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**THE SOCIO-LINGUISTIC CHANGES IN
THE FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS
AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM**

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Languages evolve

I could have stopped my presentation right there, since all I'm going to talk about is how incredibly –to the point of absurdity- language has changed in the former Soviet Republics since the fall of communism, and how hard sometimes it is to accept some of those changes.

Before I start to present the case I would like to provide “full disclosure” about myself, in order to make it clear where I stand and what my angle of observation is. I am a naturalized U.S. citizen, native Russian speaker, and ethnic Ukrainian. 14 years ago I emigrated from the USSR to the USA, and I currently work as a Russian translator and interpreter for the Department of State (our Ministry of Foreign Relations). In this capacity I frequently travel to the former Soviet Republics and take part in preparing intergovernmental documents. The issue of the choice of words while working on these documents is a source of constant arguments between my former compatriots and me. Sometimes these arguments can be quite nasty.

The failure of the first and longest-lasting Marxist social model in history, with which the Soviet Union experimented for almost 75 years, brought Russia and 14 other newly independent republics back to the realities of the modern world with all the good and bad that it has. People were suddenly forced to embrace a whole new world of economic, political, legal and cultural concepts, many of which not only had no name in the Russian language, but their very concept was totally alien to Russian-speakers. “Leasing”, “Grant”, “Tolling”, “Racket”, “PR”, “Broker”, “Petting”, “Political Correctness”, “Privacy”, “Asset”, “Bounty Hunter”, “Hedging”, “Hitman”, “Futures Contract”, “Dealer”, “Pager”, “Sponsor”, “Printer”, “Roaming”, “Piercing”, “Talk-Show”, “Provider”, “Digest”, “Thriller”, “Consensus”, “Default”, “Shaping”, “CD”, “Time-Share”, “Fantasy”, “Fitness”, and many other ideas never existed in the communist universe. As a result, the Russian language was flooded of thousands (some say up to 10.000) of new foreign words, almost all of them taken from American English.

English became so sexy that people started to use English words even when they could easily turn to an existing Russian term with a vintage history. The classic example is the case of the English word “summit” which replaced the Russian expression “встреча в верхах” and became “саммит”. Another example is the term «vice-premier» - in Russian «вице-премьер» instead of the traditional «заместитель председателя Совета министров».

Along the same line «председатель парламента» was pushed aside by «спикер» –English “speaker”. “Осуществление” turned into “имплементация”– from English “implementation”. «Стоянка» became «паркинг»- from English “parking”. «Председатель горисполкома» became “мэр” –though a French term- it was instilled into the new Russian language under the English influence, because before the old Soviet term there was a «бургомистр».

The other way of employing borrowed words was to use the literal translation.

Russian diplomats use the word «вызов» –English “challenge” and gave up the good old «проблема», while «проект»– English “project” has replaced the words «план» and «программа».

Sometimes new words go against the grain of elementary rules of the Russian or - for that matter – any grammar. A classic example is “женщина-бизнесмен” – if translated back into English literally it is “a woman-businessman”.

Since not that many Russians speak English fluently, it was quite natural that they started to misuse borrowed English words. The most common example is the transformation of the acronym “PR” which spawned the Russian words «пиар», «пиарщик», «пиарить», «черный пиар», «перепиарить». None of those words resemble “PR” when translated back into English. Usually it means something close to “propaganda”, “aggressive campaigning” or “advertising”, and in case of «черный пиар» it could mean «negative campaigning». But none of the above could fully reflect the meaning of this new Russian phenomenon first introduced in the mid 90's, when the most unpopular presidential candidate –President Boris Yeltsin- was reelected for the second term thanks to an incredibly aggressive political campaign carried out by “пиарщики”.

Another good example is the new Russian word “киллер”, derived obviously from the English word “killer”, but actually it means “hitman”. Russians joke that the term “киллер” became so popular, that it has influenced the spelling of another new Russian word “диллер”, which, unlike the English “dealer” is spelled with “ll”. For whatever reason, Russians indeed frequently spell “диллер” with “ll”.

The Russian financial crisis of August 1998 was dubbed “дефолт”. Although the situation correctly reflected by one of many meanings of the English word “default”, the majority of Russians now interpret the word “дефолт” more like “The day of final judgement”.

My latest discovery during my last trip to Moscow was the word “мерчандайзинг”. Although obviously derived from the English “merchandising” it actually means a pleasant arrangement or presentation of a set of merchandise on the counter.

Some words are artificially created on the basis of existing English words. A tourist agency in Moscow was offering a trip to the Galapagos Islands for “дайвингеры”. Never mind that in English the one who dives is a “diver”, and not a “divinger”, but Russian itself actually has at least two good terms for those who practice this kind of sport – “аквалангист” and “любитель подводного плавания”.

