

Language and the cultural border in contemporary Ukraine

現代ウクライナの言語や文化的な境界

Bogdan PAVLIY

Abstract

Nowadays, the Ukrainian army is fighting with pro-Russian separatist groups supported with Russian weapons and military forces penetrating in its territory, and it is still unclear whether Ukraine can maintain its current borders. In such a difficult time, one of the crucial tasks for the Ukrainian government is to realize and admit the presence of the linguistic divisions and the cultural border inside Ukraine.

In this research, I look at the current situation in Ukraine considering the language situation in different regions of Ukraine. It would be erroneous to imply that the language is a key factor for a national identity of Ukrainian people. Although most people in Ukraine are bilingual - or, at least, they can understand both languages enough to use them in their daily life - their attitude toward Russia or Ukraine is quite different. In times of serious political turbulence national identity plays more important role than the language choice of the individuals or communities. For each community the use of language is indicative of local factors rather than politically definitive.

Keywords: Ukraine, language, politics, border

Introduction

Until recently, Ukraine used to balance between the two main powers in the region: the European Union and Russia. Ukrainian political elites tried to keep the “equilibrium between the two poles” (Rocabert, 2010) and Ukrainian presidents managed to maintain relatively good relationships with both powers. The first two presidents of Ukraine – Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma were the most successful in that, they succeeded in promising the Ukrainian people “the road to Europe”, while getting cheap gas and oil from Russia. At that time Russia was getting through a transition period and could not show economic strength or serious political impact. The situation has changed, when Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia. Oil and gas prices rose, Russia became comparatively rich and started to increase its economic and political pressure on the neighbor countries. The third and fourth presidents of Ukraine, Viktor Yushenko and Viktor Yanukovich respectively, went through the “gas wars” with Russia. The EU, while having the potential to be an influential actor, preferred to

remain a spectator in these economic wars, usually taking the strategy to support the economically and politically beneficial side. Contradictions and tensions between Ukraine, Russia and the EU grew. It had become clear that Ukraine was bound to make its definitive geopolitical choice.

In the beginning, President Viktor Yanukovich tried to take a pro-European course and promised to sign the Association with the EU at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in November 2013. But just before the summit he suddenly changed his course and completely turned to Russia. The idea of signing the Association Agreement with the EU was abandoned, which caused peaceful protests against Yanukovich and his government. On November 30, 2013, the protesters were severely beaten by a special squad of Ukrainian police, the "Berkut". This provoked an uprising in Ukraine, when millions went into the central streets of the capital city, demanding the resignation of the president and his government. To suppress the uprising, Yanukovich ordered the use of police and sniper squads against unarmed people, and over a hundred protesters were killed in February 2014. That put an end to Yanukovich's regime. He was defeated and fled to Russia together with the key figures from the Party of Regions and his allies. The Ukrainian parliament approved a new government after consultations with the protesters.

However, Russia refused to recognize the new government as a legal one, started military exercises and - while using its naval base in Sevastopol - occupied a part of Ukraine, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. After a quick referendum in Crimea, which was totally uncontrolled by the Ukrainian side, Russia has claimed that around 90 percent of the Crimean population showed the desire to reunite with Russia. Ukraine did not have enough military power to fight for Crimea and retreated from Crimea. Russia took control over the peninsula. Moreover, the newly formed Ukrainian government failed to control the situation in Donbas - historically the most pro-Russian region of Ukraine, which consists of Donetsk and Luhansk oblast (district). In May 2014 most of the Donbas territory was controlled by separatists, supported and organized by Russian volunteers and military.

Types of Ukrainian people by their attitude towards Ukraine and Russia

Considering the language and cultural prerequisites of what has happened in Ukraine recently, we have to make a distinction between four groups of people involved in territorial conflicts.

- 1) "Russian world". They are mentally, culturally and linguistically Russian people. A relatively high percent of such people can be found in Crimea,

where almost 55% percent of the population are Russians by blood. However, there are also people of that category in Donbas, Kharkiv, Odessa and other Russian-speaking regions.

2) “Ambivalent”. Mentally and culturally ambiguous people. They can be considered pro-Russian, but in fact they are neutral to both countries. This category of Ukrainian citizens do not mind if the territory they live in belongs to Ukraine or Russia. They culturally belong to Russia rather than Ukraine, and tend to use Russian, or “surjik” (a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian languages), but some of them, especially politicians, use Ukrainian if there is a need. The majority of Donbas is of that type. Some percent of such people can also be found in Crimea, Odessa, Kharkiv and other regions of Ukraine.

