

Problem with Russian Speakers: How the Soviet Nationality Policies Created and Reinforced Contradicting Views on Linguistic Identities

Rusça Konuşanlar Sorunu: Sovyet Milliyet Politikaları, Dilsel Kimlikler Üzerindeki Çelişkili Görüşleri Nasıl Yarattı ve Pekiştirdi*

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Abstract

This article discusses how Soviet nationality policies have continued to influence nation-building efforts in post-Soviet states in relation to the region's sociolinguistic situation and the question of language use. Despite the Soviet Union's dissolution, the region remains shaped by its legacies, particularly by the tension between ethnolinguistic nationalism and multilingual social reality. This tension also manifests in the political narratives of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The article argues that the tension stems from Soviet policies that promoted immutable ethnolinguistic identities as the basis of nation-building while simultaneously fostering freedom of language choices and welcoming linguistic assimilation. This contradiction continues to complicate post-Soviet efforts to reconcile national identity with linguistic diversity. The article provides a historical account of Soviet policies, emphasizing their linguocentric nature and contradictory character. It concludes by discussing the challenges that post-Soviet states face in balancing national language policies with the sociolinguistic realities inherited from the Soviet era

Keywords: Language Policy, Nation-building, Russian speakers, Soviet Union.

Özet

Bu makale, Sovyet milliyet politikalarının, bölgenin sosyodilbilimsel durumu ve dil kullanımı meselesi bağlamında, Sovyet sonrası devletlerdeki ulus inşa çabalarını nasıl etkilemeye devam ettiğini tartışmaktadır. Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasına rağmen, bölge hâlâ Sovyet mirasıyla şekillenmiş olup, özellikle etnodilsel milliyetçilik ile çokdilli toplumsal gerçeklik arasındaki gerilimle belirlenmektedir. Bu gerilim, aynı zamanda devam eden Rusya-Ukrayna çatışmasının siyasi anlatılarında da kendini göstermektedir. Makale, bu gerilimin, Sovyet politikalarının ulus inşasının temeli olarak değişmez etnodilsel kimlikleri teşvik ederken, aynı zamanda dil seçim özgürlüğünü destekleyip dilsel asimilasyona açık olmalarından kaynaklandığını savunmaktadır. Bu çelişki, Sovyet sonrası devletlerin ulusal kimliği dilsel çeşitlilikle uzlaştırma çabalarını zorlaştırmaya devam etmektedir. Makale, Sovyet politikalarının tarihsel bir anlatımını sunarak, bu politikaların dil merkezli doğasına ve çelişkili karakterine vurgu yapmaktadır. Son olarak, Sovyet döneminden miras alınan sosyodilbilimsel gerçekliklerle ulusal dil politikalarını dengelemek konusunda Sovyet sonrası devletlerin karşılaştığı zorlukları tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dil politikası, Rusça Konuşanlar, Sovyetler Birliği, Ulus İnşası.

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1. Introduction

Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union over three decades ago, the fifteen independent states that emerged from its collapse are still commonly viewed as a unified region. This enduring perception is a testament to the continued influence of the Soviet era, both in material and ideological terms. The legacies of Soviet discourses and policies on nation-building and ethnic diversity management are particularly potent. They have shaped the paths of nationalization in post-Soviet republics, influenced minority-majority relations, and molded public attitudes toward national and ethnic identities. One of the aspects of this Soviet legacy that occupies a relatively less conspicuous place in academic discussions is its enduring influence on the current sociolinguistic landscape of the region and on the ways in which local elites and masses alike tend to interpret this landscape. The predominantly ethnolinguistic understanding of the nation coexists in the region with the notion of individual and group language rights, freedom of language choices and a plethora of multilingual institutions. The resulting tension is apparent. Nationhood is closely tied to ethnicity and defined primarily in linguistic terms, which implies that national and language identities should be congruent with each other. However, the enduring multilingual institutional framework and the freedom of language choices go against any form of state engineering that would reverse such sociolinguistic tendencies as the spread of assimilated bilingualism, linguistic Russification, and the emergence of sizeable numbers of Russian speakers—people of non-Russian ethnonational background with Russian as their first language.

