

<https://doi.org/10.19195/0137-1150.174.11>

Data przesłania artykułu: 17.10.2019

Data akceptacji artykułu: 10.05.2020

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Russian and English: Minority languages in Europe?*

Abstract

The term ‘minority’ for an ethno-linguistically defined group residing in an ethno-linguistically ‘foreign’ nation-state was firmly introduced to the lexicon of international relations and international law after the Great War. In these spheres the term was limited to central Europe, where the Wilsonian principle of ethno-linguistically defined national self-determination was actually applied. In turn, this term yielded the legally enshrined collocation ‘minority language.’ After the end of communism, both terms have become the basis for formulating and implementing minority rights in the Council of Europe’s space, from Greenland and Lisbon to Vladivostok and Kamchatka. However, using the terms ‘minority’ and ‘minority language’ for characterizing Russophone groups living outside Russia seems to make little sense. Otherwise, we should also talk about English as a minority language and of Anglophone communities strewn across today’s Europe as minorities. But we do not, because English is not connected to a single nation-state, and its (post-)imperial and hegemonic character cannot be genuinely described as ‘minoritarian’ in its character. The same is true of Russian, though its hegemonic status is largely limited to the post-Soviet states (alongside Mongolia and Israel).

Keywords: Council of Europe, English, language politics, minority, minority language, Russian

Руская і англійская: Мовы меншасцей у Еўропе?

РЭЗЮМЭ

Тэрмін „меншасць” для этналінгвістычна вызначанай групы, якая пражывае ў этналінгвістычна „чужой” нацыянальнай дзяржаве, быў цвёрда ўведзены ў лексікон міжнародных

* I thank Hyniek for encouragement, the three peer reviewers and the language editor for their comments and suggestions for improvement. Obviously, I am responsible for any remaining infelicities.

адносін і міжнароднага права пасля Першай сусветнай вайны. У гэтых сферах гэты тэрмін быў абмежаваны Цэнтральнай Еўропай, дзе фактычна ўжываўся Вільсанаўскі прынцып этналінгвістычнага вызначэння нацыянальнага самавызначэння. У сваю чаргу гэты тэрмін спрыяла стварэнню заканадаўча замацаваную калакацыю „мова меншасці”. Пасля канца камунізму абодва тэрміны сталі асновай для фармулёўкі і рэалізацыі правоў меншасцей на прасторы Савета Еўропы ад Грэнландыі і Лісабона да Уладзівастока і Камчаткі. Аднак выкарыстоўваць тэрміны меншасць і мова меншасцей для характарыстыкі русафонскіх груп, якія жывуць за межамі Расіі, здаецца, мае мала сэнсу. У адваротным выпадку мы павінны таксама казаць пра англійскую мову як мову меншасці і пра англафонскія супольнасці, рассяяныя па сённяшняй Еўропе, як меншасці. Але мы гэтага не робім, бо англійская мова не звязана з адзінай нацыянальнай дзяржавай, і яе (пост-)імперскі і гегемантычны характар нельга паспраўднаму ахарактарызаваць як «мінарытарны» па сваім характары. Тое ж самае тычыцца і рускай, хоць яе гегемонны статус у значнай ступені абмежаваны постсавецкімі дзяржавамі (разам з Манголіяй і Ізраілем).

Ключавыя словы: Савет Еўропы, англійская мова, моўная палітыка, меншасць, мова меншасцей, руская мова

The very central European rise of minorities

The concept of ‘minority’ entered Europe’s politics and law after the Great War. In essence, the term refers to a population that in numerical terms is smaller from the state’s dominant (‘titular’) group of citizens. A minority, typically, differs from this dominant group from an ethno-linguistic (or ethno-religious) perspective. Drawing at such a perceived difference, the ‘state-owning’ dominant group (potentially) marginalized, discriminated against or even excluded the minority from the state’s body politic. This phenomenon became pronounced, when in the wake of the breakups of Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany, Tsarist Russia and the Ottoman Empire, the newly put in place frontiers of successor states were defined in ethno-linguistic (or ethno-religious) terms. Language (or religion) trumped any long-established tradition of statehood or historical boundaries. It was the western Allies — Britain, France, Italy and the United States — which imposed on central Europe ethno-linguistic (ethno-religious) nationalism as the norm for building, legitimizing and maintaining statehood. Obviously, they followed the wishes of a plethora of ethno-linguistic national movements — be them Czechs, Lithuanians or Poles — who clamored for their own nation-states. By fulfilling these national movements’ wishes, the Allies could delegitimize the defeated Central Powers (Austria-Hungary, the German Empire, or the Ottoman Empire) and justify their post-1918 partitioning (Preece, 1998).

