

5-2020

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Language and Ethno-nationalism in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine

A Global Studies Capstone Project Report

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May 8, 2020

Introduction

In 2013, the Euromaidan protests (also known as the Euromaidan Revolution and the Ukrainian Revolution) began as opposition to the Ukrainian government's rejection of the EU Association Agreement. It turned into an uprising that included a wide range of issues which focused on "civic patriotism and ethnic nationalism" (Kulyk 2016). The language issue in Ukraine caught my attention when the main square in Kyiv was engulfed in fires due to burning tires. The square was full of protesters, filled with bright blue and yellow Ukrainian flags alongside EU flags (See Figure 1). I read an interesting BBC article entitled "A year after Euromaidan: expert opinions" that evaluated the changes that happened after Euromaidan protests, and I wanted to find my own answers to the questions (BBC News Русская служба 2014). Specifically, as a Russian speaking Ukrainian, I was mostly concerned about the article's interpretation of the revolution as a fight against Russian aggression. I was also interested in how the Euromaidan changed Ukraine.

Right after the Euromaidan, attitudes towards Russian speaking Ukrainians – actually, anyone who speaks Russian – turned hostile (Kulyk 2015). These changes were caused by few reasons. Russia's aggressive political involvement resulted in annexation of Crimean Peninsula, and it continued with the war in eastern Ukraine, in Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Kulyk 2016). In a meantime, Ukraine was working towards strengthening country's ties and friendship with Europe. Similar anti-Russian sentiment and movement towards Europe were a core of the Orange Revolution that happened in 2004 in Kyiv (Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa 2015).

The ability to speak Ukrainian as the native language has been very important, and these kinds of sentiments increased after the Euromaidan revolution in 2013. The Euromaidan protests reinterpreted the historical experiences of Ukraine by redefining who the nation is and what it

stands for. As a Russian speaking Ukrainian, I have always thought that Russians and Ukrainians are united by their Slavic kinship. However, after the Euromaidan protests my perspective of a united Ukraine with two ethnicities has changed. I argue that the Euromaidan protests shifted Ukrainian national identity, which became distinctly tied to the Ukrainian language and decreased use of the Russian language in everyday life, media and politics.

Language is a major factor for claiming national identity in Ukraine today. As scholars have noted, national identity serves as a link between the individual and the society” (Prizel 1998, 19). The hardening of ethnic, linguistic, and national identities led to escalation in the eastern part of Ukraine and created questions about the nature of Ukrainian identity (Onuch, Hale, & Sasse 2018). The manifestation of national identity and nation-building through privileging one language over the other doesn’t seem to be working right now, considering the multiethnic and bi-lingual population of the country (Bilaniuk 2005, 23). The Ukrainian government is moving fast to implement the Ukrainian language policies that subordinate the Russian language. As a result, we can see how linguistic preference is working to reshape and transform national government policies and identities.

Literature review

National identity generally belongs to a certain collectivity and can be identified on individual and collective levels (Kulyk 2016). National identity can relate to either ethnic (cultural) or civic (political) communities, which are commonly discussed as co-existent terms. National identities tend to be expressed through common history, territory, culture and a spoken language. That is, during the Soviet Union Ukrainians didn’t have their ‘own’ independent state, rather it was a more superficially autonomous unit belonging to a larger political entity - Moscow. As a result, Ukrainians “perceive their national distinction solely in cultural terms”,

with references to history, place of residence or language (Kulyk 2016, 590). Moreover, membership of the nation was perceived in ethnocultural more than civic terms due to lack of political distinctiveness from other socialist republics (Kulyk 2016). Kuzio (2002) explains that during the USSR, the question of nationality had been resolved through homogenizing policies of urbanization, which meant that non-Russians didn't fit in Soviet studies and nationality question was ignored by Sovietologists.

