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Francesco Trupia

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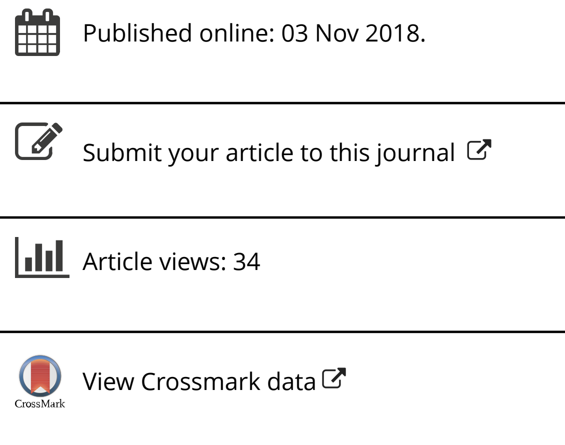

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BOOK REVIEWS

Russian speakers in post-Soviet Latvia. Discursive identity strategy, by Ammon Cheskin, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, 248 pp., £75.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-7486-9743-4

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, approximately twenty-five million ethnic Russians found themselves living as members of minority groups in the formerly Soviet Republics across Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia. Three decades onwards this historical shift, in the so-called Eastern Bloc ethnic minority groups continue to play a central role in nation-state building processes and ongoing transition of power toward full-fledged democracies. Among others, Russian minority groups have been a specific and intersectional case study in academia. For instance, while the Canadian philosopher Will Kymlicka has listed them under the category of *sui generis* minorities due to a wealth of cultural, political and even geographical peculiarities, the survey conducted by Alexander Cheskin among Latvia's Russian speakers brings a new light on the subject matter. The former, indeed, has regained relevancy in light of the military clashes that erupted in Southeast Ukraine in 2014 as consequence of the Euromaidan revolution and Crimea annexation to the Russian Federation. Hence, rather than following a traditional paradigm by which stereotyped pictures and ideas engulf Russian minorities in post-Soviet Republics, Cheskin offers a fresh and cool-headed interdisciplinary approach with the purpose to analyse certain *nodal points* (e.g. conflicting memories from particular events, post-Soviet identities, discourse strategies, acts of *othering*, etc.) which constitute the overall state of affairs in post-Soviet Latvia.

In particular, Cheskin devotes his study to the analysis of these *nodal points*, around which social identities have been shaped and accepted in post-Soviet Latvia. Thus, they are relevant within the construction of media discourse since they have played, and continue to nowadays, a central role in the propagation, articulation and transformation of majority-minority power relations. In addition, unlike many other surveys and studies on post-Soviet minority groups, Cheskin's perspective moves along a majority-minority binary in order to constantly confront bottom-up and top-down phenomena while attempting to grasp how political and cultural values and norms have changed in power and social relations so far. This critical analysis employs also discursive strategy to unravel nodal points overlapping politics and triggering instability and tensions within Latvian political and cultural space in confrontation with that of the Russian-speaking community.

A likely back-and-forth read of the book shows to the readers a twofold study. In the introduction, a well-presented methodology boosts a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that confronts all empirical issues and survey outcomes that follow up in the second part. Throughout, Cheskin aims to notice how political and social collective identity of the Russian-speaking community in post-Soviet Latvia tends to change over time because not static. On the contrary, he manages to outline how the group identity of Russian speakers can, just alike others do oftentimes, evolve and develop itself in turn.

Within this survey, identity transformation is indeed visible through the cultural and political role of language and further discourse strategies, which are paramount not only for articulating a coherent Russian-speaking identity in post-Soviet Latvia, but also for leading to a clearer demarcation between majority-minority dichotomy and within the same Russian-speaking community in today's Latvia. Moreover, it is equally important to note how the usage of the terminology "Russian-speaking community" displays another new angle of study. As the title states, the usage of the terminology "Russian-speaking community" clarifies Cheskin's

