



Game of Languages!

Understanding the current status of Russian language at the post-soviet realm

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At the popular TV series "Game of Thrones" there are seven noble families fighting to control the Iron Throne of Westeros. In the post-soviet realm there is currently an intense ongoing competition amongst some National Languages and Ethnic Idioms due to the collapse of Russian as lingua franca after the transformational events of December 1991.

The Queen of the Soviet multiethnic empire: Russian language

Russia has lived two transitional moments in less than 100 years. Although the majority of scholars focus solely on the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation, we have also to consider the earlier transition from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union. Any close examination of the extraordinary events happening from 1917 to 1923 will show a transitional momentum that was consolidated with the project to engineer the "New Soviet Man".

The monumental task was entrusted in Narkompros, the *People's Commissariat of Enlightenment* who "devised a new pedagogy, the 'Complex Method', which would not teach just academic subjects, but life itself" (Husband, 2009: 334). It is important to stress out that the 'Complex Method' failed to meet some of its goals, but allowed to pluck the seeds to instrumentalized Nationalism in order to organize and pacify and immense sociopolitical space under a common flag.

In the 1930's the Soviet leaders triggered a series of legislative initiatives in order to use nationhood as a prerogative to organize sub-state ethnonational collectivities. In 1932 the birth nationality became a mandatory element printed at the passport of



each Soviet Union citizen. In the subsequent years several other measures were implemented. The Soviet Kremlin supported "the cultivation of a large number of distinct national cadres (...); the deliberate policy of nation-building, aimed at the consolidation of non-Russian nations (...); the cultivation and codification of a large number of national languages; and the development of an elaborate system of schooling, including higher education, in non-Russian languages" (Brubakers, 2009: 29).

The empowerment of Russians and Russian Culture inside the Soviet Union continues to puzzle historians and researchers. On one side the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic was the most active political and economic arena of the entire Soviet Union, but on the other side, due to its size, this was also "the nation with the greatest potential to upset Bolshevik policy" (Service, 1997: 134) of ethno-territorial federalism. It is known that Lenin always feared Russian chauvinism.

In the first years of the Soviet Union, under the auspices of the New Economic Policy, Russians "were [indeed] the nationality most tightly restricted in their cultural self-expression" (Service, 1997: 134) with authors like Dostoevski banned from schools and bookstores. But with the rise of Stalin to power there was a gradual shift that allowed Russians to capture significant prominence inside the Soviet Union. In the end of the 1930's, with another global war on the verge, "Russians were indeed the dominant nationality, effectively controlling key party and state institutions; and Russian was promoted by the state as its *lingua franca*" (Brubakers: 2009: 28-29).

What the Soviet Union designed was a system of double tension between ethnonational crystallization at a local level and *soft* Russification at a state level. The institutional process of *korenizatsia* (nativization) was intentionally built with a deficit: the "Soviet power never gave legitimate expression to the national aspirations of the peoples who were subordinated to it" (Dunlop, 1997: 7). To sum up, the Soviet Union build up cultural ethno-nations voided of political strength.

The fact that Russian was chosen as *lingua franca* had a clear political intention: Russians were elevated to the status of sociopolitical elite inside the Soviet Union. All non-Russian ethno-nations were allowed to express themselves in cultural terms, as long as they kept theirs politicization on a permanent state of frozenness. The politics of ethnonational development were only an intermediary state towards the *slyianie* (merging of nations), that would manufacture an equalized and homogenized



sociopolitical space. The *slyianie* process was conceived as the epitome of the Soviet Union Civilizational project.

Language, specifically Russian language, was used as a tool to colonize an immense multinational space. It is important to underline that the Soviet Union was only a colonial space *de facto*, in which the colonizer and the colonized interacted at a multilevel scale, and not *de jure*. Russian language was indeed quintessential to harmonize this multinational sociopolitical project since "language usage includes major symbolic aspects of identity as well as pragmatic communication requirements" (Armstrong, 2005: 189).

The mere fact that Russian was chosen as *lingua franca* of a common space that spread from Riga to Tashkent, or in a more macro perspective from Prague to Ulan Bator, was a symbol of the immense value of Russians and their Culture. Only a strong and powerful language could have been chosen for this humongous task. Russian language was not only powerful enough but also flexible enough to assimilate the natural linguistic idiosyncrasies of the non-Russian citizens.

Let us return to the argument that Russian language use as *lingua franca* inside the Soviet Union territoriality had also a colonizing dimension. By learning the Russian language the non-Russians were immersed in a process of multilevel russification. Russian language teaching to non-Russians, inside the Soviet Union, was focused not only on instructing the spelling and writing system, but had also in account cultural, social and historical elements partially recovering the "Complex Method" of Narkompros.

