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# Protect Russian Culture and Language

By Alexei Pankin

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Ekaterina Biserova, who won a round on Oct. 18 with her rendition of "All that Jazz," a song from the 1975 musical Chicago. **The Voice**

At a recent meeting of Russia's literary and educational elite, President Vladimir Putin expressed his concerns about the fate of the Russian language: "It has become the norm not only for ordinary Russians, but unfortunately also for those in the mass media and film industry to disregard the rules of their native language."

I think that is an understatement. In fact, Russia is facing not only disdain for the language, but Russian is increasingly excluded from important areas of culture and especially mass culture.

A television program called "The Voice" on Channel One is an amazing phenomenon. Four pop stars use a blind voting system to gather a team of contestants, out of whom finalists are selected who vie to be named "The Voice of Russia."

The show is extremely popular: 1.7 million viewers took part in last year's vote for the final

winner. This season, it holds a steady 30 percent share of viewers aged 18 years and older. The reason for its popularity is clear: Viewers are treated to new faces, fair play and friendly competition. In short, the program offers something they get so little of in real life.

The only problem is that three-fourths of the songs that contestants sing are in English. Singer Leonid Agutin bemoaned the situation, saying, "Of the 26 people chosen for my teams over the last two years, I have finally gotten one who sings in Russian."

I tried to understand why young singers aspiring to achieve national recognition in Russia choose mostly American songs. My professional musician friends explained to me that today's youth have grown up listening to American music. As they need to be completely and thoroughly familiar with whatever piece they use for their public debut, it is only natural that they choose such songs. In other words, this generation of youth feels greater "ownership" of American pop music than their own country's rich musical and lyrical heritage.

The French call such a phenomenon cultural colonialism and actively resist it. In Russia, however, even the main national television channel accepts this as a norm. After all, they say, it's a free marketplace of goods and ideas.

But isn't Channel One, with its huge prime-time audience, supposed to do more than just follow the latest fashion? Isn't it supposed to promote Russian culture, for example?

Something very serious is at stake. As Soviet writer Alexander Zinovyev once said, the Russian people risk losing their status as players in the historical process through the deformation of their language and culture.

He was correct. Russia's new national idea should take the form of strict cultural protectionism, not only on the level of state policy, but also as each person's patriotic duty. I would even call for something amounting to "prohibitive levy" on American songs, including those performed on Russia's favorite television programs.

Judging by the statements Putin has made since the Valdai Club met in September up until the meeting with the country's top writers last week, it seems the president has begun to understand this point. The question is whether he has enough political will to reconcile the need for cultural protectionism with his own system of economic liberalism.

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