Poorly dubbed American movies and TV serials are one of the major sources of linguistic pollution of the Russian language. For a long time I couldn't find an explanation for a new Russian phrase “Мы это сделали!” –a phrase which became so popular now that the Russian soldiers wrote it on the ruins of the Chechen President's palace when they took Grozny. Obviously it was a literal translation of the English “We made it!” but it didn't make much sense in Russian in the Soviet times. The answer came unexpectedly in Moscow when circumstances left me no choice but to watch a third-rate U.S. TV show where the main characters making their way through the hordes of enemies yelled in the end: “Мы это сделали!” instead of the usual “Мы пробилась!” or “Мы выстояли!” – which would be a correct translation. Probably the fact that Russian talk-show hosts now wrap-up their programs with an odd phrase “берегите себя” is also the fault of the poor quality interpreters who literally translated the English “take care of yourself”, since

translated back from Russian it sounds like “*protect yourself from*”, instead of using the good old Russian “*пока*”.

Probably along the same lines, young Russians say now “*Вау!*”, “*У-у-у!*” and “*о-кей*” (“*wow*”, “*oops*” and “*OK*”) instead of “*Ух ты!*”, “*Ой!*” и «*хорошо*».

Last but not least are the omnipresent words «*типа*» and «*как бы*» –a literal translation of the “*kind of*” and “*like*”, with which American youngsters pepper their conversation without any obvious need for it!

There is another major source of “barbarization” of the current Russian language –the criminal slang which permeated practically all the social strata of the country, from President Putin with his famous «*Мочить в сортире!*» to the federal legislators and to the mass media. The Russian criminal argot –so called “*феня*” has a long pedigree, maybe even going back to the times of the Slavic conquest of the vast plains of present-day Central Russia, where the local rural population remained bilingual for many centuries, and the local Finno-Ugric dialects were gradually pushed out of everyday use into marginal areas –like the slang of thieves. Whatever the roots of “*феня*” are, it became almost institutionalized in Stalin’s Gulag system, where the common criminals had an upper hand over millions of the “political” criminals. This parallel society had a well developed structure, with its own laws and ethics. However, in the strongly centralized and rigidly controlled Soviet society, the official language used by the media, politicians, and books and criminal “*феня*” could never mix.

The collapse of the Soviet system meant a total dismantling of the system of supervision over the linguistic purity of the Russian language. The dam was broken and the words «*опустить*», «*наезд*», «*шмон*», «*крыша*», «*откат*», «*по понятиям*» became an integral part of the vocabulary used in the State Duma and by leading TV journalists.

Many Russian linguists and writers deemed the current situation intolerable and called for restoring control of the language through legislative means –something the French tried to do in 90’s. This February the State Duma –the Lower House of the Russian Parliament-- approved the draft law “On the State Language of the Russian Federation”. A week later the Upper House declined the draft, but the battle is not over yet. Opponents of the legislation indicated that it can be a powerful tool for oppressing the mass media, since it provides fines and administrative penalties, and serious offenders could have their broadcast or publishing licenses revoked. The other argument is based on the simple fact that language cannot be regulated. Actually, during the last 3 centuries the Russian language has experienced dramatic revamping – during the reforms of Peter the Great in the early 18th century, when the Russian language was overloaded with French and German words at perhaps no lesser an extent than it is now with English words, and after the Communist Revolution in 1917, when the literate classes were either exterminated or forced into emigration, and the new elite was drafted from the peasantry and proletariat, when a new reality required a new language.

This linguistic situation was quite accurately reflected by George Orwell in his masterpiece “1984” in which he described “Newspeak” in great detail.

As a young man in the Soviet Union, I recall being amused by the language of Russian emigrants who escaped the Revolution and preserved the old style Russian language in their ghettos, from Shanghai to Buenos Aires and Paris. Now I find myself in

a similar situation, because every time when I go back to Moscow I need to carefully watch what I am saying there, otherwise people quickly recognize me as a foreigner by my old fashioned way of talking. As for my professional duties, I continually try to avoid borrowing English in Russian texts whenever I can, and correct my Russian colleagues when they interpret the Russian “о-кей” as “OK” in English –” since “о-кей” in Russian means “excellent” .

No matter how confusing the linguistic situation is in Russia itself, it is even more perplexing in the other former Soviet republics.

One should clearly distinguish the case of the 3 Baltic republics which were occupied by the USSR in 1940 as part of the Hitler-Stalin deal on dividing Eastern Europe. For the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, Russian was always the language of the oppressors, and linguistic resistance was a part of the comprehensive national struggle against the occupation of communist Russia.

For the other 11 republics this was not the case. They had been part of the Russian Empire for the previous 2 centuries, and Russian was the language of science, culture, and interethnic communication. It allowed many people in the Caucasus and Central Asia to have access to the wider European world. In many ways it was as natural for educated non-Russian Central Asians and Caucasians to speak Russian as it was for South Americans to speak Spanish or for Africans to speak French or English in the times of Spanish, French, and British colonial rule.

However, the parallel stops here. In the 19th Century, when the Spanish Empire crumbled, it was only one former Spanish colony –the Philippines-- that decided to drop the Spanish language and switch to something else.

