

Ammon Cheskin. *Russian speakers in post-Soviet Latvia: Discursive identity strategies*. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh 2016. 248 pp. [*Russian Language and Society Series*.] ISBN 9780748697434 (hardcover), 9781474428507 (paper).

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How many times since I left Lebanon in 1976 to live in France have people asked me, with the best intention in the world, whether I felt 'more French' or 'more Lebanese'? And I always give the same answer: 'Both!'

Amin Maalouf (2000: 3)

The above immediately came to mind when I was asked by Wayles Browne, the Review Editor, to review this book by Ammon Cheskin, a colleague I have met at several conferences. Being an Estonian Russian (according to the most often used official classification of various ethnic groups living in Estonia who happen to speak Russian as their first language) and a sociolinguist, I am often asked by laypeople and by colleagues from here and abroad whether I feel more Russian or more Estonian. The answer to this question is: neither. That was especially clear to me in April 2007 during the Bronze Nights, also known as the April Unrest and the April Events (street disorders triggered by the relocation of a Soviet war memorial, the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn). Since then I have often thought of Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004: 18) observation that "identity becomes interesting when it is contested or in crisis", which is relevant to my research on identity construction among Estonian Russians as well as to my understanding of my multiple identity.

The last three decades have witnessed an increase in interest in the Baltic countries, in the titular languages, in Russian language use, and in identity construction among Russian minority groups. Almost all of these publications, dissertations, and research projects have "post-Soviet" in their titles. To be honest, in my work on post-Soviet Latvia I have also followed that trend. The question arises, How many more years will we researchers be talking about post-Soviet Latvia, post-Soviet Estonia etc.? If we go back in history 100 years, we see that both countries gained their independence from Bolshevik Russia in 1918. If we think about the start of the second period of independence (i.e., 1991) then we see that after 28 years it is still relevant to talk about

post-Soviet Latvia, post-Soviet Estonia, etc. But was it really relevant to talk about post-Tsarist Latvia, post-Tsarist Estonia, etc. in 1946?

My mother was born in 1946 and is now a pensioner. In 1993, when I was 12 years old, my mother then a schoolteacher, returned one evening from a school meeting organised by local authorities in the north-eastern coastal part of Estonia and said: "Nasten'ka, schools will shift to Estonian as the only language of instruction in the nearest future. Please take your studies seriously." And I did. I graduated with a gold medal from a Russian-language secondary school, I graduated cum laude from the MA program in Estonian Philology and I have taught Estonian as a Second Language for five years. But now, in March 2019, I ask myself: why do I feel more and more like a character from the film "Groundhog Day"? The only difference is that the long awaited tomorrow will never come: we still hear about post-Soviet Russians and/or post-Soviet Russian Speakers living in the Baltic countries who do not know the titular/official language, who do not study (in) the titular/official language etc. This is why I felt no enthusiasm about reviewing the book.

But to my great surprise Cheskin's book not only opens some new perspectives on "Russian Speakers in post-Soviet Latvia" but also leads me to reconsider some known facts and events in the history of the neighbouring Baltic country.

The book is clearly organized: it is composed of an Introduction (or Chapter 1), where Cheskin states his aim to highlight "that new forms of identity have been emerging in Latvia which are neither entirely 'Russian' nor entirely 'Latvian'" (2), and eight more chapters. The glossary and appendices provide detailed descriptions of the field research and facilitate an understanding of an ongoing storyline.

Chapter 2, "Discourse, Memory, and Identity", presents a clear contextual background, where it is explained, based on a number of approaches, why the "Other" (who is naturally Russian) is dangerous for Latvians. The same topic continues in Chapter 3, "Latvian State and Nation-Building", where again and again the reader is reminded of this threat because "in the case of Latvia, history and memory were clearly utilised as discursive tools that could help to construct a 'core' group of 'Latvians'" to be "further unified through contrast to the external 'other': 'the Russians'" (63). This chapter reveals the hypocrisy of the Popular Front of Latvia in late Soviet times and the future official actions of policy-makers, which tied the national language to history and established it as an expression of pride and resistance to Soviet rule, in a clear manner. To understand, it is enough to read just one sentence of the discussions of the citizenship law in the PFL's newspaper *Atmoda* in June 1990: "Nationalism is not intended as discrimination against other people, but rather as a cultural principle, an external boundary to protect you from others, and an internal boundary to protect others from you" (47).

