Turkish, and even Chinese soon made inroads against Russian as the second language of choice across post-Soviet Eurasia, as well as in countries such as Slovakia, Romania, and Mongolia, where Russian was once the natural choice foreign-language study. Statistically insignificant, but politically relevant, Russian also lost its cachet as a prestigious second language in developing countries such as Ethiopia, India, and Nicaragua.

Geolinguistics and the Post-Soviet Transformation of Russophonia

In an effort to best assess the current and future prospects for “global Russian,” this paper utilizes on analytical tools drawn from the field of geolinguistics (Levitt, Ashley, and Rogers 1987; Breton 1991; Dalbera 2002; Bouffard and Caignon 2006; Roques 2004; Rowe 2011). According to Breton (1991), there are six dimensions to consider in any discussion of the language space or geolinguistics of a language: 1) spatial; 2) societal; 3) economic; 4) temporal; 5) political; and 6) linguistic. Like any human-dependent phenomenon, a language space is always in a state of flux; this change occurs both internally and externally, either progressing or regressing vis-à-vis the space it dominates, the people who use it, and the status in which it is held by both its speakers and non-speakers (Breton 1991).

As Maurais and Morris (2003) point out, territoriality is one of the best tools for understanding language space, particularly in the era of “solid modernity” (Bauman 2000) when states employed systemic and bureaucratic mechanisms to affect some level of linguistic homogeneity within their national borders (often to the point of the de facto prohibition of minority languages and/or the mastery of certain “foreign” languages). However, one must also accept that in the current postmodern era, other forces are ascendant, most notably “market dynamics” that have resulted in a “new linguistic order” (Fishman 1999; Maurais 2003); this new milieu is determined by transnational and socio-economic factors which were comparatively absent in the first
three-quarters of the twentieth century. Whereas statist regimes once enforced the “language ecologies” of Norwegian, Arabic, and Sinhalese like dutiful wardens in a game preserve, the contemporary linguistic ecosystem—shaped by the transformational power of ICTs, particularly satellite television and the Internet—is a chaotic zone of competing tongues where the story of global geolinguistics is constantly being rewritten and the Darwinian process of “natural selection” is an undeniable reality (Kibbee 2003). With this in mind, I will now present a brief overview of the current status of the Russian language and its corresponding language space since 1991.

In their essay “Russian in the Modern World,” Mikhalchenko and Trushkova (2003) identified seven spheres of usage for the Russian language:

- The national language of the Russian Federation
- The language of ethnic Russians (within and outside of the Russian Federation)
- The “mother tongue” (i.e., native language) of some non-ethnic Russians in the Russian Federation and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)
- The “mother tongue” of some non-ethnic Russians in countries outside of the CIS
- The language of interethnic communication within the Russian Federation
- A language of interethnic communication within the CIS
- A recognized language of communication within the United Nations (UN) and UNESCO

Clearly, these categories reflect the highly politicized nature of the Russian language in the immediate post-Soviet era, most notably with the authors’ reference to the CIS, an organization which—at the behest of the Kremlin—sought to maintain Russian language use in the international relations between most of the former republics of the USSR. A somewhat more simplified schema, and one that better reflects the realities of aforementioned new linguistic order, might be as follows:

- The national language of the Russian Federation
- A language of ethnic Russians living outside of Russia
- The native or second/third language of some non-ethnic Russians living outside of Russia
- A lingua franca across post-Soviet space and the former Second World
- A language of commerce and communication in countries where large numbers of Russophones reside and/or visit
- A language of cyberspace (Runet)
- A recognized language of diplomacy

My spheres, while certainly up for debate, are somewhat less politically overt (most notably by not singling out the Baltic States—where many Russophones reside—from other post-Soviet republics) and arguably more reflective of the current status of “global Russian,” including highlighting its importance in cyberspace (see, for instance, Fialkova 2005; Schmidt, Teubener, and Konradov 2006; Saunders 2006, 2010; Gorham 2011; Uffelmann 2011; Minenko 2012). As is the case with any (post-) imperial language, it is nearly impossible to disentangle politics from language use. In the case of Russian, this is a particularly acute issue, given both the recentness of the Soviet imperial collapse, the often “unwarranted” domination of Russian in the non-Russian republics, and the ideological association of the Russian language with totalitarianism (Mikhalchenko and Trushkova 2003).

**The Russian Language at “Home” and Abroad**

Perhaps the only country in the world where Russian is not overtly politicized as an idiom is the Russian Federation, although, even its national homeland, the Russian tongue is not without controversy as Russian is often forced to compete with the national languages of Russia’s twenty-one ethnic republics, as well as nearly a dozen other languages that enjoy co-official status in regions associated with indigenous minorities (or, in the case of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast in the Russian Far East, minorities who were relocated for political purposes). Between 97-98 percent of Russian citizens speak Russian (Saunders and Strukov 2010), a rather high number given the presence of more than 150 mostly indigenous minorities, speaking a list of languages that literally goes from A (Adyghabza) to Z (Zyrian), as well as the use of dozens of languages other than Russian in primary education in the country (Muckle 2005). Given the fact that 98 percent of Russians living in Russia—approximately 80 percent the country’s total population—are monolingual, it is not surprising that Mikhalchenko and Trushkova state that the Russian Federation is the “most advantageous geographical space” (2003, 263) for the Russian language moving forward. The government’s commitment to maintaining the situation is also palpable, most notably with the 1 December 2012 enactment of a test in Russian language fluency for all “immigrants working in housing, maintenance services, retail stores, or public services” (Bondus 2012). Returning to Breton’s sextet of geolinguistic dimensions, it is clear that the Russian language is dominant (though not totally unchallenged) in all areas: spatial; societal; economic; temporal; political; and
linguistic. The same cannot be said for the rest of post-Soviet space where Russian has persevered in certain areas while languishing in others.[1]

