

# Double Talk: Why Ukrainian Fight Over Language

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Since the collapse of Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych's regime last month, the question of minority rights within the country has become a matter of international concern. Russia based its military intervention in Crimea (and its threatened intervention in eastern Ukraine) on a supposed need to protect Russians and Russian speakers. In turn, the European Union has called for the "full protection of persons belonging to national minorities." Both sides have conflated language and ethnicity. In Ukraine, however, the two are separate. Rather than Ukrainian against Russian, battles over language and representation in the country pit Ukrainian against Ukrainian. Kiev's new government -- and the West -- must recognize that truth if they are to begin rebuilding the country.

In the 2001 census, the last conducted in Ukraine, 17 percent of the population declared itself to be ethnic Russians (or Russian by "nationality," in the eastern European phrasing). Of the Russian population, 83 percent is concentrated in Ukraine's nine eastern and southern provinces. With the exception of Crimea, however, none of these provinces has an ethnic Russian majority -- not even close. Taken together, Russians constitute only 30 percent of the population there (and only 38 percent in the Yanukovych stronghold of Donetsk) whereas ethnic Ukrainians make up 63 percent.

The language picture, however, is strikingly different. Censuses generally ask respondents for their *rodna mova* (*rodnoi yazyk* in Russian). That phrase is usually translated as “mother tongue,” but a closer rendering is “language of origin.” An overwhelming majority of western Ukrainians name Ukrainian.. But a majority of residents of southeastern Ukraine, 51 percent, claim Russian. In other words, nearly one-third of self-declared ethnic Ukrainians give Russian as their language of origin. According to sociological surveys conducted over the last 20 years, an even greater proportion of residents of southeastern Ukraine prefer to use Russian when given the choice. Thus, a survey conducted by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology in 2004 indicated that 81 percent of residents in southeastern Ukraine prefer to use Russian. In urban areas of the East, Russian is almost always used in public offices, although the number of Ukrainian schools has grown notably.

As a whole, Ukraine is a bilingual state. But on the ground in southeastern Ukraine, it verges on unilingual: Anyone who has spent time in cities of eastern Ukraine can attest to the fact that Ukrainian is rarely heard publicly and that Ukrainian speakers who wish to converse with civil servants in Ukrainian will hardly ever succeed. (The reverse is true in Western Ukraine) The stark divide is why the language question has been so central to Ukrainian politics since its independence in 1991: those who prefer to speak Ukrainian want to be able to use it in public everywhere in the country, and those who prefer to speak Russian fear that they will be disadvantaged if they are suddenly required to speak Ukrainian in certain situations.

In Ukraine, language politics is first about symbols. Russian was the language of state administration in the Soviet Union. The 1989 Ukrainian language law, passed by the Soviet Ukrainian parliament as a reaction to similar laws passed in the Baltics and Moldova, declared Ukrainian to be the sole “state language.” The move was partly symbolic, since it was vague on how the law might be implemented, however, and failed to require civil servants to use Ukrainian. What it did accomplish, however, was the rise of Ukrainian schools. Whereas merely half of pupils had Ukrainian as their primary language of instruction in the late 1980s, the proportion grew to 82 percent by 2011. It nevertheless raised hackles in southeastern Ukraine, where, over the next 20 years, parties and candidates demanded that Russian be given an official status as well. The 2012

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language law, passed by the Yanukovich government, was the first to do so. It made Russian a “regional” language alongside Ukrainian as a state language. Meanwhile, Minister of Education Dymtryo Tabachnyk began to dismantle the system that had given Ukrainian preference in school, for instance by no longer requiring that high school graduates take their university entrance examinations in Ukrainian (seen by Ukrainian-speakers as an essential way of making Ukrainian a language of mobility]. These moves, too, reinforced rather than changed facts on the ground: they meant that Russian-speakers would never have to use Ukrainian, but they had never done so in their own region anyway. And yet, they also signaled that the gradual trend making Ukrainian a language that one would need to make a career at the center would be reversed, a prospect that was anathema to Western Ukrainians.

Language is also an emotional topic in Ukraine. Ukrainian-speakers tend to present the predominance of Russian in the southeast as the result of an artificial “Russification” – the policies by Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union that prevented the use of Ukrainian in cities (Ukrainian was banned under the Tsars and Ukrainian schools disappeared from cities of southeastern Ukraine in the 1950s). That is something Russian-speakers (who are mostly ethnic Ukrainian) resent, since they do not like being told that their language of comfort is not legitimate. No matter how they historically came to speak Russian, they feel that they have language rights too.. On the other hand, Russian-speakers fail to understand that the official bilingualism that they demand means the willingness to speak two languages, not Russian exclusivity. For Western Ukrainians, the Ukrainian language is an expression of national identity. Eastern Ukrainians, however, are ambivalent towards Ukrainian: on the one hand, they want their children to acquire it; on the other hand, Russian is the language of their professional and cultural circles. In both cases, language defines who they are, as Ukrainians.