This tension has been visible in claims and narratives surrounding one of the most critical events in the recent political history of the post-Soviet region—the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict. On February 21, 2022—less than three days before the invasion—Russian President Vladimir Putin made an address to the nation concerning Russia's imminent recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (Kremlin, 2022). In this speech, Putin challenged the validity of the modern Ukrainian nation, questioned the legitimacy of Ukraine's political system, and stressed the detrimental effect of Western meddling on Ukraine's relations with Russia. Among other things, he also mentioned the topics of state-imposed de-Russification, forced (linguistic) assimilation, and violation of language rights. These issues have never disappeared from the official Russian narrative on the conflict. As recently as September 2024, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov lamented the absence of discussions on rights for Russian speakers from various peace initiatives on the conflict and reiterated the importance of this subject (TASS, 2024).

Similarly, language-related issues have been integral to Ukraine's official narratives about the invasion and war against Russia. The question of the existence of large numbers of Russian-speaking Ukrainians and its implications for Ukraine's official language policy and the promotion of the Ukrainian language as the titular language of the Ukrainian nation-state has been present in the public discourse throughout the country's independence. However, the Russian invasion introduced a sense of urgency to this topic. In the words of Ukraine's State Language Protection Commissioner Taras Kremen, the language question is also part of the struggle against Russian aggression and a marker that helps distinguish "us" from "them." The term "Russian speakers" is the product of Russian ideology, which should not be used in discussions on language rights, and Ukrainians who speak Russian as their first language should commit to switching to the Ukrainian language (Radio Svoboda, 2023).

In view of such seemingly incompatible stances on the issue, this article intends to address the following research question: What are historical roots and ideational foundations that account for the continuing coexistence of contradictory views on the role of language and language identity in nation-building in the region? The article argues that such stances on the question of language and the problem of Russian speakers both have their common origin in the nature of the nationality policies and ideologies of the Soviet Union. The article contributes to the nascent academic discussion on the nationalities question in the USSR and the post-Soviet region by highlighting the continuing tension that inevitably arises from the coexistence of ethnolinguistic understanding of nationhood, promotion of linguistic Russification, and the existence of Russian speakers with non-Russian ethnic backgrounds in the post-Soviet republics. The article explicates this argument by providing a historical account of prevailing approaches to the question of nationhood in the USSR with an emphasis on their connection to the issues of national languages, language choices, and linguistic identities. It suggests that the emergence of this tension can be explained by the fact that the definition of nations and nationalities adopted in the Soviet Union was—at least in its practical applications—extremely linguocentric and it has dictated the congruence of ethnonational identities with linguistic ones. However, while individual national identities were institutionalized as immutable and heritable characteristics, linguistic identities remained self-ascribed

and individual language choices were mostly voluntary. This contrast contributed to a noticeable and growing divergence between these two principles when applied to the ethnonational and linguistic landscape of the region to this day.

2. Bolsheviks' Approach to Nationalities Question

Why did the first socialist state turn to the active promotion and institutionalization of ethnocultural and linguistic heterogeneity despite the fact that classical Marxist doctrine was mostly suspicious or, at best, indifferent to the question of nationalism? The rise and proliferation of national movements in Central and Eastern Europe by the late 19th and early 20th century made it apparent that nationalism remained a relevant and explosive political ideology which required an intellectual response within the socialist camp. The attitudes of prominent socialist thinkers and political figures of that period varied but mostly fell within the two radically opposite perspectives. The first perspective, held by Rosa Luxemburg, shared the skepticism of classical Marxism and its view that nations were the product of capitalism—a false consciousness that masked the real struggle between economic classes (Smith, 1999, pp. 7). Once the capitalist system withered away, national differences became irrelevant. The second perspective was held by the group of Austrian socialists (Pipes, 1997, pp. 24-26). In their view, national differences transcended the capitalist state and class divisions. In fact, progress towards a socialist society would increase the role of ethnocultural differences as the only meaningful identity category once class differences disappeared. Consequently, some combination of federalism and non-territorial ethnocultural autonomy would be the political arrangement that best served a multiethnic/multinational socialist state.

Russian Bolsheviks were split in their views on the nationalities question but, as a rule, gravitated towards some form of a compromise between the two extremes because, having initially rejected ethnic federalism and cultural-national autonomy, they were well aware of the complexity and explosiveness of the situation with nationalism in the Russian Empire. Lenin's position seemed to be more in line with the classical Marxist view, but his policy preferences in this area were more flexible, pragmatic, and informed by specific political contexts (Lenin, 1913, pp. 143-150). Despite Stalin's criticism of the Austrian solution to the nationalities question through a combination of ethnic federalism and non-territorial cultural autonomy, his personal view on nations seemed to differ somewhat from that of Lenin and be more in line with the Austrian approach, as his ontologically objectivist definition of nation, coined in 1913, demonstrates: "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture" (Stalin, 1913, pp. 296). Unlike the Austrians, he did subscribe to the idea of the possible weakening and eventual disappearance of national differences: "It goes without saying that a nation, like every historical phenomenon, is subject to the law of change, has its history, its beginning and end." (Stalin, 1913, pp. 297).