Belarus, located in Eastern Europe and bordering the Russian Federation represents the best case scenario for the survival of Russian beyond the borders of the Russia proper. Ironically, Belarus—an independent state with its own national language (Belarusian)—commands roughly the same percentage of speakers of Russian as is the case in the Russian Federation (though there are certainly less native speakers of Russian in Belarus, owing to use of both Belarusian and Trasianka, a Russian-Belarusian interlanguage).[2] Belarus, which entered into a unique post-independence relationship with the Russian Federation known as the Union State, enjoys extensive ties with its larger neighbor in nearly every sphere. Consequently, the geolinguistic status of Russian is extremely high across all dimensions. Politically, Russian is viewed as the idiom of the governing elite (with Belarusian being seen as sort of “counterculture” language by the younger generation and opposition-minded portions of the population). In 1995, following a short-lived flowering of Belarusian linguistic nationalism, Russian was designated as the country’s second official language (alongside Belarusian). According to the 2009 census, some 40 percent of the population consider Russian to be their native language and 70 percent speak the language at home, which importantly demonstrates growth in the use of Russian even as the number of self-identifying ethnic Russians is declining across the republic (Woolhiser 2011), a trend also present in Ukraine (Janmaat 1999). The situation of Russian in other parts of the former Soviet Union is less healthy (see Map 2).

Map 2: Status of the Russian language

Kyrgyzstan, a small and impoverished country in Central Asia, also represents a success story for post-Soviet Russian, though one with qualifications. In the country, which designated Russian (alongside Kyrgyz) as an official language associated with “interethnic communication” in the 2010 constitutional reforms, a current push is on to rename more than 100 villages with “Russian-sounding names” with more Turkic-sounding appellations. Russophones—both ethnic Russian and indigenous Kyrgyz—and the Russian Embassy have also complained about recent changes in broadcasting which have made reception of Russian-language TV and radio stations more difficult to access (Eurasianet.org 2011). However, the status of the language was shored up April 2012 when Foreign Minister Ruslan Kazakbayev publicly stated that it had been a mistake to question the role of Russian in the country, adding “The Russian language helped the Kyrgyz to join the international science and culture” (VOR 2012), thus echoing the late Chyngyz Aitmatov’s long-held defense of Russian (most notably in 2000 when the former Kyrgyzstan ambassador to the European Union and NATO heralded Russian’s restoration as a state language which would “improve the republic’s chances of raising its general cultural level” [Medvedev 2007, 13]).

In neighboring Kazakhstan, which has a sizeable ethnic Russian population and where Russification and Sovietization were most effective outside the Slavic republics of the former USSR (Okott 1981; Akiner 1995; Uffelmann 2011), the Russian language is also in retreat. Nationalist politicians are pushing for the removal of the clause in the republic’s constitution that states that “the Russian language is officially used equally with Kazakh in state bodies” (Lillis 2011). In 2011, presidential candidates—for the first time since independence—were required to demonstrate competency in the national language (a move paralleled in neighboring Kyrgyzstan), reflecting the reality of everyday linguistic development in the country where employers often demand fluency in Kazakh of all job applicants (Kamzieva and Kamalov 2011). A leaked document in 2011 stated that “use of Russian in official bodies would be banned starting in 2013,” prompting vitriolic exchanges on the Internet and a governmental statement clarifying that no such change was under consideration (Lillis 2011). There is some dispute on the total percentage of Russophones in the country, with the 2009 census stating that 94 percent of the population speaks Russian (Kamzieva and Kamalov 2011), while earlier statistics put the figure at closer to 82 percent (Ezykin
2005), thus suggesting that Russian may be on the rise linguistically even as its political fortunes are ebbing. This paradox was recently laid bare with the reception to the news that Kazakhstan-1, the main broadcaster, was dropping Russian language programs from its schedule in 2011; according to one report: “In Almaty, the relatively affluent former capital in the Kazakh-dominated south of the country, Russian is still mainly spoken on the streets but the move met with broad approval” (Kilner 2011). In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Russian remains spatially strong in urban areas and weak in the provinces; socially, Russian remains a marker of the older elite and reflective earlier patterns of internationalism (as Fierman [2009, 1208] points out, “international” in Soviet parlance was synonymous with “Russian”), whereas English, Turkish, and German are gaining ground as the new languages of the globally-oriented elite of the Astana, Almaty, and Bishkek; however, as Uffelmann (2011) argues, an increase in English—particularly in Kazakhstan—does not necessarily come at the cost of Russian fluency for the outwardly-mobile Kazakh elite.

In other parts of post-Soviet Central Asia, the Russian language is in an even more perilous position, at least officially. Recognizing the symbolic power of language and the control it represents (Fierman 2009), Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan moved quickly to marginalize Russian and promote their respective national languages in the decade following the end of Soviet rule. Turkmenistan, known for the bold and sometimes quixotic policy positions of its late leader Saparmurat Niyazov (Turkmenbashi), reduced Russian language instruction across the country while simultaneously adopting the Latin script for its Turkic language in 1991 (to be more accurate, this is actually a re-adoption as a Latin-based script was used for Turkmen from 1928 to 1940, as well as the other titular languages of the Central Asian republics).[3] Today, nearly all higher education in Turkmenistan in conducted in the national language (Fierman 2009). Of all the former Soviet republics, Turkmenistan ranks lowest in Russian-speakers with less than a quarter of the population officially speaking the language, situating it lower than some non-Soviet states in worldwide rankings.

