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Shifting Russian-speaking diasporas:
New directions in the study of Russian as a heritage language

Irina Dubinina & Olesya Kisselev*

Abstract. The Russophone diaspora is one of the most established and well-studied diasporas across the world; however, the events of the past decade, especially since the start of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, and the intensification of political and social persecutions in the Russian Federation, began to significantly contribute to the reshaping of the Russian-speaking communities by a) prompting an intensified large-scale movement of Russian speakers across the globe and b) raising new questions about the future of Russophone communities in the world and the development of Russian as a heritage language. This paper provides a brief overview of the formation of Russophone diasporas and then focuses on the new wave of immigrants from the Russian Federation as well as refugees from Ukraine. It considers new sociolinguistic ecologies that are being shaped by this most recent movement of Russian-speaking migrants and the effect newcomers may have on more established Russian-speaking communities around the world. The paper concludes with a discussion of possible directions that Russian as a heritage language may take.

Keywords. Russian as a diasporic language; Russian as a heritage language; Russophone diaspora; immigration; language maintenance

1. Introduction. In one of her numerous papers on heritage languages, Maria Polinsky noted a tension that has always existed in heritage language studies: it is the "…tension between recurrent similarities across different heritage languages, which indicate the universality of underlying processes, and the effects of situational factors on the same heritage language" (Polinsky & Scontras 2020: 4). In this paper in honor of Dr. Polinsky, we consider the effect of these situational factors on the existence, development, maintenance, change, and loss of Russian as a heritage language, generated by the current sociopolitical context.

Studies of Russian as a heritage language have contributed greatly to the development of linguistic theory and the advancement of heritage language studies, thanks to an immeasurable degree to Dr. Polinsky's work (e.g., Scontras et al. 2015; Polinsky 2018, 2020, inter alia; Kupisch & Polinsky 2021; Montrul & Polinsky 2021). In fact, as one of the more widely studied heritage languages and as a language of a multiethnic and geographically dispersed diaspora, Russian is a focal language for the study of immigrant/heritage bilingualism and diasporas (see, e.g., the following works on *the lexical aspect*: Isurin & Ivanova-Sullivan 2008; Kopotev et al. 2020; Rodina et al. 2023; on *multiple linguistic aspects*: Polinsky & Kagan 2007; Polinsky 2011; Dubinina & Polinsky 2013; Meir & Armon-Lotem 2013; Makarova 2019; Kisselev et al. 2024; on *nominal systems*: Polinsky 2008b; Gagarina & Voeikova 2009; Sekerina & Trueswell 2011; Schwartz et al. 2015; Laleko 2018; Rodina et al. 2020; Meir & Polinsky 2021; Fridman et al. 2023; on *pedagogy*: Kagan & Dillon 2001; Kagan 2005; Protassova 2008; Kisselev et al. 2020;

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on *pragmatics*: Dubinina & Malamud 2017; Avramenko & Meir 2023; Blacher & Brehmer 2024; on *sociocultural and sociolinguistic aspects*: Andrews 1999; Isurin 2011; Laleko 2013; Isurin & Riehl 2017; on *reading*: Parshina et al. 2021; on *verbal systems*: Laleko 2011; Polinsky 2008c; on *word order and syntax*: Sekerina 2003; Polinsky 2008a, 2019; Kisselev 2019; Ionin et al. 2023, inter alia). However, the events of the last two years, including the start of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine and the intensification of political and social persecutions in the Russian Federation, have begun to significantly reshape Russian-speaking diasporas by prompting an intensified large-scale movement of Russian speakers across the globe and by raising new questions about the development of Russian as a heritage language and the future of Russophone communities in the world.

We first provide a brief overview of the formation of Russophone diasporas, focusing on the last of the so-called waves of immigration of the 1980s-1990s, which coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union. We then describe the new wave of immigrants from the Russian Federation as well as refugees from Ukraine and consider new sociolinguistic ecologies that are being shaped by this most recent movement of Russian-speaking migrants and the effect newcomers may have on more established Russian-speaking communities around the world. We conclude by discussing possible directions that Russian as a heritage language may take.

2. Russian as a diasporic language. Russian emerged as a diasporic language as a result of three major geopolitical trends (in chronological order): territorial and colonial expansion, emigration, and political changes affecting the state's borders.

2.1. TERRITORIAL AND COLONIAL EXPANSION. Beginning in the early 16th century, the expansion of the Russian state, mostly to the north, south, and east of its center, brought Russian speakers to new territories and forced dozens of languages already spoken on these territories into contact with Russian, initiating a slow but steady language shift toward the colonizing language. As a result of the state's expansion, the linguasphere of Russian stretched from the Eastern European plains all the way to the Arctic and Pacific oceans and to Central and East Asia, at one point reaching even across the Pacific into Alaska and northern California. At the dawn of the Communist era, the Russian empire was one of the largest colonial states in the world.

As a highly multiethnic and multilingual state that did not have much of a coherent policy on ethnic minorities or a language policy before the Soviet period, Russia engendered and perpetuated "…constant and fundamental contradictions of identity in its populations, with implications for their linguistic behaviours" (Ryazanova-Clarke 2014: 4). These contradictions and inconsistencies were inherited by the Soviet Union, which at different times of its history focused on either indigenization or russification, producing often contradicting policies, with russification eventually prevailing and empowering the Russian language with a higher symbolic status among all ethnolinguistic communities in the USSR (Suny 2012; Ryazanova-Clarke 2014). By the end of the Soviet period, the Russian language became one of the common and, perhaps, strongest markers of Soviet identity – whether for monolingual or bilingual speakers (Ryazanova-Clarke 2014; Mustajoki et al. 2019). The last Soviet census recorded that Russian was spoken as a first or second language by at least 62% of people of non-Russian ethnicities across all Soviet republics and within various sub-national administrative units of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Soviet National Census 1989), in addition to 100% usage by people who claimed ethnic Russian identity living across various Soviet republics.