However, Stalin envisioned a very long temporal horizon for the process of weakening and eventual disappearance of such national differences. During his years as the Commissar of Nationalities in Lenin's government, Stalin became a champion of ethnonational particularism, managed to defeat internal opposition on the issue, and turned this principle into the official policy of the young Bolshevik state. The Soviet Union was founded in 1922 as an ethnic federation in which all major ethnocultural groups received some territorial autonomy in the form of titular (i.e., bearing the same name as the corresponding ethnic group) republics, oblasts, okrugs, and autonomous regions. A plethora of official bodies, such as local communist party organizations and administrative, cultural, educational, and academic institutions, was established—often from scratch—to reflect this ethnic federal arrangement. At the individual level, one's ethnic origin became an important official category, recorded and tracked by the state, that served as a basis for affirmative action and positive discrimination, aiming at increasing titular representation in associated units, organizations, and institutions.

3. Nationality and Language in the Early USSR

From the very beginning, the nationalities question has been closely and organically linked to the question of language identity, language use, and the state's recognition of linguistic diversity. Despite ideological differences and preferred political responses to the nationalities question, at least limited satisfaction of language-related demands was viewed positively across the socialist camp (Smith, 1999, pp. 18-19). Russian socialists embraced the position that the state should provide language rights to linguistic minorities as early as 1904 (Stalin, 1904, pp. 32-55), and Lenin himself firmly opposed the idea of a single official language for the Russian state (Lenin, 1913, pp. 233-266). The Bolsheviks remained

principally committed to this position throughout and after the October Revolution (Suny, 1993, pp. 102) while flipping 180 degrees on the question of political autonomy and federalism, which ended up being the organizing principle of the Soviet Union. Having faced unprecedented nationalist resistance during the Civil War, Lenin and Stalin had to alter their pre-revolutionary positions regarding the scope of political concessions to the national movements. Lenin turned to the advocacy of federalism and the right of self-determination, whereas Stalin favored restricted autonomy only, which became the subject of a serious disagreement between the two in the early 1920s (Simon, 1991, pp. 22-23). Both also had to overcome a strong intra-party opposition, which was probably supported by the majority of rank-and-file Bolsheviks, in defining the nationalities policies of the newly founded Soviet state (Simon, 1991, pp. 240).

Support for local languages was driven by two practical considerations, bundled together with the idea of symbolically dismantling Great Russian chauvinism inflicted upon minorities during the czarist era. On the one hand, Bolsheviks had to appease national movements, which were closely associated with ethnocultural and linguistic revivalism vis-a-vis Russian cultural and linguistic domination. On the other hand, state-supported use of local languages would serve as a more relatable medium for disseminating socialist ideas and helping contain anti-Russian sentiments and secessionist demands. For Stalin, the provision of state support for local languages was the ultimate answer to national tensions:

“What concerns the national minority the most? The national minority is discontented with the absence of rights for the native language, not with the absence of the national [political] unit. Let it use its native language and the discontent will disappear of itself. The national minority is discontented with the absence of schooling in the native language, not with the absence of the national [political] unit. Provide it with such native schooling and the discontent will lose any ground” (Stalin, 1913, pp. 363).

Clearly, the language issue was an integral part of the discussion on nations and nation building early on and remained such in the following years. Stalin’s definition of nation, which subsequently became the standard definition was used and with minor modifications in the Soviet Union up until its dissolution (Tishkov, 2001, pp. 17), is valuable in this context. He highlights the commonality of language as the first characteristic that distinguishes a nation and rejects the possibility of a multilingual nation: “A common language for every nation, but not necessarily different languages for different nations! There is no nation that speaks several languages at once” (Stalin, 1913, pp. 294). Moreover, all other characteristics included in the seemingly objective definition, such as territory, economic life, psychological makeup, and common culture, are, in fact, much vaguer than the commonality of language.