With its fairly sizeable ethnic Russian population and its cosmopolitan capital of Tashkent, Uzbekistan has retained a high level of Russian language speakers since 1991; approximately two-thirds of the country has a command of the language. Yet, like their Turkmen neighbors, Uzbeks have adopted the Latin alphabet (see Map 3), which over time will likely retard with the ability (or perhaps desire) of its citizens to learn Russian. Unlike in totalitarian Turkmenistan, the shift was not accomplished overnight and there has been a slow transition to the new orthography. Kazakhstan, which has plans to phase in the Latin alphabet over the next decade, is now pursuing a model similar to that of Uzbekistan. This impending abandonment of the Kazakh variant of the Cyrillic alphabet is being undertaken with the explicit goal of encouraging a distinct national identity, as a recent government declaration states: “[Cyrillic] facilitated and facilitates the orientation of the Kazakh national consciousness towards the Russian language and Russian culture. As a result, Kazakh identity as such remains largely undefined. On this level, moving to Latin will make it possible to form a clearer national identity for Kazakhs” (Bartlett 2007). Returning to the linguistic situation in Uzbekistan, despite years of Uzbekification of the public sector, the glorification of “Uzbekness,” and aggressive promotion of the national language including the “burning of Russian-language books” (Khalikov 2006), many contemporary non-Uzbeks in the country prefer to invest their time in learning Russian (and English) rather than the state language due to the “perceived and real advantages” in employment that stem from fluency in one or both of these “foreign” tongues Fierman 2009, 1225). President Islam Karimov’s volte-face on Russian-Uzbek relations in the mid-part of the last decade has also produced some positive changes related to the Russian language, with more space being made for the language following the rapprochement with the Russian Federation (a shift which began under the first Putin administration). Though the language is not officially protected or sanctioned, it is in high demand in the republic (Khalikov 2006).

One of the few positive developments in the region on the political level was a 2011 decision by the Tajikistan Parliament to reverse a 2009 decision stating that the only
permits the language for publication of government documents was Tajik (Kamzieva and Kamalov 2011), thus recognizing that Russian—for all intents and purposes—remained the language of interethnic communication in the troubled and ethnically diverse republic. As Rowe (2011) points out, Russian remains the dominant language in Tajik universities due to the fact that most faculty lack fluency in Tajik, while Russian also provides the best medium for accessing scientific and academic research. Similarly, Russian retains dominance in the field of publishing due, in part, to economic factors associated with the country’s costly civil war in the 1990s. However, Tajikistan’s proposed shift to the Persian alphabet could drastically alter this situation if a new generation of Tajik speakers were to master an orthography that would give them access to enormous print and new media resources from Iran, Afghanistan, and the U.S.-based Persian community (the Farsi-language blogosphere is estimated to be the fourth largest in cyberspace [Kelly and Etling 2008]).

20 In Azerbaijan, a country that shares both linguistic and cultural links to Central Asia, the role of Russian is somewhat complex. Officially, a majority of Azeris claim fluency in Russian and the language remains a tool for business and commerce; however, like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan has opted for the Latin alphabet. Given Azeri’s similarity to Turkish, this development naturally portends a dissipation of Russian’s strength over the long term. While many of the old elite still converse in Russian (as do many upwardly mobile young people), particularly in the capital Baku, a recent study argues that knowledge of Russian in the Caspian nation is among the lowest of all the former Soviet republics (though still well above that of Turkmenistan); however, the good news for Russian is that the situation is rather stable compared to other post-Soviet republics, where knowledge of the language is in measurable decline (Karavaev 2008). As Russian has been effectively “depoliticized,” Azerbaijan may be a good barometer for understanding how the eventual delinking of Sovietization and the Russian language will affect the Russian language in its own right, i.e., free of its old ideological baggage (Karavaev 2008).[4] This state of affairs is tacitly recognized by members of the Russian government who have sought to expand Russian cultural and linguistic knowledge through the Russkiy Mir (‘Russian World’) program after the rather embarrassing failure of an attempted upgrade of Russian in the country in 2003 (Eurasianet.org 2003).

21 Armenia represents somewhat of a statistical outlier among the non-Slavic, former Soviet republics, which—generally speaking—show the strongest correlate between knowledge of Russian and the presence of ethnic republics (Wixman qtd. in Rowe 2011) as some two-thirds of the population speak Russian while less than one percent of the population is ethnic Russian. Due to close political cooperation between Yerevan and Moscow after the independence, strong commercial links, and possibly as the result of so-called civilizational affinities (see Huntington 1997), knowledge and everyday use of Russian in the mountainous republic remains high, particularly in business and commerce (Medvedev 2007). In 2010, the popular báladéer Ruben Hakhverdyan made a ribald quip that Armenians know Russian so well they even use the language during their lovemaking (Tert 2010). After a 1990s-era ban on education in foreign language in public schools, Russian has returned to the classroom in the current decade (Makukyan 2010).

22 In neighboring Georgia, political developments have directly impacted the status of the Russian language in the past decade. Following the 2003 Rose Revolution, Tbilisi’s foreign policy pivot towards the West exacerbated relations with Russia, ultimately culminating in a summer 2008 war between the two nations. Since then, the Russian language has suffered in Georgia proper, while its status has been elevated in the country’s breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Both republics have now been recognized as independent states by Moscow and have made Russian the co-official language alongside the local Iranian (Ossetian) and Caucasian (Abkhaz) languages (GT 2012; Abkhazia 2013). In fact, the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi was the site of an 18 December 2012 conference of Russian linguists, writers, researchers, and educators who gathered to discuss innovative ways to promote the Russian language in the South Caucasus, particularly through the use of new information and communication technologies (Romanova 2012). As a border state, Russia has long held sway over the secessionist republics, which sought to convert their statuses as ASSRs within Georgia into full independence after 1991, with Moscow even going as far as to issue Russian passports to willing recipients. Now with all ties to Tbilisi broken and substantive Russian aid and trade flowing into these war-torn statelets, the already-high level of Russian fluency can only be expected to rise even more—quite different from the situation in the rest of Georgia where the robust—effectively mandatory—learning of English (Levy 2011), the suspension of Russian-language broadcasting (RFE/RL 2012), and other obvious slights to Russia and the Russian language are now commonplace.