National identities change and shift over time to provide a sense of belonging to group members, to develop positive self-image, to give common ownership of land as well as to justify a societal group that was once victimized (Korostelina 2013, 293). The major shift in these identities, though, tends to take place after economic or political crises. In "Mapping national identity narratives in Ukraine" (2013, 293), Korostelina explains that national identity is "a product of both (1) ethnic history and identity of the community, religion, and belief system, and (2) dominant ideology and conscious manipulation, including commemoration, ideology, and symbolism". National identity is constantly being reconstructed in order to serve different purposes, such as a sense of belonging, cultural development, coping as a group of people who have been victimized. During crisis and instability, the nature of national identification and relations with others often changes (Torbakov 2011, 210). Torbakov (2011) explains that the rapid politicizing and instrumentalizing of history immediately takes place.

National identity relies on how a group interprets its history; therefore, these perceptions point to a certain direction, and overtime constitutes 'collective memory' (Prizel 1998, 14). This collective memory leads to a definition of the 'national idea' and adopting specific courses of action in the local, international and global conducts. Nations derive their sense of identity from common language, geographic location or cultural practices. Using the Nietzsche concept of

ressentiment, Prizel (1998) cites Greenfeld, "in many cases national identity emerges after the introduction (or importation) of one culture into another. This creates a reaction or rejection of indigenous culture to alien culture. The alien culture in the case of Ukraine since the end of the USSR is Russian, while indigenous is Ukrainian.

Language is used as a tool or a model for expressing cultural and social differences across different groups. It binds nations over the course of time, keeping them and their history together. Bernsand (2001, 38) argues that "Notions on language and on social belonging linked to language can thereby work as mechanisms of exclusion and social boundary markers". Therefore, language puts certain people on the inside, outside or between speech communities (Bernsand 2001, 39). Moreover, language provides access to economic, social and cultural goods for those who speak a group's language.

The unsettled nature of the language poses a big risk to the security of the state, thus needs to be resolved in a peaceful way (Litoshenko 2014). Prior studies have identified the geopolitical division of the Russian and the Ukrainian languages over the territory of Ukraine and its subsequent influence in defining the population's attitudes towards foreign policy, cultural awareness, civil conduct, education, etc. (Prizel 1998, Kulyk 2016). The use of two languages demonstrates a co-existence of people who live in Ukraine and speak both Ukrainian and Russian. The presence of the minority Russian language in Ukraine has been a highly debated issue due to the long history of Russian influence over Ukraine, before and after Ukraine's independence.

Theoretical Framework

My research focuses on the ethno-linguistic nationalism, its emergence and influence in Ukraine. It deals with the local-global continuum since the issues of language in the territory of

Ukraine go beyond the nation-state; local communities and relations between Ukraine and Russia, and other neighboring states of the European Union. My research also includes historical contextualization of Russo-Ukrainian relations as “it is impossible to understand the current geopolitical map and multiple conflicts without some understanding of the colonial past and imperial histories that established modern national boundaries and set up enduring ethnic and territorial tensions” (Darian-Smith and McCarty 2017, 47)

The Ukrainian language policies can be understood best through ethno-nationalism. Ethno-nationalism is defined by belonging to a common ethnicity, shared culture and heritage (Csernicskó and Réka 2017). Speaking native language signifies a return to the roots, shared heritage that was denied and oppressed for so long. Privileging one language over the other gives nation the power to shape its national practices and identities. Therefore, there is no room for two languages competing for its status in the same territory (Csernicskó and Réka 2017).

This case study builds on Kuzio’s (2002) and Kulyk’s (2016) framework of nationalism in Ukraine, which is often perceived in negative manner due to the Russo-centricity. All liberal democracies are composed of combination of ethno-cultural and civic features, as a result, nationalism is a product of the modern state and an integral part of the state building (Kuzio 2002). However, because the nationality was ignored during the Soviet Union, it laid a foundation for many scholars to define nationalism through the prism of the post-Soviet lenses (Kulyk 2016). Moreover, the ongoing Russian aggression – annexation of Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine – facilitates nationalist beliefs, in particular anti-Russian (Kulyk 2016). An external threat of Russia’s political infringement resulted in reinforcement of the ethno-nationalism in Ukraine. Kulyk (2016) attributes increased Ukrainian self-identification to the Euromaidan Revolution.