2.2. WAVES OF IMMIGRATION. The second factor shaping Russian as a diasporic language was the dispersal of its speakers around the world in several massive waves of migration. Most of these

waves occurred in the 20th century, as a result of the cataclysmic sociopolitical events that unfolded in that part of the world – the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian Civil War, the two World Wars, and then the dissolution of the USSR. The stream of emigration from the former Soviet Union – i.e., monolingual or bilingual speakers of Russian – continued well into the 21st century, with the Russian Federation still being the third largest "origin country" in the world after India and Mexico, according to the World Migration Report (International Organization for Migration 2022).

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, scholars traditionally distinguished four large waves of movement out of the Russian state: the first two resulting from the world wars and the third wave being prompted by a worldwide effort to force the Soviet Union to allow citizens with Jewish roots to leave the country (Andrews 1999; Zemskaja & Glovinskaja 2002; Isurin 2011). Millions of Russian-speaking Soviet Jews and their non-Jewish relatives left the country between the early 1970s and mid-1990s, with a hiatus of about eight years when there was a full stop on outward movement following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980, which ended with Perestroika in the late 1980s. This wave established the core of current Russian-speaking immigrant communities in three "traditional" destination countries – US, Israel, and Germany. The collapse of the Soviet state intensified immigration from the post-Soviet space as the system of mandatory Soviet-era exit visas was abolished and western countries started generously issuing various types of student, travel, and work visas, in addition to Jewish refugee and other immigrant visas. New origin countries emerged as the former Soviet republics became independent states and saw emigration of their own citizens. This movement of Russian speakers happened at a smaller scale than previous waves, but is significant because it further expanded already established Russophone communities and added new immigration destinations.

The most popular destinations for Russian-speaking immigrants have been the US, Israel, and Germany, although sizable communities were also established in Canada, Australia, and other countries. The US has typically been noted as one of the most important Russian-speaking diasporic communities, both due to the original number of arrivals from the USSR and the number of prominent Soviet dissidents settling in the country. By 2008, Russian speakers in the US made up 10% of the total foreign-born population of the country, with 67.5% of the group falling within the well-educated and high-earning bracket (Tishkov 2008: 22). Since then, the flow of immigrants from the former Soviet Union has slowed down significantly, and by 2022, according to the US Census Bureau report, Russian was spoken at home in the USA by about 1.04 million people aged five or above (Dietrich & Hernandez 2019), which makes it the 12th most commonly spoken language in the country.

The greatest number of Russian speakers by *proportion* of the total population when considering countries outside of the former Soviet Union reside in Israel; reportedly, over 15% of all Israelis speak Russian (Khanin 2010). Approximately one-third of this group are from the Russian Federation, another third are from Ukraine, and the rest come from various newly independent states of the former Soviet empire (Niznik 2024). Russian speakers in Israel have contributed in most significant ways to the economic development, political life, and growth of the country's cultural capital. Most importantly for the point of this paper, they changed the linguistic landscape by creating a "Russian-speaking world within Israel" (Emmons 1997: 348). There are Russian-speaking neighborhoods, daycare and cultural centers, stores, small businesses, various services, radio and TV stations, theaters, and several dailies, to count only some of the ways in which Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants wave created a "large Russian subculture in Israel" (Emmons 1997: 348).

Germany has the highest Russian-speaking population in Europe outside the former Soviet Union; in 2022, the country's Federal Statistical Office[1] reported about 3.5 million immigrants and their descendants from Kazakhstan, Moldova, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine. Before the current war forced millions of refugees out of Ukraine, the largest proportion of these (former) Soviet immigrants in Germany were from Kazakhstan and Russia – either the Soviet republics or independent states – with almost equal distribution. The fact that these immigrants came from former Soviet republics right before and after the breakup of the Soviet Union allows one to count these immigrants as speakers of Russian with a reasonable degree of certainty; their descendants in today's Germany represent Russian-German heritage bilinguals with varying degrees of proficiency in the Russian language. Ethnically, however, Russian-speaking immigrants in Germany belong to three large groups: Russian Germans (*Russlanddeutsche*), frequently referred to in Germany as *repatriants* or *Aussiedler*, Jews,[2] and others, including ethnic Russians (the largest group), Ukrainians, Belarusians, and other ethnicities of the former USSR.

Although the numbers and proportion of Russophone immigrants vis-à-vis the total population are not as high as in Germany and Israel, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and many European countries have also received notable numbers of Russian speakers during the last decade of the Soviet Union and in the years that followed its dissolution. In October of 2022, Canada reported 548,140 persons of "Russian ethnic or cultural origin".[3] Among European countries, Great Britain, France, Spain, and Italy had a strong attraction for Russian-speaking immigrants before the full-scale war in Ukraine began in 2022 (Ryazantsev et al. 2021). As of January 1, 2022, the Spanish National Institute for Statistics estimates the country's Russian-speaking population at approximately 306,534 (Ivanova & Kressova Iordanishvili 2024), while Italian officials reported that about 315,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union resided in the country as of 2010 (Perotto 2014). Noting the complexity of identifying the exact number of "Russians" in Great Britain, Ryazanova-Clarke (2020) estimates the diaspora size to be anywhere between 130,000 and 300,000. Furthermore, in several European countries that are not newly independent post-Soviet states, Russian speakers constitute some of the largest minorities. The Russian-speaking population in Cyprus, for example, is among the most populous minority groups in that country, comprising almost 5% of the total population as of 2011 (Karpava et al. 2018), and likely more at the time this paper is published. In Finland, Russian is the third most-spoken language, although numerically the community is rather small: as of 2018, it accounted for about 1.3% of the total population (Viimaranta et al. 2018). A significant proportion of them are Ingrians, i.e., those who were categorized as Finnish by ethnicity in the Soviet Union, but who grew up as monolingual or bilingual speakers of Russian. To summarize, the steady migration of Russian speakers from the post-Soviet space has created small and large Russophone communities in virtually every country in Europe and as far out as New Zealand and Australia.

