Rebuilding Babel? Language and Identity Change in the Former Soviet Union

David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

During the Cold War most specialists on the Soviet Union focused their attention on Moscow. Probably they were aware that Russia proper was only one of fifteen members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Perhaps they knew that its territory encompassed only about half of the entire country and that Russians constituted roughly fifty percent of the population. The rest of the citizens of the USSR came from more than a hundred different ethnic groups, termed "nationalities" in the Soviet nomenclature, and spoke as many different languages. Especially for students of Soviet foreign policy, as I was, that's about where our knowledge of the non-Russians ended.

The demise of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union led to the creation of fifteen nominally independent states by the beginning of 1992. Viewed from Moscow's perspective, "foreign policy" took on a new

dimension, with political leaders expressing great concern about relations with countries of the "Near Abroad," the former republics of the Soviet Union. Muscovites who had thought nothing of hopping on a train to visit Riga, "our Western Europe," as they imagined it, or to head to the Crimean shore for summer vacation, now found these destinations located in foreign countries – Latvia and Ukraine, respectively. Eager to brandish the symbols of independence, the governments of the former Soviet republics quickly imposed visa and trade restrictions, complicating life for people whose identity as Soviet citizen became newly meaningful in its absence.

More worrisome from the standpoint of the Russian government, the unexpectedly quick disintegration of the USSR had stranded more than 20 million Russians outside of the Russian Federation. Typically politicians in the newly independent states – especially Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania -- viewed the Russians as unwelcome colonists, even though many had never lived in Russia. Legislatures passed laws imposing stringent requirements for citizenship, intended to favor members of the "titular" nationality (the group for which the republic was named). Among the most demanding requirements was knowledge of the titular language. Previously, people who were not members

of the titular nationality (nearly half of the population in places such as Latvia, especially in urban centers) had been able to get by with no trouble using Russian, the official language of the USSR.

For Russian speakers in the Near Abroad, the passage of the language and citizenship laws and the breakup of the USSR created what David Laitin calls "a double cataclysm that turned their world upside-down." Imagine, he suggests, with a pithy (if somewhat exaggerated) analogy, that "New Yorkers were suddenly faced with the prospect of learning Iroquois or being deported to England" [p. 85]. The threat of discrimination against Russian speakers raised the specter of serious consequences beyond those affecting individuals and families. What if politicians in Moscow seized on the plight of Russians abroad to launch a campaign of nationalist violence, seeking to change the new international borders or reconstitute the Soviet Union by force? What if Russian speakers in the Near Abroad, facing economic and political discrimination, began to arm themselves for interethnic war? In 1991 and 1992, the breakup of Yugoslavia provided a vivid example of how gangs of young, unemployed Serbs and Croats, facing discrimination as minorities in newly independent countries, became ready recruits for militias inspired by

nationalist demagogues. Could a similar nightmare threaten the former Soviet Union?

Whether or not such concerns provided the initial impetus to David Laitin's masterful study of Russian speakers in the Near Abroad, they are among many reasons the book should attract a wide audience. Fortunately, Laitin was never a Sovietologist, and his background is as different from the conventional training of a Soviet specialist as one could imagine. A professor of political science, and the author of several major studies of African politics, Laitin was a latecomer to Soviet studies, beginning his work on the USSR not long before the country ceased to exist. His longstanding interest in language and religious identity, and his affinity for an unusual combination of ethnographic field work, formal mathematical modeling (based on rational choice theory), and mass survey research, have yielded an impressive book that few, if any, ex-Sovietologists could have written.

Besides the likely policy-driven concern to understand the potential for ethnic violence in the former Soviet Union, Laitin's book was motivated by a scholarly interest in the sources of cultural and political identity. If identities are fluid and multiple everywhere – with the

relative salience of any particular one at any given moment often dependent on circumstances outside one's own control – they are especially complicated in the former Soviet Union. A multiethnic entity from its very origins, Russia has always been a difficult place for people to assert any kind of primordial or elemental identity. Laitin captures the picture well with the common Russian ditty, "*Mama tatarka, otets grek, i ia russkii chelovek*" (My mother's a Tatar, my father's a Greek, and I'm a Russian).