3) “Independent”. Mentally and culturally pro-Ukrainian people. They may use Russian, Ukrainian or “surjik” and most of them can easily switch from one language to another. These people have a feeling of patriotism. Whatever their first language is or whatever language they choose to use in daily life, they value the independence of Ukraine and do not want any part of the territory of Ukraine to belong to Russia. The majority of Ukrainians is of that type.

4) “Strong Ukrainian”. People with strong nationalistic feelings. These people prioritize Ukrainian and insist on using it as the only official language in Ukraine. Most of them can communicate in Russian and can use “surjik” or their local dialect, but prefer to use Ukrainian in their daily life. The range is wide: from the rural population of western and central Ukraine to the so-called “banderivtsy” (named after Ukrainian hero Stepan Bandera (1909-1959), who fought for the independence of Ukraine from the USSR) or ultra-nationalists. These people were in the epicenter of the uprising against Yanukovych in 2013-2014. They are patriotic and sometimes intolerant to “mediocre” Ukrainians of the second and third group, which makes them an easy target for the anti-Ukrainian propaganda of Russia.

Cultural border

To explain the difficulties in discerning and demarking where the cultural and linguistic border lies, we have to realize, that there is no zone with the representatives of just one of the above types. Communities, especially in big cities, are a mix of all types. But the percentage of types in certain regions is different. Consequently, it makes a strong influence on the life of each region and its integration into Ukrainian society. Moreover, in a time of war or military operation, the percentage of people of a certain

type, can be the decisive factor for the success of an army. Why has Ukraine let Crimea be occupied without even trying to protect this territory? We can consider many factors, among which the disorder in the country and government, an ineffective or maybe even uncontrolled army, the Russian military base in Sevastopol, fear of open war with Russia, lack of support from the EU and the USA. But one of the most important factors, in my opinion, is that the percentage of people of the “Russian world” type is distinctively high there.

Crimea was occupied by Russian military troops without any real resistance from Ukraine. Russia at first denied its military presence, but finally has confirmed that it had moved troops into the Crimea region (Oliphant, 2014).

Crimea is occupied, but it has not been recognized as a part of Russia by the international community. Possibly the desire to have an extra argument for international recognition moved Putin to start an operation in Donbas. Two oblasts (districts) Donetsk and Luhansk, proclaimed their independence. Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhanska People’s Republic (LPR) were established in April 2014.



Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27535999>

The leading figures of the “governments” of these republics were Russian citizens along with marginal regional activists and “Russian world” politicians. From the day

they proclaimed independence, they started to ask for a protection and support from Russia. To prevent separatism, the Ukrainian acting president Oleksandr Turchinov launched an anti-terrorist operation (ATO).

In May 2014, to prevent separatism and further Russian expansion into eastern Ukraine, the newly elected president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko restarted the ATO, which Russia claimed to be a nationalist war against the “Russian world” supporters in Ukraine. In late August 2014, when the ATO was almost finished, Russia provided massive military support to both republics and that changed the dynamic. This has led to the worst crisis in Ukraine-Russia relations and will most likely lead to an open war between the two countries.

But even if the ATO turns to be successful, it is doubtful that most of the population of Donbas will forget the bloody military conflict on its territory and turn back to Ukraine.

Where is the real border?

Donbas is not the only potentially pro-Russian region in Ukraine. Russian radical nationalist and ideologist Alexander Dugin (2014), in his letter to the American people on Ukraine predicted the following:

So in the near future there will be the creation of two (at least) independent political entities...The Western Ukraine with their pro-NATO position and at the same time a ultra-nationalist ideology and Novorossia with a pro-Russian (and pro-Eurasian) orientation.... The West of Ukraine will protest trying to keep hold over the East and South. It is impossible by democratic means so the nationalists will try to use violence. After a certain time the resistance of the East and South will grow and / or Russia will intervene.

(Dugin, 2014)

Dugin’s prediction is clear. He sees Ukraine as a country split into two big regions:

- 1) Western Ukraine with the pro-European position and NATO support.
- 2) East and South Ukraine (so called Novorossiya) which is a part of a Russian world.