2.3. CHANGING BORDERS. The third trend that shaped Russian into a diasporic language was the movement of political borders rather than the movement of people across existing borders. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in the creation of 15 newly independent

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[1] https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Society-Environment/Population/Migration-Integration/_node.html.

[2] In the Soviet Union, "Jewish" was considered an ethnic, not religious, identity, and was recorded as such in the Soviet passports on the infamous fifth line (*nacional'nost'* 'nationality, ethnicity'). Many (former) Soviet Jews continue to perceive their Jewishness as separate from or not necessarily connected to religion (see, e.g., Gitelman 2016).

[3] https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810035501.

successor states, including the Russian Federation, and contributed to the diasporization of the Russian language in the most dramatic way. Practically overnight, Russian went from being a language spoken mostly in one, albeit gigantic, country to a language spoken by sizable minorities in 14 different successor states, not counting the Russian Federation (Ryazanova-Clarke 2014; Brehmer 2021). Unlike pre-dissolution years when the language was carried out beyond the country's borders by its speakers, the fall of the USSR created diasporas by moving borders over people. Brubaker (2009) argues that such a process leads to the establishment of a specific type of diaspora that he calls *accidental*, because it was created suddenly and without active or purposeful involvement of its members. As a result of the borders movement in 1991, Russian speakers in the 14 newly independent states found themselves a linguistic minority with a limited connection to the linguo-cultural national center (i.e., the Russian Federation). Importantly, accidental Russian-speaking communities are perhaps even more ethnically diverse than the communities formed by voluntary (e)migration,[4] due to the multitude of political, historic, and social factors that shaped them and, to a great extent, due to the nature of colonial experience in each particular region. But regardless of the ethnic composition of the Russian-speaking population, the common linguistic feature of all the newly independent states that formed in the post-Soviet space is the role of Russian as the lingua franca for various non-titular ethnic groups. This example from Lithuania is typical for all other states: as of 2023, Lithuania hosted 203,157 immigrants from various post-Soviet states, including Belarus, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Moldova, as well as refugees from Ukraine, and "almost all of them speak Russian" (Kalėdienė & Aleknavičienė 2024: 6).

More than three decades after the fall of the USSR, Russian-speaking minorities are still a significant presence in all of the post-Soviet states, even in those countries that have implemented sustained de-russification policies, as is the case in the Baltic states, for example. According to the latest available statistics, 29% of Estonian[5] and 26% of Latvian[6] citizens reportedly speak Russian as a mother tongue; another 30% to 38% report speaking Russian as a "foreign" language respectively. Lithuania has the smallest number of Russian speakers among the Baltic states, with only about 7% of its citizens reporting Russian as their native language,[7] although this number is likely higher now with thousands of Russian-speaking Ukrainian refugees settling in the country (Kalėdienė & Aleknavičienė 2024); and Russian is still the most commonly studied second foreign language, after English and ahead of German (Kalėdienė & Aleknavičienė 2024). These numbers, however, do not include non-citizens of the three EU countries who may hold Russian, Moldovan, Ukrainian or other passports but who speak Russian as their first or second language.

In Central Asia, the largest Russophone community is found in Kazakhstan, where 21% of the population report speaking Russian as a mother tongue and almost 85% of the population are proficient in Russian, according to the 2009 census (Zubacheva 2017). Kyrgyzstan has the second largest Russian-speaking community in Central Asia, with close to 9% of the population speaking the language natively and 30% speaking it as their second language, as of 2009 (Zubacheva 2017). Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan show progressively smaller percentages:

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[4] The newly independent states are based on a titular majority ethnic group (just as they were as republics within the USSR), but most of them also include sizable autochthonous minorities as well as minorities that resulted from the movement of various ethnic groups during the Soviet era.

[5] https://www.stat.ee/en/statistics-estonia/population-census-2021.

[6] https://www.csp.gov.lv/en/population-and-housing-census-2021.

[7] https://osp.stat.gov.lt/documents/10180/217110/Lietuvos_gyventojai_2011.pdf.

5.4% as of 2016, 2.1% as of 2021, and 0.5% in 2012 respectively.[8] Among the three post-Soviet countries of the South Caucasus, Armenia has the largest Russian-speaking population, with 0.8% of residents reporting it as a mother tongue, but 67% speaking it as their second language.[9] In Azerbaijan, 7.6% of the population speak Russian as a first or second language and 26% of the population report being fluent in the language as of 2006.[10] The Georgian Russian-speaking minority is the smallest among the three countries of the Caucasus, standing at 1.2% in 2014.[11]

Belarus has the largest proportion of citizens who report using Russian at home – approximately 70% of the entire population, including ethnic Russians and Belarusians, according to the latest survey done in 2009 (Woolhiser 2014). Ukraine also has a significant percentage of the population who claim Russian as their mother tongue and/or the language used at home; in 2001, it was close to 30%.[12] The complexity of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism and language use and attitudes, especially in the current socio-political context, merits an extended discussion, which we reserve for later in this section.

Regardless of the proportion to the total population, after the fall of the USSR, Russian-speaking minorities in all these newly independent states found themselves in need of redefining their ethnocultural and linguistic identities and reshaping their linguistic practices in response to social and political pressures, including the remedial language policies of their newly defined home countries. Language ideologies in post-Soviet successor states played out differently in different places. The shift away from the use of the Russian language and various de-russification policies were most pronounced in the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia (Ryazanova-Clarke 2014), which stripped the Russian language of any official or legal status immediately following their independence from the USSR. All three Baltic states currently have intense political debates about their education policies with regard to the language of instruction, which are seen as one way to counteract Russian influence; Latvia and Estonia are already in the midst of implementing changes to the educational systems that will result in Latvian-only (by September 1, 2025) and Estonian-only (by September 1, 2024) instruction. In Lithuanian society, the issue of Russian as the language of instruction now occupies a prominent space in public debate since the start of the all-out war in Ukraine. At the time of writing of this article, Russian is still used in 28 out of 910 public schools (Kalėdienė & Aleknavičienė 2024), but due to the rising political and military tensions with Russia, Lithuanian education policy makers are now forced to include the issue of Russian language instruction on their agenda and "there are calls to follow the example of Latvia and Estonia and switch to Lithuanian in all schools where the language of instruction is not Lithuanian" (Kalėdienė & Aleknavičienė 2024: 7).