From the interwar perspective the term central Europe referred to the region extending from France’s eastern frontier to the Soviet western borders, and from Finland to Turkey. Its political shape was fully overhauled in line with ethno-linguistic nationalism. Significantly and poignantly, no nation-state was on the cards

for central Europe's 9 million Jews, who predominantly spoke Yiddish. At that time, they accounted for more than four-fifths of all the world's 11 million Jews. Anti-Semites claimed that, despite living in Europe for two millennia, Jews were *not* Europeans, but 'racially inferior immigrants' who should be expelled from the continent (Rabinovitch, 2019, pp. 48–61). Many new central European ethno-linguistic nation-states were underpinned by anti-Semitism. The Allies consented, and London, in the laconic 1917 Balfour Declaration, promised a nation-state to the Jews in Ottoman Palestine, just conquered by the British forces. Europe's anti-Semites welcomed this declaration as 'proof' of their conviction that Jews did not belong to Europe (Mendelsohn, 1983, p. 33; Mendelsohn, 1977, p. 110).

The Allies avoided applying the ethno-linguistic (ethno-religious) concept of national statehood in their own states, or elsewhere in the world (that is, in the colonies). In Britain no one thought it sensible or practical that Welsh-speakers be given their own nation-state solely on the basis of speaking a Celtic language of their own (Hechter, 1999, pp. 213–214). France would not consider separate ethno-linguistic nation-states for Basque or Breton speakers, either. In a similar fashion, with a whiff of racist disdain for 'natives,' the multitude of indigenous languages in the British colony of Kenya were disregarded as 'inferior.' Instead, the European imperial tongue of English was imposed on the *non*-English-speaking population as the sole medium of this colony's administration and education (Manela, 2009, pp. 19–34).

The postwar imposition of ethno-linguistic nationalism on central Europe put in question *all* the region's historical boundaries and polities. Any established political stability immediately melted away into thin air in 1918, or soon afterward. Ethno-linguistic (and ethno-religious) border military conflicts, uprisings, and civil wars followed swiftly, sending millions of refugees across the continent and also away from Europe. Unsurprisingly, in an effort to limit the damage caused and the resultant instability, after 1923 the Allies drastically curbed the use of ethno-linguistic nationalism (officially dubbed 'national self-determination') for forming polities (Magocsi, 2002, pp. 118–119). However, the Soviet Union, founded formally a year earlier, pressed on with this agenda under the name of a 'nationalities policy.' Political instability worked in favor of the Bolsheviks' program of 'exporting' communist revolution across the entire world, or at least to central and western Europe. By the turn of the 1930s, the Soviet authorities had established over 17,000 ethno-linguistically defined autonomous territories of a variety of administrative ranks, including the Jewish Autonomous Oblast with its capital in Birobidzhan, complete with Yiddish as its official language in addition to Russian (Martin, 2001, p. 413).

The Kremlin had wrapped up its nationalities policy by 1938, leaving only 51 national and autonomous republics in its wake. However, this policy of 'unbridled' national self-determination under strict totalitarian control afforded Moscow —

for a time — a higher moral ground, leading to the spread of communism among anti-colonial movements (Gupta, 2017, pp. 212–231). Soviet anti-colonial propaganda portrayed the west, correctly, as merely paying lip service to the ideal of national self-determination. Another lasting legacy of the Soviet nationalities policy was the spread of the ethno-linguistic nation-state as the sole legitimate model of statehood to central Asia and the Caucasus (Landau and Kellner-Heinkle, 2001). In turn, some tenets of the Soviet nationalities policy were adopted in communist China, the post-Indochina communist polities of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, and in India (Bernstein, 2011).

