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## The Problem of Bilingualism in Ukraine: The Historical and International Context

They make war against Ukraine not for the sake of protecting Russians, but for a different reason. Freedom is contagious. The people of Ukraine rebelled against the gang of thieves. The fraudsters in the Kremlin cannot sleep at night because they fear that this fire may be passed on to Russia. The criminals in the Kremlin must suppress freedom in Ukraine because it is a vivid example for the peoples of Russia. They must strangle democracy in their neighboring country to protect their stolen billions, to preserve their unlawful power, and their own heads and asses from the wrath of the people. They have nowhere to run.<sup>1</sup>

Viktor Suvorov

The problem of bilingualism in Ukraine used to be a subject of attention for linguists, educators and cultural workers and often resulted in never-ending discussions about the advantages for Ukrainians of mastering different languages, especially Russian, which is allegedly richer, more developed and used more widely in the world. Historians and political scientists addressed this issue less frequently, while economists virtually never did so. However, this problem, like most problems in any country, actually has an important economic component. Those who have denied the Ukrainian language's right to existence have ultimately denied the right of Ukrainians to decide how they want to live, what to build, and what to grow on their land. In the late Soviet era, they even questioned the importance for Ukrainians of living in their homeland, promoting the well-known slogan "My address is not a house or a street, my address is the Soviet Union." Due to lack of education on the part of participants in this dialogue, or indeed quite intentionally, the discussion of the role and place of the Ukrainian language in the life of the country is still hidden or superseded by a specific philological discussion on the best usage of words or correct cases.

1 Suvorov V. *Voyna protiv Ukrainy – predsmertnyie sudorogi totalitarnoy imperii*. <<http://rufabula.com/news/2014/08/09/suvorov>>.

In reality, the problem of bilingualism, or more precisely, of a single language, in essence entails the fundamental right of the speakers to certain territories, along with the right to manage their land, finances, human resources, etc. In the not-so-distant 1970s, a traveler from Ontario visiting Montreal could say "Speak white, please" to a French-speaking taxi driver, meaning that he should switch from French to English as a primary language, relegating the former to a secondary language. While this probably was not a manifestation of white racism, as both participants of the cross-cultural dialogue could be either Caucasian or not, for a native English speaker, this language served to confirm his right to this territory, its resources, laws and culture. He was hardly aiming to undermine the language of the great Montaigne, Molière or Hugo, nor did he have any prejudice against Montesquieu or Voltaire. He most likely did not even know anything about them, rather he was demanding respect as a representative of the metropolitan center.

The problem of bilingualism in Belgium, which is well-known in Europe and has lasted for centuries, has similar economic origins, with some people believing that they are giving up too much to make allowances for their counterparts, while receiving too little economic welfare, respect and recognition in return. This can be experienced even now when entering the country and speaking to border guards from either language group.

This is the reason that the problem of bilingualism in Ukraine, which is traditionally presented as merely a linguistic, cultural and folkloric challenge or as a problem for writers and artists, is essentially an economic, territorial and political issue that is camouflaged in the cheap clothing of discussions about correct orthography or word usage.

Ukrainian, like most literary languages of the European continent, took on its modern form in the early nineteenth century, almost at the same time as other European languages. A broad and developed literature in all fields of knowledge has been created in this language. It is used in everyday life by 30 to 40 million people in Ukraine and elsewhere in the world. Therefore, ongoing talk that this language is artificial, useless, provincial and backward should have long become an anachronism or at least bad manners in a decent society. However, such theses continue to be discussed not only in tabloids, but are even defended at international conferences by respectable Russian scholars and their Ukrainian followers.

Most Russian opponents base their arguments on the assumption that the Russian language emerged first and that it is natural, while Ukrainian is artificially constructed and useless. However, if we look back further than two centuries in terms of the European history of language usage, we can see that, prior to that, educated communities on the continent mostly communicated in Latin. In the eighteenth century, this was replaced by French, which was written and spoken by the educated strata in most European capitals. Only in the late eighteenth–early nineteenth centuries were the languages of most European people diffused among all strata of educated citizens and began to acquire contemporary features.