23 Across the Black Sea, regionalism and the Russian language similarly go hand-in-hand. In Moldova’s breakaway republic of Transdniestria, the language is the dominant idiom among the diverse population of Ukrainians, Romanians, ethnic Russians, and Russophones Jews.[5] In fact, the conflict over language rights actually led to the initial conflict which ripped the country apart (Chinn 1994; Prina 2012). According to
Janmaat, “The seriousness of the language issue can be illustrated in the Moldovan case. There, a conflict over language between the titular Moldovans and the Slavic speakers (Russians and Ukrainians) escalated into a short-lived war, in which the latter, with the help from the Russian army, pushed the Moldovan troops out of the left-bank region of Transdniestria” (1999, 475). The secessionists achieved their linguistic goals: Russian language media outlets dominate the region and the language is the language of commerce and education. Russian remains inextricably linked to the settlement of the frozen conflict, with a number of competing plans for ensuring that Russian will either be recognized as an official language in part or all of a reunified Moldova in the future (Makarkin 2013). In 2002, obligatory Russian-language instruction was ended in Moldova proper and, as of 2011, less than 20 percent of Moldovan university students were studying in the Russian language (Moldova 2011), though the percentage is much higher in the autonomous and ethnically-mixed region of Gagauzia which has flirted with the notion of making Russian an official language. While the constitution states that “the State shall recognize and protect the right to the preservation, development and functioning of Russian and of other languages spoken in the territory of the country”, the status of Russian west of the Dniestr River remains ambiguous (and wedded to its categorization as a “minority language”), despite efforts by the country’s Communist Party to raise its official status (Prina 2012). In his analysis of the status of Russian in Moldova, sociolinguist Matthew Ciscel (2013) argues that two distinct orders of indexicality exist: in Moldova proper, Russian is a marker of urban and economic prestige, as well as one of nostalgia for some, though a symbol of oppression for others. In Transnistria, Russian represents the ideological norm, as well as a bulwark against divisive nationalism. Regardless of such geolinguistic distinctions, Russian remains an important medium of “interethnic communication” on both sides of the river.

In neighboring Ukraine, where the geolinguistic situation of Russian is arguably the most complex, the Russian language remains a political shibboleth, frequently being used a cudgel by both the Ukrainian nationalists in the west or the regionalists in the east. During the 1990s, Ukrainization of the media, education, and public sector somewhat reduced the prevalence of Russian in daily life, but with a large percentage of ethnic Russians in the south and east of the country, Russian maintained dominance in certain areas, particularly Crimea, which was part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic until the 1950s. In the politically-charged atmosphere that is contemporary Ukraine, many Russophones declare Ukrainian as their native language despite using Russian in everyday life, making accurate statistics about language use rather difficult to obtain; however, many estimates suggest parity between Ukrainian and Russian in terms of everyday use (SGR 2012). Following the 2005 Orange Revolution, identity politics stimulated renewed calls for protection of the Russian language in the Donbas Arena and other regions which command larger numbers of Russophones and where the Russia- and Russian-friendly Party of Regions dominates. A new law enacted in 2012 formally recognizes the status of languages in regions where more than 10 percent of the population speak a language other than the “state language,” i.e., Ukrainian. Consequently, Russian now enjoys the status of a “regional language” in 13 out of 27 districts of the country, including the capital Kyiv, the port cities of Odessa and Sevastopol, Crimea, Kharkiv and Dnepropetrovsk Regions. The new law allows residents of these regions to “choose the language of education [and] TV and radio companies to decide on the language they use in broadcasting” (RT 2012b). In a recent national poll, public opinion was evenly divided on granting Russian the status of state language across the country (SGR 2012).

In the Baltic States, which existed as fully-fledged nation-states during the interwar period only to be annexed by the USSR during World War II, the Russian language is highly politicized, but lacks any state support. In Estonia and Latvia, restrictive post-independence citizenship laws created hundreds of thousands of “stateless persons,” mostly Russophones, who were required to learn the national language to gain full rights in their respective countries of residence. In 2011, Mikhail Kilvart, deputy mayor of the capital Tallinn, declared: “All state officials are obliged to know Estonian in the course of their work. This is written in our language law. It also applies to people working in the majority of public services” (RT 2011). The city of Narva, an ethnic Russian enclave in the east of the country, has come under special scrutiny by the Language Inspectorate, which is charged with enforcing that public business be conducted in Estonian; in one case, orphanage workers were fired for not being able to speak the Finnic language to the children, even in a town where more than 95 of the population is Russophone (RT 2011). Such policies have resulted in condemnation by the human rights organization Amnesty International (Levy 2010). In Latvia, Russian language schools have come under intense pressure to reduce Russian-language instruction (Moyseowicz 2011), while legislation was proposed that signage in public areas must be made in the Latvia language only; regardless, Riga and other parts of the country remain areas where Russian can be heard (Saunders 2008). A 2012 referendum sponsored by the pro-Russophone NGO Native Tongue showed overwhelming opposition to making Russian an official language in the Baltic country, with 75 percent voting against the measure with a 69 percent turnout (BBC 2012). In Lithuania, where the indigenous population enjoys a strong demographic majority and Russians and other non-Lithuanians tended to learn the local language in higher
numbers than anywhere else in the Soviet Union (Janmaat 1999), linguistic policy has not been as draconian. However, the long-term expectations for Russian language use in Lithuania is rather poor (Karavaev 2008), though Yuri Prokhorov, Rector of the Pushkin State Institute of Russian Language, recently sounded a positive note, arguing that without required instruction in Russian, the language is being embraced: “Now [Lithuanians] understand that this is a means for communication, and when this is needed, people begin to honestly study the language” (RMF 2012d). He also pointed to emergence of peculiar forms of Russian developing in the region, which he suggested would be an interesting topic of investigation in what he termed “geo-Russian studies.” Despite the challenges for Russian in the Baltic States, one fact is clear according to a recent report by the European Commission: “Russian has been introduced to the map of the most spoken languages in Europe” (EC 2006, 12).

