**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**The impact of the collapse of communism and EU Accession on language education policy and practice in Central and Eastern Europe: two case-studies focussing on English and Russian as foreign languages in Hungary and Eastern Germany**

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**Abstract:**

This paper considers the impact of geopolitical factors, and in particular the collapse of Communism and EU accession, on language education policy and practice in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). CEE is understood here as referring to the former soviet-controlled, eastern bloc counties of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. A particular focus is placed in this paper on the teaching of English and Russian as foreign languages in Hungary and the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). The paper begins by reviewing current thinking in the field of language education policy and practice. It then provides an overview of developments in language education policy and practice in CEE more generally before focusing on two case-studies of language education policy and practice in Hungary and the former German Democratic Republic. Implications both for language education policy and practice in CEE and for the nature of research in this field are discussed.

**Key Words:** Language education policy, Hungary, Germany (East), Russian, English, multilingualism

‘The decline in the use of languages associated with the post-war era may continue to challenge growth in language learning in the EU overall’ (Eurobarometer, 2012: 144).

**Language education policy and practice**

The study of language education policy and practice has been a central focus of the study of language policy since its inception as an academic discipline in the second half of the 20th century, primarily in the context of nation building (Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech, 2015). One of the reasons for this is the significance of the impact of language education on language practices and beliefs (Bruen, 2013; Spolsky, 2008). Language education policies or ‘language-in-education’ or ‘acquisition’ policies outline the languages to be offered to the population within frameworks created by formal education systems. They focus on the acquisition of additional languages in society which are different to the domestic languages spoken and, for a variety of economic, political and social reasons, have been identified as important.

These policies operationalise the aspirations of a nation state or supranational organisation like the EU with regard to the desired linguistic competencies of its citizens. Such supranational organisations direct language planning towards multilingualism and the ideological, political and social transformations in CEE have also affected language issues. There is growing consensus among researchers in language education policy that it should not be studied in isolation from the context to which it applies. The latter approach was prevalent initially when the study of language education policy and indeed language policy, more generally was in its infancy and a rationalist, neo-classical approach dominated (McCarty, 2010). According to such an approach, language policy including language education policy, was developed and assessed according to a process whereby it was formulated, implemented, evaluated and revised. However, many leading researchers (including McCarty, 2010; Shohamy, 2006) argue the inadequacy of this approach given that:

‘Policy is not a disembodied thing but rather a situated socio-cultural process – the complex of practices, ideologies, attitudes, and formal and informal mechanisms that influence people’s language choices in profound and pervasive everyday ways’ (McCarty 2010: xii).

Thus, in order to accurately represent and understand a linguistic context, a more critical perspective argues that it is necessary to view language education policy and practice from both a top-down (de jure), policy-led, and, perhaps more importantly, a bottom-up (de facto), educator-led, perspective (see for example Hornberger and Johnson, 2007; Spolsky, 2004). This facilitates exploration of what Hornberger and Johnson (2007: 509) call ‘…spaces in which local actors implement, interpret and perhaps resist policy initiatives in varying and unique ways.’ In many cases, these ‘local actors’, educators or implementers of official language policy are often those with the greatest insights into how a particular language education policy impacts language practice on the ground. It is from within this approach to the study of language education policy and practice that this study emanates, particularly as it is situated in a period of political change which in turn influenced education policy.

**Developments in language education policy and practice in CEE**

Historically, under the Hapsburgs, certain parts of central Europe were multilingual. However, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and subsequent creation of new nation states (Fodor and Peluau’ 2004) meant that some countries, such as Hungary, became virtually monolingual while others, with significant ethnic minority populations developed language education policies and practices where multilingualism either flourished or where ethnic minorities and their languages enjoyed a precarious existence. At the same time, long-standing traditions and geopolitical considerations influenced the choice of foreign languages so that Romania had a preference for French, like Romanian a Romance language, as the main foreign language of choice in contrast to Hungary where German enjoyed popularity due to Hapsburg influence and geopolitical considerations.

In CEE, a particular feature of language education in the decades following the Second World War was the simultaneous suppression of many university foreign language and literature departments and the imposition of Russian within the education systems despite the lack of qualified teachers, a problem solved by the retraining of former French or German teachers (Fodor and Peluau, 2004: 87). Russian was intended to act both as a lingua franca in the multilingual Soviet Union and its satellite countries and as an indicator of social mobility. Following destalinisation in the mid-1950s, the voluntary study of a second foreign language was permitted, in essence almost a policy of Mother tongue plus two additional foreign languages, one of which was Russian. While Russian remained compulsory until the end of the 1980s, a second foreign language, English, French or German, became the norm at second level. The exception to this trend was Romania where Ceausescu’s cult of personality meant that Russian was not a necessary part of the social fabric.

