

Polina Kliuchnikova

OWRI Postdoctoral Research Associate, Durham University

‘But Do We Speak It?’ Discourses on Language Proficiency and Performance Among FSU Migrants in Russian Cities

Urban environments of Russian megalopolises have gradually become more diverse due to, beside other factors, constant inflows of migrants from other former Soviet Union (FSU) countries. Since the collapse of the USSR, the language of these mobile groups has gradually become occasional rather than systematic, non-standard rather than normative, conversational rather than formalized. Once they arrive in Russia, however, they usually face strong sociolinguistic stereotyping exercised in different communicative contexts. Characteristically, the majority of contemporary urban ‘langscapes’ in Russia hardly manifest their multifaceted or vibrant composition, hiding the large proportion of their ethnic and linguistic diversity into the underbelly of suburban and downcast areas.

What this implies for incoming migrants themselves is that their linguistic background – whether they are mono-, bi- or multilingual – has to go through critical changes once they move to Russian cities. Not only do they face strong normativity which automatically labels them as ‘non-native’ speakers of the dominant language (i.e. Russian) and downgrades their proficiency in other FSU languages as irrelevant to their migrant present, but their own vision of language skills at hand changes, with inevitable consequences in communicative patterns which such ‘calibration’ to a new language regime implies – both at an individual and group level of interaction.

Based on the results of ethnographic research carried out among post-Soviet migrants in large Russian cities in April-October 2017, the proposed paper seeks to look into migrants’ own accounts of transformations their (socio)linguistic behavior undergoes in the new context of Russian urban culture. It examines migrants’ narratives through the perspective of their own perceptions of ‘differences’ which they discover in own linguistic behavior and performative strategies to deal with them – both as individuals on the day-to-day basis or as a minority group with an emerging voice.