Thus, the definition of nation was primarily linguistic, especially in its practical application to “stateless” nations and nationalities (Slezkine, 1994, pp. 427-428). At least partially, the focus on language could be explained by the fact that despite being a conspicuous identity marker, it remained a medium that could equally effectively channel any, including ideologically desirable, content (Slezkine, 1994, pp. 418). Moreover, the task of the Soviet government was to assist and encourage national development in native languages. Stalin’s response to a note regarding the artificial cultivation of a Belarusian nationality, which he received during the X Party Congress of 1921, is exemplary in this regard. Stalin stated that “that is not true, for there exists a Belorussian nation, which has its own language, different from Russian. Consequently, the culture of the Belorussian people can be raised only in its native language” (Smith, 1991, pp. 27). During the congress, Stalin also stated that the linguistic nativization of cities in Soviet republics, such as Ukraine, was an inevitable and desirable process (Simon, 1991, pp. 30). The congress marked the end of the intra-party debate on the future course of Soviet policies on nationalities and the official beginning of the Soviet policies of *korenizatsiia*—the promotion of national cadres in positions of administrative power, state support for education, publishing and cultural activities in national languages, development of cultural and educational institutions, such as national theaters, operas, universities, academies of sciences, etc. (Martin, 2001). In a sense, the Soviet Union began to function as a pseudo-federal state in which genuine political federalization was substituted by the encouragement of ethnocultural particularism.

Despite the overall focus on language and an essentially linguistic understanding of a nation at the collective level, at the individual level language and ethnic identity were treated as two separate categories. The population census, conducted after the formation of the Soviet Union, included separate questions on *natsionalnost* and native language immediately following each other. The census results mentioned 145 unique languages and 185 nationalities, derived from the lists prepared by the All-Union Academy of Science’s commission on research of the tribal composition of the USSR’s population (*Vsesoiuznaia Perepis Naseleniia*, 1928). The discrepancy in the census between the two categories

appears larger than it seems because the associated languages of some numerically small ethnic groups were not listed separately and because the census also included a number of ethnoreligious (Adjars/Muslim Georgians, Hemshins/Muslim Armenians, Kriashens/Christian Tatars, Karaites and Yezidi Kurds) and regional (Georgian and Central Asian Jews) identities. Subsequent institutional changes facilitated the formal separation of ethnic and linguistic identities. With the introduction of the Soviet passport system in 1932, nationality became a personal and virtually immutable characteristic, because it was assigned to individuals based on the nationality of their parents. Individual nationality was recorded in internal passports, military IDs, and birth certificates, as well as in various official forms and questionnaires (Tishkov, 2001, pp. 356). In contrast, language remained a self-reported category. The two identity categories did not match for a sizeable number of people already in 1926 when the first census was conducted. In and of itself, such a mismatch may not necessarily be considered a challenge of particular significance. However, it was perceived as a deviation from the norm, considered an anomaly so that such "denationalized" individuals were supposed to be encouraged to re-embrace their native languages.

The idea that national differences are supposed to weaken and eventually disappear under socialism, proclaimed by Lenin on multiple occasions, remained in the background, posing a looming threat to the future of Soviet nationalities and causing concerns among local elites. Stalin's response to Buryat comrades during his speech at the Communist University of the Tailors of the East in 1925 reflects an attempt to soothe the concerns:

Buryat comrades raise a question regarding the assimilation of certain nationalities in the process of building of a proletarian culture common to all humankind. Definitely, some nationalities can be subjected and, probably, will be subjected to assimilation. Such cases happened before in history. However, this process of assimilation of certain nationalities does not exclude but presupposes the opposite process of strengthening and developing of a number of living and evolving nations, for a particular process of assimilation of certain nationalities is the product of the general process of national development. This is why possible assimilation of some isolated nationalities does not negate but confirms the absolutely correct statement that a proletarian culture common to all mankind does not preclude but presupposes and feeds the national culture of peoples, in the same way as the national culture of peoples does not preclude but complements and enriches the universal proletarian culture (Stalin, 1925, pp. 140).

Therefore, in Stalin's view, while some isolated nationalities might assimilate, the general direction was of national flourishing, reflected in Soviet policies of the period. However, policies that encouraged ethnocultural differences were also questioned and criticized within the party ranks, for they clearly went against the expectation of the eventual weakening of national differences. In 1929, Stalin addressed this criticism in his response to letters by comrades Meshkov, Kovalchuk and others. In his response, Stalin claimed that the destruction of old bourgeoisie nations served as the fundament for the development of the new socialist nation that maintained the same national form. The victory of socialism in one state:

[D]oes not create conditions necessary for the merging of nations and national languages ... quite the opposite, this period creates favorable conditions for the revival and flourishing of nations, previously oppressed by the czarist imperialism and currently liberated from the national oppression by the Soviet revolution. The Soviet state should remain committed to the cultural development of its nations, carried in their national languages, because million-strong popular masses can only be successful in the matters of cultural, political and economic development in in the native, national language (Stalin, 1929, pp. 333-355).