In the new circumstances of simultaneous political and economic transition, people's very survival depends on their identity, even if the relative salience of different categories of identity is no easier to pin down. If a fifty-year old Russian woman gets fired from her job as a lathe operator in Narva, Estonia, it could be because of her class identity (rust-belt industrial worker), her nationality, her sex, or her age -- or, in this case, possibly all four. Whether she chooses to engage in political activity to improve her situation depends on the perception of her identity (by herself and others) and its relationship to the identities and political activities of others. Thus, Laitin begins his study by seeking to develop a "theory of political identities," drawing on psychoanalytic insights from the work of Erik H. Erikson.

Laitin is particularly drawn to Erikson's notion of the relational character of identity. On the one hand, identities are not fixed in any primordial way, but are dependent on judgments and perceptions of the self and others. On the other hand, as Laitin puts it, "not any identity will do." Identities are limited by what Erikson called the "identity possibilities of an age" [p. 20]. What puzzles Laitin is how identities change. He wants to be able "to account for both the impressive power of identity groups to give their adherents a sense of natural membership and the equally impressive power of individuals to reconstruct their social identities" [p. 21]. In order to make his subject more tractable, Laitin has focused on one particular source of identity: language. He wants to understand how communities change their language over the course of a generation.

For Laitin, the key to whether the Russian speakers in the Near Abroad will assimilate into the newly independent non-Russian countries lies in their choice of language. If they choose to retain their native Russian and insist on language rights for the Russian-speaking community, they risk repression at home and might prompt intervention from abroad (Russia). If they adapt and learn the new "foreign" language of their home country, they stand a chance of

prospering or at least living peacefully. What Laitin finds intriguing is that either choice could seem "natural" – to retain one's native language or learn the new one -- if it becomes the choice of most people. He gives a personal example and one from the Russian case to illustrate his point:

> When my grandparents came to New York in the late nineteenth century, they knew that other children of Yiddish speakers would be learning English, and it would be irrational for them to seek to maintain the intergenerational transmission of Yiddish. Meanwhile, when Russians moved into the "virgin" lands of Kazakhstan at that very time, they fully expected other Russians to maintain the linguistic repertoires they had in the Russian heartland. Here we have examples of opposite and extreme equilibria. In New York after a generation, hardly any monolingual Yiddish speakers were left. In Kazakhstan after a generation, very few descendants of Russian immigrants were even bilingual in Russian and Kazakh. [p. 22]

As Laitin's use of the jargon word "equilibria" indicates, he draws his insights into the puzzle of language change from game theory, particularly from Thomas Schelling's notion of the "tipping game" or "cascade." In the tipping game, people make rational, instrumental calculations about which identity to emphasize in a given situation, depending upon what choices they anticipate others making. If Russian speakers in Kazakhstan expect few of their community will learn Kazakh, there will be no intergenerational assimilation to the new language. If Yiddish speakers in New York expect everyone to learn English, everyone will. For the process of change itself, game theorists posit a "tipping threshold" of a certain number of people making the change, beyond which everyone else changes quickly in a cascading fashion. Particularly intriguing about the tipping metaphor is that what seems so inevitable in retrospect is revealed in the moment to be highly contingent on individual calculations and perceptions.

To apply the tipping game to language choice, Laitin sought to understand what would motivate individuals to learn a new language. The most obvious reason, from a rational-choice theoretical orientation, would be to improve one's individual economic welfare ("economic

payoffs"). So for Laitin, an expectation of improved employment prospects would be the first factor influencing a Russian in Estonia, for example, to try to learn Estonian. Second would be factors relating to "in-group status," how the members of your own (Russian) language community view the value of learning the official state language. Laitin highlights the notion of *competitive assimilation*, "the pressure to learn the titular language before other members of your own community do in order to get first pick of the job and educational opportunities available to linguistically assimilated Russians" [p. 120]. The third set of factors concerns "out-group acceptance," the prospect that learning the titular language would result in being accepted as potentially one of the members of the titular community. Here Laitin runs into a possible drawback to using language as a proxy for political or cultural identity. If Estonians or Kazakhs do not accept Russians as members of their community, no matter how well they speak the language, then an assessment of propensity to learn a new language still leaves some key political questions unanswered.