The majority of Central Asian states have also implemented policies that push the national agenda in the direction of promoting the language of the titular ethnicity; yet political, economic, and cultural connections to the Russian Federation (and economic and political dependency in some cases) ensure the continued linguistic vitality of Russian in the region. In Kazakhstan, for example, where approximately 15% of citizens consider themselves Russian, the goal of the state's language policy since independence has been to promote the use of the Kazakh (Qazaq) language in all spheres of public life (Kucherbayeva & Smagulova 2023); however, both Kazakh and Russian are spoken widely, and Russian has the status of a co-official language in state and

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geographical_distribution_of_Russian_speakers#cite_note-undata-6.
[9] https://translatorswithoutborders.org/language-data-for-armenia.
[10] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geographical_distribution_of_Russian_speakers#cite_note-27.
[11] https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/georgia/.
[12] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geographical_distribution_of_Russian_speakers#cite_note-undata-6.

local administrations (Kucherbayeva & Smagulova 2023). This status can be attributed, among other things, to the fact that in the decades prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian served as a lingua franca among the many sizable ethnic communities residing in Kazakhstan, which include Uzbeks, Germans, Ukrainians, Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, Uyghurs, Koreans and others, and the Kazakh language has not yet replaced Russian in that role.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the status of the Russian language remained relatively high not only as a language of intercultural communication in the republic, but also as a language that offered better educational opportunities either in the Russian Federation (Bakishev & Plumlee 2022) or even in local Kazakhstani institutions of higher education, where the use of the Russian language has been sustained by intellectual capital accumulated in the previously dominant language (Kucherbayeva & Smagulova 2023). Knowledge of Russian also offers wider job prospects, given continued economic, political, and cultural ties between Kazakhstan and Russia. After the announcement of partial mobilization by the Russian government in the fall of 2023, tens of thousands of Russian citizens, mostly young males, fled to Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus, out of fear of being drafted or of borders closing for a long time. These newly arrived Russian speakers increased the economic capital of the Russian language, on the one hand, and created sociolinguistic pressures on already existing tensions between the two official languages of the country, including their symbolic and economic power, on the other.

2.3.1. Russian language in Ukraine. Until February 2022, the dynamics of dealing with the linguistic legacies of the colonial era through a combination of ideologically motivated language policies, political interests, and economic imperatives (Sandhu & Higgins 2016) applied to Ukraine as well. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian was a significant minority language with a large proportion of Ukrainian citizens – regardless of their ethnic identification – speaking Russian natively, and over 70% of all Ukrainians reportedly using Russian regularly in various aspects of everyday life (Marshall 2002). The use of Russian was steadily diminishing after independence at different paces in different parts of the country and in different social contexts, but overall, a shift towards Ukrainian progressed steadily. This shift, however, is often difficult to describe in “objective” numbers, since questions about ethnic belonging and linguistic identity in Ukrainian society are frequently blurred and often become conflated (Kulyk 2014). The question of language use or even the question of “nativeness” in one language or another become entangled in complex and often contested ideas of national and ethnic identity, language preferences, and political and social self-identification (Kulyk 2014). For example, in 1992, 69.7% of Ukrainians claimed Ukrainian ethnicity, and by 2012, that figure had risen to 84.3% (Pavlyshyn 2023); in a 2017 poll funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, the number of Ukrainians claiming Ukrainian as their mother tongue was at 64% (Pchelintseva 2023), which is much lower than the 84.3% who claimed Ukrainian ethnicity, but if we consider that 17.4% named both Russian and Ukrainian as their native languages in equal measure, the figures begin to make more sense (as compared to only 17.1% of respondents who claimed Russian as their only mother tongue). The same poll measured people’s use of languages in everyday life: 46.9% of respondents reported using Ukrainian exclusively or in most situations, while 31.8% claimed to use only Russian, and 20.8% reported equal use of the two languages. These numbers reveal another important characteristic of Ukrainian society – its linguistic hybridity, where both the Ukrainian and Russian languages coexist in one context either as parties in code-switching or as contributors to a mixed language known as *surzhyk*. A 2003 report by the Kyiv International

Institute of Sociology (Khmelko 2003), for example, showed that *surzhyk* was used by at least 21.7% of Ukrainians in the north-central region, 14.6% in the center of the country, 12.4% in the south, and 9.6% in the east. Thus, as some researchers of the Ukrainian linguistic landscape underscore, any discussion of linguistic identities in Ukraine must take into account the complex nature of post-Soviet identities of Russian speakers: as Kulyk (2023: 316) points out, "there was a large discrepancy between ethnicity and language, meaning that the ethnic and linguistic boundaries between the two main groups did not coincide". Kulyk further argues that in the 30 years following the establishment of independent Ukraine, Russian speakers gradually transformed into Ukrainians without changing their language ideologies or practices, and that even with the war breaking out in the east of Ukraine in 2014, Ukrainian Russian speakers "…even in the seemingly pro-Russian east-southern regions, allied with their fellow citizens rather than their linguistic 'brethren' across the border" (Kulyk 2023: 315).

The studies on Ukrainian Russian speakers' identities discussed here illustrate the complexities involved in the attempts to define national, ethnic, and linguistic identity markers of post-Soviet identities and underscore a complex play of various factors: "there appears to be no single, unifying label that the Russian-speakers have found and accepted. Their status as a unified 'identity group' is, consequently, ambiguous at best" (Barrington 2001). The same could be applied with a high degree of certainty to other Russian-speaking groups around the world. Research on the ethnolinguistic identity of people in Ukraine before the full-scale war in particular underscores the complexities of the label "Russian speaker", a topic to which we turn in the next section.