Each minority should possess its own ‘minority language’

In spite of the presence of some ethno-religious considerations, post-1918 nations and minorities were defined mainly through their languages, that is, on ethno-linguistic grounds. The League of Nations’ minority rights protection, as designed by the Allies, mostly focused on language as the main separator of human groups and the yardstick of their political and cultural rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010, p. 212). Hence, the coalescence of the legal concept of minority also entailed the rise of the concept of ‘minority language.’ Between the two world wars, the protection of minority rights in central Europe focused on the use of minority languages as media of education and (regional) administration (Horak, 1961). In turn, in the interwar Soviet Union, such minority languages *de facto replaced* Russian in their respective groups’ autonomous territories as the main media of education, administration and culture. After 1938, however, these languages became *secondary* to Russian, rebranded as the ‘progressive communist language of interethnic communication’ in the Soviet Union, and potentially across the entire world (Sinitsyn, 2018).

After the Second World War, minorities were often spuriously blamed for the outbreak of this bloody conflict, although, in the first place, it was the west that after 1918 had created the concept of minority and imposed it on central Europe, thus coaxing into political existence such ethno-linguistically defined minorities. When the Cold War between the Soviet ‘east’ and the United States-led ‘west’ followed swiftly, the issue of minority rights protection was pushed to the back burner. After 1945, no international oversight was recreated under the United Nations. Minorities and their rights were left to the discretion of central Europe’s nation-states. During the period only Austria and Italy negotiated a 1969 bilateral agreement on the protection of the rights of the German (Austrian) (Volkmer, 2016, pp. 48–64) minority in the latter country’s autonomous region of Trentino-Alto Adige (South Tyrol) (Alcock, 1982; *Implementation...*, 1988). In 1955 Denmark and West Germany stopped half-way on the road to a treaty by issuing unilateral — but in reality, reciprocal and parallel — declarations, in which

Copenhagen guaranteed the rights of the German minority in southern Denmark (South Jutland), while Bonn of the Danish minority in northern Germany (Schleswig-Holstein) (Kühl, 2005).

The end of communism, followed by the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the unification of Germany, and the rapid breakups of the non-national multiethnic communist federations of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, brought the issue of minority rights to the fore again. The aforementioned breakups and unification reconfirmed ethno-linguistic nationalism in its role of the sole accepted ideology of statehood creation, legitimation and maintenance in central (and eastern) Europe. Previously, the monopoly of ethno-linguistic nationalism in this function was challenged by communism and the existence of the aforementioned communist polyglot and multi-national federations. Now, after the disappearance of Czechoslovakia, the USSR and Yugoslavia, each single polity in postcommunist central Europe is an ethno-linguistic nation-state (with the qualified exceptions of Bosnia and Kosovo).

Again, it was the west, which was left alone to address the ensuing issue of political instability in central and eastern Europe, as generated by state collapses and breakups, followed by the founding of brand-new or renewed ethno-linguistic nation-states. In the framework of the Pact on Stability in Europe, as proposed by the French Prime Minister Édouard Balladur between 1993 and 1995, over a hundred bilateral treaties on friendship and cooperation were contracted between nation-states of central and eastern Europe (Gallis, 1994, pp. 199–206).

Following the wrapping up of the wars of Yugoslav succession, a similar Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe was implemented between 1999 and 2008 (Busek and Kühne, 2010). Almost each of the resultant bilateral treaties includes clauses on (usually reciprocal) minority rights provisions. Given the importance of language for defining minorities and securing their rights in 20th-century central (and eastern) Europe, in 1992, the Council of Europe put forward for signatures the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. It came into force six years later, in 1998. In order to avoid any accusations of impositions, parties to this Charter are free to choose the scope of offered protection and the actual minority (or regional) languages covered (Woehrling, 2008).

Oftentimes, it is not more than a game of pretenses. For instance, under the Charter's terms, Poland protects the languages of Armenian and Tatar, which are *not* spoken in this country and have not been in use on the territory of Poland since the Middle Ages (*Ustawa...*, 2005). On the other hand, Poland does not recognize the language of Silesian, although it is the country's second largest language (regarding the number of speakers) after Polish itself. About half a million people speak Silesian, or 1.5 percent of the Polish population (Kamusella, 2012, pp. 42–74). Another telling example is Paris's insistence that the languages covered by this Charter should not be exclusively referred to as 'minority languages.' In line with France's political convictions and principles, there are *no* (ethno-ling-