It is easy to suggest that Dugin’s visions are accepted in a Russian mainstream political discourse, because Dugin is now in favor of president Putin and other Russian top-politicians.

“As Dugin and other like-minded thinkers have wholeheartedly endorsed the

Russian government's action in Ukraine, calling on him to go further and take the east and south of Ukraine, which, he writes, "welcomes Russia, waits for it, pleads for Russia to come." (Barbashin and Thoburn, 2014)

DPR and LPR merged into a new state, which they called Novorossia. It was proclaimed as a newly formed country by one of the separatist leaders Pavel Gubarev in Donetsk on May 23, 2014. But the country was limited to Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and did not include any Eastern or other Southern oblasts (Kharkiv, Zaporizhia, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odessa). The idea of a belt from Russia to Moldova's Trans-Dniester region, which was a part of Dugin's plan, seemed to be temporarily abandoned. The territory of Novorossiia has shrunk to just two oblasts of Donbas.

Moreover, in July 2014 the Ukrainian army took Sloviansk (Slavyansk), which was a headquarters of separatists at the time. The Novorossiia project in Donbas failed and it caused serious contradictions between the separatists and the Russian government. As Michael Weiss (2014) has described it in his article on foreignpolicy.com :

In the week since eastern Ukraine's pro-Russian separatists withdrew from Slavyansk on July 5, ceding control of their de facto capital to Ukrainian armed forces, their allies in Russia have begun to turn on them. The rebels repaired to Donetsk, some 70 miles to the south, where they burrowed into the civilian infrastructure and, more or less, vowed to use residents as human shields against a feared Ukrainian invasion.

"Who lost Slavyansk?" has become the question on the lips of every proponent of the revanchist project to establish and expand "Novorossiia," the once Russian-conquered lands of the Black Sea region, of which east and southeast Ukraine are crucial constituents. Accusations of betrayal and cowardice leveled against the separatists have been met by counter-accusations that Russian President Vladimir Putin egged on a movement he did not sufficiently support militarily and now seeks to abandon. But the merry-go-round of recriminations is exposing interesting disclosures and hypotheses for what the Kremlin is now playing at in eastern Ukraine.

(Weiss, 2014)

Here arises another question: "Why has Dugin's theory proved to be erroneous and, except for two oblasts of Donbas none of the southern or eastern oblasts of Ukraine welcomed Russia?"

I presume that Dugin's theory of the Novorossia, as a part of Russian world is based on the mere speculation that a Russian-speaking people in Ukraine (those, who willingly choose Russian as their language of communication) would belong to the

“Russian world”. Consequently, they would be willing to reunite with Russia and forget about their Ukrainian past. But the linguistic choice has proved not to be the best indicator of political preferences.

Language situation in Ukraine

Until the uprising in Ukraine, which started in late November 2013, the language situation seemed to be understandable and predictable. In the most populated regions of Ukraine - especially in big cities of Eastern and Southern Ukraine such as Kharkiv, Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk, and Odessa - Russian was a common language for daily use and Ukrainian was used mainly for official procedures. While the opposition between languages has not been a decisive factor in Ukrainian politics, it has often been used by Russia to justify its political and military pressure on Ukraine.

During more than twenty years of independence of Ukraine, Ukrainian was endorsed and promoted as the only official language. All Ukrainian presidents before Yanukovich were reluctant to bring about major changes in language politics and the old 1989 law “On the languages in the Ukrainian SSR” remained in use until July 2012. But when Yanukovich and his Party of Regions were in power they managed to adopt the new language law, which enabled Russian to be an official regional language in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. This new language law, called “On the principles of the state language policy” (informally, “Kolesnichenko-Kivalov law”) was officially adopted on July 3, 2012. According to this law, if in an administrative district of Ukraine the percentage of representatives of national minority exceeds 10% of the total population of the district, to the language of the minority should be granted the status of a regional language, which means that it can be used in the governmental institutions in the district (including schools, courts, governmental offices, etc.) along with the official language, Ukrainian.