For example, Kiryukhin explains Ukrainian ethno-nationalism through focus on identity problems and nations self-determination. The focus of self-determination becomes salient through national memory, history, and culture. In this case study, independent Ukraine aimed "accentuating ethno-cultural differences between Ukraine and Russia" (Kiryukhin 2015). Russia serves as 'the other', and Ukrainian identity has been developing in rejection to it. The Ukrainian national identity is based on ethno-cultural ground due to nationalist discourse maintained by the government. Despite complex identity formation, language becomes a security and the marker of Ukrainian national identity.

Methodology

I chose the case study method as a method of analysis as well as my specific research design for examining my research problem. I use an illustrative case study due to the descriptive nature of my research. Illustrative case studies utilize an event to demonstrate a given situation; they also serve the purpose of presenting unfamiliar phenomena to make them more familiar and to provide a common vocabulary and knowledge about the phenomena involved ("Writing@CSU" 2020). My intent is to provide an overview of a problem that is not commonly discussed within Ukraine or worldwide, namely – the connection between language and nationalism. The recent revolution in Ukraine has affected Ukrainian nationalism and national identity as well as language policy. The primary units of analysis are language and nationalism at the national and subnational levels.

My bibliographic research included books, journals, newspapers and various specialized documents such as government documents and reports; as well as additional online sources of online journals and magazines, informative websites of relevant non-governmental and research organizations, blogs, databases, both in English and Ukrainian languages.

Both qualitative as well as quantitative data were examined due to the scope of this research project. Qualitative data was the most appropriate information for the examination of the issues involved in this study since it is focused on groups of individuals with different language preferences. Qualitative data, such as map of language distribution that I used in my research, was helpful in evaluating the preferences for the Ukrainian and Russian languages in certain settings and how they affect the notion of national identity. Sources of quantitative data were also used for evaluation of the language usage within the territory of Ukraine as well as presence of certain ethnic groups that affect language politics.

Findings

Before the USSR was formed, Ukraine's land has always been considered a product of different "patterns of regional settlement" (Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa 2015). These patterns define Ukrainian and Russian speaking population that were settled on the opposite sides of the river Dniro. Eastern Ukraine has its own ethnic community whose primary language has been Russian due to historical influence of tsarist Russia since the 18th century; while western Ukraine, whose land bounced between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 16th century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 18th century, is predominantly occupied by Ukrainian speaking population (See Figure 2). Figure 2 is a 2015 linguistic map of Ukraine, which demonstrates where the Ukrainian and the Russian languages are predominantly spoken. Pie charts numbers represent the percentage of the language spoken in that area. The colors represent the language, Russian, Ukrainian or other; orange color stands for Ukrainian as the main language used at home; dark blue is Russian as the main language spoken at home; less dark blue – mixed Ukrainian and Russian or bilingualism; green – other languages spoken at home. As it can be seen, eastern and southern Ukraine are marked blue with the primary

language Russian, central and northern Ukraine are primarily bilingual speakers, while the majority of western Ukraine is Ukrainian speaking. After independence the mixed language usage, surzhyk, was considered an embodiment of Soviet oppression and degraded culture (Bilaniuk 2005, 146). However, the use of surzhyk in everyday life has been changing to more positive attitudes.

The Soviet legacy had direct influence over the social development of Ukraine and the nature of its bungled 'transition' (Torbakov 2000, 462). Majority of ethnic Ukrainians lived in 'Russian Ukraine' where they "were offered a two-tiered identity - an imperial one (which was much broader than the ethnic term *ruskii*¹) and a regional one (*maloruski*²)" (Torbakov 2000, 462). Russian hegemonic view of Ukrainians as 'younger brothers' was a major narrative during the Tsarist years and the Soviet Union (Riabchuk 2016).