In the late eighteenth century, King Friedrich the Great, one of Germany's founders, who cannot be accused of prejudice against the German language or a lack of patriotism, wrote the following in his treatise *De la littérature Allemande*: "I see that this is a semi-barbarian language, which has as many dialects as there are provinces in Germany. And each group is confident that their patois is the best."<sup>2</sup> He further explained this by referring to Germany's impoverishment due to long wars and the insufficient development of trade and the bourgeoisie. He also predicted that growth in prosperity would allow German culture and science to flourish, and that Germans would become civilized and rise to the same level as other nations.

Thus, the great German king legitimately drew a connection, first of all, between the underdevelopment of the German language relative to French and economic factors. However, as Germany created its empire throughout the nineteenth century through wars and revolution, it both developed and disseminated its language. At that time, Ukraine finally became a part of the Russian Empire, which, as all other known empires, aimed to spread its political, economic and cultural power throughout all its conquered territories. The problem of the Russian Empire was that most of the people it was trying to unite and subjugate had already developed a historical memory and legal traditions. They had already achieved a much higher cultural level than the majority of Russian speakers.

As early as the eleventh century, when Christianity (which came to Ukraine from Byzantium) was firmly established on Ukrainian territory, the kings of Central and Western Europe gladly married Ukrainian

2 Elias, N. Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*. Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1976, 61. My translation.

princesses. They thereby confirmed a common Christian cultural space, extending from the Atlantic Ocean to the Dnieper River. The most famous of these princesses was Anna, the daughter of the great Kyiv King Yaroslav the Wise, who became the wife of the King of France, Henri I.

The fact that Kyiv was integrated in the cultural space common to the countries of its contemporary West is expressively certified, for example, by the frescos in the St. Peter and Paul Cathedral in Regensburg, which are virtually identical to the frescos of the St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv. Perhaps they were even painted by the same Byzantine masters. The underserved downplaying in today's Western Europe of the role of Byzantium and of its fundamental influence on European culture has prompted many Europeans to perceive Ukraine as something different and culturally alien. We should have overcome such stereotypes long ago.

At the same time, in Russia, despite the widespread concept of a "single nation," there always existed an understanding of the cultural peculiarity of Ukraine. In order to overcome this, Russian kings even risked the so-called "change of faith." Historians consider this famous church reform, which took place in Russia in the mid-seventeenth<sup>3</sup> to be an attempt not only to modernize the backward Russian Christianity, but also to bring it closer to Christianity in Ukraine, in terms of both language and ceremony. Otherwise, there would be no reason to pursue the policy of seizing Ukrainian territories, which has been justified by the unity of the Orthodox faith.

Other telling evidence of the recognition of the Ukrainian language as a separate developed phenomenon is represented by the laws of 1863 and 1876.<sup>4</sup> They prohibited the use of Ukrainian in all spheres. Yet it is impossible to prohibit something that does not exist. Thus, the prohibition of the Ukrainian language became an additional powerful method for the economic expansion of the Russian empire. In addition to this, after the Hetmanshchyna was finally abolished, non-Ukrainian merchants were permitted to trade in Ukrainian cities without paying taxes for 20 years,

3 Kapterev, N.F., *Patriarch Nikon and Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich*. Sergiyev Posad, 1912, vol. 2, 9.

4 On July 30, 1863, the Minister of the Interior of the Russian Empire, Piotr Valuyev, issued a secret directive to territorial censorship committees, ordering them to halt the publication of books written in Ukrainian. According to the directive, the publication of religious, educational and enlightening books was prohibited. The operation of Valuyev's circular was secured and expanded by the Ems ukaz of Alexander II of 1876, which almost entirely prohibited publication of works in Ukrainian. See further: Aleksey Miller. *Ukrainskiy vopros v Rossiyskoy imperii*. Kyiv, Larus, 2013, 111–133.

thereby destroying the economic grounds for the existence of a Ukrainian bourgeoisie for many years. Nevertheless, despite numerous prohibitions and obstacles, the Ukrainian people, who constituted over 90% of the population of the territory of contemporary Ukraine, remained devoted to their language and culture, and it turned out that the empire was not culturally strong enough to replace the language and cultural code of such a huge homogeneous mass of the population. This is the reason why, immediately after the February 1917 revolution in Russia, a Tsentralna Rada (Central Assembly) was created in Ukraine as a representative body for all Ukrainians, followed, later on, by the Ukrainian People's Republic.