guistic or ethno-religious) minorities in France, because everyone is a French citizen, and as such belongs to the French nation. But this French civic nationalism conceals the undeclared ethno-linguistic policy of suppressing other languages but French, which brought a difficult to contain reaction on the part of Alsatian-, Basque-, Breton-, Catalan-, Flemish-, or Occitan-speaking French citizens. In the heady times immediately after the end of the Cold War, Paris relented to their demands and signed the Charter in 1999. However, this country's signature required that the protected languages would be referred to as 'regional,' not 'minority.' Hence, the Charter's title includes the previously unknown legal collocation 'regional or minority languages.' But, in the end, the Council of Europe's bowing to Paris's wishes did not bear any fruit, because France decided *not* to ratify this Charter (Żelazny, 2000).

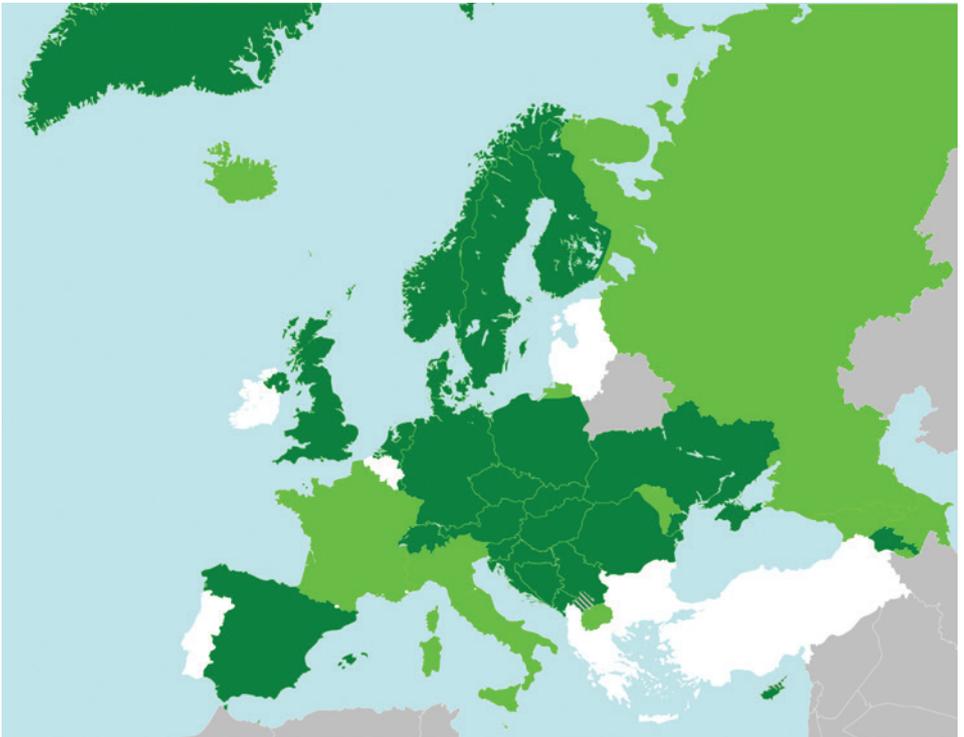


Figure 1. Member states that signed and ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages are marked in dark green, those that signed but not ratified in light green, those that did not sign or ratified in white, while non-member states of the Council of Europe in grey

Source: Fuseau..., 2013.

Outside central and eastern Europe, the languages covered by this Charter are referred to as 'regional.' The label of 'minority languages' is reserved for central and eastern Europe, where the interwar minority rights protection and the Soviet

nationalities policy were implemented, respectively. In western Europe, where civic (state-centered) nationalism predominates, language typically does not constitute any legitimate basis for political projects that could breach the territorial integrity of a state. The state is *primary*, while the nation is secondary. On the other hand, in central and eastern Europe the state is believed to be *secondary* to the ethno-linguistically defined nation (group of people). Hence, there is a distrust on the state's part toward speakers of minority languages, who tend to be seen as 'potentially disloyal' on this account.

