

'Language borders' as experienced by post-Soviet migrant in Russia

Polina Kliuchnikova, OWRI postdoctoral research associate, Durham University

p.s.klyuchnikova@durham.ac.uk

Intensive migration flows within the post-Soviet spaces have maintained a relatively homogenous image of Russian as a persistent 'lingua franca' of the region; the Russian language of these mobile groups, however, has long become occasional rather than systematic, non-standard rather than normative, conversational rather than formalized. Once mobile migrant groups from the post-Soviet space arrive in Russia, however, they usually face strong language normativity exercised in different communicative contexts, labelling them as a priori 'non-native' speakers of the language.

The paper seeks to explore the concept of 'language border' as reflected through post-Soviet migrants' experience of adapting to the 'mainland' Russian context. Firstly, it examines the official language certification recently introduced by the government, which is aimed at constructing an idealised 'language profile' of incoming migration. By preparing for, passing through, and using the results of the test, migrants are supposed to enter a new linguistic regime by 'fitting in' linguistically but also critically (re)considering their identities. Secondly, for many of them, language performance becomes a crucial area of experiencing language borders within the society, where their non-standard uses or accented speech restrict their social mobility or ease of employment. Thirdly, local groups within Russian society also consider their role in the process of migrant integration – the variety of initiatives has sprung up to aid in resolving language-related problems that FSU migrants might face. It is argued that all of them present examples of a wider perspective for making Russian more accessible and 'transnational' in its usage while struggling against the monolingual ideology of mainstream discourse and building bridges across different uses of Russian exercised by local and migrant groups.