Moving beyond post-Soviet space, Russian temponously holds on to a significant number of speakers within the former member states of COMECON, particularly Mongolia, Bulgaria, Poland, and the successor states of Czechoslovakia. However, recent research shows that these countries’ Russophones will not be replenished in future generations, as other languages are edging out Russian due to economic factors. Perhaps Mongolia is best situated to maintain Russian, but even there English and Chinese are chipping away at Russia’s status as the foreign language of choice (Cohen 2005; Suprunova 2007). Bulgaria, once labeled the “sixteen republic” of the USSR for its leadership’s dutiful allegiance to Moscow, remains a bright spot in the old Eastern Bloc due to cultural and linguistic affinities with Russia, a fact recognized the Russkiy Mir Foundation which launched its “Bulgaria and Russia in the 21st century: Spirituality – Education – Culture” program last year to buttress links between the two countries; currently, one-quarter of Bulgarian school children study the language (RMF 2012a). In Central Europe, however, memories of the mandatory tuition of Russian during the Cold War remains a retardant to efforts to maintain the language’s presence in the region, particularly as the expansion of the EU has turned trade, social, and cultural relations in a westerly direction.

Outside of the former Second World, the Russian language has made some interesting inroads through immigration. Certainly, Israel represents the most dramatic case. Immigrants from the 15 post-Soviet republics make up the largest foreign-born group in the country today, totaling over one million (Kopeliovich 2011). While the majority of children born to these immigrants use Hebrew as their first language and English as their second, Russian enjoys a strong presence in contemporary Israel, particularly in certain working-class areas, as well as in Ariel, the largest settlement in the West Bank where Russian language signs are more prevalent than those in Hebrew.[7] On the political front, the Russophone community in Israel is quite active in party politics, often functioning as a kingmaker in parliamentary elections (Khanin 2002, 2010). In terms of social presence, robust media offerings in Russian and the spread of Russian use in the military and the realm of business and commerce has given impetus to Russophone Israelis to preserve the language (Kopeliovich 2011). According to a recent report, “The Russian-speaking community also wields an outsized influence in other aspects of Israeli life. Every fourth employee in Israel’s flourishing high-tech industry is a Russian-speaking immigrant, as is every other engineer” (Baility and Estrin 2012). With one million Russophones, Israel commands the highest percentage of Russian-speakers outside the Newly Independent States (if one excepts Svalbard, an “special entity” in international politics though under Norwegian sovereignty, where Russophones make up approximately one-third of the population). Israel is followed closely by Cyprus which has unexpectedly emerged as a new colony in Russian geolinguistic space in recent years as the result of Russian immigration, tourism, a favorable tax and business environment, bilateral trade, and extensive foreign direct investment from Russia (Harding 2012). On the island, every eighth person speaks Russian (Nikonov 2011) and the port of Limassol is colloquially known as “Moscow on the Mediterranean.” Finland, once a Russian colony, also reflects the new norms of Russian language dispersion as many tour operators, restaurateurs, and shop-owners have mastered Russian to cater to Russian tourists since the mid-1990s (Protassova 2013); as these Russophones have joined the ranks of Russian-speakers who have preserved their identity since Finnish independence, a measureable percentage of the Finnish population is now adept at the language. Similarly, Russian immigrants and tourists have also expanded the shores of Russophonia to Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Montenegro. However, the countries with the largest numbers of Russophone immigrants are Germany and the United States, with 3.5 million and 2.9 million respectively. In both countries, Russian-speaking immigrants have established strong social bonds, including business communities, Russian-language schools, and media outlets that serve to keep them connected to each other and the rest of the Russophone world, as evidenced by the motto of Berlin’s largest Russian-language newspaper Russkij Berlin: “Our homeland is the Russian language” (Darieva 2005, 162).

The Once and Future Geolinguistic Region of the Russian Language: A Prospectus

When making comparisons with other post-imperial languages, one would certainly
include English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese among the successful models, as each of these languages enjoys vastly more native speakers outside of their original ecumenes (i.e., England, northern France, Castile, and Portugal) than within them. Similarly, unsuccessful post-imperial language models would include Hungarian (formerly the language of the elite in Romania, Croatia, and parts of Ukraine), Turkish (once spoken across the Levant, Egypt, and the Balkans), and—at least to some extent—German (which historically served as the lingua franca of Eastern Europe). However, none of these models is entirely appropriate for Russian in the post-Soviet era and the polycentrism of linguistic realms that characterizes the global era. Today, there are undeniable and powerful disruptions to the historical paradigms that influenced the success or failure of the aforementioned post-imperial languages. The various social, economic, and cultural flows of globalization and the proliferation of inexpensive and widely available transborder information and communications technologies have subverted the rules which applied to geolinguistics in an earlier time (see Chart 1). Some of the most important factors influencing the future of Russian’s geolinguistic situation are popular culture, new media, economics, and the promotion of linguistically-oriented cultural programs by the Russkiy Mir (‘Russian World’) Foundation and the unfortunately-named Federal Agency for the Affairs of the CIS States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation or Rossotrudnichestvo (Saunders and Ding 2006; Saunders 2006,2008; Gorham 2011; Kosachev 2012a; Hudson 2013; Ryazanova-Clarke 2013).