Unfortunately, Russian attempts at russification were much more successful under the Soviet regime.

Thus, after the February revolution occurring in the Russian Empire as an outcome of World War I, Ukraine declared its independence and began building its statehood. Incidentally, at that time, German, Polish, Greek and other national autonomous regions also started to appear in Ukraine. Schools were opened, as well as newspapers and administrations in the respective languages. However, the Russian-Ukrainian war, which started soon after, prevented Ukrainian statehood from coming to fruition. In terms of the number of victims and results, this war eclipses all wars occurring on the territory of Ukraine from 1914 through 1926. However, for political reasons, it is still called a civil war, even in respected academic works. In the short period of this war, the Ukrainian language gained the recognition of the Bolshevik government in Moscow. It actually became the means for Russia's colonization of Ukraine and its transformation into a totalitarian communist republic of the USSR.

As long as battles between Ukrainian patriots and Russian imperial troops lasted, the Ukrainian language was not significantly suppressed by the central government in Moscow. The creation of the Ukrainian communist state, as an equal member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and with Ukrainian as the national language, was essentially a compromise that Ukrainians agreed to in the war with the Russian communist occupiers. However, this compromise did not last for long. Moscow gradually concentrated the full scale of military and repressive power in its hands and began attacks on the Ukrainian language, not only on the territory of Ukraine, but also in the places where many Ukrainians had settled in the Russian Federation, such as the Kuban, Povolzhye and the Far East.

The late 1920s brought mass repressions against Ukrainian native speakers, in the form of the Holodomor of 1932–33, which killed millions of Ukrainians,<sup>5</sup> as well as the extermination of the majority of the higher cultural stratum of the Ukrainian nation. The staff of the Ministry of Education of Ukraine was almost entirely liquidated (twice). In 1934, after such cleansing (i.e. arrests, executions and deportations to GULAGs), only two out of 200 persons remained free.<sup>6</sup> Most writers, artists, scholars and teachers met the same fate. It is known that 80% of teachers with pre-revolutionary experience were repressed.<sup>7</sup> These repressions occurred under the slogan of struggling against Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism and involved squeezing the Ukrainian language out of all areas of usage within the state.

However, the occurrence of World War II suspended this process of Ukraine's physical transformation into a single-language province of Russia.

After the war, the Russian government was forced to spend over ten years suppressing the Ukrainian anti-Soviet, or actually anti-Russian, movement, which developed mostly in Western Ukraine. Under those conditions, as in the 1920s, the Russian government in Moscow did not dare implement total russification. Besides, this was a period of activity for various anti-colonial movements in the world. Therefore, it was the wrong time to conduct a war against Ukrainians and eliminate the Ukrainian language. A short-lived pseudo-ukrainization began during the “thaw” of the 1960s: schools teaching in the Ukrainian language were opened in big cities, the works of Ukrainian writers began to be published, and new artists and cinematographers appeared.

Retrospectively, this “thaw” may be evaluated as a successful special operation of the KGB aimed at identifying naïve pro-Ukrainian cultural workers, most of whom were successfully cleaned out or intimidated later in the 1970s (over 1000 people were repressed<sup>8</sup>). In addition, in the 1960s, the Soviet Union was still trying to build its socialist camp and did not want to frighten potential “cell-mates” with excessive repressions in

5 Snyder, T. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. Basic Books, 2012.

6 Marochko, V.I., and H. Giotz, *Represovani pedagogy Ukrayiny: zhertvy politychnogo teroru (1929–1941)*. Naukovyi svit, Kyiv, 5–21 and 246–55.

7 *Represovani osvityany Cherkashchyny: imennyi pokazhchyk* / uklad. V.M. Polyekhina. Uman: RVC “Sophia,” 2008, 106.