viewpoint in considering linguistic affiliation and orientation rather than a well-defined entity of this social group along ethnic lines. In fact, the Russian-speaking community in post-Soviet Latvia is described as a porous and not well-identified ethnically social group because constituted of other formerly Soviet national minorities, e.g. Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians and so forth. This survey is therefore particularly trenchant as it labels the minority condition of Russian speakers through a linguistic categorisation to neither misname nor mislead the overall scenario in today's Latvia. By this definition, Cheskin considers the Russian language as a maker of social identity and principal stake in shaping different political and cultural poles: while the Russian-speaking minority is very well-positioned on the one side, Latvians are on the other. It follows that, the definition of "Russian speakers" comes to function as a valid *signifier*, which, in tandem with a *signified* (e.g. a variety of collective and autobiographical memories, images, sounds, words and depictions), constructs and produces a community-oriented discourse. By taking into account the notion of discourse in all its forms of instances, usages and units, gestures, verbal, linguistic and written forms, the discourse itself is also a key-factor in establishing discursive strategies in the majoritarian-minority cultural system and forming collective identities accordingly.

Interestingly enough, Cheskin combines this identity discursive analysis with historical events that occurred before and after the collapse of the Soviet regime by employing the philosophical and vibrant theory of political and cultural hegemony formulated by the curious Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. Likewise, Cheskin borrows the so-called "organic crisis" in order to explain how the demise of the Soviet Union left room for the emergence of a new hegemonic social group to come to power while consolidating its political imposition thanks to a set of new norms and values by which it legitimately began to rule over a dominated group. At this point, Cheskin's argumentation opens the doors to a new approach to have a look at the in- and out-group dynamics in light of the radical changes that post-Latvian society began to experience throughout the shift towards a new political regime. By constantly following Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Cheskin defines the substitution of the Soviet political and cultural hegemony in Latvia as a replacement with a new political and cultural hegemony, which in turn may be still prompt to further and potential changes between those who governed and those who are governed. To a certain extent, Cheskin notes how other political and cultural phenomena (e.g. perestroika, glasnost') could similarly anticipate what happened in post-1989 all over the Soviet orbit. Therefore, the author strengthens this historical overview by introducing Laclau's and Mouffe's *logic of equivalence* in order to point out how post-Soviet structures of the social realm consider Russian-speaking community to be "equally different" within today's Latvian majoritarian system. Both theory of hegemony and *logic of equivalence* do not only unravel group identity transformation in confrontation with Cheskin's historical explanation of the emergence and replacement of hegemonic blocs. In addition, they remark the construction of an overly simplified depiction of Russianness which, by being based on "positive discrimination", considers all Russian speakers as equally different to others (e.g. the Latvians) irrespective of their social, cultural, educational, and political differences. This clear act of othering, unlike other phenomena of potential change throughout the Soviet era, did not only consolidate political and cultural hegemonic blocs in post-Soviet Latvia, but also it does continue to construct a more negative perception of separateness between Latvian-ness and Russian speakers-ness.

Whether the collapse of the Soviet hegemony was replaced by the rise of another cultural and political order or not, today's scenario is the result of discursive identity strategies that the Latvian democratic opposition, namely the Popular Front of Latvia (LPF), began to use from the mid-to-late 1989s up to early 1990s. As Cheskin analyses, the LPF managed to articulate successfully a peculiar and sophisticated discursive strategy whose main goal was to firstly invalid the Soviet legacy, to guide consequently an integrational discourse, and to construct

a new social realm in which Russian-speaking minority would fade away. In post-Soviet Latvia, all these three aspects of discourse strategy (e.g. *anti*-Soviet, *integrational* and *constructive*) came to be culturally comprehensive and legitimate because of being expressions of a collective identity linked to "one nation discourse", "one Latvian language" and "one community". In this instance, Cheskin combines LPF's threefold discursive strategies in the period of *Atmoda* (e.g. the Awakening) with the creation of the Latvian nation-state myth, which is historically fundamental to facilitate a clearer understanding of the construction of the so-called Latvian-ness in opposition to Russian-speaking minority's loss of relevancy in the country. All of these are crucial to look beneath the surface of today's most common grips in post-Soviet Latvia, such as the issue of citizenship for ethnic Russians, education, media consumption and language, which seem to degrade and insult more the Russian-speaking minority due to the high level of exclusion they face.