![Chart 1: SWOT analysis of Russian as a global language](https://example.com/chart1)

While the Soviet-era linkages based on the high culture of literature, drama, opera, and ballet are fading in potency, they are quickly being supplanted by new forms of Russian popular culture (music videos, movies, TV series, etc.) which are spreading via satellite television and the Internet. Various forms of new media are sustaining or creating shared cultural spaces across the Russophone world. This is especially evident among young, upwardly (and outwardly) mobile elites in post-Soviet space. While the political desires of elites in Riga, Chişinău, and Astana are resulting in the gradual displacement of the Russian language from classrooms, courtrooms, and boardrooms, the invisible hand of the market ensures that Russian-language DVDs, TV programs, and glossy magazines continue to proliferate, if only because it is more expedient to pursue 275 million Russian-speakers with one product rather than producing it in the fifteen national languages of the former Soviet Union (to put the market stats in comparison, Estonian, for example, has only 1.1 million speakers). As a recent study conducted for the British Ministry of Defense (2011) shows, Russian popular culture, aided by linguistic bonds and “spread by satellite television, a growing film industry, rock music and popular novels,” is a particularly important factor in maintaining strong connections between Russia and Ukraine. A recent Chatham House (2012) report demonstrated the tendency for important literary works to be translated into Russian and not the other languages of the former Soviet Union as factor contributing to the sustained strength of Russian in the former USSR.
New media is a vitally important factor in sustaining the Russian language in the twenty-first century. As Internet use in Russia and the former Soviet republics has skyrocketed (particularly through the usage of smart phones), video sharing web sites, blogs, social networking sites, a burgeoning e-commerce sector, and deep pool of local IT talent have kept the Russian language as one of the dominant idioms in cyberspace. A recent *Economist* (2012) report showed that the number of Internet users in Russia, currently at 53 million, now outstrips that of any other European country, including Germany, France, and Britain; in terms of Internet penetration, Russia is currently neck-and-neck with Italy at 37 percent, thus leaving, in the words of the *Economist*, “lots of room left to grow.” Influenced by a number of political, social, and economic factors unique to the post-Soviet societies, the Internet tends to enjoy an out-sized level of importance in individual development (Saunders 2006; Popov 2012). Thus suggesting healthy development for Runet, that uniquely Russian portion of cyberspace (Schmidt and Teubener 2006), over the coming decades. Recent technological changes in the structure of the Internet, i.e., the introduction of the ‘.rf’ Cyrillic Internet domain, are also reasons to be sanguine about the future of what Gorham (2011) calls “virtual rusophilia” and Uffelmann (2011) labels “cyber-Rusphonia”; however, it remains to be seen if the majority of cyber-Russophones will embrace this new virtual territory of the “great and mighty” Russian language. Warf’s (2009) analysis of robust and relatively cohesive “Eurasian” Internet space suggests that despite the newness of the Internet, older habits, structures (including the Cyrillic alphabet), and flows shape developments in cyberspace, a fact underlined by Uffelmann’s (2011) study of the Russophone nature of Kazakhstani cyberspace. As he states:

> When it comes to the Internet, the connection of space and language cannot be described in terms of geolinguistics, but of virtual linguistics. Due to the decentralized nature of the web, this communicative, cyberlinguistic space can only vaguely be circumscribed because its concrete localities are extremely difficult to grasp....The linguistic identities of the Russian-using web community vary depending on the communicative, inter-active or consumerist purpose of their Internet usage. The Russophone identity of the Eurasian web community provides no more than a situational linguistic habit (Uffelmann 2011, 178).

Other new media are also a factor: Russia Today’s (RT) new Al RTV channel, which is exclusively dedicated to issues facing Muslims in Russia and across post-Soviet space, may prove an effective tool for maintaining the Russian language beyond the borders of Russia, particularly given the network’s glossy, visual-centric format and success in attracting audiences via its English, Spanish, and Arabic-language broadcasts (Strukov 2013). From a somewhat different angle, Gershenson (2011) has demonstrated how globalized mediations between Russia and Israel, primarily through film, are now showing up in cyberspace, thus connecting “global” Russophones in Moscow, Tel Aviv, and New York in new and interesting ways.

Economics and commerce may also hold the keys to success of the Russian language in the Newly Independent States. According to Deputy Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center Dmitri Trenin, “Russia is working to create its own solar system. For the first time since the unraveling of the Soviet Union, Moscow is treating the former Soviet republics as a priority. It has started promoting Russian economic expansion in the CIS as an effort both to obtain lucrative assets and to enhance its political influence” (Trenin 2006, 91). Due to centuries of commercial exchange, long-standing communication and transportation networks, and the lingering effects of Soviet-era systems of economic interdependence, the Newly Independent States are inextricably bound to Russia (with the possible exception of EU members Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), a fact which Russian elites understand and attempt to profit from via a “common information space” (Ryazanova-Clarke 2013). In addition to historical factors, Russia is exceptionally privileged by its geography. The country effectively functions as a land bridge for the transit of goods to European and other markets, thus making Russian an indispensable partner in most global financial transactions of the so-called “near abroad.” Contributing to these factors, Russia’s positive economic performance since 2000 has translated into linguistic victories; according to Vitaly Kostomarov, President of the Pushkin State Institute of Russian Language, “Language is not the base but an extension of a nation’s development in general.... Now that the Russian economy is growing, the language has also shown some indications of recovery” (qtd. in Babich 2007). If, as Putin claims, the ruble can be the reserve currency of the world (RT 2012a), then why not Russian an alternative global language? Furthermore, Moscow and St. Petersburg remain the preeminent destination for guest workers from the region, who, consequently, are motivated to maintain or improve their Russian-language skills, particularly in the case of Kazakh citizens; since 2011, do not need a work permit for employment in the Russian Federation (OECD 2012), or, more intriguingly, with the recent situation among Circassians in Syria who are learning Russian in order to repatriate to their ethnic homeland after nearly two centuries of exile (Antonova 2013). It is worth noting that with an estimated 12.3 million immigrants, the Russian Federation is the second-
Certainly, the most aggressive attempts at preserving the Russian language beyond Russia come from the Russkiy Mir Foundation, described by one scholar as “the most concerted effort to date at conceptualizing a notion of ‘Russianness’ that transcends ethnic bloodlines and geographical boundaries” (Horvath 2011, 30). The ethos of Russkiy Mir is decidedly international in its scope and focused on the “promotion of Russian culture and Russian language as a global language” with the aim of “bringing the world together,” which Hudson (2013) describes as a form of civilization—“meta-politics.” Heartily backed by the Kremlin and a new cadre of political technologists in the Putin administration, Russky Mir has set up shop not only in post-Soviet space and major world capitals, but in some less likely locales as well including Guayaquil, Ecuador and Bangkok, Thailand. While it is clear that Russkiy Mir is focused on extending Russian’s geolinguistic presence in new parts of the globe, the primary focus remains the traditional spaces of Russophonia as more than one-third of all centers are located in the former Soviet Union, with roughly the same number located in former Soviet satellites. According to the organization’s web site:

The Russkiy Mir Foundation has undertaken an international cultural project to develop Russian Centers in partnership with educational organizations around the world. The Foundation’s Russian Centers are created with the aim of popularizing Russian language and culture as a crucial element of world civilization, supporting Russian language study programs abroad, developing cross-culture dialog and strengthening understanding between cultures and peoples.