When Bolsheviks came to power in 1918, ethnic nationality was built around Russian dominance. There was an enforced idea of unity of all the Soviet republics as one Slavic civilization. Even though socialist republics had defined territorial units and superficial autonomy, Zubair argues that they were considered 'substitute nation-states' (Rather 2017). Soviet nation-building was characterized through the cultural imprint of the dominant Russian ethnic group. The USSR's solution to the national problem was the creation of a one group of Soviet people, thus ensuring less possibility of ethnic confrontation. Due to the fact that during the Soviet Union Russian culture and language was forced on the non-Russians, it is believed to give rise to nationalist ideologies to the post-Soviet countries after they gained their independence. As a result, Ukraine, as a post-Soviet state is returning to the historiographic tradition, where the past needs to be rewritten and new identities to be formed.

¹ Russian identity that included all people of the Soviet Union Republics

² 'a little' Russian, embedded view of Ukrainians

When Ukraine became independent, making Ukrainian a state language was an important part of the constitution of independent Ukraine, even though Ukrainianization³ was ‘soft’. After independence Ukraine’s government was characterized by the low administrative capacity and unstable political leadership. This was not enough for radical reform, furthermore, to formulate a clear language policy. In the following years, Ukrainian identity started gaining its salience and shifting toward civic nationalism. The Russian language played a secondary status, but a very influential role in state structure, thus Ukrainization wasn’t successful in Russian-speaking east and south (Zhurzhenko 2000, 10). Correspondingly, due to the weak feeling of national unity, the Ukrainian people had doubts to which political community they belong. As a result of being oppressed by Soviets, Ukrainian ethnic identification was gradually acquiring its position. Moreover, new emerged Ukraine faced the disagreement on how to identify national collectivity, considering all the ethnic Ukrainians and Ukrainian citizens.

During the Soviet Union existence, language played a major role in differentiating ethnicities, even though concept of nationhood was unclear. When the USSR fell apart, some people – predominantly eastern Ukraine – still identified themselves as ‘residents of the post-Soviet space’ (Pikulicka-Wilczewska, Sakwa 2015, Kulyk 2016). Even after Ukraine's independence the narrative of Russia as an 'older brother' remained deeply rooted in the society, taking away the legitimacy of the Ukrainian language, culture and its political sovereignty (Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa 2015). By enhancing the legal status of Ukrainian ‘own’ language, Ukraine is demonstrating its power against the dominant influence of Russia (Bilaniuk 2005). It is a common way for many former Soviet countries to use a native language as a political weapon against the dominant Russia. As a result, many Ukraine’s policies were

³ Promoting elements of Ukrainian culture

addressed towards increased use of national language in all spheres of public life (Korostelina 2013).

From 1991 until 2012, the Ukrainian language played the role of a sole state language. During that time, it was strongly used in schools, but weak in media and at work, while Russian took predominance in the informal oral setting and state institutions, mainly in western Ukraine (Arel 2017, 233). The 2012 Language Act gave more legitimacy to Russian language in the territory of Ukraine, which only intensified language conflict. The Act brought Russian to a new level where its dominance was politically acceptable if the Ukrainian language was promoted symbolically and through the national policies (Arel 2017, 233). The law was highly criticized for many reasons. First, it attempted to give the Russian language a status of a state's second language. Second, it created less incentive for people to use Ukrainian. The protests against Russian language caused Russia to immediately announce that it would defend the Russian speaking minority from Ukrainian nationalism (Csernicsekó and Réka 2017).

As Onuch, Hale, and Sasse (2018) suggest, the country as ethnically divided as Ukraine is better understood in terms of different dimensions. Drawing on relational theory, these authors define these four dimensions as: "individual language preference, language embeddedness, ethnolinguistic identity, and nationality". All of dimensions represent their own distinct relationships, but they also partly overlap and affect one's political views and behavior. These dimensions show the complexity of studying and measuring ethnic identity, and the need to consider its multidimensionality. National identity and language crisis in Ukraine have been the core of the Euromaidan revolution as they remain to be very powerful dictators of the nation's policies (Onuch, Hale & Sasse 2018).