The multidimensionality of the teaching process, regarding Russian language to non-Russian citizens, had its foundation in the conception that "linguistic assimilation to the Russian language was (...) the essential equivalent of psychological assimilation" (Kaiser, 1997: 15). In other words, the learning of the Russian language had simultaneously an instrumental function of russification of non-Russian peoples.

It was through the process of linguistic assimilation that the Soviet Union manufactured a non-formal colonial space. Russian as a *lingua franca* of this multi-ethnonational space was not only a necessary device to allow communication between more than 200 different communities, but, and more significantly, it had a colonizing purpose. Consequently "the process of decolonization entails the transition from a Soviet multiethnic empire to the establishment of post-colonial sovereign states" (Smith, 1999: 6) with their own national languages; in some cases, these new national



languages are the same ones developed under the Soviet program of *korenizatsia* (nativization).

Despite this nationalization of certain territorialities and politicization of several national and ethnonational communities, Russian language could have maintained its status as *lingua franca*. India's independence from the United Kingdom colonial rule did not change locally the relevance of the English language as well as the independence of the Latin American countries did not diminished the regional impact of the Spanish and Portuguese languages.

A Princess among others! Russian language in the post-soviet space

With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 more than twenty States entered in a phase of transition towards a new and uncertain future. In the 1990's the same political elites crafted by the Soviet Union *korenizatsia* (nativization) processes had to face two major challenges: 1.) to justify the politicization of a certain group in a certain territoriality; 2.) to give substance and meaning to the group in itself. Both these processes had to happen simultaneously.

The manufacturing of a National or Ethnonational identity is a multidimensional process in which several dynamics interact to create the idea of "Us". Although all dynamics have some sort of significance, Cultural dynamics have a more prominent role in the process of National or Ethnonational identity building.

We have to reflect on the fact that "Culture is important in the making of ethnic [or national] groups, but it is more important for providing *post facto* content to group identity" (Horowitz, 2000: 69). In a circular perspective it is through Culture that the ethno-national groups justify their own existence; the same existence that initiates that same Culture.

Language has a quintessential role within those Cultural phenomena regarding ethno-national identity building, across the post-soviet space. In this regard we agree with the notion that "Language as group marker has more social and psychological weight than does dress code" (Nash, 1989: 12), since the process of learning a new Language is also a process of acculturation.

The strong interconnection between Language, ethnonational identity building dynamics and the politicization of those ethnonational groups is summarized by Joshua Fishman (2009: 67) when he argues that "Eastern Europe [as well as the



remainder post-soviet spaces] exemplifies how ethnic authenticity has been used for new 'collective' purposes and how language has been used to authenticate those purposes and maximize their attainment".

Let us now move to a more practical approach. Two central questions will guide us from now on: 1.) Was the Russian language able to keep its status as *lingua franca*? 2.) What is the relation between Russian language, now a foreign language in several post-soviet states, and the national languages of the post-soviet states?

In Central Europe "Russian has been the bigger loser (...) struggling for third or fourth places after English, German and sometimes French" (Fodor, Peluau, 2003: 97). In Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary the teaching of English and German languages has gained an enormous preeminence. Although the teaching of Russian language was mandatory until 1991 "lack of motivation as well as antipathy toward the Soviet model led to a more or less conscious refusal to learn Russian" (Fodor, Peluau, 2003: 87), making easier the transition to learn other foreign languages.

Russian language impact at the Balkans was always residual. It is important to remember that Stalin and Tito had a disagreement in 1948 after which the Yugoslav Communist Party "promoted a Yugoslav identity anchored in a unified Serbo-Croatian language" (Greenberg, 2004: 18), mandatory initial step to create a sense of homogeneity in a highly ethno-complex space. With the implosion of the Soviet Union, Russian language remained residual with English, German and Italian languages has the most popular and widespread foreign idioms.

At the Baltic States (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) language policies have two separate goals. First and foremost "Baltic States are attempting to redefine their languages from a minority status that they had *de facto* acquired (...) to a full national status as the language of state and administration, and of most social discourse" (Ozolins, 1994: 161). Baltic elites firmly believe in the need to protect their own national languages.

This psychosocial need to protect national languages were in the basis of the result of Latvia's Referendum in which "Latvians have resoundingly rejected the option of making Russian the country's second official language" (*BBC News*, 2012). Despite this result and even despite the staggering progress regarding the learning of English, it is the Russian language that continues to be used as *lingua franca* at a domestic (to allow the interaction between national majorities and Russian minorities), regional (to ease interstate communication) and international level.