Russkiy Mir’s eighty centers around the world (see Appendix 2) facilitate Russian-language learning through print and digital publications, distance learning facilities, arts programs, cultural events, and support services for educators. Such efforts seemed to be aimed at shifting Russian from its Soviet-era identity as the language of “interethnic communication” within the socialist realm to an idiom that commands the status of a genuine “global language,” partially if not totally depoliticized and delinked from the Russian Federation.

While Russkiy Mir’s work is closely modeled on preexisting cultural-linguist outreach efforts employed by Germany (Goethe-Institut), China (Confucius Institute), and the UK (British Council), its partner, Rossotrudnichestvo—or the Federal Agency for the Affairs of the CIS States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation—is a bit different. Rossotrudnichestvo’s mission is explicitly political, proudly dedicated to integration efforts across the CIS, “formation of a positive image of Russia abroad,” and protecting the “linguistic and cultural needs” of Russia’s 20 million compatriots living outside the country (Rossotrudnichestvo 2013). Established in 2008, the autonomous federal government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs operates fifty-nine centers of science and culture, with plans to open thirty-five additional ones by 2015; by 2020, the organization plans to have a presence in 100 countries (ITAR-TASS 2012; RMF 2012b). Organizations like Rossotrudnichestvo, the International Council of Russian Compatriots, and the Rodina Association provide support to Russophones living outside of Russia, but increasingly, they also expect something in return from “compatriots,” i.e., active social and professional activities intended to preserve the Russian language and Russian culture in their states of residence (Horvath 2011; Ćwikł-Karpowicz 2012).

Taken together, the activities of Russkiy Mir and Rossotrudnichestvo represent two planks of a worldwide campaign by Russia to expands its influence through the vehicle of the Russian language, an effort made clear by President of the International Association of Russian Language and Literature Teachers and Chair of the Russkiy Mir Foundation Board of Trustees, Lyudmila Verbitskaya, in 2012 when she stated: “The well-coordinated work of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, foreign Russian specialists, language experts of Russia and Rossotrudnichestvo should facilitate the realization of our dream – the planet should start speaking Russian” (RMF 2012c). While Russia’s current status as a genuine “global language,” partially if not totally depoliticized and delinked from the Russian Federation, the Putin administration, Russkiy Mir has set up shop not only in post-Soviet space and major world capitals, but in some less likely locales as well including Guayaquil, Ecuador and Bangkok, Thailand. While it is clear that Russkiy Mir is focused on extending Russian’s geolinguistic presence in new parts of the globe, the primary focus remains the traditional spaces of Russophonia as more than one-third of all centers are located in the former Soviet Union, with roughly the same number located in former Soviet satellites. According to the organization’s web site:

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Moscow’s new obsession with “soft power”—part of which hinges on use of the Russian language—reflects an attempt at postmodern statecraft, but one that often leaves much to be desired (see, for instance, Kudors 2010; Gorham 2011; Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012; Roslycky 2012; Ćwikł-Karpowicz 2012; Kosachev 2012b). Since 2005, Russia has shifted from what was half-jokingly referred to as the Monroeski Doctrine (Smith 1993) to a new political repertoire of state-supported efforts which have demonstrated at least a basic understanding of the tenets of Joseph Nye’s soft power thesis. More recently, the Kremlin has embraced the notion of “nation branding” (Anholt 2002; Gudjonsson 2005; Dinnie 2008) for similar purposes,
making the “attractiveness quotient” or Q-score an explicit part of its public diplomacy. With its rather late start to the “new kind of race” that is nation branding and the realization that Russia’s image abroad was “much worse than the actual state of affairs” (Lebedenko 2004), the international image and reputation of Russia has finally emerged as a “matter of importance” in the country (Ostapenko 2008). Consequently, the Kremlin has made PR an “extremely important element of Russian foreign policy” (Feklyunina 2008, 612), engaging the global public relations firm Ketchum to spruce up its image in 2006 and more recently dropping millions on advertising supplements entitled “Russia: Beyond the Headlines.” These Western-focused efforts have even more robust corollaries within post-Soviet Eurasia.

By promoting “common humanitarian values” across the “multinational Eurasian region” while attempting to disabuse its CIS partners of its imperial ambitions (Feklyunina 2008), the aim has been to renew bonds broken by the dissolution of the Soviet Union; however, it is clear that post-colonialism continues to shape not only non-Russian attitudes towards such policies, but the orientation of the (former) colonizers as well (Hudson 2013). Regarding this new vector, Vladimir Frolov, an independent political consultant, stated in 2005 that “Russia will try to have an impact on the events in neighboring countries by means of cultural initiatives and humanitarian cooperation, or in other words, by using soft power, as political scientist Joseph Nye called it. Russia’s projects to promote culture and education remain one of the few effective tools for influencing governments in the CIS. They do not spark violent accusations that Russia is indulging its imperial ambitions” (Frolov 2005).

