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For Russia, Even the Language Can Be a Weapon

Putin says there's a war against the mother tongue in the Russian-speaking world outside the federation's borders.

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Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency

According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, "Russophobes," "aggressive nationalists" and certain countries (nod toward Ukraine and the Baltic states) are waging a "war" on the Russian language. That's a strong word. But because Russian is regarded as the only major language under the monopoly control of the eponymous state, the resistance it runs into and the losses it suffers are greater than those faced by other widely spoken languages.

Russian, according to Ethnologue, the resource dedicated to cataloging the world's more than 7,000 living languages, is the eighth-most-used in the world, with 258 million speakers. That makes it one of the few languages with lots of speakers outside the titular country:

Russia's population is 145 million.

The countries where such languages originated don't usually have, or want, any kind of rule-setting monopoly or ownership rights on them. The U.S. and the U.K. are equally important sources of English, but neither tries to force its standards on Australia or India. China invests in the global spread of Mandarin Chinese through Confucius Institutes, but the Taiwanese variety of Mandarin, the official language of Taiwan, is proudly distinct from that of the mainland. Germany doesn't try to dictate rules and usage to the people of Austria and Switzerland. The French mock the Belgians but can't get them to use the same idiom and pronunciation as Parisians. It probably makes more sense to learn the Brazilian version of Portuguese than the one used in Portugal.

Russian isn't like them. Tomasz Kamusella, who studies language politics and history at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, counts 22 polities in which Russian is widely used "in writing, speech, the mass media, administration, publishing and education." This approaches Arabic's spread.

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But, Kamusella wrote last year: "Russian is the sole world language that is construed as a homogenous and unitary entity, officially with no diverging state or ethnic varieties. The situation seems to be like that because Russia and other post-Soviet states concur with Moscow's highly ideologized insistence that speaking Russian as a first language is the sure sign that a person belongs to the Russian nation, despite the fact that at present she or he may be a citizen of numerous other countries than Russia. This Moscow-led Russophone aspiration to national and linguistic unity and homogeneity — so typical of ethnolinguistic nation-states in Central Europe — is unheard of among states that employ other world languages for official and educational purposes."

The rules of Russian are laid down and its official dictionaries are written in Moscow. Any deviations from this norm that occur wherever else the language is spoken are frowned upon and treated as errors and sometimes even politicized. One example is the phrase "in Ukraine." The norm backed by Moscow is "*na Ukraine,*" while that country's Russian speakers use "*v Ukraine*" — and though the meaning is the same, one can usually determine the speaker's political views concerning Ukraine's relationship with Russia by this usage alone.

This goes a long way toward explaining a curious exchange that took place during a meeting on Tuesday of the Russian Language Council in the Kremlin. Picking up on Putin's mention of war, presidential adviser Vladimir Tolstoy, a great-great-grandson of the author of "War and Peace," lobbied for a special government program to stop the "incessant shrinking" of the "Russian world" beyond the Russian Federation's borders: "A war is on in the so-called civilized world against the Russian world, the Russian language, and this allows us to see it as a powerful, dreaded weapon that must be kept in full combat readiness."

Putin took exception: "Let's not use such words. I'm serious, it makes sense to refrain from using them. Why do I say so? Because if it's a weapon, they'll start fighting it as a weapon. They're fighting it anyway, but for other reasons. Yes, [the Russian language] is power in a certain sense, a kind of soft power. That's quite enough, I think."

Putin's propaganda machine sees the Russian language as a tool for communication with this so-called Russian world, understood as a diaspora — the Russian-speaking populations of post-Soviet countries cut off from Russia by the Soviet Union's collapse. The official term is "compatriots living abroad."

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The concept of Russians as a nation divided calls for a centralized approach to language as a tool for keeping these people's links to Mother Russia alive. But from the point of view of post-Soviet nations, especially the Baltics, the line is thin between tool and weapon, diaspora and fifth column. After all, the Russia-backed separatist insurrections in Moldova in the early 1990s and in eastern Ukraine since 2014, as well as the annexation of predominantly Russian-speaking Crimea by Russia, followed Moldova's and Ukraine's refusal to recognize Russian as an official language.

One could argue, however, that the tens of millions of Russian speakers living in post-Soviet countries, in Europe and beyond, don't all belong to a diaspora that wants to retain a link to Russia. Many see themselves as members of an ethnic minority with interests firmly tied to their current nation's politics (that's a common identity in the Baltics), as multilingual members of their society (that's often the case in Ukraine), or as immigrants eager to integrate into European cultures (a frequent case in Western Europe).

Putin's approach to running Russia is divisive, and far from dominant in the communities that make up this multitude of Russian language users. In some emigre families I know in Germany and the U.S., parents have made the conscious decision not to maintain their children's Russian so they blend in with their host societies and give up any link to Moscow and everything it stands for.

For some of those who want to keep using the language — such as my family, for example — the Kremlin's claim on the Russian language as a weapon or even a source of soft power isn't valid. Instead, I subscribe to Kamusella's idea of multiple geographic varieties of the Russian language. Just as we can choose "English, U.S." or "English, U.K." for our computers' spell-checkers, we should be able to choose "Russian, Russia," "Russian, Ukraine" or "Russian, Latvia."

Just as it makes sense for Moscow to invest in the Russian language as a weapon or a soft-power tool, it also would be a good idea for countries with large Russian populations to invest in compiling dictionaries and in studying and teaching Russian without any help or interference from Moscow. If the language can be weaponized, it can also be turned back to peaceful use. Then, restrictions on Russian-language content such as those existing today in a number of post-Soviet states will become unnecessary and the "war" Putin talks about would end — just not in a way he'd like.

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