Even after the ultimate global victory of socialism, the disappearance of separate nations (clearly closely dependent on linguistic assimilation and loss of national languages) will take place very gradually. When a common world-scale economy starts to shape, there will be a necessity for some form of linguistic unity, first in the form of a supplementary lingua franca at the global or perhaps at the regional level. Only at the final (and apparently extremely remote) stage, separate languages and nations will be replaced by some form of common language. Thus, Stalin's response watered down rather than resolved the contradictory nature of the official Soviet view on nationalities. It also demonstrated that the hypothetical merging of nations was understood mostly as linguistic assimilation, highlighting the dominance of the perception of an organic connection between a nation and its associated language.

Interestingly enough, the contemporary view of the Soviet state on the future of nationalities found its counterpart in the Soviet linguistics of the period when "the new teaching about language," pioneered and promoted by Nicholas Marr, gained its momentum. Although Marr's theses were originally unrelated

to the socialist doctrine, he successfully capitalized on the parallels between the two by selectively incorporating Marxist arguments into his writing and speeches throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Alpatov, 2004, pp. 68-69). “The new teaching about language” rejected the conventional genealogical approach to comparative linguistics and classification of languages into families as “bourgeois science” and postulated that language was a superstructure that reflected the class consciousness of its speakers (Alpatov, 2004, pp. 34-41). Therefore, lexical and grammatical evolutionary changes in languages could be explained by changes in underlying socioeconomic conditions; and formation of a new socialist society would bring about corresponding linguistic transformation. Although Marr died in 1934, his disciples—Ivan Meshchanin being the most prominent among them—remained influential in Soviet academic circles up until 1950, when Stalin himself openly dismissed Marrism for falsely claiming that languages originated in class continuousness (Stalin, 1950, pp. 104-138).

4. Change and Continuity at Discursive and Policy Levels

Neither the general principle of ethnonational pseudo-federalism nor assumptions and ideological arguments framing the nationalities question in the Soviet Union were fundamentally challenged, let alone successfully altered, in the decades that followed the 1920s (Slezkine, 1994, pp. 442). Soviet policies on nationalities and languages, however, underwent a turn since the beginning of the 1930s. By the 1930s, the center grew suspicious of the uncontrolled flourishing of national sentiments in titular republics, and respective national projects were scrutinized and decisively overhauled in order to be more reflective of the socialist ideology. The underlying vision of the Soviet Union as a multinational state remained intact, but it was supposedly already leaving the stage of flourishing and entering the stage of rapprochement and merging of nations (Simon, 1991, pp. 138). Previously established local-level institutions for ethnic minorities (essentially, anyone who did not belong to the titular ethnicity of a higher-level administrative unit) were dissolved (Simon, 1991, pp. 58-61), some ethnic categories were discarded or merged together, probably reflecting Stalin’s view that some isolated small nationalities would assimilate and disappear in the course of socialist development. Most importantly, in the 1930s, a great shift occurred regarding the position of Russians, the Russian language, and culture. Formerly the bearer of Great Russian chauvinism, the Russian nation was now redefined as the most Soviet nation with the most progressive culture, great history, and a model for all other peoples (Martin, 2001, pp. 452-454). Several important changes in language acquisition and corpus-planning policies of the period were also congruent with this turn. The first was introducing the Russian language as the obligatory subject in all non-Russian schools in 1938 (Slezkine, 1994, pp. 443). Other elements included reforms of titular languages that introduced the new rules of terminology borrowing, designating Russian as the primary source, and the changes of alphabets from Latin to Cyrillic for a number of non-Slavic languages in 1937-39 (Bromley, 1975, pp. 267).