One of the main Ukrainian narratives is a reinterpretation of national identity through major alienation from Russia. As a result, in many spheres, the Russian language is seen as the oppressor's language. Over the years, nationalization of the Ukrainian language has been used as a weapon in negotiations over the country's status and its political future (Bilaniuk 2005). Before Ukraine's independence, speaking Ukrainian was punished by the government. As a result, being able to speak the native Ukrainian language is not just a right, but also a defense of national interest. Language, in this case, became a collective unifying link for Ukrainian nation to establish post-Euromaidan Ukraine.

Post-Euromaidan Ukrainian crisis broke ethnic stereotypes about Russians being 'elder brothers' (Torbakov 2011, 212). Changes due to revolution and eastern Ukraine alienation only increased the national identity crisis; attitudes toward the anthem and flag have improved (Kulyk 2016, 600). Over the years, language intensified its position as a defining feature for one's cultural belonging. Kulyk's survey (2016, 600) demonstrated that Ukrainian language became perceived not only in legal terms as state language, but also "in symbolic terms, as the national language". Being able to speak the native language has become a crucial factor to represent a true Ukrainian national identity and demonstrate alienation from the past. Majority of the population perceives the national identity as the someone who loves the Ukrainian anthem, flag, independence and language.

In 2015, not too long after the Euromaidan revolution, President Poroshenko passed the new law of decommunization. The law eliminated most of the World War II monuments, Lenin statues, or anything that was related to Soviet non-Ukrainian figures; it also enforced renaming of public places nationwide (Marples 2018). Decommunization is seen as an important process of rethinking the past and 'a chance' for the future of the nation (Marples 2018). Figure 3 shows

a map of Ukraine with regions that need a name change. As of 2015, there were 3%⁴ of total places in Ukraine that had Soviet-related names. This data has been collected in accordance with the law “On the Condemnation of Communism and the National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and the Prohibition of Propaganda of Their Symbols” (*В Україні за півроку змінять назви 3% міст і сіл*, 2016).

Another enforcement of decommunization law was set up by the Institute of National Remembrance (INR). The INR decommunization project mainly focuses on popularizing Ukrainian history: commemoration of the fighters for Ukrainian independence and victims of totalitarian regimes, preservation of the memory of the Euromaidan protests, creation of the Museum of the Revolution of National Dignity, and improving the teaching of the national history in schools (Marples 2018, 4). It is believed that many problems of contemporary Ukraine can be attributed to misconceptions about the “happy life” during the Soviet Ukraine. As was mentioned by Kulyk (2016), Russian involvement only facilitates Ukrainian nationalist beliefs; as a result, strengthening of Ukrainian history and culture through decommunization will ensure the future consolidation of the nation.

Kiryukhin (2015) identified that nationalist thinking identifies three narratives: heroism, sacrifice, and romanticism. These narratives can be observed in Euromaidan time. The nation has mobilized to fight for its place in Europe. The government introduced language laws, limiting use of the Russian language or intensive use of the Ukrainian language, and introduced decommunization laws to alienate Soviet past. Finally, the nation is using Ukrainian nationalism to connect to its European ties.

⁴ 871 inhabited localities, 76 cities, and 795 villages

Kuzio (2002) has similar framework for understanding nationalism in Ukraine. One of them is extreme (radical) nationalism, which is the most common understanding of nationalism, referring to the extreme right (ethnic Ukrainian or Russian nationalists). Another one is a state (civic) nationalism, which “recognizes that liberal democracies are composed of civic and ethno-cultural variants”. State nationalists support state independence and defend Ukraine's interest (Kuzio 2002). While Soviet Ukrainian nationalism is taking extreme left position, and in favor of joining the Russian-Belarusian union by destabilizing Ukrainian independence (Kuzio 2002).

Today, the debate about language importance in the representation of one's identity is very controversial in Ukraine. Many argue that keeping the Russian language on the territory of Ukraine will only destroy its culture because of a long imperial history that suppressed the native Ukrainian language (Csernicskó and Réka 2017; Kulyk 2015). While others support a united identity where Russian speaking Ukrainians are treated equally and can't be suppressed for their language that has a minority status (Zhurzhenko 2002). On the other hand, Kulyk (2015) argues that the "stronger Ukrainian identity doesn't mean a worse attitude toward Russian", therefore speaking Russian doesn't make someone less Ukrainian.