This sort of resistance to the Russian language is much lower, if existent, at the Eastern Europe countries. In July 2012, Russian language status was upgraded in Ukraine. A parliamentary bill "recognized Russian as a "regional" language in predominantly Russian-speaking areas, enabling its use in the public service" (Polityuk, *Reuters*, 2012).

In Belarus the post-soviet state with the strongest socio-cultural liaison to Russia "the majority of the population prefers to use Russian, although they declare to be ethnically Belarusian" (Giger, Sloboda, 2008: 315). In Moldova things are a little more complex due to a "high degree of uncertainty and contention about the identity of the majority language (Romanian or Moldovan)" (Ciscel, 2008: 373). The two belligerent languages compete also with Russian, perceived as a colonial language. Despite this quarrel, Russian language maintains its status as *lingua franca* in Moldova, mostly because of the linguistic impasse regarding the selection and crystallization of a national language.

At the Caucasus, in the core of the Eurasian space, "Russian is challenged by both the ongoing comeback of vernacular languages and, as the area opens up ever further to the outside world, a growing command of English" (Lomsadze, 2012, *Eurasianet.org*) and Turkish. We have to consider at first the fact that Russian communities at the ethno-complex South Caucasus are not significant in numbers.

Cumulatively in the South Caucasus national-building processes are strongly used by the local political elites that have always resented the "absorption" into the Russian Empire. The low numbers of Russians living at the South Caucasus and the nationalizing programs supported by the local authorities are the main reason why "Russian is in steep decline across the region" (Nixey, 2012: 7). The Russian language decline is also facilitated due to "restrictions placed on Russian language broadcasting and increased interest in other languages" (Nixey, 2012: 7) like English and Turkish.

The situation at Central Asia differs from the Caucasus in one key aspect: while in the South Caucasus sovereignty was the goal to achieve in between 1989 - 1991, in Central Asia sovereignty was not an objective of the political elites. Independence came by due to the *domino effect* and to the chaotic transformations that the Russian Federation underwent in the 1990's.

Political elites, across Central Asia, tried also to impose national-building practices that "included elevating the titular language to that of the State language while the language of the redesignated colonizer was consigned to a secondary role" (Smith,



1999: 91). Russian, we can see already, was never marginalized or substituted by other foreign languages.

In other words “despite the efforts by nationalist elites in the Soviet successor states to squeeze out Russian language from public and social life, millions still prefer to converse and do business in Russian” (Tsygankov, 2006: 1083). There are however two potential challengers to the Russian language dominance across Central Asia: Turkish and Chinese.

In the 1990's with the demise of the USSR there was a firm belief that Turkey would have a strong ascendant over Central Asia, since the majority of the titular nationalities are of Turkish-descent with Turkish-based idioms. Turkish Centers and Turkish Universities mushroomed, as well as Turkish stores and even some banks (like the *DemirBank*) appeared through the landscape. Despite all that initial fuzz, what time demonstrated was a strong capacity for the Russian language to endure, majorly due to the legacy of the Soviet educational system.

Nowadays there is something of that sort happening with the Chinese language. But for the moment “it looks like China is going to become another Turkey - a strong trading partner, and a source of goods and services... but not a controlling cultural influence” (Foust, 2011, *Registan*), with that role exclusively reserved for the Russian language and Culture.

What can we conclude? On the contrary to what is commonly perceived Russian is not losing its place as lingua franca across the post-soviet space. We have to acknowledge that the impact of Russian language at Central Europe and at the Balkans is residual, but it was always residual. Russian language as a stronger presence at Eastern Europe and the Baltics majorly because those regions have significant Russian communities, and also due to the historical legacy that comes from the enlargement of the Russian Empire.

Despite that, Russian language faces numerous challenges to keep its status at the Eastern Europe and the Baltics. The biggest challenger in those regions it's the English language. English language provides a new idiom that eases communication, has global impact and that does not have any colonizing feature. Equally at the South Caucasus, Russian language is losing its prominence apace with English and Turkish languages attracting more and more new bilingual speakers. In Central Asia, Russian language maintains a strong presence despite the significant influences coming from Turkey and China.



So there is indeed a game of languages ongoing at the post-soviet space, and for the moment no one can say who will win the final battle. The Kremlin is prepared to fight to keep its crown. In this regard "Russia has devised the 'Russian language' federal program led by Lyudmila Putin, the president's wife" (Tsygankov, 2006: 1083). It is too soon to know the results of this program. What we can say is that Russian authorities know that the game is on and they are prepared to play it.

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