Nevertheless, language is undoubtedly a key factor underlying interethnic relations in the former Soviet Union. Laitin designed his research project to investigate

language change and assimilation in four former Soviet republics: Latvia, Estonia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. He used multiple methods, including mass public opinion surveys, carefully designed language tests (called "matched guise" experiments) conducted at high schools, and on-site ethnographic study. Laitin himself lived for seven months with a Russian family in Narva and took Estonian lessons at the local language center. Three other scholars did similar field work in Ukraine (Dominique Arel), Kazakhstan (Bhavna Dave), and Latvia and Estonia (Vello Pettai), and contributed their field notes and research findings to Laitin's project. The chapters describing the family strategies of the Russian speakers with whom Laitin and his colleagues associated make for fascinating reading, even if they do not always support the theoretical predictions of Laitin's rational-choice model.

In addition to understanding the role of Russian speakers in the Near Abroad, Laitin seeks to explain the attitudes of the titular groups and the sources of the nationalist revivals that broke apart the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Here the author draws on historical generalizations about the building of nation-states and empires to propose three models of how rulers have sought to incorporate peripheral areas into an expanding empire

and how the peripheral elites behave when they seek ultimately to build their own independent nation-states. Laitin derives expectations about contemporary language policy from the three historical models. The models are plausible and they seem compatible with my own impressions of visiting the non-Russian regions of the Soviet Union over the last two decades.

Ukraine for Laitin represents the "most-favored lord" model of elite incorporation. Central authorities co-opt regional elites to serve in the imperial center and thereby increase incentives to abandon the language and culture of the periphery. The historical referent is the incorporation of regions such as Languedoc and Brittany into the French state and their subsequent movements for autonomy. Like the advocates of Occitan and Breton in the 1970s, Ukrainian nationalists today seek to revive the Ukrainian language, but it is not an easy task. "Because the two languages are so similar, the boundary between Russian and Ukrainian is constantly tested." Bilingual conversations are "part of everyday speech, especially in Kiev, the republican center." Yet "nationalists in Ukraine are committed to keeping the boundary between the two languages distinct" [p. 197]. I remember visiting a farmers' market in Kiev in 1987, as the *glasnost'* of

Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalizing *perestroika* reforms opened up possibilities for expression of nationalist sentiments. A man came up to me and said something in Ukrainian. I responded in Russian, apologizing for not being able to speak Ukrainian. He answered in Russian to make his only point: "You see, they are not the same language!"

One of the great concerns of the Ukrainian nationalists is that their language will get absorbed into Russian. Many Ukrainian residents are satisfied with simply adding Ukrainian expressions to their everyday Russian, to create a mélange known as *surzhik*. As Laitin points out, "the development of *surzhik* as an institutionalized speech form tends to subvert the nationalist program," which seeks to differentiate the languages sharply in order to assert the prominence of Ukrainian [p. 145]. But in practice, it is difficult for Ukrainians themselves to separate the two languages. I remember asking one of my students who had grown up in Kiev and emigrated to the United States with his parents as a child which language they spoke at home. He wasn't sure.

Kazakhstan for Laitin represents a "colonial" model akin to France's policy towards Algeria. There the native elites, like the Kazakhs, typically lacked the educational

and other prerequisites for positions of central authority; the *pieds noirs* colonizers were French speakers of diverse origins (including Portuguese, Greeks, and Jews), much as the Russian-speaking settlers in Kazakhstan came from Ukrainian, Jewish, and other backgrounds, as well as Russian. For Kazakh elites, adopting Russian was the key to career advancement, and they learned it very well – thanks, as one of Laitin's interlocutors points out, to the fact that many of their teachers were exiled members of the St. Petersburg gentry.

Learning Russian also fostered a certain allegiance to Moscow and even to the Soviet regime. As one young Kazakh woman told me in flawless Russian in 1984, "if not for Soviet power, today I would just be somebody's seventh wife." Instead she was the first secretary of the local communist youth league (*Komsomol*) in the Kazakh capital, Alma-Ata, an important stepping stone to a political career. In Kazakhstan – and in Ukraine, as well, for that matter – identifying culturally with Russia (a practice called *mankurtism*) does not preclude nationalist sympathies. Indeed, one of the leaders of the Kazakh nationalist revival in the late 1980s, Olzhas Suleimenov, was admired throughout the Soviet Union for the essays and

poems he wrote in Russian – a language he knew much better than his native Kazakh.