Enacting the law was controversial; in many Ukrainian cities the law faced strong rejection and opposition. In some places there were protests and clashes with police. Before voting for the law in the Parliament, there was a fistfight between the Party of Regions and the opposition. After the adoption of the law, Parliament Chairman, Volodymyr Lytvyn, refused to sign it and tried to resign to avoid its ratification. However, the Parliament did not accept his resignation and he had to sign the law. Then it was signed by the President Viktor Yanukovich and came into force on August 10, 2012. Since then, Russian has been declared a regional language in the oblasts (districts) of Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and in the cities of Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, Kharkiv, Luhansk,

Krasny Luch and Sevastopol. (Pavliy 2013:213).

Language preferences by region

Let us look at the data, provided by the Ukrainian sociology group “Rating” in their exit-poll in February 2012:

Native Language (%) Region	Ukrainian	Russian and Ukrainian	Russian	Other
UKRAINE	50	20	29	Less than 1
West	96	2	1	Less than 1
Center	75	19	6	Less than 1
North	58	23	19	Less than 1
East	29	34	36	Less than 1
South	21	18	56	5
Donbas	5	28	67	Less than 1

Table 1. Native language of Ukrainians

Language of communication (%) Region	Ukrainian	Russian and Ukrainian	Russian	Other
UKRAINE	45	14	39	Less than 1
West	91	5	4	Less than 1
Center	73	19	8	Less than 1
North	51	31	17	Less than 1
East	18	15	65	Less than 1
South	22	7	67	4
Donbas	7	10	83	Less than 1

Table 2. Language for daily communication

Source: Ratinggroup.com.ua

http://ratinggroup.com.ua/upload/files/RG_mova_dynamika_052012.pdf

We can see from the above, that the split in linguistic preferences between the West-Center-North group and South-East-Donbas group is obvious. This polarization of

regions of Ukraine by their linguistic choice was endorsed by the active speculations of political powers during their election campaigns. Linguistic tensions have flared and subsided throughout the last two decades, but the question of language status has continued to be a solid basis for political conflicts.

But still, when it comes to patriotism, language is not a decisive factor. The linguistic choice should not be considered a crucial factor for identity or belonging to a certain type. While watching the recent political talk show on Ukrainian TV, I had an awkward feeling that something in the studio is upside down. Some of the pro-Ukrainian guests and politicians were speaking in Russian, while their opponent, the representative of pro-Russian Party of Regions, Mr. Yuriy Miroshnichenko retorted in pure Ukrainian. Suddenly I realized that this phenomenon can be used as a good description of what is going on in Donbas.

Nowadays, linguistic choice is not the crucial point determining the cultural and political attitude of Ukrainians. Accepting the fact, that the language can be a unifying factor for people in different regions of the country, and it has some effect on their political choices, *language preferences should not be considered the key marker of national identity* in Ukraine (Kuzio, Bilaniuk).

Zhurzhenko (2010) in her studies on the borderland village of Udy shows that even in the villages close to the Russian border in Kharkiv oblast, where people speak Russian (which would be considered a part of the “Russian world” by Dugin and other Russian ideologists), people have a strong feeling of their Ukrainian identity. As an example she quotes a local teacher of mathematics:

We have become a Ukrainian village already... it seems. There is no communication with Russia ... as there used to be. I think we feel more like a Ukrainian village...despite the fact that people here speak Russian. We have become a part of Ukraine (female, mathematics teacher, 36)

(Zhurzhenko, 2010:313).

Zhurzhenko comes to conclusion that in Udy, village on the border of Ukraine and Russia, “contrary to what one would have expected, language and ethnicity were not instrumentalized” and, consequently, “did not become a mobilizing factor” in election campaign (Zhurzhenko, 2010:317).

Donbas dilemma

While many Ukrainians consider the majority of the Donbas population being the

separatists, not so many people in the Donbas region did really want to part with Ukraine and unite with Russia. Most of them wanted stronger federalization, with more rights for their region. Assumingly, people there can be called rather “pro-Donbas” than “pro-Russian” or “anti-Ukrainian”. They have their own patriotism, characterized with a mediocre feeling of belonging to the Ukrainian nation in general, but a very strong feeling of belonging to their own regional community. They cannot fully accept Ukrainians from other parts of Ukraine, and see western Ukrainians as more hostile for them than Russians.

Since the proclamation of independence in 1991 different Ukrainian governments have faced the challenge of dealing with the Donbas as a significant factor in national politics.