3. The Russian language and multiple identities of its speakers. In our descriptions of the diaspora thus far, we are painfully aware of the misleading nature of generalizations we and other scholars make, at least in some cases, as they contain hidden assumptions that may or may not have a reasonable basis. In fact, many scholars investigating Russophone diasporas around the world note the inherent difficulties in gathering statistics on the number of Russian speakers. One of the greatest challenges concerns the fact that the word "Russian" in the languages of most host countries obscures the complexities of ethno-linguistic identities of (former) Soviet citizens: e.g., "Russian" can mean anyone who themselves or whose ancestors come from territory at one time or another associated with the Russian state, including the Russian Empire (which in the 19th century included parts of present-day Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland, in addition to the already existing Russian imperial lands acquired through population expansion and colonial wars), the USSR, the Russian Federation, or sometimes any of the post-Soviet newly independent states. Thus, a contemporary American can claim "Russian" cultural heritage because his great-grandparents came from Warsaw, which historically may be true (this person's ancestors must have emigrated at the end of the 19th century when part of Poland was absorbed by the Russian empire after the second partition of the Polish state, and many Poles became Russian subjects), but makes no sense in a 21st-century context. A US immigrant from the former Soviet Belorussian Republic can answer a question about her background with a single word "Russian", because it is much more easily understood by her American colleagues and friends, or as a "Russian-speaking Jew from Belarus when it was the Soviet Union", if she wants to express the full complexity of her ethno-cultural-linguistic identity. A final example comes from an essay in the November 23, 2020 issue of *Mosaic* magazine describing the integration of Russian-speaking Jews in Israel, where the author states: "The *Russian* grandmother should have received the *Israel Prize* for her contribution to *immigrant absorption*" [emphasis ours] (Halevi 2020). It is

clear from such frequently encountered references that the understanding of the demonym "Russian" should be reinterpreted in both the public mind and academic discourses, moving it away from a marker of an "ethnic identity", "origin identity" or even "ethno-linguistic identity" to a marker of a "conglomerate identity" based on the non-ethnic characteristics shared by a group of people in immigration (Laitin 1998: 31).

Another challenge is caused by the fact that "Russian" can and frequently does mean a "Russian language speaker", but for members of the host communities this linguistic identity often obscures the national, ethnic, and cultural identities of the Russian speakers in question (e.g., Kazakh, Buryat, or Moldovan), who themselves may rank these aspects of identity much higher than their common Russian linguistic identity. In fact, the linguistic marker "Russian" often forces a new identity on immigrants from the former Soviet Union, as happened, for example, to (post-)Soviet Jews, who are often referred to as "Russians" in Israel and Germany (Yakymova 2020), even when the very reason for their decision to emigrate was rooted in their Jewish ethnoreligious identity, their experiences with anti-Semitism in the home country, and/or their desire to be proudly recognized as Jews. Indeed, as some researchers argue, it is the Russian language that serves as the linguistic glue that holds Jewish communities in post-Soviet states, Israel, the US, and Europe together and is even called the lingua franca of the post-Soviet Jewish diaspora (Gitelman 2016; Khanin 2023).

Literature on Russian-speaking communities is abundant with examples of unintentional forcing of "Russian" linguistic identity on the former Soviet immigrants of various ethnicities and post-Soviet nationalities: for example, numbers provided for Russian-speaking immigrants from the former Soviet Union in Italy show that the largest groups, accounting for almost 90% of the ex-Soviet expatriate community, come from Ukraine and Moldova (Perotto 2014: 145). Whether these immigrants actively speak Russian, Ukrainian, Moldovan, or a combination of Russian and Ukrainian or Russian and Moldovan, is not known or at least not reported, but it is assumed that these numbers represent "Russian-speaking" immigrants. It may be a reasonable assumption, especially if one considers the age of the immigrants and their Soviet past, but it is an assumption nevertheless. It may be driven by the observations of multiple scholars and many diaspora members themselves on the role of the Russian language as "a 'unifying cultural marker' of the multiethnic post-Soviet global imagined community abroad, demonstrating its peculiar rootedness in the Soviet Union" (Byford 2009: 59). In fact, as Rancour-Laferriere (2000) observes, it could be that the very multiethnic nature of the diaspora causes the transformation of a post-Soviet identity into a Russian-language identity. This observation is supported by a more recent study of Russian speakers in New York's Brighton Beach, who are shown to view the language as a marker of solidarity with fellow speakers rather than a marker of identification with Russian culture (Laleko & Miroshnychenko 2022).

These are valuable observations; nevertheless, what becomes apparent now is that measuring the size of the Russian-speaking diaspora is a major challenge for any discipline, precisely because we cannot easily define who "Russians" are. And the name "Russian diaspora" may not represent what people who are counted as its members think about this imagined global community. Indeed, the concept of a "Russian diaspora" seems to be more clearly defined from the *etic* perspective: anyone who speaks Russian is a Russian. From the *emic* point of view, immigrants from the former Soviet Union have highly complex identities, consisting of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and regional aspects, which they may promote or suppress depending on the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts of an interaction, as well as for individual and purely serendipitous reasons. Still, before the Russian-Ukrainian war, the unifying factor of the Russian

language indeed held a significant power in the "Russian diaspora." February 24, 2022, the day of the full-scale invasion, changed that in most tragic ways, the consequences of which we now have to observe. The war has already caused many immigrants from the post-Soviet states to re-evaluate their sense of belonging to the Russian(-speaking) community, affecting language shift for some and distancing from the "Russian" conglomerate identity for others.

4. Russian as a language of diaspora after the attack on Ukraine. At the very end of the 20th century, as the latest massive emigration wave deposited millions of Russian speakers across the globe, Laitin (1998) argued that these migrants emerged as a new category of identity and a new type of community *in crisis and shock* (italics are ours). In the subsequent decades, researchers have made some sense of this group, even with all the tensions and discontents inherent in the community produced by speakers of a language with a contentious history and highly diverse in ethnic and cultural backgrounds. One of the disciplines that contributed to a more developed understanding of the community is heritage linguistics, which has been studying various linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of Russian language maintenance, including heritage speakers' motivations to (re)learn their home language and their linguistic knowledge. Today, researchers yet again are looking at Russian-speaking communities outside traditional Russian-speaking spaces as a community in an even greater crisis and shock, with all the unresolved issues of ethno-linguistic identity in immigration and new complications and tensions, including those over the role and the place of the Russian language as the shaping factor in their belonging to this global community.