The Baltic republics of Latvia and Estonia, according to Laitin, "represent a unique historical form" which he calls "integral" incorporation. As part of the Tsarist Russian empire, the Baltic states were ruled on behalf of Moscow by a German aristocratic elite. When native Baltic elites sought to advance their own positions, they typically did so by learning German and converting to Lutheranism, rather than learning Russian and becoming Orthodox. Except for some Russianized revolutionaries who became part of the Bolshevik movement, Baltic elites "had little need for Russia." As an elderly Estonian woman I met in Tallinn in 1987 insisted, "it was the Germans who built this city. The Russians didn't do anything for us."

Independent for two decades following the Russian Revolution, the Baltic states were only fully incorporated into the Soviet Union after the Red Army drove out Nazi occupiers after World War II. Even then, argues Laitin, "each of the Baltic republics developed [a] parallel set of institutions for indigenous and Russian speakers with little communication across the language divide. It was fully possible for Balts to experience a complete cultural,

professional, and social life without entering into the Russian (or Soviet) world" [p. 67]. The difficulty of the Estonian language made it easy to freeze Russians out of traditional Estonian cultural events. Once in 1984, on a visit to Tallinn sponsored by an official Soviet youth organization, our Estonian hosts invited us to a local club to hear Estonian folk songs, while our Moscow-based escort sat uncomfortably in a corner. Later, visiting a high school, the students surprised us by asking which television program we preferred: "Dynasty" or "Falcon Crest"? Unlike most Soviet citizens, Estonians had access to U.S. programs broadcast from Helsinki in Finnish – the only language mutually intelligible with Estonian. As Laitin's model suggests, the Estonians and Latvians held onto a strong sense of their national identity even during the Soviet era. To the extent they looked elsewhere for cultural influences, it was to the West rather than to Russia. Once freed from Soviet rule, the Baltic states had even less need for Russia or their Russian-speaking citizens.

Thus, Laitin provides plausible, historically grounded rational-choice models for understanding the language choices of both the titular nationalities and the Russian speakers. The models yield expectations about language

policy that seem reasonable to a non-specialist who has visited the various places Laitin studies. But how do they fare in the face of his own ethnographic, survey, and experimental evidence? Alas, the results are mixed at best. The ethnographies, by putting "some flesh onto the skeletal tipping game" reveal that the "neat categories – expected economic returns, in-group and out-group status – that were theoretically enumerated become a little messy" [p. 156]. To his credit, Laitin discovers and acknowledges that other considerations came into play when Russian-speaking individuals and families made decisions about language assimilation. Moreover, their repertoire of possible responses to the "double cataclysm" consisted of more alternatives than whether to learn a new language or not: emigration to Russia, political mobilization for minority rights, armed mobilization for ethnic war. Unfortunately, Laitin neglects discussion of the strategic interaction of Russian speakers and titular nationalities until the final chapter. His ethnographies had turned up evidence that one group's decisions were often affected by changes in the other group's behavior. So, for example, as Russians began learning Estonian, the Estonian government raised the standards for language certification, thereby changing the calculus of Russian speakers' decisions about

language assimilation. But only in the conclusion does Laitin begin to address the issue. There he presents a simple game and makes some informed speculation about the future, but without adducing much empirical support.

Laitin's most creative method for assessing his models came in devising a "matched-guise" test of the relative prestige of Russian and the titular language and administering it in the four republics. Bilingual speakers read non-political texts in both languages and students were asked to ascribe certain personality traits to the speakers. Laitin's description of how the tests were arranged, with extensive quotations from the notebooks of his collaborating researchers, is fascinating and often amusing. But it also revealed problems with the formal nature of Laitin's language assimilation game. Even simple questions put to the respondents in advance of the tests elicited confoundingly complicated answers. As Laitin reports,

> In Ukraine, the family situations reported by the students were so complex that a clear distinction between a Ukrainian-speaker and a Russian-speaker cannot be made. Only 16 of the 156 respondents reported speaking Ukrainian to both their

> parents; 69 reported speaking Russian to both parents; 61 reported speaking a mixed language to either parent; and 6 reported speaking Russian with one parent and Ukrainian with the other. [p. 232]