Given the symbolic and emotional weight of language in Ukraine, the rushed cancellation of the 2012 language law a mere 24 hours after the collapse of the Yanukovich regime (a decision since vetoed by interim President Oleksandr Turchynov) was unwise. It was interpreted in the southeast, both among Ukrainians and Russians, as an attack -- an attempt to ban Russian in public life. Actually banning Russian, of course, would have required capacity that the

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national and regional government do not have, since the vast majority of urban residents, and thus of state officials, in the southeast are more comfortable using Russian. The slogans of radical groups aside, banning Russian is obviously not what the national government intends but, as often happens in language politics, lawmakers were unconcerned with the symbolism of repealing a law without discussion.

With Crimea formally annexed by Russia and with the looming threat of Russian military intervention in southeastern Ukraine, language policy has become a matter of national security. Russia is now demanding that Russian should become a second “state language,” which is a non-starter, as the experience of Belarus amply demonstrates what two state languages actually mean in practice in the post-Soviet world: only Russian is used in state offices. If people accustomed to speak Russian are told they can use Russian in all situations, then they will and speakers of the other language have to accommodate. The entire Soviet experience, at least since the early 1930s, speaks to that reality. In the escalating crisis, it would be easy for each side to double down on symbolically provocative stances (two state languages, no status at all for Russian, de-Russification etc.), but this can only aggravate the real danger of state fragmentation.

Instead, Ukraine should step back from the brink. Politicians must recognize that language rights starts with individuals, not those in positions of authority: it is people who need to have the choice of speaking Russian or Ukrainian when dealing with the state. This means that state officials across the whole country must be conversant in both, that graduation in school must be contingent of an active knowledge of Ukrainian, and the language of state administration at the national level must be Ukrainian. These changes, or the consolidation of existing trends, would not alter the reality that most people in the southeast would continue to speak only Russian, but it would create incentives for the development of Ukrainian as a public language. Since symbols matter, Russian should be given a status akin to a “regional” language, but only under conditions when incentives to use Ukrainian are in place. To be sure, with the Russian state labeling Ukrainian-speaking Mайдan activists as “fascists,” and with emboldened Ukrainian far-right groups in the western part of the country disinclined to compromise on cultural matters, striking the right balance on

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language policies will even more difficult than it has in the past.

And that speaks to a broader challenge: For decades, Ukraine has been unable to build a culture of regional inclusion and politics there have remained remarkably regionally polarized. In the 2010 presidential election, Yanukovich obtained 77 percent of the vote in southeastern Ukraine, but only 18 percent in the center and west, where 53 percent of the electorate resides. In the 2004 election, Victor Yushchenko, the winning candidate, obtained 84 percent of the vote in the west, but less than 20 percent in the east. In both cases, the result was a government that largely excluded half of Ukraine.

One way to address this problem would be to build a party with cross-regional appeal. Efforts to have effect have repeatedly failed in the past two decades and the five parties in the current parliament are rooted in the regional half of the country: the Party of Regions and Communist in the southeast, Fatherland (Yatsenyuk), Udar (Klitschko) and Svoboda (Tyahnybok) in the West. Instead, Ukraine could promote inclusion by diminishing the powers of the president and transforming its political system into a parliamentary democracy. A second step would be to make government more representative of regional interests. Any project for the “federalization” of Ukraine, now demanded by Russia, is stillborn, since the term is inexorably linked in the popular imagination to separatism and the collapse of the Yugoslav, Czechoslovak, and even Soviet federations. (Ukraine had to make a partial exception by granting Crimea the status of an “autonomous republic” in 1991, but under the legal contradiction that the Crimean autonomy was part of a “unitary state”) But Ukraine could increase regional representation by making regional governors elected, rather than appointed. It could also tweak its electoral system so that it favored the creation of coalition governments built on the principle of regional representation. Thus, instead of a single proportional representation list for the entire country, there should be several for a number of large regional entities. Such a system would have the side benefit of promoting competition within regions. For a long time, Yanukovich’s Party of Regions has held near total control in the southeast while two or three parties have competed for the vote in the West. Smaller blocs could force some cooperation between ideological and regional factions.

A balanced language law and regional inclusivity would not have anything to do with protecting ethnic Russians. That is just not how politics in Ukraine are organized: Ethnic Russians in Ukraine do not come together as one bloc (even in Crimea, the Russian nationalist party, which was installed in power by the Russian military obtained only four percent of the vote in the last provincial election), notwithstanding the violent attempts by Russia to portray ethnic Russians in peril. The fact that Yanukovich's party called itself the Party "of Regions" and appealed to Russian-speakers, but never to ethnic Russians, is revealing enough. In day-to-day life, the identity boundaries between Russians and Ukrainians in southeastern Ukraine are weak to non-existent. A sense of regional belonging is what unites them. A surefire way of avoiding a growing sense of estrangement from Kiev is to include their elites in national decision-making. Some say that Russia's meddling in Ukraine may spur what Ukraine has failed to create in 20 years: national unity. Yet national unity can only be achieved if Ukrainian politicians devise rules of governance that make it possible.