4.1. Effect of the full-scale invasion on Ukrainian speakers of Russian. The full-scale invasion of February 2022 sent a massive wave of war refugees from Ukraine into the world. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, almost 6 million refugees from Ukraine were reported in Europe and 6.4 million globally.[13] For Ukrainian refugees, the major destinations have been Poland and Germany. In fact, Poland has seen the largest number of border crossings from Ukraine since the start of the war (nearly 17.3 million) and currently hosts over 956,000 Ukrainians, with over 1.6 million Ukrainian citizens having applied for asylum as of June, 2023, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees data.[14] Germany received at least 1.1 million refugees as of February, 16, 2023, according to the German Federal Statistical Office,[15] which made Ukrainians the second largest foreign population in the country after Turkish citizens. Since the start of the war, the US government has granted 146,000 Ukrainians Temporary Protective Status (TPS). As reported by CBS News, citing statistics from the Department of Homeland Security, an additional 235,000 Ukrainians have entered the US since March 2022 through other programs, such as temporary visas, as well as receiving asylum status after crossing the southern border on foot, and in August 2023, the Biden administration announced an expansion of the Uniting for Ukraine program granting TPS for 166,700 more Ukrainians.[16]

Notably, a significant percentage of Ukrainian refugees are either monolingual speakers of Russian or Ukrainian-Russian bilinguals, according to the Rating Group (2023a), a Ukrainian independent non-governmental organization specializing in sociological research. In August 2023, it reported that 72% of the polled Ukrainian refugees living abroad (n=750) consider Ukrainian their mother tongue, and 25% consider Russian their native language, with 43% reporting

[13] https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine.

[14] From https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine.

[15] From https://www.destatis.de/EN/Press/2023/02/PE23_N010_12411.html.

[16] https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukraine-tps-temporary-protected-status-expansion-applications/.

Ukrainian as the language they speak at home, 40% reporting both languages, and 9% indicating Russian only. The report also shows that internally displaced persons and refugees living abroad are more likely to use both languages or speak Russian than Ukrainians who never left the country, probably due to the fact that many, if not most, refugees come from the eastern, north-central, and south-eastern parts of Ukraine, where Russian was spoken by significant proportions of the pre-war population and which have experienced the most intensive fighting and bombing. It is also likely that these Ukrainian refugees have to rely on Russian to access services in the host countries that have more Russian-speaking personnel and to communicate with members of the post-Soviet communities already established in those countries.

At the same time, the outbreak of the big war drastically accelerated language shift toward Ukrainian in most if not all areas of public expression and private lives, as recorded in a number of new studies (cf. Goodwin et al. 2023; Racek et al. 2024; Bahtina & Throne forthcoming). On the eve of the 2022 invasion, the proportion of people claiming to be native speakers of Ukrainian was at 76%, and the number of Russian speakers dropped to 18%, although support for Russian as a state language alongside Ukrainian was still at 25%; by March 19, 2022, it was 7% (Pavlyshyn 2023). A year into Russia's full-scale invasion, the Rating Group (2023b) recorded a significant increase in the percentage of the population reporting Ukrainian as their mother tongue across all respondent groups, which included Ukrainians residing in the country, refugees living abroad, and internally displaced people, to 82%. This shift was especially noticeable in the south and east of the territories still controlled by Ukraine, despite the difficulties of transitioning to Ukrainian due to the fact that a third of the residents identified Russian as their native language (Rating Group 2023b: 13).

4.2. Effect of the full-scale invasion on Russian citizens. Citizens of the Russian Federation have also been leaving their homeland since February 2022, albeit in smaller numbers than Ukrainians. Some left as political dissidents, anti-war activists, or conscientious objectors, some out of fear of being drafted and sent to fight in Ukraine, some to avoid Putin's all-reaching propaganda and for the sake of their children; others have left for personal economic stability and opportunities to live a better life (Zavadskaya 2023). The exact numbers of these new immigrants, or *relokanty* as they are often called, vary, and it is estimated that anywhere from 150,000 to 800,000 Russians have left the country since February 24, 2022 (Meduza 2022; Zavadskaya 2023). This is the largest exodus of Russian speakers since the last large (fourth) wave of Soviet/post-Soviet immigration of the 1990s. Already in 2020, the World Migration Report indicated that "at nearly 11 million emigrants in 2020, the Russian Federation had the largest population in Europe living abroad" (International Organization for Migration 2022: 88). After the invasion of Ukraine, the numbers of Russian-speaking immigrants have increased among citizens of the Russian Federation and have grown exponentially due to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees.

For citizens of the Russian Federation, finding a resettlement place has proven to be rather complicated from a legal standpoint, since they by and large are not eligible to claim refugee status, and several European countries, including those in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, actively discourage any inward movement of people holding a Russian Federation passport. The US currently does not have special immigration provisions for Russians to enter the country, and although US tourist, student, and research exchange visas are still being issued to Russian citizens, they do not create legal pathways for immigration. Some Russians opt for overstaying their visas and even risk illegal border crossing from Mexico in hopes of applying for asylum status

on American soil. Germany may be viewed as an exception among the western states in that Russian citizens are allowed to apply for humanitarian protection visas or to use one of the repatriation programs Germany still offers to citizens of the Russian Federation, e.g., Acceptance for Jewish Immigrants. At the end of 2022, Germany reported 69,000 Russians seeking protection status.[17] In fact, Berlin has become a home for the new Russian political elites, according to Alexey Yusupov of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.[18] However, the largest number of Russian citizens have been admitted by Kazakhstan, Georgia, Turkey, and Armenia (Zavadskaya 2023). The choice of these countries for Russian migrants is conditioned by their lenient visa requirements for Russian citizens, opportunities to hold a legal job and, in many cases, to continue working remotely for a job they hold in Russia. Additionally, the presence of an established and sizable Russian-speaking population in these three post-Soviet countries also makes them attractive to migrants from the Russian Federation. A significant number (about 200,000, according to the Associated Press in July 2023[19]) has also settled in Serbia, a Slavic country whose government is currently friendly to Putin's regime, but whose community is sympathetic to Russians wanting to escape repression in their homeland.

