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Moscow's False Rationale to Save Russian Speakers

By Tom Hobson

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In justifying the annexation of Crimea, President Vladimir Putin has made many references to the need for Russia to protect the rights of Russian speakers there. This line is now being used as an endorsement of the escalating disturbances in eastern Ukraine. It is based on the premise that "Russian-speaking" is a valid proxy for "ethnic Russian."

But the problem is that language does not equal ethnicity.

The last Ukrainian census, conducted in 2001, included questions about Ukrainians' first language and ethnicity. The published results show a big difference between these two identifiers. Data extracted from the census report of Ukraine's State Statistics Committee show that while 30 percent of the population reported Russian as their mother tongue, just 17 percent declared themselves to be of Russian ethnicity. These figures have validity being based on the self-declared responses of the population given under the assurance of confidentiality.

Census data provides quite a detailed picture of the distribution patterns of language and ethnicity across Ukraine with data being reported at the level of 25 regions. In the 2001 census, just three of these regions — Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk, which are all located in the south and southeast —reported a majority of Russian speakers. Of these regions, only Crimea showed a majority — 60 percent — of ethnic Russians, a fact that lends some hard evidence to Russia's assertions regarding the appropriate governance of the peninsula.

But in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, where the latest surge of unrest is concentrated, the percentage of ethnic Russians was just 38 percent and 39 percent respectively. Yet, these two statistical regions are predominantly Russian-speaking with more than 70 percent of the population reporting it as their first language.

In these regions, the use of language as a surrogate for ethnicity provides a convenient but false rationale for Moscow's support for the actions being taken there by pro-Russian agitators.

The Odessa region on Ukraine's western border, which is home to a strategically important seaport and transportation hub on the Black Sea, has a Russian-speaking population of 42 percent, but half of these Russian speakers did not declare themselves as ethnic Russians in their census returns.

This is not just the case in Ukraine. Census data from other former Soviet states confirms that this is the reality throughout the wider region. Russian is the first language for almost 20 million people in the four countries bordering Russia's western frontier, but only 10 million in those countries described themselves as ethnic Russians in their census returns. In Belarus, for example, 42 percent of the population speak Russian as their first language, but only 8 percent declare themselves as ethnic Russians.

It is clear from statistics that language and ethnicity are not synonymous. It is also clear that Moscow has chosen to make selective use of ethnicity and language statistics to manipulate the Ukrainian conflict to its advantage.

What if Russia were to extend its actions across its western frontier based on the premise that Russian speakers are, in fact, ethnic Russians?

Challenging the sovereignty of states or the integrity of regions within states based on the language of the population would potentially destabilize many areas on the eastern frontier of Europe with Russia. Belarus would become a target, and significant areas of Latvia, Kazakhstan and Estonia would be considered fair game.

To avert this scenario, the dialogue around the current crisis needs to be focused on the verifiable facts of ethnicity. Russia should stop relying on the fallacy that language necessarily indicates ethnic or national allegiance.

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