However, this schematic division between western Europe on the one hand, and central and eastern Europe on the other, as conditioned by the political developments and practices of the 20th century, is not as tight as usually believed. The Catalans' recent demands for independence from Spain, couched in the rhetoric of ethno-linguistic nationalism, are quite 'central European' in their character (Walsh, 2017). On the contrary, Poland's Silesian speakers do not appeal for any nation-state of their own, but just want to be free to use their language in Poland. Hence, their demands are rather 'western European' (civic) from this perspective (Musiał, 2018).

Imperial or minority languages?

Since the early 19th century, English-speaking Britons and Americans have settled in considerable numbers in Paris, Florence, Rome, or Berlin (Conolly, 2020; Ludovici, Pisapia, 1984, *The British...*, 2016; Wagner-Martin, 1995). But neither they, nor their home countries have ever appealed for recognizing them as national minorities and English as a minority language. The same is true nowadays of about two million Britons living in Spain and France, or elsewhere in the European Union (EU). They are perceived and see themselves as 'expats' (short for 'expatriates'), or 'individuals residing outside their patria (nation-state)' (*British...*, 2019; O'Reilly, 2018). The British expats in the EU are more numerous than all of the Slovenian nation, and as such, from the central European perspective of ethno-linguistic nationalism, they should be given a well-earned status of an ethno-linguistically defined national minority. But these expats in question are *not* interested. They are laid back regarding this issue because of two reasons. First, their own definition of the nation is state-based (civic), meaning that they enjoy their full rights as citizens and thus, members of the British nation in the United Kingdom. Hence, outside their nation-state they remain British citizens. But if they want to enjoy similar civic rights abroad, they understand that they would need to acquire Spanish or French citizenship through naturalization. In turn, such naturalization, as a matter of course, would necessitate the acquisition of Spanish or French, as their new state ('national') language. Second, English is

a former imperial and present-day world language. Its elevated symbolic value is underpinned by the military, economic and cultural might of Britain, the United States and other English-speaking countries, from New Zealand and Australia to India, South Africa, and Canada. In practice, a good working command of English accords one a substantially heightened employability and other socio-economic and cultural opportunities than that offered by the knowledge of French, German, or let alone Slovenian.

Therefore, British citizens in Spain or France do not see and do not feel themselves to be any minority. In their own eyes and in the eyes of Spaniards and French, they are fully empowered ‘citizens of the world.’ What is more, the logic of ethno-linguistic nationalism and minorities has not obtained in 20th- and 21st-century western Europe, *unlike* in central and eastern Europe. As a result, this significant empowering (alongside their own civic nationalisms) prevents English-speakers of different civic nation-states from perceiving themselves as ‘minorities,’ even if they number tens of thousands in some capitals of the post-communist national polities in central Europe, be it Berlin, Budapest or Prague.

The phenomenon can be easily explicated with the notion of ‘sociological majority or minority.’ Typically, when an ethno-linguistically (or ethno-religiously) different group is smaller in numerical terms than the nation-state’s titular (majoritarian) population (nation), it is seen as a ‘minority.’ But in apartheid South Africa, although the ‘non-white (black, colored, Asian)’ population accounted for almost 90 percent of the country’s inhabitants, they actually constituted a ‘sociological minority.’ This means they were disempowered through disenfranchisement and the concomitant economic and social marginalization. It was the ‘whites,’ or barely a tenth of the country’s inhabitants, (*Census...*, 2012) who were the ‘sociological majority,’ thanks to their full political, economic and social empowerment. Obviously, only the languages of this empowered sociological majority (that is, Afrikaans and English) served as apartheid South Africa’s official media of administration. On the other hand, the disempowered sociological minority’s indigenous (‘black,’ African, Asian) languages were largely disregarded in a colonial fashion.

Hence, numerical minorities of speakers of post-imperial world languages, when residing outside their countries of citizenship, more often than not constitute empowered sociological majorities. Not surprisingly, under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, not a single English- or Spanish-speaking ‘minority’ is recognized or protected anywhere in Europe. The same is true of speakers of the French language, with the tiny exception of Switzerland’s bilingual cantons, where French speakers happen to constitute a numerical minority of inhabitants. Their linguistic (*not* national or ethnic) rights are guaranteed under the Charter. All of these French speakers are perceived and see themselves as Swiss, meaning Swiss citizens. They do *not* consider France to be their kin ethnic nation-state (*States...*, 2018, pp. 4, 7).