Overall, from Stalin’s death in 1953 onwards, it was established that “classes and their ‘ideologies’ came and went, but nationalities remained. In a country free from social conflict, ethnicity was the only meaningful identity” (Slezkine, 1994, pp. 449). The eventual merging of nations was to happen in such a distant future that it would be meaningless to expect it, but some rapprochement, understood primarily in linguistic terms, was possible and desirable. This perspective seems to have continued informing and directing much of the Soviet scholarly literature on ethnicity and nationalism. Post-World War II Soviet scholarly literature on ethnic processes remained committed to an ethnocentric definition of nations (Bromley & Kozlov, 1989, pp. 425-438). The scholarly discussion of the 1960s revolved around the refinement of Stalin’s definition, resulting in the growing acceptance of ethnic identity as a key component of an ethnonational category. The general view of that period was that while ethnic self-identity was a form of consciousness, it was still a derivative of objective factors. The commonality of language was generally recognized as a crucial factor in ethnogenesis, albeit with an important caveat, such as the possibility of preserving ethnic self-identity even after the original mother tongue is lost. Different formations—tribes, ethnic groups (*narodnost*) and nations—were conceptualized as reflecting different social and economic development stages of the same ethnic core (Bromley, 1975, pp. 11-13). The dominance of the territorial-political meaning of the term nation in Western European languages, as opposed to an ethnocentric understanding, was explained by the fact that Western European states consolidated around relatively homogenous ethnic cores (Bromley, 1975, pp. 14). Likewise, the distinction between “bad” forced assimilation and natural assimilation, understood primarily in linguistic terms, and the ongoing rapprochement of nations under socialism remained unchallenged (Bromley, 1975, pp. 20-22). For example, Bromley and Kozlov as late as 1989 argued that

[interethnic] integration usually takes place within the framework of a multi-national state that facilitates gradual reconciliation and merges in culture and other ethnic parameters... The formation of a new people – the *Soviet people* – plays an important role in the further development of these processes by the establishment of a unified economy and ideology through the widespread use of the Russian language as an interethnic medium, through the many characteristics of Soviet culture and the Soviet way of life, and through their reflection in national consciousness (Bromley & Kozlov, 1989, pp. 435-436).

The concept of the Soviet people was considered to be both the embodiment and the vehicle of the process of rapprochement. The use of the concept itself could be found already in the 1920s and it was increasingly used during the 1930s (Martin, 2001, pp. 450). Khrushchev introduced it to the official discourse in 1961, during the XXII party congress (Khrushchev, 1962). The same reference to “a new historical community of people” was made by Brezhnev ten years later, during the XXIV party congress in 1971 (Brezhnev, 1971, pp. 26-131) and was included in the preamble of the 1977 Soviet constitution (Konstitutsiia, 1985). Both Khrushchev and Brezhnev referred to the multinational Soviet people as an accomplished fact and a sign of ideological unity, progress, and national rapprochement in the Soviet Union. Some scholars view the use of the Soviet people as the introduction of an alternative national identity (Aktürk, 2012, pp. 197-228), while others evaluate it as merely superficial and supranational (Brubaker, 1996, pp. 28). However, it was never explicitly articulated that the concept of Soviet people was to compete with and replace national identities as an alternative of the same order. Likewise, it did not explicitly challenge either the multinational character of the Soviet Union or the ethnocentric definition of nationhood and the ethnic character of titular republics, as apparent from the corresponding entry on the Soviet people in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia (Kaltakhchian, 1976, pp. 25).

Neither Khrushchev nor Brezhnev explicitly listed the Russian language as a component of the new Soviet identity in their party reports. Nevertheless, the spread of Russian-titular bilingualism was treated as the most tangible and desirable symptom of its formation. The use of Russian was itself considered a positive sign of national development since “in view of increasing cultural level of those [non-Russian] peoples the knowledge of native language only ceases to satisfy their new needs, which is the most important prerequisite of the widespread bilingualism” (Bromley, 1975, pp. 274). Regarding language policies, a positive view on the rapprochement of nations as the Soviet Union advanced in its development was reflected in the facilitation of the spread of the Russian language as the all-Union lingua franca. The educational reform of 1957-58, among other innovations, provided the parents of school students with a possibility to attend schools with the medium of instruction of their choice and opt out of learning titular languages in Russian-medium schools (Grenoble, 2003, pp. 57). The reform had important sociolinguistic implications as it contributed to a decrease in the number of titular language schools and the lack of knowledge of titular languages by migrants from outside of Union republics. Equally importantly, it rendered obsolete the principle of congruence between ethnic identity and medium of instruction for secondary education, which had been mostly observed prior to this reform. In the 1970s and early 1980s, developments in the Soviet educational system included the improvement of the training of Russian language teachers, Russian language materials and introduction of the Russian language as early as in kindergartens (Grenoble, 2003, pp. 58). Often there was an unofficial division of labor between Russian and titular languages, when most administrative and economic activities were conducted primarily in the former and cultural activities were conducted in the latter.