8 Rusnachenko, A.M. *Natsionalno-vyzvolnyi rukhv Ukrayini: seredyna 1950-kh – pochatok 1990-khrokiv*. Kyiv, 1998.

Ukraine. Nevertheless, after the “Prague Spring” was suppressed in 1968, such concerns about the international community lost their urgency. At the same time, the Soviet regime also became less bloodthirsty compared to Stalinist times. The physical annihilation of the bearers of a language and culture was replaced with the policy of “unity of languages – unity of cultures,” i.e. the policy of the gradual russification of all national groups of the Soviet Union. At that time in Ukraine, the number of schools teaching in the Ukrainian language significantly decreased. Most subjects at universities, with the exception of a few universities in Western Ukraine, then came to be taught in Russian. In the early 1980s, Russian was officially declared the state language of Ukraine. The remnants of the republic’s economic and cultural autonomy were destroyed, and decisions regarding all economic problems were totally subordinated to the central government in Moscow. Incidentally, Ukraine now has such large underground gas deposits because from the 1950s to the 1970s the imperial center developed them in order to support industry in Russia around Moscow.

Thus, like a Canadian demanding “speak white,” a bureaucrat coming to Kyiv or Lviv from Moscow could ask a Ukrainian speaker to speak “human” or “normally, not your calf dialect.” This was because he felt himself a full-fledged master on the territory controlled by the imperial center he represented.

This was the state of affairs when Ukraine faced the collapse of the Soviet Union and practically began to build its statehood from ground zero. For many people, even those who knew about the existence of some republics or could locate Ukraine on the map of the Soviet Union, their conception of this territory was somewhat as follows: somewhere behind the Curzon line there was a dull grey mass of “Russians” who hardly differed from each other from Murmansk to Baku or from Lviv to Magadan. At first sight, especially in the early 1990s, such an understanding was probably close to the truth. While today the staff at Turkish resorts is immediately able to distinguish Russians from Ukrainians or Kazakhs, such a difference was not fully evident for most foreigners at that time.

After enduring deep sovietization and russification, Ukraine entered this new era, divided into two uneven parts. However, it was not divided in the way imagined by S. Huntington,<sup>9</sup> who was indifferent to Ukraine and

9 Huntington, S.P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon & Schuster. 2011.

thus incompetent, or even the version espoused by the more benevolent and better-informed Z. Brzezinski.<sup>10</sup> Despite the endeavors of Moscow political technologists, who, during the Orange Revolution of 2004, attempted to geographically delineate Ukraine into four areas, like dissecting a bull's carcass, it remained divided not along territorial, but mental lines – between the old Soviet nomenklatura and people who were spontaneously, yet consciously, anti-Soviet.

Such a division influenced the further development of the Ukrainian state. At the same time, it caused numerous misunderstandings among its leaders, as well as those who did not wish Ukraine well and enemies from the north-east. This leads to the question: why is it then that these divisions, proposed by both the old Soviet and the new Russian political technologists, and sanctified by Western masters, finally proved to be erroneous?

The issue is that the cultural and mental codes of Ukrainians and Russians differ significantly. Today, under the conditions of the present Russian invasion of the Ukrainian territory, which is unreservedly supported by the majority of the Russian Federation's population, this difference is becoming particularly evident.

For a non-biased researcher studying the formation of the Ukrainian state for a long time, it is clear that Ukrainians first and foremost strive for personal independence from the state, and that they do not respect the state as an institution, thereby relying on their own forces. They are mostly resourceful and able to self-organize in the case of danger. The main demand advanced by rebellious Ukrainians during the Orange Revolution and the latest Euromaidan movement was that the government adhere to European values, which, according to their beliefs, rest in the rule of law, transparent and invariable legislation, understandable taxes and their transparent usage, an independent judiciary, and non-corrupt public service and law enforcement systems. For over 23 years, these aspirations of most Ukrainians for a life they call “European” or “civilized” have been a major stumbling block for the post-Soviet nomenklatura in their efforts to return the people of Ukraine to the Russian empire of Yeltsin-Putin.

One of the instruments being used to achieve this goal has been the traditional policy of russification and attacks on the cultural space of Ukraine.