Languages in Eastern Europe have served as a symbol of political and cultural opposition to the previous political regimes that have been closely associated with Russia. Many of Russia's Eastern European neighbors are also reshaping their identities, just as Ukraine, which is “seeking to strengthen its own sense of Europeanness and distinguish itself from Russia, which is often cast as a non-European” (Marples 2018, Torbakov 2011, 215). Considering that Ukraine is a victimized state and a nation, it attempts to ‘cleanse’ its own national history from what's considered a ‘false’, Soviet, history (Torbakov 2011).

National language and rejection of the past, including the Russian language alienation, brings the population their own sense of Europeanness - the new future, different from where they were once victimized. This new pro-European narrative is built on strengthening ties with Europe which can be done through conforming to the native language (Torbakov 2011, 215). For Ukraine, European identification means rejecting and 'cleaning off' everything that distinguishes it from Russia (Torbakov 2011, 215). By promoting Ukrainianization at the expense of the Russian language, Ukraine proves to be a much wanted "European choice" (Zhurzhenko 2002, 3). As a result, creating stricter policies targeted on increased usage of state language in public spheres took place (Bilaniuk 2005) Such 'Europeanized' Ukraine is burning bridges with Russia, which poses a risk to Russian national security and its imperial identity.

As a part of the plan for overcoming the ethno-cultural differences in Ukraine and demonstrating how one nation that speaks two languages can get along, Litoshenko (2014) suggests that the country should focus on spiritual integration rather than ethnic one. To preserve a unity, a new effective form of administrative-territorial reform needs to be developed. Due to current centralized unitary state failure and eastern Ukraine fighting for separation, there is a need for a more decentralized government that considers ethno-territorial communities.

This change for a better future of the nation would require a shift from national interest to a public one. Moreover, Ukraine needs to target existential values like love, freedom and unity, the personal development, regardless of national and religious affiliation. To achieve multicultural unity, recognition of regional identity needs to be put in perspective through a new set of laws. The stepping stone for building a strong society, where two languages are accepted, is through strengthening the spirit of Ukrainians as a united community (Litoshenko 2014, 104). And Russia, indeed, as a USSR successor, needs to take responsibility and recognize the crimes

that were committed by the Stalin regime to Russian people and other Eastern European countries (Торбаков 2011, 13).

When it comes to present time, President Zelensky, as a Russian speaking Ukrainian, expressed his positive attitude towards using the Russian language and importance of prioritizing the Ukrainian language (Валерия Доброва, 2019). However, throughout his campaign he was condemned for his struggle speaking the Ukrainian language. On April 25, 2019, the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) adopted the law on ensuring the Ukrainian language as the state language, which was signed by former President Poroshenko before the end of the term (Валерия Доброва, 2019). This law implies state authorities, local governments, educational institutions and hospitals to use solely the state language, which infringes the rights of Russian speaking population.

Conclusion

The formation of the national Ukrainian identity has been through many stages since Ukraine was divided and ruled by other dominant nations. Independent Ukraine brought new challenges to understanding and use of the Russian language. The Euromaidan protests became a new stage in Ukrainian life that brought its salience, defined by alienation from Russia and Soviet past. Post-Euromaidan time marked significant shift in language policies that aimed at the increased use of the Ukrainian language in all spheres of life. Reinterpreted history of Ukrainian nation demonstrated bigger love for Ukrainian anthem and flag as well as heroization of Ukrainian victims of totalitarian regimes.

Further study of this nature would be very interesting to me. As was demonstrated by this research, language issue has been a hot debated topic and there are many more aspects of it that need to be researched. When I will have the next opportunity to conduct a research, I want to

focus on mixed language in Ukraine that includes elements of the Russian and Ukrainian languages – surzhyk.

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Figures



Figure 1. Euromaidan protest, people are holding flag of Ukraine and flag of the European Union

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Figure 2. Map of Ukraine’s language usage

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Figure 3. Map of Ukraine showing places that need name change to get rid of Soviet connection

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