Since the collapse of the communist empire in 1989 and the accession of the CEE states to the EU, Russian is no longer compulsory within the education systems and has declined in importance. In parallel, the numbers learning English, French and German and to a lesser extent Italian, Spanish and Japanese have increased (Eurobarometer, 2012: 79). Nonetheless, in overall terms, with the removal of Russian as a compulsory subject at all education levels, there has been a steady decline in the percentage of the population in a number of CEE states able to speak at least one language in addition to their mother tongue (Eurobarometer, 2012). For example, CEE states which have seen a significant reduction between the Eurobarometersurveys carried out in 2005 and 2012 in the percentage of their populations able to speak an additional language to their mother tongue include Slovakia (-17 percentage points to 80%), the Czech Republic (-12 points to 49%), Bulgaria (-11 points to 48%), Poland (-7 points to 50%) and Hungary (-7 points to 35%). Romania is the only one of the former soviet-controlled eastern bloc states to experience a slight increase over this period (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Percentage of the population able to hold a conversation in a language other than their mother tongue.** *Data source: Eurobarometer, 2012.*

This contrasts with the figures for member states outside of CEE where the situation has either remained the same over this time period or has increased. For example, there was a 1% increase in the numbers able to hold a conversation in a language other than their mother tongue between 2005 and 2012 in Malta, Slovenia, Sweden, Denmark and the United Kingdom, a 2% increase in Spain, a 3% increase in The Netherlands, a 6% increase in Ireland and Finland, and a 16% increase in Austria (Eurobarometer 2012). Much of the decline noted in CEE can be explained by a fall in the percentage of respondents able to speak Russian. For example, the proportion able to speak Russian has dropped in Bulgaria (-12 points), Slovakia (-12 points), Poland (-8 points) and the Czech Republic (-7 points). Eurobarometer (2012: 16) suggests that this may be the result of the fact that many of those who learnt Russian at school, where it is now much less commonly taught, are now deceased or have forgotten how to speak the language.

The number of languages learned within compulsory education in CEE has remained relatively stable over the last 10-15 years with, on average, slightly more than one foreign language learned per pupil in secondary education (Figure 2). Romania is again an exception averaging two foreign languages, generally French studied by 86.3% of upper secondary school pupils and English taken by 99.1% (Eurostat, 2013).

As Figure 2 indicates, the EU average, in contrast, increased slightly over the period for the 27 member states surveyed in 2011 to on average 1.5 foreign languages learned per pupil with five of the six countries of interest to us in this study below this EU average.

**Figure 2. The average number of foreign languages learned per pupil in secondary education** in CEE states compared with the EU average. Source: Eurostat (2015).

Excluding primarily Anglophone states such as the UK and the Republic of Ireland where the provision for the teaching of foreign languages in schools is sometimes less than optimal, the figures for the remaining EU states, in contrast, lie predominantly above the average of 1.5. For example, in 2012, the average number of foreign languages learned per pupil in secondary education was 1.8 in Denmark, 1.9 in Greece, 1.5 in France and Croatia, 2.0 in Italy and Cyprus, 2.5 in Luxemburg and 2.1 in the Netherlands (Eurostat 2015). The additional language studied as part of formal education in CEE states is increasingly English as follows: Bulgaria 88.4%, Czech Republic 100%, Germany 92.8%, Hungary 78.5% (but importantly, with 44.4% learning German), Poland 93.4%, Romania 99.1% and Slovakia 99.6% (Eurostat, 2013; see also de Swaan, 2001). Furthermore, the average of 1-1.5 represents a fall from an average of two foreign languages up until the collapse of Communism, the two being Russian plus one additional foreign language.

Thus, there is evidence to suggest that the policy objective of the European Union and the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe, as expressed in a series of communications and policy documents (Council of Europe, 2008; European Commission, 2005, 2008), that its citizens should speak their mother tongue plus two additional foreign languages is not being fully realised in practice. Instead, it would appear that in CEE, in particular, a policy of *Mother tongue plus two* has been eroded since the collapse of communism and is moving in the direction of *Mother tongue plus English* for the majority of citizens. While it would appear that this is a trend throughout the European Union, the figures discussed above indicate that the trend has become more pronounced in the CEE states. It is the purpose of the case-studies at the heart of this paper to explore this trend from both a top-down and a bottom-up perspective.

**Language education policy and practice in Hungary and the former German Democratic Republic: Two case-studies**

***Methodology***

In order to obtain richer insights into the quantitative data presented in the previous section, qualitative data was gathered in the form of written reflections and individual in-depth interviews, the objective being to uncover ‘emic’ or ‘bottom-up’ perspectives (Merriam, 2001) from educators and implementers of language policy regarding the teaching and learning of English and Russian. In both the reflections and in the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on what they regarded as significant issues around the teaching and learning of Russian and English in their respective states. While narratives or written reflections and interviews can be an imposition on participants in terms of time and workload and can impact negatively on participation rates, it was felt that they were appropriate for this study as they allowed the participants to present considered views on English and Russian outside of the framework of a structured questionnaire. Similar advantages apply to individual interviews which were conducted with local migrants from Hungary and Eastern Germany. Ethical permission for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the researchers’ university and this was followed by initiation of contact with potential participants. Publically available lists of schools, school teacher networks and universities were used and potential participants approached via email. The material generated in the form of reflections and abridged transcriptions of the in-depth interviews was analysed using thematic content analysis.