However, the freshly post-imperial and ‘newly’ world language of Russian constitutes a strange case of a ‘regional or minority language’ (needlessly?) protected under the Charter’s provisions in Armenia, Finland, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine. Furthermore, following the 1995 referendum, Russian was made equal and co-official in Belarus, alongside the country’s national language of Belarusian (*1995–2005... , 2005*). A similar move was attempted in 2012 with the language referendum in Latvia, but was defeated (Lubin, 2013, pp. 385–387). On the other hand, like France, the Russian Federation signed the Charter in 2001, but did *not* ratify it. As a result, *no* language is protected under this Charter’s provisions in today’s Russia (*Chart... , 2019*).

Ethnic Russians amount to fewer than a tenth of Belarus’s inhabitants. So in numerical terms, they constitute a minority. But the political, military and economic power as symbolized by resurgent Russia’s official (and national?) language of Russian makes them into a sociological majority. What is more, the lasting memory of the Soviet Union as a superpower continues to add to the overall prestige of post-imperial Russian. During the last two decades, the example of ethnic Russians, perceived so highly, have made most ethnic Belarusians abandon their Belarusian language in favor of Russian. Hence, from the perspective of observed ethno-linguistic practice, the numerical majority of Belarusians (84 percent) are a sociological minority in their own nation-state. As a result, at present, fewer than a tenth of the Belarusians speak, read and write Belarusian in everyday life (*Natsional’nyi... , 2018*).

A similar scenario was sought in Ukraine with the adoption of the controversial 2012 language law, which recognized Russian as a ‘regional language’ in most of the country’s eastern and southern regions. Had this law not been repealed in 2014 in the wake of the Revolution of Dignity, in all probability, Russophone sociological majorities (that is, Russian ethnic — or more correctly, Russophone *minorities* — who accounted for the majority of inhabitants *only* in Crimea [*Prokil’kist’... , 2004*]) would have replaced Ukrainian with Russian as the overwhelming language of public life, state administration and education (Moser, 2014). Only nowadays, in 2019, has this possibility been (finally?) prevented by the implementation of a new language law. It unequivocally makes Ukrainian the country’s sole official and state language (*Prozabezpechennia... 2019*).

The clear danger is that applying the European Charter’s provisions for regional or minority languages to the post-imperial world language of Russian, as a matter of fact, may lead to the rapid marginalization and exclusion of a given signatory (post-Soviet) state’s official (national) language from public and private use. This fear, well substantiated by the developments in the sphere of language politics and practice in Belarus and pre-2014 Ukraine, actually convinced the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania *not* to sign the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. For this reason Moscow continues to decry the Baltic republics and Ukraine as ‘undemocratic’ laggards (*Russia... , 2018*). At the same time, the

Kremlin adopted ethno-linguistic nationalism as part and parcel of its neo-imperial ideology of *Russkii Mir* ('Russian World'). In essence, on the basis of language, this ideology equates all 'native' Russian-speakers, irrespective of their country of residence or citizenship, with the Russian nation. Therefore, the Kremlin maintains that Russia has the right to extend control or even annex these regions alongside the country's frontier, which are compactly inhabited by Russian-speaking communities (Kravchenko, 2018). Acting on this principle, Moscow contracted a (highly unequal) union state with Belarus in 2000, annexed Crimea in 2014, and controls the de facto polities of the Luhansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine. In mid-2019, on the ethno-linguistic understanding that they are Russian-speakers and as such *must* be Russians, Moscow began issuing Russian passports to all then inhabitants in these two de facto polities (*Russia...*, 2019).

But, like English, Spanish or French, Russian is *not* any minority or regional language. Labeling it as such is a clear error of classification and of political judgment (Kamusella, 2018b, pp. 153–196). The ensuing terminological confusion shows that a resurgent Russia has not failed to use the Charter to its own ideological and strategic advantage, while flouting other salient democratic standards, as promoted and presumably safeguarded by the Council of Europe (Gessen, 2017). The Kremlin made the Charter's provisions for Russian as a 'regional or minority language' into another offensive weapon within the framework of the country's arsenal of 'hybrid war,' so firmly underpinned by the ethno-linguistic ideology of *Russkii Mir* (Kamusella, 2018a). At the same time, the Kremlin — like Paris — signed this Charter, but has no intention to ever ratify it. Despite Moscow's official rhetoric of support for the Russian Federation's official and unofficial languages in the country's autonomous republics and regions, the de facto policy is to discourage and suppress their use, leading to their swift replacement with Russian mono-lingualism (Babushkin, 2019).

