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Language Provision & Translation Support for Post-Soviet Migrants in Russian Cities

Incoming migration flows coming from other post-Soviet countries to Russia have been consistently changing the population structures of its large cities as well as contributing to their multicultural composition for decades. The response from authorities, however, has rarely been adequate to the fluctuating and diverse nature of these migrant waves, language policies regarding immigration being just one particular example of such neglect. The stereotypical representations of post-Soviet migrants in mainstream media or general public discourse portray them as 'non-native' (and, therefore, 'inept', 'undereducated') users of Russian – despite their real linguistic competences and backgrounds of mono-, bi-, or multilingual speakers. These two interconnected factors have created a context where the sociolinguistic experience of migrants becomes, on the one hand, one of the key focal point of their integration to the receiving society and, on the other, is least protected by official policies or support programmes leading thus to possible discrimination and limited access to welfare or education.

Migrant support activism is an emerging way of dealing with the incongruities of country's migration legislation and widespread immigrant integration paradigms. Small-scale and practice-oriented, run by both locals and people with migrant backgrounds, these activist projects are aimed at language provision (e.g. preparing for work permission or school entry tests) and translation support (e.g. with formal documents in job-seeking or renting accommodation), but what they also achieve in the long run is creating spaces of multilingual communication and cross-national solidarity in contested city surroundings.

Based on the results of ethnographic research carried out in Russian cities in April-October 2017, the paper examines the variety of grassroots initiatives emerging to provide linguistic and translational support to migrants arriving to the Russian Federation from other post-Soviet countries. Diverse communicative contexts (educational, business, judicial, healthcare) and migrant backgrounds (i.e. labour, family, student migration, illegal migrants or asylum seekers) are considered in the analysis to provide an account of current practice-oriented approach(es) to migration. The overarching perspective is to explore this emerging area of civic support and migrant solidarity as a response to the growing diversity of languages, repertoires, and linguistic rights in urban environments of Russia.