In terms of participant selection, it was decided to approach academics (second level teachers, teacher trainers and university lecturers) in Hungary and Eastern Germany as the primary implementers of language policy; it was also felt that they could provide insights into their own experiences and reasons for choosing to study English and/or Russian, their pupils’ and students’ reasons as well as lecturers’ and teachers’ subsequent practices. Since the primary objective here is not to generalise the findings to the population from which the sample is drawn but instead to “obtain insights into a phenomenon” (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007: 287), a ‘criterion’ or ‘critical case’ sampling scheme was used which involves targeting “settings, groups and/or individuals based on specific characteristic(s) because their inclusion provides the researcher with compelling insight about a phenomenon of interest” (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007: 285). In addition, this approach recognises sociopolitical realities at local level as well as in the geopolitical sphere (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007: 129). At university-level, the primary criterion was that the university should offer both English and Russian to its students. For second-level school teachers, it was felt that ideally they should be from publically funded, mainstream second level schools offering English and/or Russian.

One large and respected university in Eastern Germany, which offers a wide range of languages including English and Russian, agreed to participate. A written reflection was provided reflecting the views of its twelve English and three Russian lecturers. Follow-up questions were responded to by email. In addition, a Professor of Education from an institution in Hamburg with an expertise in educational matters relating to the five eastern German states also agreed to provide a reflection and to respond to follow-up questions. At second level, one teacher of Russian, one of Russian, English, French and Spanish, and one second-level teacher of Russian and trainer of Russian teachers agreed to provide in-depth written reflections. Between them, the teachers have 142 years’ experience of teaching languages within the German educational system.

In Hungary, eminent professors and highly regarded lecturers across four universities agreed to participate. While one university is located in Budapest, the others represent respected institutions in the south of the country. Though Russian is offered at university level, English language departments are more numerous and it was not possible to focus only on universities offering both languages. Consequently, five English language lecturers, some of whom also had experience of teaching Russian, offered written reflections and e-mails provided follow up questions. At second level, four teachers responded of whom one worked in an international environment. The other three had taught Russian initially and subsequently switched to other languages after 1989, namely English, French and German. These teachers work in a grammar school in the north east of Hungary and have had long careers, with each of them teaching Russian for about ten years followed by over twenty years of active engagement with their second language. Finally, two migrants, one from Hungary and one from eastern Germany, currently resident in Ireland, participated in in-depth one hour interviews to further explore the issues raised. The findings from the qualitative research are presented in the following sub-sections following a brief contextualisation of each setting.

***Eastern Germany***

In Germany, the teaching and learning of languages has played a prominent role in its education system since the early 19th century. At that time, its primary function was to support the intellectual and cultural development of the child, in other words to contribute to its *Bildung* (Ellis, Gogolin and Clyne, 2010) as well as to increase metalinguistic awareness and ensure a better command of the mother tongue (Humboldt, 1907). Since, the end of the 19th century, however, the focus has tended more towards a utilitarian, ‘functional’ perspective in that language competency is perceived as facilitating international trade and political relations as underlined by the fact that the three languages introduced after World War II were the languages of the allied forces, English and French in the West and Russian in the East (Garcia, 2015). However, the notion of the cultural contribution made by language teaching remains embedded in the German psyche as evidenced by the continued support for the teaching of classical languages such as Latin and Greek in schools in the *Gymnasien*, the schools in the higher education track.

Today, multilingualism in Germany is promoted primarily by means of a language education policy whereby provision is made for a broad range of languages within the school system with some states offering up to 20 foreign languages in their schools including Mandarin and other Asian languages (Ellis, Gogolin and Clyne, 2010). The core group, however, includes English, French and Spanish with many of the schools designed to prepare students for study at university level. Of these core languages and with a small number of exceptions, ‘English is generally the object of this promotion’ (Ellis, Gogolin and Clyne, 2010: 446), a claim that is borne out by the evidence. For example, 63.9% of primary school pupils (Eurostat, 2010) and 95% of those at secondary school (*Statistisches Bundesamt,* 2012), where one foreign language is compulsory and a second optional, study English, with pupils in some states starting to learn English at the age of 6 and others at the age of 9 (Ellis, Gogolin and Clyne, 2010: 447). In 2012, the total figure for those learning English at school was 86.7% when both primary and special needs schools are taken into account, 81.1% for those in the five new states created on the territory of the former GDR.

Mirroring the situation in CEE more generally as discussed in the previous section, Russian was compulsory within the school system under the Communist regime and the study of an additional foreign language, the norm. Following the collapse of Communism and German reunification in 1990, the number of pupils studying Russian in eastern German schools experienced a dramatic fall. (Figure 3) when Russian lost its compulsory status and was demoted and placed on an equal footing with English and French (Lakomski, 1992: 7). At the same time, the numbers electing to study Russian in school remained relatively stable in the western part of Germany during this period of transition from Communism to democracy (Figure 3). There does appear, nonetheless, to have been a stabilization in the eastern part of Germany in more recent years.

**Figure 3. Number of students studying Russian in Germany, East and West**

Source: Statistisches Bundesamt 2014

These figures can be further interpreted in the light of the qualitative data from which a number of themes emerged. For example, all of the teachers, lecturers, teacher trainers and academics expressed the view that English is ‘a given’ in Germany today [all German and Hungarian quotations translated by the researchers] and the need to study English unquestioned at any point (University Academic). The university lecturers also pointed out that English is viewed by pupils and students as a relatively easy language to learn and similar to German in several ways. One commented, however, that this attitude did not reflect reality when it came to achieving progression at the higher English proficiency levels; one Russian teacher felt that Russian is actually easier than other languages because it has more regular verbs and pronunciation is more literal. The Russian teachers expressed their deep appreciation and liking for the Russian language itself as did the migrant from eastern Germany. Their intrinsic love of the language was divorced from any political associations but was spoken of in terms of a liking for the language itself, and an interest in Russian history and culture more generally.