In the 40's to 60's of the last century, at the time of the demise of the British and French Colonial Empires, some new countries –mostly in the Far East-- opted to give up French, as it reminded them of foreign oppression. An even smaller number of nations tried to abandon English, but very few succeeded.

In the 90's, when the USSR fell apart, the Russian language became the first victim of the newly independent states. With the exception of Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, no other former Soviet republic has recognized Russian as the second official language.

“The national language (on the former Soviet Republics) has acquired a sacred and almost mystical status. There was an impression that the language by itself was going to solve all the problems, that it would feed the people, it would make them strong and truly independent. In other words, the language became to tool for developing national awareness. Why did it happen? Because the newly independent states had no other base to build on. There was nothing else to justify their national identity. Local leaders tried to use the language to incite basic tribal instinct, to hide their inability to solve both economic and nation-building problems. This means that the language became not only a political tool, but it was also used to cover up the most unscrupulous political intrigues, the vilest political programs¹.”

The National Language Law directly or indirectly bolstered several bloody ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet republics. Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and

¹ Efim Bershin “Dikoe pole”, “Druzhba narodov” #9 2002, Moscow

Uzbekistan started aggressive campaigns to remove the Russian language from the mass media, education, and political life.

Probably the most perplexing results of this policy can be observed in Ukraine. The Ukrainian and Russian languages are closely related to each other –like Spanish and Portuguese, maybe even closer, since Russians and Ukrainians lived in the same state for many centuries, and as a result, new terminology entered the Ukrainian language via Russian. By 1991 only a few western regions of Ukraine which throughout most of its history were not part of the Russian state, spoke Ukrainian language. The overwhelming majority either spoke Russian only or –mostly in the rural areas- used a mixture of both languages. According to the latest statistics, almost 100% of Ukrainians switched to the Ukrainian language. In reality –and I have many sources inside Ukraine to comment on the situation– people continue to speak Russian in everyday life, although its quality has deteriorated significantly, since students do not study it in school. Meanwhile, politicians and government officials –President Leonid Kuchma included- employ a widely used device when they speak in public - they think in Russian and speak Ukrainian. As a result, Russian construction can be easily detected in their Ukrainian, and their message is getting increasingly obfuscated. The demand to introduce Russian as the second official language continues to be very strong, and odds are pretty high that the next political upheaval in Ukraine might bring a partial restoration of the role of the Russian language.

In Moldova the linguistic policy of the first government in 1991 caused the country to split into a bloody conflict which has still not healed. The self-proclaimed Dniestr Republic was created on the eastern sliver of the country, and official recognition of the Russian language is one of the key demands of the separatists.

Azerbaijan, with a language closely related to Turkish, does its best to narrow the gap between the two languages. Last year President Geidar Aliyev decreed that Azerbaijani was now to be written exclusively in Latin letters. It created mayhem, because during most of Soviet rule, the Azerbaijani language had been written in the Cyrillic alphabet, and many people became illiterate overnight. However, from the linguistic standpoint, dropping Russian was no big challenge, since virtually all ethnic minorities –Russians, Armenians, and Jews-- left the country.

Armenia has no official policy for getting rid of the Russian language, but the trend is still there, since after gaining its independence, Armenia also became a mono-ethnic nation.

In the several wars which followed its declaration of independence, Georgia has lost two significant chunks of its territory. The general state of decay and more homogeneous ethnic composition resulted in a decreased knowledge of Russian. Increasingly larger numbers of Georgians coming to the U.S. for all kinds of training programs do not understand enough Russian and frequently refuse to take an English-Russian interpreter.

Kazakhstan, the largest former Soviet Republic in Asia, continues to use the Russian language, but refuses to acknowledge it as official. In Soviet times Kazakhs were about half of its population, and even among ethnic Kazakhs, the majority didn't speak the Kazakh language. Although the ratio has changed in favor of ethnic Kazakhs and the government actively pursues the use of the Russian language, it will take at least another decade to ensure that Russian in Kazakhstan has lost its dominance.

Uzbekistan is much more ethnically homogeneous than its northern neighbor, but so far it has not succeeded in switching to the Uzbek language completely. Its capital, Tashkent, continues to be a Russian-speaking city, and the Uzbek government continues to deal with the rest of the world in the Russian language. This is partially the result of a lack of legal and academic terminology in the Uzbek language.

Tajikistan has not rushed to abandon the Russian language, but the long and bloody civil war and precarious political and economic situation in this republic led to a huge exodus of educated people and Russian speakers. It resulted in a total loss of Russian languages in many areas of Tajikistan.

Although there was no civil war in Turkmenistan, the economic and political situation there is so bleak that Russian speakers left the republic *en masse*. Like the rest of Central Asia, Turkmenistan uses Russian when dealing with the rest of the world.

It is very interesting to compare the linguistic situation in the former Soviet republics and the former Yugoslav republics. Croats and Bosnians, whose language is almost identical to Serbian, took great pains to make their languages as different from Serbian as possible.

There is no great risk in arriving at the conclusion that in the new 21st century the trend to use national languages as a nation building tool will grow, and national languages will serve to stress the differences between new nations.