In Kazakhstan, it proved impossible to find a Russian who could speak fluent Kazakh. It was much easier to find a Russian-speaking Kazakh with poor command of her native language; this "Russian speaker" was then matched with a "Kazakh speaker" who could speak proper Kazakh. This situation of relative language competency was reflected among the students who took the test as well. Many of the Kazakh students began filling in the questionnaire in Kazakh, found it too difficult, and switched to the Russian one instead. They seemed somewhat exasperated by the perceived need to demonstrate their Kazakh identity through knowledge of the language. When Laitin's colleague explained the purpose of the test, some students exclaimed, "Oh, again nationality and language divisions, why do Americans need all this? Why can't they leave nationality alone?" [p. 228]

Despite the high level of creativity, Laitin's matched-guise experiments yielded disappointing results for

his theory. He had anticipated that prestige and status would figure into calculations about language acquisition, in addition to more basic concerns about economic payoffs. Instead, Laitin acknowledges that "the principle finding, for the purposes of this book, is that there are no in-group or out-group gains to be had for Russian-speakers to speak the titular language" [p. 241]. Even the advantages for employment seem ephemeral: "In fact, in Latvia, where the Russian-speaker speaking Latvian earned considerable relative respect, the job ascription to this guise was relatively low status" [p. 241].

Laitin then turns to survey data to evaluate the relationship between acquisition of the titular language and job prospects for Russian speakers. He finds that "economic returns for speaking the titular language are highest in Estonia, second highest in Ukraine, neutral in Kazakhstan, and negative in Latvia" [p. 254]. These findings are rather troubling for a tipping game that relates language assimilation to prospective employment gains. Russians in Latvia turn out to have high assimilationist attitudes, despite low economic returns, whereas Russians in Estonia resist assimilation despite high economic returns. To account for these findings, Laitin is obliged to turn to plausible, but *ad hoc*

explanations. He mentions a history of mutual respect and cooperation between Latvians and Russians, reflected, for example, in high levels of intermarriage [p. 257]. He explains the reluctance of Russians to emigrate from the Baltic states by citing "their respect for the Balts as Europeans, as having a window on Europe and the Western world [which] gave Russian-speakers a strong disincentive to pack their suitcases" [p. 354].

One disappointment of Laitin's study is that the author ultimately never goes very far in exploring the implications of his findings for Russia's foreign policy and the prospect of interethnic violence. He includes a chapter entitled "If Not Assimilation, Then What?" in which he considers the three options identified by A.O. Hirshmann -- exit (emigration), voice (political mobilization), and loyalty (assimilation) – plus a fourth: armed conflict. Yet none of his cases include regions where organized violence broke out, so he is limited in what he can say about it. In an unfortunate lapse in an otherwise thoughtful research design, Laitin failed to include cases such as the Transdniestria region of Moldova, where Russian speakers, supported by the Russian army, engaged in a minor civil war to establish a separatist republic. Nor did he give much consideration to the potentially volatile Crimean

peninsula, where pro-Russian separatists receive strong rhetorical support from Moscow politicians. In a methodological appendix, the author explains, understandably, that he did not want to put researchers at risk in regions undergoing civil wars, but there is still much secondary literature that could have been brought to bear to study the sources of separatist violence.

The lack of attention to strategic interaction between potentially violence-prone groups is one that further research can remedy. Other limitations of Laitin's work are inherent in the project itself. Using language as a proxy for culture provides for no *a priori* way to anticipate the attraction that Russian speakers feel for the Baltic states as representing the West. It also makes it difficult to understand the many people in Ukraine and Kazakhstan who consider themselves culturally Ukrainian or Kazakh, yet prefer to speak Russian. Nevertheless, Laitin's focus on language policy reveals much about the state of post-Soviet politics. His notion of the tipping game, despite somewhat spotty empirical support, remains a powerful metaphor. Finally, Laitin's findings from the ethnographic field research are intrinsically interesting, and the author's ability to assess new information and develop convincing explanations within his general

framework is impressive. *Identity in Formation* is a broad-ranging and erudite work. It should serve as an inspiration to recovering Sovietologists and attract a wider readership as well.

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