Despite functioning as such in practice, Russian was not formally declared the official language of the Soviet Union, probably reflecting the continuing symbolic influence of Lenin’s opposition to the idea of a common official language. The 1977 constitution referred only to an opportunity to receive education in native languages and to “the languages of the Union and autonomous republics” in the context of issuing official documents and conducting legal proceedings. The 1978 constitutions of the Union republics did not include a provision regarding the official language with a notable exception of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, all republican constitutions included provisions about publishing legislation in both the titular language and Russian (Zakonodatelstvo SSSR, 2018). Likewise, all republican coats of arms included the phrase “proletarians of all countries, unite!” in titular languages and in Russian. Only in April of 1990 did a separate law designate Russian the status of the all-Union official language—after all the language laws of the Union republics had already been adopted (Zakon SSSR, 1990). This reactionary adoption of a Union-level piece of language legislation happened against the backdrop of accelerating centrifugal tendencies in Soviet political life and had no chance of leaving any lasting institutional legacy or impacting language policies in soon-to-be independent republics.

Post-Soviet Russia, which inherited the ethnic federal structure of the RSFSR and the general ethos of the Soviet “brotherhood of peoples,” found itself in a somewhat unique situation: unlike other post-Soviet republics, it could not directly embrace linguo- and ethnocentrism in its nation-building policies. On the one hand, Russia reconfirmed its principal commitment to ethnic federalism (Konstitutsiia, 1993) and multilingualism (Zakon RSFSR, 1991) and started contemplating policies towards its diasporas abroad (Federalnyi Zakon, 1999). On the other hand, it also embarked on a search for a more coherent civic national identity (Shevel, 2011). The promotion of a new national identity—often labeled with a Russian-language adjective *Rossian* (Tishkov, 1995)—began during Yeltsin’s presidency and continued throughout the 21st century. Among other elements, this new identity has increasingly emphasized a shared Russophone space and the importance of the Russian language as a crucial identity marker both inside and outside Russia. However, it has never fully replaced the multiethnic and multilingual foundation of the Russian Federation, either at the level of official discourse or at the level of state policies and institutions. Thus, Russia’s nation-building project remains ambiguous in this regard and continues to harbor the already familiar tension of Soviet nationalities and language policies.

5. Problem with Russian Speakers

The framework for the Soviet nationalities question remained overwhelmingly ethnocentric from the very moment of its establishment to its disintegration. All politicians, public figures and scholars had to positively reference the Leninist ambivalent take on the role of nations in history that simultaneously declared its commitment to national development and welcomed internationalism and the eventual disappearance of national differences under socialism. For instance, during his report at XXVI Party Congress Brezhnev reiterated the official narrative:

Life convinces us that the intensive economic and social development of each of our republics is speeding up the process of their all-around rapprochement. The flourishing and mutual enrichment of national cultures and the formation of the culture of a united Soviet people – a new social and international community – are taking place [simultaneously]. This process is unfolding exactly as it is supposed to unfold under socialism: on the principle of equality, brotherly cooperation, and voluntariness. The party has watched after the strict observance of these Leninist principles. We will never renounce them! (Brezhnev, 1981, pp. 75).

At the group level, ethnic and national identities were closely associated with corresponding linguistic categories, although there always remained a conceptual and institutional separation between the two. The actual ethnolinguistic situation never fully reflected neither the supposedly ethnic charter of the republics nor the symbolic prominence of associated languages, since none of them was ethnically and linguistically homogenous. Quite the opposite, varying initial degrees of heterogeneity that emerged in the process of border drawing were later sustained and furthered due to continuous migration flows, as well as the spread of assimilated bilingualism and linguistic Russification on the part of the titular population. On the linguistic front, personal freedoms in language choices were supported by an extensive institutional environment made up of Russian-language publications and mass media outlets, Russian-language secondary schools and university programs, and multilingual professional and administrative organizations.

Despite the continuing efforts in the official and academic discourses of the post-war Soviet Union to further disassociate language from national identity, there remained an underlying assumption that the two should match, which was, among other things, reflected in a tendency to report one’s associated ethnic language, rather than the actual language spoken at home, as mother tongue during population censuses. This enduring perception is among reasons why—despite the decades of linguistic Russification—the number of non-Russians who reported to be speaking Russian as their primary language seemed to be surprisingly low, even in the most linguistically Russified republics of Ukraine and Belarus, as Table 1 illustrates.