10 Brzezinski, Z. *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. Basic Books. 1998.



Thus, during all Ukraine's years of independence, there has been an ongoing and ceaseless struggle to renew the sphere of usage of the Ukrainian language within the Ukrainian state. However, this was often ineffective. To resist the dissemination of the Ukrainian language, its enemies resorted to all possible means and virtually unlimited resources, which were removed from Ukraine's national wealth by an oligarchic nomenklatura controlled by Russia.

In the late 1980s, during perestroika, when the population received most of its information from newspapers, one of the most popular dailies was *Vechirniy Kyiv*. Since its establishment in the 1920s, it had always been published in Ukrainian, and only in the late 1980s, during the period of intensified russification, did a Russian edition finally appear. When there was no longer any pressure from the Communist Party, in a seemingly russified Kyiv, the daily circulation of its Ukrainian editions reached half a million copies compared to a few dozen thousand for the Russian edition. The phenomenon of *Vechirniy Kyiv*, as well as the anti-Soviet and anti-Russian student revolution on granite in 1991 and further events vividly prove the strong resilience of the Ukrainian language and culture to destruction.

However, in later years, the pro-Russian nomenklatura, which transformed into the pro-Russian bourgeoisie following the collapse of the Soviet Union, continued to conduct ongoing and purposeful attacks on the development of culture in Ukraine. First, with the help of corrupt commercial schemes, they smashed the old print media. Further, television and FM radio were totally russified, national cinema was ruined, national pop music was marginalized and guest artists from Moscow began to dominate all central stages of the country.

While the Ukrainian press and pop culture were being extinguished, the country's humanitarian space became permanently tense with discussions on Ukrainian orthography, the language of instruction at schools, the content of textbooks on history and literature, and the law on languages. Those debates persisted continually and intensified when it was necessary to push a privatization law through Parliament in favor of the oligarchic groups in power. At that time, the attention of economically incompetent patriots was purposefully concentrated on essentially secondary "language" issues, rather than on the primary questions of economic development and property redistribution, which were the main interests of Ukrainian oligarchs and their Russian partners.

Although much money and effort have been spent, the history of the struggle for the renewed status of the Ukrainian language in Ukraine has

resulted in optimistic, rather than pessimistic developments, and has taken an unexpected turn. Today, the Ukrainian language is a symbol of Ukraine's European choice, as well as freedom, the rule of law and progress, while, due to Moscow's efforts, Russian has become a symbol of totalitarianism, terrorism and backwardness.

At the same time, the recent events of winter 2014 have proven to the whole world a fact that was understood long ago by many Ukrainian patriots in the west, in the east, in the north and in the south. Despite all the endeavors of the enemies of Ukrainian statehood, language in Ukraine has not become an absolute marker of either a pro-European or pro-Russian orientation on the part of its speaker. Language has not divided, but instead, has united Ukraine.

Several generations of Russian-speaking citizens have grown up in Ukraine to become patriots of their state, irrespective of their language of daily communication. Almost all Ukrainians are bilingual, if they want to be. It is for this reason that, for Russian-speaking Ukrainians, the official status of the Ukrainian language is not an obstacle for one's personal career, but rather a state symbol, much like its flag, national anthem, emblem and territory. For this reason, during the parliamentary elections to the Verkhovna Rada in 2012, a few dozen thousand Russian-speaking residents of Kyiv consciously voted for the Svoboda Party, which was rather dubious in its political slogans and actions. They did so because it was the only party that managed to clearly come forward to protect the Ukrainian language from one of the "language" shenanigans committed in the Parliament by the Yanukovych-led majority.

Hence, the war that Russia has unleashed against Ukraine is not only a war concerning the economic assets of Putin's clique or against Ukrainians' European choice. This is a war against the alternative "Russian world" that has emerged in Ukraine, in which most Russian-speaking citizens have consciously stood in favor of an independent Ukrainian state, the rule of law, freedom of choice, and free mass media. Unfortunately, these European values have not spread amongst the wider population in Russia, despite the powerful support rendered to it by the West throughout the post-Soviet years.

In Ukraine, these values have gained a foothold and expressively manifest themselves despite all obstacles. Therefore, the further fate of languages in a new democratic Ukraine calls for optimism rather than pessimism among all their bearers, who are so different, yet so united.

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