On the one hand, the Donbas is an industrial, economically strong and highly populated region. It used to strongly influence internal politics in Ukraine. Politicians realized that integration of this region into a strong state together with other parts of Ukraine is difficult. Unproductive competition for the political power and influence, enhanced by the constant fear of western Ukrainians would continue to stifle any progress in Ukraine. A dangerous political “see-saw” and constant disturbance inside Ukraine would also continue. From this perspective, maybe *to detach Donbas from Ukraine and “press the accelerator”* as a popular expression says might be the best step to lead the country out of crisis.

The government is aware, though, that giving autonomy either to the whole Donbas or to a part of it will lead to its assimilation by Russia. Or if the autonomous part is fully inside Ukraine, then it would become a Russian enclave similar to Moldova’s Trans-Dniester region. Giving up the Donbas will show that Ukraine has no real determination to fight for its current borders. Donbas’ autonomy would become a “green light” for Russia to continue its annexation of parts of Ukraine. This process will not be stopped, unless there is a clear, firm, and approved by the majority of Ukrainians national strategy of demarking a new state border. And this border should accord with cultural border that Russia will not be able to take over.

On the other hand, nowadays, even in the best scenario for Ukraine if the ATO is finished successfully and Ukraine is completely restored in its own borders, would it be better for the whole nation to have Donbas in its current state as a part of Ukraine?

Here, I cannot but agree with Wilson (1995):

From the Ukrainian point of view, the Donbas is part of the modern Ukrainian state

because it is an integral part of Ukrainian ethnographic territory and Ukrainians' historical patrimony. Unfortunately, local Ukrainians are 'denationalized', and easy prey for local demagogues (it is significant that western Ukrainians often refer to eastern Ukrainians as mankurty or yanichari, after the denationalized soldiers of the Ottoman empire, taken from their own villages as children and later to return to fight against their own kith and kin), but history should take precedence over the wishes of postwar immigrants and the false consciousness of local Ukrainians.

Russophile historiography, on the other hand, has created the ideological basis for a movement for regional autonomy or even separatism in the Donbas. The key point in Russophile historiography is that Russians are not 'immigrants' in the Donbas, but a 'rooted [or indigenous] people'. The implication, therefore, is not that Russians should flee the region, but that Kyiv should recognize the special status of the Donbas or even that it should revert to Russia. Either way, the potential for conflict with Kyiv is obvious.

(Wilson, 1995:283)

It did not really mean that people who live in the Donbas would welcome Russian occupation or military invasion. Divisive politics towards the region led to a situation when attempt of political change which comes from the non-Donbas government seems to oppose the population of Donbas. At the moment, Ukrainian military forces fight against separatists in Donbas. A lot of people are killed in this battle. Many of the separatists are citizens of Ukraine. They have families, relatives, and friends. So if such people are killed in the war in Donbas, what feeling would their families have toward the government? It is easy to imagine that they would consider president Poroshenko and the Ukrainian government war criminals and be unlikely to accept Donetsk and Luhansk oblast as a part of Ukraine. This situation will continue to be played up by the massive Russian propaganda. What was absolutely different in the situation in Donbas compared to other regions of Ukraine (except Crimea), is that in Donbas a very high percent of the population was "Ambivalent". These people did not like Ukraine, felt culturally and linguistically closer to Russia and could not be fully integrated in the country with "Strong Ukrainian" people.

So the question is: will they always tend to compete with western and central Ukraine, because, as Janmaat (1999) describes it "cultural differences between western Ukrainians and Russians are indeed substantial" (Janmaat, 1999:493). Will they feel afraid to lose in this competition with the western Ukraine, or it is possible to change the attitude of Donbas from "Ambivalent" to "Independent"? If so, then how?

Conclusion

Considering the present situation with language and the cultural border, I come to the conclusion that it would be erroneous to imply that the language is a key factor for a national identity of Ukrainian people. While the language which is used in a regional community seems to be a unifying and politically definitive factor, in reality each community has its own attitude towards the country politics and the use of language is indicative of local factors rather than politically definitive for that community. In other words, if Russia continues its political and military pressure on Ukraine, the eastern and southern oblasts of Ukraine would become more pro-Ukrainian, as was seen from the Donbas' example. Although Russian is spoken there, it does not indicate that Donbas' population is fully pro-Russian now, but shows that up until now this region had very close influence from Russia and its population has been adapting to that. Hopefully, because of sudden change in relations with Russia they can find their new identity, which will influence their future language choice once this conflict is resolved.

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