In addition, Russian citizens in smaller numbers have been turning up in various other countries, including Portugal, Cyprus, Finland, Italy, and Brazil. The number of Russian-speaking immigrants has also been increasing in Israel after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and, although no exact numbers are available at the time of this publication, it is estimated as of December 2022 that at least 70,000 people immigrated to Israel in 2022, with more than three-quarters coming from countries involved in the Russia-Ukraine war – 37,364 arrived from Russia, 14,680 from Ukraine, and 1,993 from Belarus, according to the Jewish Agency (Gross 2022).

4.3. Effect of the full-scale invasion on the Russophone diaspora. The new waves of migrants who speak Russian as monolinguals or Ukrainian-Russian bilinguals have further pushed the boundaries of the Russian-speaking diasporas, expanding the size of previously existing communities and establishing new ones. We now find greater numbers of Russian speakers (monolingual or bilingual) in established locations and in new destinations. However, the newest surge of Russian speakers does not necessarily mean greater opportunities for the maintenance of Russian as a heritage and diasporic language. While it is true that the constant flow of newly arrived immigrants contributes positively to language preservation (Fishman 2006), in the contemporary case of the Russian language, Russia being an aggressor state has made most associations with the country and its culture, including the language, undesirable to many. The complexities of the Russian/Russian-speaking identity described in the previous sections are now being tested by the current socio-political context of forced and voluntary migration of speakers of Russian outside their homelands.

Unlike previous immigrants who were not immediately concerned about language ideologies in the host countries, whether outside or within post-Soviet states, the new migrants appear to be very cautious or wary about their Russian-speaking identity. Following the full-scale invasion, multiethnic Russian-speaking areas, such as Brighton Beach, quickly shifted toward emphasizing their multiculturalism and away from a Russian-language identity, as is manifested, for example, in store signs or advertisements (Laleko & Miroshnychenko 2022). In some parts of

[17] https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Society-Environment/Population/Migration-Integration/Tables/nowcast-protection-time-series-protections-status.html#fussnote-1-586704.
[18] https://www.wilsoncenter.org/audio/berlin-home-new-russian-political-exiles.
[19] https://apnews.com/article/serbia-russia-ukraine-antiwar-activists-ban-ceae2d6107914002a3542ab51665e8b8.

the Russophone diaspora, language shift is happening in real time. For many newly arrived Russian-speaking Ukrainians, a switch to a Ukrainian-only rule within their family units is motivated by feelings of patriotism, a protest against Russian aggression, and an expression of solidarity with the Ukrainian nation fighting for its existence. The Rating Group report (2023a) indicates that 46% of Ukrainian refugees living abroad consider speaking Ukrainian as the second most important indicator of patriotism, after volunteerism and financial support through donations (61%), ranking it much higher even than service in the Ukrainian Armed Forces (33%). For some Ukrainians in established Russophone communities, for example in the US and Canada, a similar sentiment is manifested in a shift to English-only in communications with their Russian colleagues and friends and to Ukrainian within their family circle whenever possible.

Russian speakers from the Russian Federation in the near and far abroad are also considering difficult choices about Russian culture and language. According to a recent sociological survey (Zavadskaya 2023), Russians temporarily living in the Republic of Georgia are questioning the appropriateness of speaking Russian in public, considering the contentious recent history of Russia's relations with this country, and choose English for interactions with locals. More broadly speaking, newly arrived Russian immigrants, especially in Georgia, feel self-conscious about their country of origin and try to downplay their belonging to the Russian Federation or Russian culture. There are, to be sure, local tensions as well, and Russians are not welcomed everywhere for both political and economic reasons: all host countries report, for example, a steep increase in prices with the arrival of Russians, who are typically more affluent than the local population (Meduza 2022, 2023). Russian speakers report unwillingness of some local population to speak Russian with them, and many restaurants make public statements by producing menus available only in the local language and English. Combining these factors with visa limitations, it is not clear whether these new Russian exile communities will be permanent or transitory, and how this will affect the existence of the Russian language in the Caucasian and Central Asian regions. In fact, *relokanty* themselves are ambivalent about the length of their forced migration; in the meantime, many take on the task of learning the language of their host country, even if Russian is regularly spoken there (Kostenko et al. 2023).

At the same time, it appears that not only centrifugal forces are operating on the Russian language, separating it from its speakers; there are also centripetal forces that bring previously disparate elements closer together, creating new synergies. Due to the political isolation of the Russian Federation after the invasion of Ukraine, its neighboring countries came to the spotlight as good alternative spaces for learning Russian. These countries now see an opportunity to market themselves as sites for the study of Russian and commodify the language they sought to downplay before. Established programs (e.g., American Councils, the School of Russian and Asian Studies, and their European counterparts) have quickly left Russia and Ukraine after the Russian invasion and reestablished or expanded their programs in Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. There are also programs that operate in Latvia and Estonia, despite these countries' unwelcoming language policies toward the Russian language. As more people are traveling to these countries, contributing to local economies, the symbolic prestige of the Russian language increases; however, at the same time, this process opens possibilities for new political and social tensions in the host countries, as exemplified by the intensifying political and public debates over the mandatory language of instruction in Lithuania and concrete steps toward exclusive instruction in the titular language in Latvia and Estonia.

