

Journal on Ethnopolitics
and Minority Issues in
Europe

Vol 23, Issue 1
2024
pp. 106-109

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.53779/VIAY0612>

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Book Review: Politics of the Russian Language Beyond Russia

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Politics of the Russian Language Beyond Russia

Edited by Christian Noack

Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

ISBN 9781474463805 (paperback); ISBN 9781474463799
(hardback); ISBN 9781474463843 (eBook – ePub); ISBN
9781474463812 (eBook – PDF)

The book *Politics of the Russian Language Beyond Russia*, edited by Christian Noack, is a series of academic publications devoted to the topic of Russian soft politics abroad, in particular to its linguistic pillar. The goal of the book is to give a “linguistic turn” to the modern debates taking place in the frame of Russian studies. It is of an asset that the series of articles does not only analyse past relationships with the former Soviet countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, but also gives a broader picture of the influence of linguistic policy, and does an in-depth research of discourse analysis and identity building of Russian-speakers in Ireland and Germany, thus trying to profile

the Russian diaspora abroad. Furthermore, the authors bring their readers to the discussion on the heterogeneity of the Russian-speaking population and the perspectives of the “Russian world” in the future.

The book is structured in two main blocks: some of the publications discuss the outcomes of already-conducted projects aimed at identifying the interconnection between language and identity-building processes (e.g., Chapters 1, 4, and 5); others underline the role of Russian cultural representations such as *Russkii Mir* and *Rossotrudnichestvo* that are responsible for cultural and linguistic politics abroad (e.g., Chapters 2, 3, 6, and 9).

Already in the introductory part, Christian Noack claims that “since 2007, non-governmental foundations like *Russkii Mir Foundation*, and a new branch of the Foreign Ministry named the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (or *Rossotrudnichestvo* for short), have been created to rebrand Russia internationally” (Noack, 2021a, p. 2).

Noack underlines the role of such organizations in the reconstruction of the public image and perception of the Russian Federation abroad, but wrongly associates *Russkii Mir Foundation* with non-governmental foundations questioning its independence from the Russian government: *Russkii Mir Foundation* was established in 2007 by the Presidential Decree which particularly mentions that its founders are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (similarly to the above-mentioned *Rossotrudnichestvo*) and the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation (President of the Russian Federation, 2007). It is remarkable that the goal of the Foundation is not only to “mainstream the Russian language, which is a national treasure of Russia and an important element of Russian and world culture” (Russkiy Mir, 2022),¹ but also to provide financial assistance to other NGOs and organizations promoting Russian language and culture abroad (Russkiy Mir, 2022), which advances cooperation between *Russkii Mir* and contractors from abroad in case of intersecting goals and thus gives an opportunity to multiply the effects of Russian soft power. Such an intense political involvement clearly shows the political will of the Russian government to unify ‘compatriots’ from all over the world based on a common language (Russian as a *lingua franca*) and culture, and thus be able to influence identity-building and adherence to the Russian values ‘from above’.

¹ Translated by the author.

The topic of unification of the Russian-speaking ‘compatriots’ abroad is well-developed by Michał Wawrzonek in the first chapter of the book, ‘The “Russian World” and Ukraine’, where he mentions the importance of the unification of ‘compatriots’ abroad for Russia, the seemingly failed attempts of unification in Ukraine and the repeated presidential claims about the necessity of protecting the rights and interests of fellow citizens. However, the author does not comment on “another side of the coin” – the adjustment in 2014 of Article 6 of the Federal Law of May 31, 2002 No. 62 National Legislation “On Citizenship of the Russian Federation” (Dulkarnaev, 2020) that forced every Russian citizen living abroad to register at the migration office in Russian Federation during the first 30 days after crossing the border into Russia. Moreover, Russian citizens possessing foreign passports/residence permits abroad had to provide the state office with copies of all foreign ID documents (passport or residence permit, along with clarifications on the address of residence abroad, etc.). Inability to register (due to e.g. short-term stay in Russia) or unwillingness to do so fell under Art. 330.2 of the Russian Criminal Code introduced the same year (Russian Criminal Code, 2024). It assigned the legal consequences for breaching this law as either fines of up to 200,000 Russian roubles (equivalent to 4,160 euro in 2014) or up to 400 hours of compulsory community service (Russian Criminal Code, 2024). Thus, on the one hand, the carrot and the stick policy concerning ‘compatriots’ living abroad is aimed at bringing up the neo-imperial ideology of common adherence to the same culture and language, but on the other hand it has targeted possible ‘fifth columns’ living abroad through the imposition of real financial burdens and conduction of legal persecutions.

It seems that adherence to Russian culture and fluency in the Russian language are the key identity-building blocks that organizations such as *Russkii Mir* and *Rossotrudnichestvo* are appealing to in trying to mobilize the Russian diaspora abroad, which makes the concept of the Russian world less attractive for the new generation of Russian speakers. In the final chapter of this book, “The Russian World in Perspective”, Noack also mentions that the tools used by *Russkii Mir* and *Rossotrudnichestvo* are rather old-fashioned and rely on the quantitative measurement of the efficiency of the Russian institutions (Noack, 2021b, p. 235), which also confirms their rigidity and justifies their conservative approach to multiculturalism and multilingualism.

The generalized approach of the Russian government to the Russian diaspora abroad leaves little space for adaptation to a multicultural environment or acceptance of a complex multi-layered identity of Russian speakers. Hence, it is of great importance that such topics as

the sociolinguistics and the linguo-cultural peculiarities of the Russian-speaking diaspora are to be further developed and introduced to a broader audience.

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