One respondent lamented the contemporary focus on British English and Global English capable of acting as a “lingua franca”, as opposed to more multicultural ‘Englishes’ (University Academic). A similar point was made by a migrant from eastern Germany (Leipzig) currently resident in Ireland. They suggested that English is being learnt today almost exclusively for communicative, functional purposes and not in order to gain insights into or more in-depth understandings of the culture(s) of native English speakers. The migrant further commented that while language learners might travel to the UK or the USA, this is primarily with the objective of perfecting their English competence and not because of an intrinsic interest in these cultures. Instead, she stressed that English is ‘the global language’ and that ‘…it is very real that wherever you go, you get quite far with English’.

All of the lecturers stressed that language choice at university is heavily influenced by the numbers taking different languages at second level. As discussed above, English is now compulsory in secondary schools in Germany meaning that all school leavers have a qualification in the language; the result being that they can draw on a significantly larger pool of degrees in English or degrees containing an English component. The teachers also noted that the number of schools in which Russian is being offered is falling steadily. They report that Russian is gradually being withdrawn from schools and offered as a result to fewer pupils. This view is belied somewhat by the quantitative findings reviewed above which suggest that the numbers studying Russian is gradually beginning to stabilise. However, this reality is not that perceived by the teachers. For example, in the words of one Russian teacher and teacher-trainer:

‘…. the numbers studying Russian are dropping. This is mainly due to the fact that fewer and fewer schools are offering Russian. Only 176 of the 924 schools in the federal state of Brandenburg offer Russian and this number falls every year because school principals replace Russian with Spanish and Italian.’

A number of explanations were offered as to why this might be the case. These are drawn from both a supply and a demand perspective. In terms of supply, both university lecturers and teachers referred to the fact that there are now fewer teachers of Russian available owing to the fact that as they retire they are not replaced. Others argue that the demand for Russian is not there among pupils in schools in Germany today as it is perceived as ‘completely out of date’ (University Academic), ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘conservative’ [[1]](#footnote-1)(University Academic), not to mention relatively difficult, for example, when compared with Spanish. One teacher commented that twenty years ago, some pupils might have perceived Russia as a powerful country, been fascinated by a different script or felt that speaking Russian could enhance their career prospects. While one teacher feels that some pupils retain this interest in Russia and its mysterious language and history, as well as benefitting from the fact that in the eastern German states some parents can still help their children with their Russian homework, the remaining teachers indicated that the majority of those who choose Russian at school now have a Russian background or a family connection of some kind with Russia with one commenting:

‘Russian as a school subject for non Russian-speakers: I fear it will remain a “niche subject”. It is a difficult language and significantly more English is being learnt in Russia now compared with during the era of the Soviet Union. They might think, sure, I’ll see how it goes with English.’

Two teachers stressed, however, that the choice by pupils in schools to study Russian today is very much dependent on the individual teacher and the way the subject is taught. According to one, in order to encourage pupils at school level to study Russian, they must be incentivised to do so and must, for example, be given the opportunity to engage in more interesting activities and projects than those offered to pupils who study other languages. In this way, ‘it is possible to generate an interest in Russian among pupils but you need teachers who can motivate pupils to study Russian’.

Two teachers refer to the fact, however, that the current lack of demand for Russian in schools is primarily associated with the point at which it is offered in the school curriculum. Here, they are referring to the fact that, where Russian continues to be offered, it is frequently offered as the third foreign language at a point where school pupils are already studying English and an additional foreign language and only those most dedicated to foreign languages would choose to add a third, often at the expense of another subject or a different third foreign language. In this vein, a number of the teachers suggested that Russian requires support from the Ministries for Education in the different German states if it is to flourish with several implying that this support is not forthcoming in all of the German federal states: ‘It varies according to federal state. Russian is most widespread in Saxony, because, and as long as, the Ministry for Education supports it.’

One teacher also argued that the decision to withdraw Russian from the school curriculum or present it late in the curriculum is primarily a political one which in their view contradicts German economic interests. This argument is made on the basis of the fact that Russia and Germany have important economic ties with 6,100 German companies currently in some form of relationship with Russia and 40% of Germany’s natural gas coming from Russia. A migrant from the GDR resident in Ireland adds that pupils in Germany fail to see the value of Russian in career terms as the economic situation remains challenging in the eastern German states and Russia is perceived as a ‘difficult’ trading partner and does not border Germany directly. She does however express the view that as the numbers learning Russian fall, it is likely to retain its reputation as an ‘exotic’ language of benefit in career terms primarily because of the small numbers learning it in Germany. The fact that these numbers are likely to become even smaller in the future is predicted finally by one of the teacher participants. While stressing the fact that Russia plays a significant role in world politics, this teacher bemoans its ‘one dimensional portrayal as “the enemy”’ in the media, fearing that if relations deteriorate further between Europe and the United States on the one hand and Russia on the other, the numbers learning Russian are likely to continue to fall because pupils will not be given the opportunity to study the language at school.