As has been noted, indeed, separateness between Latvians and the Russian-speaking community took place alongside a variety of discourse strategies politically employed to reinterpret historical events and use conflicting memories accordingly. According to post-Soviet Latvia's political spectrum, for example, such separateness displays an opposition between Latvianness and Russianness through two different media spaces, which are the result of an explicit ethnicisation of political issues and discourses that Latvians and Russians consume and vote for accordingly. In these two opposite spaces, the Russian language was used, and continues to be used, to indicate a certain political orientation in which Latvians support generally right-wing parties and Russian speakers do with left-wing parties. However, more than a right-left axis commonly applied in the sphere of political science, in post-Soviet Latvia this separateness goes along a set of values and ideals related to a wide range of *nodal points* above mentioned. Of particular interest is memory, whose cultural role and political usage in post-Soviet Latvia is paramount for discursive strategies within everyday public life. Hence, memory performed in between the historical crisis of the Soviet regime and the rise of the Latvian hegemonic bloc, in which particular recollection of historical events had the purpose to "rewrite history" and "reconstruct the past" to determine temporal and spatial dimensions.

As time went by, memory has continued to remain grounded in the past, but constantly reused in the present in order to address contemporary concerns through community-oriented discourses. In doing so, memory functions here as a signifier because of political, social and cultural performance in the process of transformation of majoritarian and minority group identities. It followed that, this community-oriented usage of memory brought post-Soviet Latvia inevitably back to examine historical events and issues connected with Latvia's history itself. The introduction of equivalent criminal charges for the usage of Nazi and Soviet symbols, and the equally showed empathy for *both* victims of Hitler and Stalin, could be just two examples to mention.

At this point, Cheskin's investigation over majority-minority identity formation confirms its paramount importance once again. In fact, while LPF's discursive strategies underwent to construct an image of the post-Soviet country in the form of mythscape, in which the vital function of memory and rewritten nation-myths were forged, transmitted, reconstructed and negotiated, a more evident demarcation from Russian culture was drawn accordingly. Because of this, the degree of (dis-)loyalty of Russian-speaking community towards the new Latvian statehood and sovereign ethnos became an important yardstick to accept minority culture in post-Soviet era. Unsurprisingly, if Russian speakers wished to be recognised as members and important part of the new Latvian society they might agree on those contested "memory wars" and historical events in the way the new Latvian political order started to publicly recollect. Instead, historical narratives and "political games" through which Russian Federation managed to engage Russian speakers in post-Soviet Latvia maintain a protection and cultivation of Soviet memory-myths of its compatriots (e.g. historical controversy between anti-Soviet

resistance and Nazi-allied support in Latvia) in clear opposition with historical claims and Latvian counterarguments.

Therefore, controversial cases with regard to series of memories, revaluation and re-interpretation of nation-myth and historical events (e.g. the "Great Patriotic War", the 9 May celebration,) continue to intertwine in today's political debates and discourses. Particularly in chapter five, however, Cheskin privileges an investigation of Russian identity from below in order to better analyse the emergence of a new Russianness among Latvia's Russian-speaking youth. What the author notes is the rise of a new and contradictory Russianness on both the political and cultural level of today's Latvian realm. While after the Soviet demise the identity of the Russian-speaking community became even an instrument to either bridge or distance all three Baltic States from/to Europe and Russia alike, Latvia's youngest generations of Russian speakers seem currently to champion a new form of Russianness. In opposition to the idea of "cultural Russia", which a Kremlin-oriented propaganda uses to keep memory-myths alive among Russian compatriots and former Soviet citizens, the emergence of a new and hybrid Russianness seems to potentially open up a brighter perspective of well-living together in Latvia.

