
The Russian Language In The CIS Countries

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Aleksey MITROFANOV, member of the Central Council of the Fair Russia party Recently, the World Strategy Center has been established within the framework of the Fair Russia party. One of its tasks is to popularize the Russian language abroad. The reasons for learning Russian have changed. The new generation needs to study it because today people, living in the CIS countries, use the Russian language at work, talk with each other in Russian, read the academic literature in Russian and surf the Russian segment of the Internet. Of course, those reasons will dominate in future, and Russia should reckon on that.

I believe that Belarusian President Aliaksandr Lukashenka has the most pragmatic attitude to the Russian language in the CIS. Without minimizing the importance of the Belarus statehood, with the strong army and law enforcement agencies, he didn't encroach upon the Russian language as it was done in other former Soviet republics except Russia itself. Most of the CIS governments did their best to weaken the Russian language and to make their population speak only the national language. They spent their forces, time and much money to develop and to promote the new national languages. In many cases it was a stalemate.

Pragmatically, the efforts to promote the new national languages have produced no results, since in terms of business translating the physics and chemistry textbooks and other literature into the national languages is not lucrative. I am thinking in terms of pragmatism not of nationalism.

Aliaksandr Lukashenka did not close down the Russian TV channels, though they had troubled and annoyed him greatly. As a result, he derived a benefit from that. Today Belarus is more independent than those post-Soviet states which give their national languages a push. The majority of the Belarusians speak Russian even at work. Russian is the main language in the country.

The same pragmatic reasons make us learn English. It lets us read the English-language literature, surf the English-language segment of the Internet as well as study and work abroad. I believe that the Russians who live in Russia's Far East should learn the Chinese language to cooperate with the Chinese in the frontier cities and towns.

To build the Ukrainian nationhood doesn't only mean that Ukraine should have its own national identity, its own history and its own hetmans. If you are going to build a strong nation, there is a need to do that pragmatically, maintaining good relations with Russia and making it possible for people to speak the language that would allow them to work and to have access to the country's cultural heritages. In Ukraine there are young policy-makers coming out for recognizing Russian as the only official language. Those include Secretary of the Donetsk City Council, Deputy Head of the Party of Regions Nikolay Levchenko, who supports Russian becoming the only national language, and one of the former Socialist leaders Vasily Volga. The young pragmatic people believe that if the Ukrainian people know Russian and a part of the Ukrainian population speak only Russian, then why, Vasily Volga asks, his sixty-year-old relatives must learn Ukrainian. Only those who want to learn Ukrainian should do it.

It seems to me that the policy-makers in the CIS countries will be more pragmatic. Russia can help them in that. We keep talking about the CIS, but we forget that population of the Eastern European countries are getting more and more interested in the Russian language. Russian is widespread in Mongolia. 25 out of 70 Mongolian MPs graduated from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University) and speak Russian fluently. Mongolia is a large country with many resources and many advantages. We should have a broader view of things: in China and Korea people would like to learn Russian. I consider that we should promote the Russian language beyond the bounds of the CIS.

If oil prices soar to a peak of just over \$140 a barrel, everybody will study Russian. And the rise in the price of oil will continue. Platinum, gold and water - all the Russian natural resources will rise in price too.

And finally, I would like to say that Russian is also one of the two languages used in the outer space. There is some mysticism here. For more than 40 years astronauts have been speaking only two languages on a spaceship - Russian and English.

Konstantin SIMONOV, president of the Centre for Current Politics in Russia I often deal with the Chinese students. Unfortunately, they know Russian much worse than the older generations do. We have neglected the Russian language issue far too long, and this is a serious problem of Russia.

We say that the current economic development of Russia motivates foreigners to learn Russian, which is right. But what have we done to make people abroad learn Russian? Here, unfortunately, extremely little has been done and new problems keep arising.

I would like to mention three "agents" that can improve the situation with the Russian language in the post-Soviet space. Those include our government, NGOs and Russian companies.

The modern democracy implies protection of the minorities' rights. The Russian government must strive for the Russian people living in the former Soviet Republics to have the opportunity to speak Russian and to study in this language at schools. The Russian language is recognized as an official language only in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan. In other CIS countries the situation with schools and with teaching the people in Russian is dramatic. The Eurasia Heritage Foundation has held the investigation on the Russian language in the New Independent States. The data show that in the countries which Russia regards as its political allies there are much more problems with the school teaching than in other CIS countries. In particular, the investigation marked out three countries where the problems with teaching Russian are quite severe. Those are Armenia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. At least, Armenia and Uzbekistan are the countries that have always been considered our partners in the Caucasus region and Central Asia. The situation in Kazakhstan has worsened sharply. Unfortunately, the Russian government winks at that and problems continue to occur. In many schools in the CIS countries the Russian language is not taught any more.

Now about the activities of the Russian NGOs in that field. All of us know the term "soft power", but little is being done to return Russian to the former Soviet Republics.

These days the Centre for Current Politics in Russia, of which I am the President, is holding the forum of the CIS young elites with the support of the Russian government. Our task is to allow young talented people, who have a good command of Russian, to understand what goes on in Russia. In many instances, a lot of young people, who live in the post-Soviet countries and hold high posts there, visit Russia very rarely. We must not lose the new promising young generation in the CIS countries. In this sense, the attempts of some NGOs to promote Russian are welcome.

Finally, I would like to say that the Russian companies should be interested in promotion of Russian in the New Independent States. Russian businessmen buy a lot of property and assets abroad. Those who will work for joint ventures should speak Russian. As is known, for example, all the employees of a transnational company (wherever the office is located, in Moscow or in Bangkok) speak English very well. Otherwise, the people will not be hired. But in Russia the Russian language exams are not conducted among migrants. Many people, who do not speak Russian, come to Russia to work.

I believe that we should put more effort into the work with those three "agents" in order to breathe life into the Russian language, since it is an important communication tool in the post-Soviet space.

The material is based on the experts' addresses to the round table "Situation with the Russian language in the CIS countries" organized by the Russian Agency of International Information RIA Novosti on June 17, 2008.

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