On the other hand, should Britain annex Prague, Budapest, Paris or southern Spain and the Canaries on the ethno-linguistic basis of British expats living there, all of Europe and of the world would protest united in outrage. Actually, the vast majority of the British would think it an unjustified act of aggression and an entirely hare-brained folly. Hence, such a development is (now) a sheer impossibility. No one seriously thinks that the fact of speaking English entitles one to British or US citizenship or makes one British, American or English. Likewise, the fact that in southern Belgium the Walloons speak and write French as their official and ethnic language does not translate into any irredentist proposals in Paris that Wallonia is an 'unredeemed part' of the 'true French nation-state of all French-speakers,' and as such must be annexed by France.

The post-imperial world languages of English, French or Spanish are never considered to be minority or regional languages that would require protection. Therefore, in Europe (or elsewhere), no protection is sought or extended to these

languages' speakers under the provisions of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. English, French and Spanish are employed in official function in many states around the world. The fact is not interpreted as a legitimate basis for appealing to create a single common nation-state for all speakers of English, French or Spanish. For the speakers of these three world languages state is the primary locus of their national identity, not language.

In freshly post-communist Russia, initially civic nationalism reigned supreme (though Moscow did not entirely give up on imperial ambitions, as signaled by the coining of the term 'near abroad' for the post-Soviet states) (Ellison, 2006). From the ideological perspective it was an easy and comprehensible replacement of *non*-national Soviet communism. Communism was rejected, but another non-national (non-ethnolinguistic) ideology seemed to be the most appropriate choice for preserving the shaky unity of the multiethnic Russian Federation, especially in the wake of the still reverberating breakup of the Soviet Union. Later, Russia's political elite became emboldened by the windfall of oil riches and the dream of recreating the Soviet Union as a Russian nation-state. For this purpose, since the turn of the 2010s, Moscow has adopted ethno-linguistic nationalism for furthering its influence across central and eastern Europe, where this kind of nationalism continues to be the sole accepted ideology of statehood creation, legitimation and maintenance. On the other hand, western Europe has consistently failed to see Russia and Russian for what they are, respectively, a resurgent empire and a post-imperial world language (Herpen van, 2015; Kushnir, 2018). The west myopically perceives the Russian Federation to be a 'typical' central and eastern European nation-state, though a tad 'big.' But it is a fundamental error of judgment, for which central and eastern Europe will pay the price, not the west, or western Europe. The problem is that in central and eastern Europe, the majority of politicians are unable to see beyond the region's ethno-linguistic nationalism. Hence, they fail to protest the Council of Europe's misguided proposal to treat Russian as a 'minority or regional language' when spoken by communities outside Russia, that is in states across central and eastern Europe.

According such legal privileges, under the Charter, to the already empowered post-imperial world language of Russian turbo-charges it, making this tongue into a formidable instrument of Russian imperialism and expansionism, as currently exemplified by the neo-imperial ideology of *Russkii Mir*. On top of that, both the west, and central and eastern Europe see this development as 'legitimate and laudable,' mistakenly believing that Russian is a genuine 'regional or minority language' in many post-Soviet states. For western Europe it is a mere error of judgment that may cause some political annoyance in the end. However, central and eastern Europe's mistake in this regard enables Russia to extend its (not so soft) influence and (perhaps) eventual domination across the region, as exemplified by a veritable host of recent Russian impositions, interventions and annexations in Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, or Ukraine. Such blatant encroachments have not

been observed in the Baltic nation-states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania yet, only because these polities belong to the European Union and NATO, and they are not parties to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. However, the existence of the Russophone communities that account for a quarter of the population in Estonia and Latvia already give Russia a presumably higher moral ground, from the position of which Moscow criticizes both countries as ‘undemocratic’ (Karmazin, 2019). The west’s misreading of the situation makes it all the more possible for the Kremlin to deploy the question of minority rights for Russian speakers for the sake of destabilizing the Baltic states and the eastern half of the European Union.

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