In the second part of the book, which interplays vitally in the process of understanding and reconsidering the new trends across majority-minority binary, human interrelations are not described as too bad as they might be understood from a relatively negative prejudice. Despite a sense of being insulted because of an overall lack of recognition in the Republic of Latvia, Russian-speaking community seems nowadays eager to change while its collective identity is being transmitted across generations. As comprehensively described in the theoretical framework of this study, social identities tend to change over time. Thus, the fact that Russian speakers' identity and Latvians' accordingly have evolved and developed in the last few years confirms the theoretical approach Cheskin employs. From a minority perspective, while in post-Soviet Latvia the old generation of Russians continues to position itself "on the other side" of the social realm because culturally distant from the majoritarian system, Russian-speaking youngest generation, whose members did not experience the passage from Soviet regime, are more likely to identify themselves differently. As Cheskin anticipated, those *nodal points* that have been a measure of confrontation immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in post-Soviet Latvia society tend to be dynamic. Concerning the issue of the Russian language, which was the most significant self-confidence factor rather than ethnic origins among Russian speakers in post-Soviet era, the bilingualism (e.g. skills and capacity to speak both Russian and Latvian languages) is today an important asset instead of a restrictive condition. Unlike those Russians currently "trapped" in their Soviet memories and personal experiences who continue to be far from full integration and a positive sense of being European and Latvian alike, young Russian generation identifies itself along neither Latvian nor Russian straight sense of belonging. Despite the fact that Russia remains a natural external homeland (*rodina*) in their eyes, lack of experiences and time spent in have changed the perception of Russia as well as Russianness among youth. To a certain extent, nowadays young Russians of Latvia seem to be neither very (inter-)connected with nor big supporters of a so-called Russian world (*rossiiskii mir*), which in post-Soviet Latvia reflects the cultural sphere of Russia, and to the world of the Russian Federation (*russkii mir*), which refers the politically oriented space for Russian diaspora and Russian minorities.

Among others, debates and historical interpretations of "occupation vs. liberation narrative" have begun recently to show a radical shift from the old generation of Russian speakers, whose first language was and is still Russian, and the Russian-speaking young generation. As Cheskin notes, the youngest generations have increasingly started to adopt a position that permits simultaneously celebration of the Soviet liberation of Latvia from the Nazi occupation and acknowledgement as well as acceptation of the "occupation narrative" in terms of severe

and negative action of the Soviet Union all over the three Baltic States. After all, this new type of Russianness among youth is not the only hybrid factor of Soviet historical events used. Besides the existence of two historical narratives to transmit, it is important to mention that in post-Soviet Latvia historically Soviet-oriented commemorations are not only widely celebrated by "Russians" but also by many Latvian citizens.

In conclusion, Cheskin's goal is to point out how separateness along ethno-linguistic lines remains presently a concern and highly problematic for post-Soviet Latvia and other post-Communist States alike. However, a deeper identity analysis from below shows a wide range of changes across generations that may be keen to embrace and foster a commonly accepted, official and national realm for a well-living together. In general, rather than examining the only Russian-speaking discourse in opposition to that politically used by the Latvian state within its majoritarian cultural system, Cheskin's study has attempted to remark how potential integrational discursive strategies may potentially sustain a more positive change in post-Soviet Latvia. Although the disloyalty of Russian minorities is currently unfolded, as the Ukrainian scenario shows, there is enough space to hope that this will possibly occur soon.

Francesco Trupia
St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University
trupia.francesco90@gmail.com http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8984-7886

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Putin's war Against Ukraine: revolution, nationalism, and crime, by Taras Kuzio, Lexington, KY, Self-published, 2017, 490 pp., $19 (paperback), ISBN: 9781543285864

There is a short film often used in introductory anthropology classrooms called *Ongka's Big Moka*. In the film, the titular character, Ongka, struggles to defend his honor as the Big Man of his community in Papua New Guinea by defeating his neighboring rival. To do this, Ongka will use the most cunning, vicious, decimating weapon he can muster: a gift (*moka*) of pigs, grains, and goods so vast and so great that it brings shame to the recipient who cannot reciprocate.

Similary, Taras Kuzio's self-published book, *Putin's War Against Ukraine*, reads like an attempt to levy a devastating *moka* on the intellectual and diplomatic communities who are interested in these current events. He presents readers with a battery of names, images, references, lists, all variety of sociological artifact, which renders the book and its contributions loose and disorganized. It leaves the reader feeling overwhelmed by, if not burdened under the weight and disorganization of it all. It is as though Kuzio prioritized his ability to say, "I really was there!" over attention to scholarly rigor.

Take, for example, the dozen or so photos that Kuzio has included *of himself,* arm in arm with Ukrainian solders, standing in trenches, trying much too hard to look cool despite his face being covered by his helmet and RayBans. Perhaps the goal of these photos was to inject a sense of authenticity into the book. Rather than authentic or authoritative, these artifacts seemed exploitative and uncouth. I thought we had settled the matter of what kind of value such representations add to a scholarly text during the ontological turn of the 1990s. It gives the impression that Kuzio is trying to prove his legitimacy, and it leaves unanswered one of the most intriguing questions of the book: what is Kuzio trying to prove—and to whom?