In conclusion, it would appear that explanations for current trends in the numbers studying Russian in Germany relate to the ‘demand’ side in terms of the image of Russia and Russian, and the attitudes of pupils towards the value of studying it, as well as to systemic issues, or the ‘supply’ side, in terms of the extent to which Russian is offered in schools and the point at which it is offered in schools. These factors do not come into play to the same extent for English as it is compulsory in mainstream second level education and perceived as essential by pupils.

***Hungary***

In 1910, German was the foreign language spoken by most Hungarians, followed by French and English and in 1930, some 23,000 Hungarians also stated that they spoke Russian as a foreign language, the first recorded statistic for Russian as a foreign language (Medgyes and Miklósy, 2000: 161). Russian became compulsory from the age of nine or ten in 1949 and was studied across primary, secondary and also the first two years of higher level education. This remained the case until the collapse of communism in Europe in1989 when Russian was removed as a compulsory element of the curriculum in 1989-1990 (Lendvai, 2009) although it continued to be offered across many schools because of the shortage of teachers qualified to teach another modern foreign language (Kontra and Bartha, 2010). There was resulting pressure to speak either English or German in Hungary so that in the 1990s, English *and* German remained the two languages favoured as foreign language choices. Economic trends also impacted on foreign language learning during the early to mid-1990s: Hungary was the beneficiary of more than 50% of direct foreign investments in the region, with France being the third largest foreign investor (Fodor and Peluau, 2004). As a consequence, a revival in the teaching of French occurred with significant support from France which included the provision of courses for former teachers of Russian. However, an unfortunate consequence of reform was that the previous policy of two foreign languages, of Russian plus one, which formed part of state education was in effect reduced to one (Figure 4).

The 2009-2010 Statistical Yearbook of Education (Oktatási Évkönyv, 2009/2010) provides an overview of foreign language learning statistics from primary to third level education from 1989 to 2010. Figure 4 shows total figures for Russian, English and German in 1989 and 2009 across the education sector.

**Figure 4. Numbers learning Russian, English and German in Hungary in 1989-1990 and 2009-2010**

Source: Oktatási Évkönyv, 2009/2010 pp. 23-24

The demise of Russian is evident as is the dominance of English by 2010. Figure 5, which also includes French, shows the rise and fall of these four languages from 1980 to 2010.

**Figure 5. Trends in the numbers learning Russian, German, English and French in Hungary between 1989 and 2010**

Source: Oktatási Évkönyv 2009/2010 pp. 23-24

The *Language Education Policy Profile* (Council of Europe Language Policy Division and Ministry of Education, Hungary 2003) on Hungary, commented on the demise of Russian from a utilitarian perspective. Firstly, the fall in numbers studying Russian could be problematic in the future because of Russia’s economic power, and the report considered that the profile of Russian should be raised. In addition, the report noted that the languages available for study in the majority of schools were English or German with French, Italian or Spanish offered by larger schools ‘occasionally’ (p. 29). Parents and pupils were only interested in the two dominant languages, and while this affirms the utilitarian approach outlined by Fodor and Peluau (2004), the country report also acknowledged that parents were keen for language courses to start in schools, as ‘linguistic capital’ (p. 34) was viewed as being important for society, despite little interest in ‘linguistic diversity’ (p. 16) and a heavy focus on English. Medgyes and Kaplan (1992) point out that not speaking English, diminishes chances to participate in international discourses and activities, and while the focus of their study was Hungarian scholars, an elite part of the population, their conclusion was that knowledge of English mattered, particularly if a state wished to progress its knowledge base.

There is consistent concern or critiques of policy in publications in the 2000s on language learning in Hungary (Fodor and Peluau 2004; Lukács 2002; Medgyes and Miklósy 2000) and Kontra and Bartha (2010) point to the rather inconvenient truth that despite improvements and successes, particularly in public education, these have not resulted in a significant increase in the numbers of Hungarians speaking a foreign language which is borne out by Eurostat data. At the same time, the profound changes in Hungarian society stemming from 1989 have also been superseded by the effects of globalisation, EU accession and economic crisis so that many Hungarians have migrated. While such migration may not be viewed as a success, young, educated Hungarian migrants speaking a modern foreign language such as English or German are able to take advantage of EU mobility. Certainly good levels of motivation to learn a foreign language, primarily English has been assessed among secondary, school pupils, students in higher education and adult language learners (Kormos and Csizér 2008) as Hungarians have considered the importance of foreign languages pragmatically in relation to EU accession, the promise of EU mobility and upward social mobility in Hungary

As with the data from the former East Germany, key themes emerged for the Hungarian teacher and lecturer participants. All participants had a positive experience of learning Russian, their first encounter with a foreign language which began in primary school prior to the collapse of communism in 1989. Factors such as exposure to another culture, travel and the opportunity to encounter the language in its natural setting, played a significant role in this enjoyment. This enjoyment does not detract from views on the teaching methods of the day which were allied to politics, or the fact that the majority of people took delight in not learning Russian:

‘The fact that deliberately not learning Russian was a form of national resistance in Hungary didn’t stop me from loving this language. Despite the Cyrillic script, I found expression in Russian similar to Hungarian and not even the silly, ideologically loaded texts that we had to read and talk about put me off from learning Russian.’ (University Lecturer)

They stress the enjoyment of language learning provided by excellent teachers; the consideration of excellence is attributed to teachers who were able to bypass the restrictions imposed by a stifling curriculum under the communism regime pre 1989:

‘A wonderful native speaker of Russian was our teacher who conscientiously stuck to the crazy, stupid and nonsensical syllabus but always added a lot of extra ideas (history, literature and her own experience) – but still it was not the everyday language we were learning. That was not taught in Hungary in the early 60s – language learning/teaching was all dealt with as a dead language, the carrier of communist ideology.’ (International school language teacher)

While pleasure in learning Russian led to three teacher participants, and one lecturer, becoming Russian language teachers, events in 1989 provided opportunities to teach the second languages for which teachers were also qualified such as German, English or French. Thus, the former policy of Russian plus one other language provided a basis for change for these teachers. As qualified teachers of German and French, they stand in marked contrast to the strong critiques of supply and demand in relation to English language teachers. One teacher refers to the changes post-1989 by saying that after ten years spent teaching Russian, she welcomed the opportunity to retrain as a German teacher:

‘Necessity brought change, which from my perspective I welcomed with joy, as next to Russian I always liked German. I was happy at the prospect of retraining, and I was one of the first.’ (Grammar school teacher)

While there are numerous references to the requirement for new languages, and their teachers, post-1989 in the literature, the sense of active decision-making by teachers themselves is conspicuously absent. Four thousand teachers retrained, some no doubt incentivised by the offer of a higher salary and a reduction in teaching hours, but there was a continued need for Russian as students finished their courses, so it is telling that a teacher decides to immediately change course when presented with the opportunity. In addition, being actively involved in teaching and learning languages features strongly with the teachers, as do perceptions about the potential for learning and teaching other languages, as in the following case of French pre-1989:

‘I switched to French before the change in 1989 because I thought it would be useful but this was personal interest.’ (Grammar school teacher)

Participants from both second and higher level education recognise the potential today to offer other languages apart from Russian and the sense of active management of self and career are an important finding as it stands in contrast to some of the despair relating to teaching quality in the 1990s.

The sense of strong teacher personalities who made a lasting impression is pervasive in the data so that all four teachers discussed this depth of influence of their own language teachers. In some instances this strong influence in turn went on to produce a new generation of Russian language teachers. Thus, teachers evaluated themselves in a tradition of excellence, in contrast to the ideologically driven policies which filtered down into textbooks that were ‘usually boring, full of materials about Lenin and the Great October Revolution’. This sense of ‘tradition’ is distinct from the political agenda which informed policy before 1989 and provides a sense of continuity, whether facing the strictures of centralised policies or experiencing the changes from 1989.

All the participants learnt Russian and there is a sadness as their knowledge of the language appears increasingly redundant along with positive memories of its influence:

‘I learnt Russian in primary school and in middle school it was my first foreign language, the second was French. Russian as a foreign language was the first language in my life. For my generation it was compulsory. … And I never saw anything political in the Russian language but saw it as a foreign language, as a means to communicate and discover another culture.’ (Grammar school teacher)

While the aim of not learning Russian reached the level of being a national sport in Hungary, there is no hostility expressed towards the language by participants today and interest focuses on the language rather than its political connotations. No one commented specifically on policy in relation to Russian which has virtually disappeared from the primary and secondary curriculum, though offered as foreign language (with business) in higher education. A migrant participant commented that there was the beginning of a resurgence of interest in the Russian language, a perspective confirmed in e-mail correspondence with a university lecturer who also offered the opinion that Russian appeared to be ‘safe’. This participant also drew attention to an article by Lendvai (2009) where the positive attitude towards Russian by university students is highlighted as well as efforts to maintain a presence at secondary level through voluntary learning.

English appears to be the language which has replaced Russian, and is the language offered in primary school, and its role as a lingua franca is mentioned most:

‘The only foreign language I need to use regularly is English. It seems that today it’s enough for most everyday purposes if you can speak English, because everybody else will speak it too.’ (University lecturer)

However, the sense of a language opening doors to another culture and, importantly, ideas, is also evident where participants chart long-standing relationships with English language-learning:

‘Knowledge of English gave me (and others) access to information which was unavailable at the time in Hungary. I happily showed off my English books and reading skills when travelling on public transport and through reading a lot I got to know a world which was very different from the one I had in Hungary. I remember when I was in Britain the first time on a summer course where we discussed issues such as identity – things which were not talked about in those days in Hungary.’ (University lecturer)

This is not to say that the advent of English-language teaching and learning arrived to an education elite who accepted it uncritically:

‘Nor did I associate English with the ‘free world’ (as propaganda then would have it).’ (University lecturer)

While English has become the language of choice for many, not everyone speaks it. The teacher of French, despite a self-confessed devotion to all things French, has also started learning English following a week-long school trip to England. She is following the trend of English becoming a lingua franca because:

‘… you can only use the French language in certain countries in Europe, but in most places, if they see that you are foreign, they switch to English.’ (Grammar school teacher)

In effect, the slightly nebulous, and possibly elitist, vision of a language creating access to another rich culture is replaced by a more utilitarian concept of learning a language to communicate with others in a globalised world. There are, nonetheless, references by participants to friends, family and colleagues who do not speak English (or Russian), a condition which cuts across generations, and leaves individuals with one less skill with which to face the global trends that affect all countries.