Language is the base upon which the success or failure of this new vector succeeds. Sounding hopeful, President Putin declared in 2007, “As the common heritage of many peoples, the Russian language will never become the language of hatred or enmity, xenophobia or isolationism” (qtd. in Babich 2007). Yet, despite Russian’s purported inoculation against anything untoward, the close linkage between language and power is problematic primarily because of Russia’s tendency to treat the geographical sphere where the Russian language remains the dominant medium of communication as the true political border of the Russian state (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012). Such behavior, if sustained, could prove a poison pill for the realization of “global Russian.” However, it appears that disentangling these two threads is not on the horizon if we are to take Konstantin Kosachev’s recent statements as a harbinger of the future. The head of Russotrudnichestvo recently penned an article in Russia in Global Affairs in which he declared:

The popularity of the Russian language in the world is a key advantage [though] it is not yet a fully developed and fully tapped resource of Russian soft power…. Theoretically everyone knows that the Russian language is “great and powerful,” but in practice we often refer to it as a language which is “losing ground.” Ensuring mere supply is insufficient for having more Russian language learners; we also need to work to increase the demand (Kosachev 2012b).

He goes on to insist that Russian-language fluency, rather than a tool for developing international understanding and promoting peace (official mottos of Russkiy Mir) or something to be valued in its own right, should be yoked to Russia’s political and economic aims for the future. Clearly, it appears that the future Russian’s geolinguistic situation in ineluctably linked to the political trajectory of Moscow.

Appendix
### Appendix 1: Russophones by country


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total no. of Russian speakers</th>
<th>% of population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russian Federation</td>
<td>137,000,000</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>9,359,000</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>1,900,000</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>3,100,000</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>37,225,000</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>14,300,000</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>2,705,000</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>978,000</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>3,850,000</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Ossetia</td>
<td>49,000</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>2,050,000</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
<td>6,350,000</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>17,000,000</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abkhazia</td>
<td>145,000</td>
<td>60%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>2,700,000</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>3,600,000</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Svalbard (Norway)</td>
<td>870</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolia</td>
<td>1,040,000</td>
<td>33%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>1,570,000</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>9,900,000</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmenistan</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>2,100,000</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>1,100,000</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>3,900,000</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>350,000</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>2,900,000</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>600,000</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>48,000</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Location of Russian Centers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Russian Center(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>Russian Center in Yerevan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Russian Center in Innsbruck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
<td>Russian Center in Baku</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Leuven, Mens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Plovdiv, Sofia, Varna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Beijing, Changshaun, Dalian, Guangzhou, Macau, Shanghai, Xi'an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>Russian Center in Havana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>Russian Center in Prague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>Russian Center in Guayaquil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Russian Center in Tallinn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Russian Center in Helsinki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Dresden, Nuremberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Russian Center in Thessaloniki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Budapest, Pécs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Russian Center in Ramat gan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Pisa, Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Russian Center in Hakodate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Russian Center in Amman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Almaty, Astana, Us-Kamenogorski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Bishkek, Kost, Osh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Riga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Saulcif, Vilnius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Bălți, Chișinău, Comrat, Tirașpol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolia</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Ulan Bator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>Russian Center in Nikšić</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Russian Center in Groningen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>Russian Center in Pyongyang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Krakow, Lublin, Siaulia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian Federation</td>
<td>Russiank Mähr Auditorsium at People’s Friendship University and at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Belgrade, Novi Sad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Russian Center in Bratislava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>Russian Center in Maribor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Busan, Seoul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>Russian Center in Dushanbe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Russian Center in Bangkok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Russian Center in Ankara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, Kherson, Kharkov, Kiev, L'viv, Odessa, Smerepol, Rivne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Russian Centers in Edinburgh, London, Oxford</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

[1] According to Karavaev (2008), “In Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova in the near term will be no major reduction of the share of the population who speak Russian. In contrast, in Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Estonia, it can predicted that a rather serious weakening of the Russian language will occur.”

[2] Trasianka refers to low quality hay, typically a mixture of fresh grass and straw. There is some debate among linguists regarding its potion as a creole or patois, as opposed to an interlanguage (see Ioffe 2008).

[3] As Rowe (2011) points out, the introduction of the Cyrillic alphabet was a calculated political move to prevent the consumption of prerevolutionary texts, to better aid the study of Russian (the intended lingua franca of the USSR), and more easily facilitate the linguistic drawing together (sblizhenie) of nations by standardizing representation of certain Russian words across the languages of the Soviet union. This move symbolizes the paradoxes of linguistic policy in the USSR; in the 1920s, the so-called “alphabet of revolution” (i.e., the Latin script) enjoyed promotion across the USSR, with 68 national languages adopting the orthography with the stated aim of integrating the various Soviet peoples into the global mainstream via a writing system more conducive to international communication. Even Russian saw a partial shift towards Latinization of its alphabet, though the experiment was cut short by Lenin’s death. Of all the alphabets of the Soviet peoples, only those of the Georgians and the Armenians were left as is during the early Soviet period (Alpatov 2013).

[4] A recent move by Azerbaijan’s Terminology Commission, established in 2012, to disallow names of Russian origin, e.g., Ekaterina, Maria, and Dmitri, continues to reflect a high level of sensitivity to linguistic issues in the fledging republic (see Leveille 2013).
[5] During the Soviet period (following the earlier tsarist model), Jewishness functioned as an ethnic category distinct from religious affiliation. Beginning in 1932, the fifth line of all Soviet citizens’ internal passports listed nationality; Soviets of mixed parentage could select either parent’s nationality upon the age of majority. This policy was rescinded in Russia in 1997, although the conception of Jews as “non-Russians” remains commonplace across the former Soviet Union.

[6] The Gagauz people, for whom the autonomous region is named, are ethnically Turkic, speaking a variant of the Oghuz branch of the Turkic language. Historically, they are Orthodox Christians, thus distinguishing them from other Turkic peoples in the Black Sea region. The tendency towards Russianization is much stronger among the Gagauz than ethnic Moldovans.

[7] The author witnessed an abrupt shift in signage upon arriving in the city in the summer of 2012. Whereas in Tel Aviv, English is easily the second most common language for signage (after Hebrew), in Ariel, English is comparatively absent and Russian language signs can be found in nearly every walk of life.

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