	Ethnic Russians		Russian Speakers		Titular Nationality with Russian as Mother Tongue	
	1979	1989	1979	1989	1979	1989
Armenia	2.36%	1.60%	3.16%	2%	0.56%	0.31%
Azerbaijan	7.89%	5.60%	11.63%	7.50%	1%	0.42%
Belarus	11.90%	13.20%	28.30%	31.90%	16.49%	19.73%
Estonia	27.91%	30.30%	31.74%	34.80%	0.99%	1.05%
Georgia	7.44%	6.30%	10.55%	8.90%	0.47%	0.23%
Kazakhstan	40.80%	37.80%	49.85%	47.40%	1.37%	1.36%
Kyrgyzstan	25.88%	21.50%	30.21%	25.60%	0.36%	0.33%
Latvia	32.82%	33.96%	40.24%	42.10%	2.15%	2.57%
Lithuania	8.95%	9.40%	10.99%	11.70%	0.21%	0.26%
Moldova	12.80%	12.96%	21.61%	23.10%	3.3%	4.31%
Tajikistan	10.38%	7.60%	12.8%	9.70%	0.55%	0.50%
Turkmenistan	12.63%	9.50%	15.34%	11.90%	0.74%	0.71%
Ukraine	21.11%	22.10%	31.34%	32.80%	10.93%	12.24%
Uzbekistan	10.82%	8.30%	13.41%	10.70%	0.4%	0.45%

Sources: Chislennost i Sostav Naseleniia SSSR (1984), Vsesoiuznaia perepis naseleniia (1989).

Table 1. Shares of Russian Speakers in Soviet Republics in 1979 and 1989.

Since national differences were intrinsically linked to underlying linguistic differences, an essentially unresolvable dilemma regarding the sociolinguistic situation in the Soviet Union emerged. Is linguistic assimilation, which in the Soviet context meant the widening use of the Russian language, a symptom of injustice and oppression against titular nations, and state policies should fight it? Or is it a natural sign of historical progress towards rapprochement and friendship among nations and nationalities, and state policies should encourage or at least tolerate it? Official Soviet discourse and language policies were initially overwhelmingly dominated by the former but increasingly tilted towards the latter as the use of Russian was promoted and bilingualism was celebrated. However, the same ideological stance still implied that multilingualism at the republican level was a sign of eventual, even if very distant, national decline and a threat to that nation's existence if one continued to define it in ethnolinguistic terms. Conversely, any form of divergence between linguistic and ethnonational identities could be readily interpreted by nationally minded leadership in Soviet republics as detrimental to the prospects of nation-building and requiring state intervention. Such concerns remained in the background until the political reforms of the 1980s revitalized national sentiments across the Soviet Union and opened doors to national "awakenings" in the Soviet republics and, eventually, to demands for complete independence. Remaining a conspicuous marker of deterioration of a nation's ethnolinguistic foundations, Russian speakers of titular ethnic backgrounds have constituted one of the primary concerns for nation-building policies in many nationalizing post-Soviet states, addressing which could justify and necessitate sacrifices in the areas of language rights and freedoms of individual language choices.

6. Concluding Discussion

As this article has demonstrated, the salience of the problem with Russian-speaking populations in nation-building discourses, narratives, and policies in the post-Soviet region is not incidental and cannot be fully explained by focusing solely on post-imperial nation-building, cultural colonialism, or minority-majority relations in nationalizing states. It needs to be viewed in connection to ideological, institutional, and policy frameworks rooted in the region's political history of the 20th century. These frameworks provide a more comprehensive explanation of why Russian speakers present a particularly challenging problem for post-Soviet nations at the conceptual level. On the one hand, the underlying logic of nation-building suggests that sociolinguistic reality should eventually be made congruent with the overall principle of monolingual ethnic nationhood. On the other hand, the multilingual social reality, the continuing use of the Russian language, and the existence of various multilingual institutions, supported by the notion of freedom in individual language choices, all provide a strong opposition to this principle of ethnonational-linguistic congruence.

The alleviation of this tension seems to be possible either through the complete dismantling of elements of official multilingualism and through assimilation or marginalization of those groups who do not conform to the principle of national and linguistic congruency or through abandoning the overarching ethnic and linguistic interpretation of nationhood and embracing a new understanding of nation-building in which the titular language would not occupy such a prominent place. Both paths are associated with tremendous implementation difficulties arising from institutional inertia, the entrenchment of prevailing norms and ideological positions, and internal political opposition. Therefore, the issue will continue to resurface as a point of contestation in state policies, public discourses, and narratives surrounding the topics of nation-building in the region for the foreseeable future. More specifically, this nation-building policy dilemma will continue to play a role in the search for a potential resolution of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, thus warranting further attention and investigation at both academic and policy advisory levels.

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