Overall, these teachers and lecturers focused deeply on their experiences of a period of profound political and social change in Hungary and its subsequent impact on policy. Their initial positive experiences of language learning provided for a sense of continuity in a tradition of excellence, even if this was not achieved throughout the state.

**Discussion and concluding remarks**

Language education policy in the EU calls for its citizens to have a high degree of competency in their mother tongue plus two additional foreign languages, although it remains vague in its communications and policies on which two languages should be learned (Ehrling and Hilgendorf, 2006). For example, a key policy document, the Council Resolution of the 21st November 2008 on a European strategy for multilingualism:

‘….reaffirmed that foreign language skills, as well as helping to foster mutual understanding between peoples, are a prerequisite for a mobile workforce and contribute to the competitiveness of the European Union economy’.

It also argues that member states should ‘support the provision and learning of a wide range of languages, in order to help enterprises, especially SMEs, to broaden their access to markets — in particular emerging markets — across the world’. In other words, the two additional foreign languages are to be drawn from a pool including both EU and non-EU languages, a key point for this study with regard to Russian.

According to Dennis Abbott, the European Commission’s spokesman for education, culture, multilingualism and youth, ‘Learning a foreign language fosters diversity, social inclusion and intercultural dialogue *in Europe and beyond*’ [emphasis own]. Abbott continues ‘But language learning is more than that. In a globalized world, languages are a crucial asset for mobility and jobs, especially for young people.’ (Teffer 2014).

On the other hand, the European Strategy for Multilingualism (2008) also stresses that:

…linguistic and cultural diversity is part and parcel of the European identity; it is at once a shared heritange, a wealth, a challenge and an asset for Europe..

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| And that:…significant efforts should still be made to promote language learning and to value the cultural aspects of linguistic diversity at all levels of education and training, while also improving information on the variety of European languages and their dissemination across the world.. |

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As well as inviting member states to:

… encourage the learning and dissemination of European languages, by making use of innovative tools such as digital communication technology and distance learning and approaches such as those based on the intercomprehension of related languages.

In other words, while all languages are mentioned, there is an emphasis on European languages. This may help to create a hierarchy of languages in terms of their perceived importance with Russian falling down in this hierarchy.

Regarding the policy objective itself of MT+2, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that it is not being realised in practice. Instead, there is what van Parijs (2011: 21) refers to as a ‘stampede towards English’ as a sole additional language, even if there may be good reason for this given the perceived role of English as a lingua franca**.** As we see in the second section of this paper, while it would appear that this trend towards English as an international language” can be seen throughout Europe, it is more pronounced in CEE,with the collapse in numbers taking Russian as it lost its status as ‘the’ compulsory language. Furthermore, focussing on the two states/regions at the heart of our study, this trend away from *Mother tongue plus two additional languages* (formerly Russian plus one other) towards *Mother tongue plus English* would appear to be even more pronounced in Eastern Germany than in Hungary.

The qualitative data gathered for the purpose of this study provide insights into potential reasons for this gap between policy and practice. The first central theme to emerge repeatedly in the data from both cases again concerns the image and perceived value of studying Russian and English respectively. The case of Russian is somewhat ambiguous. Deep appreciation is expressed for the Russian language in both countries and particularly in Hungary as a key to a fascinating culture regardless of the political context. However, in eastern Germany, the participants spoke of its image as being relatively difficult to learn, partially owing to its use of a different alphabet. While this view was not as prevalent in Hungary, there was, as in eastern Germany, agreement around its loss of value in career terms. In eastern Germany, in particular, it was described as widely considered to be no longer relevant although Russian teachers and lecturers themselves did not necessarily agree with this perception of the language, stressing Russia’s importance as a trading partner with Germany as well as a supplier of key natural resources such as gas. This belies each country’s actual and potential future economic ties and may be associated with the perceived hierarchy of languages in the EU referred to at the beginning of this section, as well as with the political environment. Notwithstanding, the Council of Europe report on Hungary and Lendvai (2009) note that loss of Russian may be economically detrimental as indeed do the German participants in the study who bemoan a desire to ‘look West’ on the part of some politicians and educational administrators, possibly to a greater extent in Germany than in Hungary.

Cenoz and Gorter (2010: 38) consider the bidirectional relationship between language and society where languages which have a high status are likely to be core to school curricula, so further enhancing their status. While Russian has lost this status, the loss may well be deeper than an apparent linguistic one. English, often referred to as being an ‘easy’ language to study, presents as a lingua franca in this study and is perceived as being essential, in fact a given as it is compulsory. There is a positive view of English, particularly in terms of its relevance for career planning and advancement. However, this positive perspective also frequently sees English as being divorced from any cultural setting apart from the language in or for use between strangers in international settings. This view of English as a lingua franca rather than a gateway to a deeper understanding of English-speaking cultures appears more prevalent in eastern Germany than in Hungary. It also contradicts the aims of the European Commission in its promotion of empathy and intercultural understanding between member states.