Chapter 4, "Russian-Language Media and Identity Formation", investigates discourses of a leading Russian-language daily, *Chas* 'the Hour'. It is not surprising that, according to the concept of the logic of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) mentioned by Cheskin (32), Russian-language media discourses mirror the mainstream ones, and not always as distorted mirrors. This chapter is also instructive to read as it provides examples of who "nashi" (ours) are and how Russian-speaking elites justify their support of official discourses of linguistic domination over local Russian-speaking minorities.

In Chapter 5, "Examining Russian-Speaking Identity from Below", the author elaborates on grass-roots ideological discourses that address political topics and aspects of the status of the Russian language, Russians, Russian-speakers etc. It is no great surprise that older respondents are not happy to be called either "Russian-speaking" or "non-citizen" (see page 106), which is not the case for the younger generation, who actually talk about how strange Russia is (108). This situation is logical because, in the case of the older generations of Russian-speakers or Russians living in the Baltic countries, the situation is seen widely as illegitimate. Their understanding is that they came to this territory when it was one country, the Soviet Union, and it still remains unclear to this group of people how it is possible to become occupiers overnight. It is clear, based on the example of Latvia and Estonia, that these grass-roots discussions only reinforce the top-down approach, which assigns greater importance to Latvian (or Estonian), protecting it tirelessly against the forces of the everlasting enemy: the "Other". But for younger generations who were born in Latvia a shift in perception has occurred. As Cheskin notes: "Naturally it is important to bear in mind the selection bias of this research, which focused on educated people who were linguistically advantaged" (128), and I would add, "and from Riga" (the capital of Latvia). This chapter should be taken as just one case study showing how only certain Russians undergo the processes of linguistic, ethnic, and national identity formation.

Chapter 6, "The 'Democratisation of History' and Generational Change", makes an effort "to move away from a strict reliance on elite discourses and the analysis of such discourses" (130). In this chapter, the figures are poorly presented in: the colors used are almost the same, and it is hard to distinguish grey from the light grey and the dark grey. But if you ignore those technical obstacles, then, as in Blok's poem, "And an eternal fight, we only dream of rest" this "eternal fight" regarding "occupation—annexation" between Latvian and Russian Federation official discourses is nicely illustrated via bottom-up positions different age groups hold in their historical interpretations.

When I read extracts from "semi-structured interviews ... conducted with six members of the Latvian Parliament" (see more on page 152) in Chapter 7, "The Primacy of Politics? Political Discourse and Identity Formation", I felt like I was in the 1979 Soviet science fiction art film "Stalker", in which getting out of the "Zone" is only possible if there is cooperation against the "Other"

and constant protection of Latvians. *Déjà vu*: these repeated discourses painfully remind me of discourses from the early 1990s. As for Chapter 7's content, I would criticise the title of the section "Rising political tensions 2010–14", as there is not much mention of 2014, an extremely important turning point in relations between the Baltic countries, the Russian Federation, and the West: EU, NATO, and the U.S.

Chapter 8, "The Russian Federation and Russian-Speaking Identity in Latvia", clearly needs to be revised in a possible second edition, adding more contemporary data on political discourse. The political changes in Latvia and in the "compatriot policy" of the Russian Federation that have occurred have already had and will have more far-reaching effects than just changes in compatriot consolidation and identity and/or political discourse construction. In its current form, Chapter 8 does not reflect the possible dynamics in these processes.

Cheskin tells the reader: "It is argued, through the course of this book, that it is very difficult for Russian speakers to find a legitimate place within Latvian discourses because the process of othering is central to the formation of Latvian identity in the first place" (33). In the concluding Chapter 9, which is optimistically entitled "A Bright Future?" on the last page of the book Cheskin states: "In light of the hardening discursive positions of the respective Latvian and Russian states, Latvia's Russian speakers will continue to be faced with contradictory identity pressures." If this conclusion is weak, it is not the author's fault. He has attempted a Sisyphean task, exploring "discursive identity strategies" of "Russian speakers in post-Soviet Latvia". His study suggests that the long awaited tomorrow will never arrive. An explanation of the situation not only in "post-Soviet" Latvia but also in "post-Soviet" Estonia (as well as in many other "post-Soviet" countries, which are outside the scope of this review) might be provided by Robert Rozhdestvensky's (1992) poem:

Dlja človeka nacional'nost—
 I ne zasluga,
 I ne vina.
 Esli v strane
 Utverždajut inače,
 Značit,
 Nesčastna èta strana!

For a person, nationality
 is neither merit
 nor fault.
 If in a country
 it is argued differently
 this means this country is unhappy.

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