

(N)either Latvian (n)or Russian: Can Russian Speakers Find a Legitimate Place in the Discourses of the Latvian Nation-State?

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Abstract:

The book *Russian-Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia* examines the trajectories that Russian-speaking identities have been following since Latvia regained its independence in 1991. The monograph is based on the discursive constructivist approach, mainly on critical discourse analysis (CDA) that seeks to investigate how the identities of Latvian Russian speakers are constructed and, even more important, changed in various social, political, and journalistic sources. By analyzing different political and media sources, Cheskin reaches the conclusion that Russian-speaking identity is based on the synthesized position between competing Russian and Latvian discursive positions. The following research has also shown that a significant number of Russian speakers make a sharp distinction between ‘cultural’ Russia, with which they commonly associate themselves, and ‘political’ Russia, to which they are often opposed.

How to cite:

Maksimovtsova, Ksenia: „(N)either Latvian (n)or Russian: Can Russian Speakers Find a Legitimate Place in the Discourses of the Latvian Nation-State? [Review on: Cheskin, Ammon: *Russian-Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia: Discursive Identity Strategies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.]“. In: KULT_online 48 (2016).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2016.995>

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Cheskin, Ammon: *Russian-Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia: Discursive Identity Strategies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. 248 pages, hardcover/paperback, 86 Euro. ISBN: 978-0-7486-9743-4

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has profoundly changed the political outlook of the world. One of the most contentious and debatable issues that remains critical is the place of Russian speakers in post-Soviet space. Since the first days of independence, the Latvian nation-state, which is defined by Rogers Brubaker as 'nationalizing', has implemented a national policy based on the increasing role and prestige of the state Latvian language, the strict citizenship law grounded on *jus sanguinis*, and the recognition of the Soviet occupation that caused an outrage of discontent from Russian speakers who lost their politically advantageous position after 1991. While Russian-speaking identity has been a subject of a great many of scholarly articles, there is still a lack of works that analyze the identity of Russian speakers from different angles. In this sense, Cheskin's book makes a significant contribution to the investigation of how Russian speakers discursively respond to the official Latvian narratives and the political discourses of Russia's so-called 'compatriot' policy.

In order to analyze the discursive identity strategies, Cheskin employs quite an impressive number of theoretical approaches. His work is based on the discourse-historical approach and mainly on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which seems to be a suitable methodological approach and provides definitions of different discursive strategies. Thus, the concepts of anti-discourse, integrational discourse, and constructive discourse provide a solid basis for the categorization of the strategies that were marked out in the course of media analysis and the Latvian political discourse. The main strength of Cheskin's work is that he scrutinizes how the discourses are changing throughout the course of new Latvian history. As an addition to this extensive work, Cheskin analyzes Russia's 'compatriot' policy in relation to Russian speakers in contemporary Latvia.

In the third and subsequent chapters Cheskin elaborates further on the main nodal points and the narratives emerging within the Latvian discourses of Russian speakers. By analyzing the Popular Front's official newspaper, *Atmoda*, dated from 1989 and 1990, Cheskin arrives at the conclusion that "the discourse of occupation has had significant consequences for Latvian state-building, and for the reconceptualization of Soviet-era immigrants and their families" (p.

55). In Chapter 6 he examines the attitudes towards the commemoration of WWII that remain a dividing line between 'Latvians' and 'non-Latvians'. By conducting a public survey in the Victory Park in Riga, Cheskin supports the logical hypothesis that the attitude towards such contrasting events will significantly differ among the Latvian population.

Russian speakers are heterogeneous not only in their attitudes towards the Soviet period but also in the relation to their perceived discrimination and (dis)advantageous position. While citizenship continues to be one of the most painful issues for them and serves as the uniting factor for imagining their common identity, Cheskin reveals different discursive strategies of identification that Russian speakers use. By analyzing the contents of the Latvian newspaper Chas, he concludes that "there are, however, also clearly observable trends for the Russian-language press to also pursue integrational discursive strategies" (p. 88). This means that Russian speakers' identity is not only formed in strong opposition to Latvian but also in synthesis with the official Latvian discourse. Cheskin points out that "this research found evidence of an acceptance of Latvian symbols and ideals centrally located within Latvian discourse" (p. 89), and he interprets it as a sign that not all Russians perceive themselves as being the victims of Latvia's contemporary nationalization politics. Europe also plays a significant role in the articulation of different discursive strategies formed by Russian speakers, varying from the notion of Latvia as being a 'totalitarian', 'pseudo-European' state to the perception of Latvia as 'multicultural' and 'tolerant' to minorities.

In Chapter 5 Cheskin tries to analyze the perception of the media messages by Russian speakers. He organized several focus groups where excerpts from Chas were presented during the discussion, thus giving an excellent opportunity to understand how discourses are perceived by Russian speakers themselves. The main conclusion of this chapter corresponds to other research where Russian speakers in the Baltics often do not associate themselves with Russia as a political unity but do associate themselves as culturally proximate to Russia because of their cultural heritage, e.g. the common language.

In Chapter 7 Cheskin highlights the idea that the primary role of politics is to ensure the perception of the official Latvian narratives of statehood. He then conducts a series of interviews with Latvian politicians and provides several interesting observations: "The focus group participants generally talked of positive interactions with Latvians in their everyday lives and saw politics as a field which artificially inflated ethnic concerns in order to serve the selfish needs of politicians" (p. 154). I assume that this point is of utmost importance not only for researchers but also for Latvian policy-makers; it may (and should) be addressed to them in order to show that being a Russian speaker does not automatically mean being anti-Latvian.

Despite the book's apparent level of work and impressive number of theoretical and methodological approaches, the point of language debates is almost entirely missing. While the term 'Russian speaker' encompasses language competence in Russian, it is almost impossible to talk about Latvian political development without reference to the issues connected with language policy. Since 1991, language policy has become a dividing line between 'Latvians' and 'non-

Latvians' because of the attempts of the government to 'normalize' the situation with the Latvian language that had been previously discriminated against in the Soviet Union. It will be interesting to see how Russian speakers respond to the state language policy and what discursive strategies they may employ towards the state measures to promote the Latvian language.

Taking into consideration some minor remarks and concerns, I assume that Cheskin's work will be perceived as an excellent attempt to shed light on the complex relationships between Russian speakers, the Latvian nation-state, and Russia. It is one of the most thorough and accurate studies of the various discursive strategies that Russian speakers appropriate within the public space in Latvia.