A second, recurrent theme concerned the nature and impact of language education policy. For example, in the former Warsaw Pact countries, Russian was compulsory and a second foreign language the norm. In a totalitarian setting, policy and practice approached one another to a greater extent than in a democratic setting such as the EU where language education policy takes the form of guidelines or aspirations. In such settings, subtle systemic (local, cultural) issues, such as the point at which certain languages are offered within the school curriculum or indeed whether they are offered at all, are of greater importance. Teasing this out a little further, the EU devolves the implementation of language policy to the member states. In many cases, their policies are also aspirational in nature. While the compulsory elements such as the requirement that English be taught in schools are implemented, recommendations that a second or third language be offered may or may not be followed. Further recommendations that a diverse range of languages both EU and non-EU be offered are likely to be influenced to an even greater extent by contextual issues such as societal attitudes towards the languages, the attitudes of school principals and local authorities/governing associations as well as of parents and students (Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech, 2015). In eastern Germany for example the data reveals that the point at which a school chooses to offer Russian is particularly significant. A decision to offer Russian late in the school system is tantamount to dropping it altogether, something which many schools have done both in eastern Germany and in Hungary. As emphasised by Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck (2005: 197) plurilingual competence is in many cases determined by the immediate environment. Tollefson (2013) is also of the view that covert issues and informal practices such as parental influence are particularly significant with regard to language learning, especially when more negative attitudes towards a particular language are prevalent outside of the education system.

Moving even further down to the local level, the significance of the individual, inspirational teacher emerged repeatedly, be it in reference to learning Russian under Communism or to contemporary language education. An excellent teacher appears capable of awakening a love for a language regardless of political context. The Russian teachers and lecturers who participated in this study indicated their awareness of this fact in their determination to make their subject *even more* attractive than other languages recognising that it will have to be if it is to survive. This can be viewed as a form of resistance to imposed policy through teaching (Hornberger and Johnson, 2007) and motivating learners through personal example of a positive attitude towards a language perceived by a majority to be the language of Communism. In turn, the centrality of the individual language teacher in motivating the language learner and promoting language learning regardless of political and policy pressures, recognised in the literature (for example Byram and Risager, 1999), must also be recognised in practice. This can be done by ensuring the recruitment of the most suitable candidates for language teacher education through for example ensuring stability and the possibility of career advancement within the profession, as well as prioritising excellence in initial and in-service training.

In terms of the policy implications Kelly (2013: 155; see also Maurais and Morris, 2001: 9) identifies one of the major challenges in language policy as being the promotion of the value of multilingualism “while at the same time recognising the value of English as a lingua franca”. This value relates in particular to the learning of an additional language and its culture for the purpose of gaining a greater understanding and insight into this culture, perhaps that of a neighbouring country or one on a different continent, or in the words of Skerret (2010: 338) “…there may have never been a more crucial moment in the human history of the planet to examine and consider alternative perspectives, perspectives which may very well be learnable through the acquisition of additional languages”. A second additional language is also likely to be of more pragmatic importance given that there is tentative evidence emerging “…to suggest a decline in the long-term value of English on the labour market as English skills become increasingly common” (Grin 2008; Gogolin and Clyne, 2010: 456) .

Practical suggestions emerging from this study to support the study of a second language in addition to English include offering it at an attractive and appropriate point in the school curriculum. The findings also support the argument that, while language shift is inevitable, in ‘such a fiercely competitive context, planning for linguistic diversity is called for’ (Maurais and Morris, 2001: 9). Specifically, in our view, they indicate that EU language education policy and national language education policies should be more specific in outlining the range of languages to be offered and these policies should be implemented rather than remaining vaguely aspirational. A second language then should be chosen from a rich selection including both EU and non-EU languages such as Russian thus providing scope for utilitarian and other considerations for second language choice. Aronin and O’Laoire (2004), for example, suggest that a more diversified model that the *Mother tongue plus two* model could be made up of the language of primary cultural identity (often the national language), a distinctive language different from the language of identity and a language of international communication (here English). Where a particular language such as Russian is identified as being of economic and cultural importance, in CEE for example,attempts to present it in a positive light could be made at a national level emulating recent campaigns by the Goethe Institut (German) and the Alliance Française (French).

Finally, as discussed in the early stages of this paper, this research operated from both a top-down and a bottom-up perspective. Both perspectives were invaluable in studying the impact of the collapse of Communism on language education policy and practice in CEE and the position of English and Russian in Hungary and the former German Democratic Republic more specifically. Operating from one perspective only reveals only a part of the picture and certainly fails to fully address the often posed question as to why policy might not be reflected in practice in certain situations.

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**Figure Captions**

Figure 1. Percentage of the population able to hold a conversation in a language other than their mother tongue

Figure 2. The average number of foreign languages learned per pupil in secondary educationin CEE states compared with the EU average

Figure 3. Number of students studying Russian in Germany, East and West

Figure 4. Numbers learning Russian, English and German in Hungary in 1989-1990 and 2009-2010

Figure 5. Trends in the numbers learning Russian, German, English and French in Hungary between 1989 and 2010

1. As well as being associated with the policies of current Russian Leader, Vladimir Putin. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)