The war in Ukraine also made the Russian language more noticeable on the streets of European cities. Reportedly, Russian is the most noticeable minority language in Warsaw, heard

abundantly on the streets and in local cafes, bars, and restaurants.[20] Even before millions of Russian-speaking Ukrainians crossed into Poland to escape the intense fighting in the east of the country, Belarusian political refugees leaving their home in the wake of political persecution of the 2020 protests, who are mostly Russian-speaking, made a home in the Polish capital. Thus, we are seeing in real-time how the Russian language continues to serve as the unifying factor for a community of people with origins in the former Soviet Union, despite the virtual absence of ethnic Russians in some places. Moreover, for one specific post-Soviet community – Russian-speaking Jews – the Russian language will most likely retain its status as the lingua franca (Khanin 2023). Khanin notes that "Russian Israel" – where Russian-speaking culture has a significant Jewish component and is not considered a geopolitical threat (unlike in Europe) – will most likely serve as a model for the transnational diaspora of former Soviet Jews.

Finally, expat communities of citizens from the Russian Federation are reported to be more tightly-knit than is usually the case with Russian-speaking immigrant groups abroad (Zavadskaya 2023). They actively interact with each other, participating in support groups, maintaining community chats, and organizing cultural events, creating spaces for Russian to be heard and spoken, even if they may be wary of advertising their Russian speaker-hood in other public places in their host countries. Members of these expat communities also maintain close ties with their relatives and friends in the Russian Federation through daily phone calls, messages, and chat groups. In the long run, such close ties with the metropoly that modern technology makes possible may support language maintenance in communities, especially in those places where Russian is one of the languages widely spoken in the host country and may be supported at the government level (e.g., in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan).

5. New directions in the study of Russian as a heritage language. As we conclude this essay, we would like to pose the question of how these centripetal and centrifugal forces operating on the Russian language in today's sociopolitical context across the world will affect heritage Russian studies. Most certainly, we will see an increase in Russian-speaking children entering daycare centers and schools in new host countries. Israel, for example, is already experiencing a greater need for kindergarten and primary school teachers for the Russian-speaking children of Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian Jewish parents.[21] These children may be carrying diverse ethnolinguistic identities and, therefore, will have unique motivations to study the language that will be interesting to investigate.

At the same time, we anticipate a decrease in interest toward Russian across the globe, as it is now associated with Putin's criminal regime (see, for example, the 2023 SRAS survey[22] of Russian language enrollments). Another reason for a decrease in Russian speakers and, consequently, Russian heritage speakers concerns the documented rapid shift toward Ukrainian within the family unit by Russian-speaking Ukrainian parents who now make a conscious choice to not speak the language of the aggressor. Moreover, in multiethnic families (not a rare occurrence in the Russian-speaking diasporas) where Russian is the common language of the parents and Ukrainian is spoken by only one parent, a switch to only Ukrainian by that parent will increase the acquisitional challenge for a child who already has a diminished input in Russian and who will now also have insufficient input in Ukrainian, and both languages will be overwhelmed by the amount of the societally dominant language of the host country the child receives. We may

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[20] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/10/warsaw-mini-soviet-union-russian-poland-capital-exiles.
[21] Personal communication with Dr. Marina Niznik, Tel Aviv University.
[22] https://sras.org/educators/survey/2023-college-survey-of-enrollments-in-russian-language-classes/.

see more heritage speakers of a mixed Ukrainian-Russian language who are dominant in English, German, or Hebrew, which may create new research questions in heritage linguistics.

On the other hand, we may witness new language dyads in the study of heritage Russian as new Russian-speaking migrants settle down in Turkey, Poland, or Serbia. It is not yet clear how long Russian citizens will be able to stay in these countries and whether they will settle permanently, creating families and sending children to local schools. A lot will depend on the political situation in the world, and if these new migrants have to move again, there is no way of predicting where they will end up. Moreover, a recent sociological study of Russian expat communities by Zavadskaya (2023) indicates that the majority of those who left Russia after the start of the war are single males or young families without children: the percentage of couples with children is much lower among the migrants (39%) than among residents of Russia of the same age group (51%). Many of these migrants are also highly educated, skilled, and affluent (in comparison, again, with an average resident of the Russian Federation), and are more likely to speak English and consume the globalized culture through this language. They may be investing in their children's bilingualism in prestigious languages (in their view), such as English and German, in addition to the local language. Time will tell what linguistic portraits will emerge as these children grow up.

As to the question of whether the Russian language has a future as a diasporic language, we believe that it does. The Russian-speaking global community, however, may become even more pluralized, and we expect the rise of several diasporas, each claiming its own relationship with the language. Different communities will forge new identities and attempt to discourse-create their relationship to the Russian language. A way forward for various Russian-speaking communities that may feel both the internal and external pressures to abandon Russian may lie in choosing the so called "voice" identity option (Hirschman 1970; Laitin 1998), i.e., creating and claiming Russian-speaking identities that are separate from those created and forced on them by the homeland and, often, by the mainstream discourses of the host societies.

What is absolutely clear is that heritage linguistics will see an increase in research of Ukrainian as a heritage language, spoken by millions of speakers in major European countries and in the US. We predict – and hope – that the study of Ukrainian as a heritage language will become a prominent area of research in heritage linguistics. First, Ukrainian as a heritage language will land itself effectively to cross-linguistic comparisons, as it will most likely exist in different majority language contexts, similar to Russian. Secondly, establishing baseline Ukrainian will advance our understanding of input properties in heritage bilingual acquisition, as this language in particular may have significant variations in the baseline: e.g., Ukrainian-dominant, Russian-dominant, balanced Ukrainian-Russian bilinguals or speakers of *surzhyk* in various host countries. Furthermore, due to the fact that Russian and Ukrainian belong to the same language family and the same subgroup within that family, they share many linguistic features. Russian as a heritage language has been a part of a rich research agenda, thanks to Dr. Polinsky's work, and can inform approaches to the study of Ukrainian as a heritage language. Investigating heritage Ukrainian will contribute greatly to our understanding of such features as gender, nominal, and pronominal declensions, agreement features, relative clauses, verbal aspect, and word order under incomplete/divergent acquisition, all topics that Dr. Polinsky has considered in her rich research oeuvre. Dr. Polinsky is leaving the field a great model to follow in conducting research on Slavic heritage languages and, more broadly, in heritage linguistics.

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