

“In the beginning was the word”

Introduction

The history of the tense relationship between Ukraine and Russia (or maybe more accurately to those who do not accept Ukraine as a country*) - the Ukrainian people and the Russian people - goes back centuries. However, the political, social, historical etc. characteristics do not develop in a linear fashion, but rather they develop in phases each of which have their own unique characteristics. This will apply to long term developments as well as the relatively short period of the present armed confrontation.

This essay is an attempt to describe the phases I have so far identified as being part of this confrontation.

Origin

“How do people define their national identity? By speaking the language”
So says a heading in ‘The Washington Post’, February, 2017**).

The sentence expresses clearly the idea that people who can speak the same language and express identical ideas using the same or identical words have a close if not intimate relationship that people who cannot use the same language or the same or identical words may only break into at their peril.

A battle is actually being fought in many parts of the world between those who speak - and may prefer to speak – the language of a minority of native residents and a majority of a relatively recent colonial population.

In the Danish parliament Greenlandic MP^{3*}) insisted on speaking entirely in her native Inuit language and refused to speak Danish. The move caused frustration among Danish-speaking lawmakers probably they were unable to understand her.

In Australia a proposal^{4*}), that would give Indigenous Australians a voice in Parliament in the form of an advisory body, was put to a referendum, but heavily defeated. Broadly supported by the country’s Indigenous people who saw it as a sign of a step to do right by them after centuries of abuse and neglect. But feared by the majority (60%) who feared they would be forced to give back their land..

On the 9th of November, 2023, a routine meeting between the Kazakhstan and the Russian leadership took place in the capital Astana. The president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, said little that was new with a notable exception: his delivery marked a notable departure from the past. He opened his remarks in [Kazakh](#), not Russian and in making messrs Lavrov and Peskov reach for their translation devices, he send a clear signal to Kremlin: the dynamics of the relationship are shifting as the Ukraine war plays out. Russia needs to actually respect Kazakhstan’s sovereignty, in deeds not just words, and adjust its imperial mindset.^{5*})

The military strategy which link into popular thinking about language and national identity may have been revealed by a Russian commander (deputy commander of Central Military district, Rustam Minnekaev). He said at a conference back in April 2022 that “one of the tasks of the Russian Army is to establish full control over the Donbas and Southern Ukraine.” It will provide a corridor to Crimea, influence the vital Ukrainian Black sea ports as well as an outlet to Moldova’s pro-Russian breakaway region of Transdnistri, where there are also facts of **oppression of the Russian-speaking population.**^{6*)}

^{6*)} Withers, Paul, *Putin's plot to invade Moldova as 'second stage' of brutal invasion laid bare*, Daily Express, 22nd of April, 2022.

It is clear that what the Russians had in mind was total control of the Northern half of the Black Sea coast line which would give them a stranglehold not only on Ukraine and its export of grain to the rest of the world, but also total dominance and control of all sea bound traffic in the Black Sea.

As an excuse for military invasion of the area they use what they consider a need for protection of the Russian language and culture in the Southern and Eastern part of Ukraine especially the four areas that were annexed and made part of the Russian Federation in September 2023: Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia.

In these areas there has been an ongoing intense struggle between Russian and Ukrainian language and culture which may have its roots in the rapid economic and population growth from late 18th century and continuing during much of the following centuries.

Language policy

On August 8, 2012 the then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich signed a law ‘On the principles of the state language policy’, that allows cities and regions to pass legislation that would give Russian (or any other minority tongue) the status of an official language if 10 percent or more of the population of that region speaks it as a native tongue. The new law was supported by the governing ‘Party of the regions’, but opposed by the opposition parties, who among other things argued that it undermined the role of the Ukrainian language and therefore contravened the Ukrainian constitution. It was eventually repealed on the 23rd of February 2014 and finally declared unconstitutional on the 28th of February 2018.

2015 "Decommunization law"

In April 2015, the Verkhovna Rada passed a law banning all communist and Nazi propaganda and symbols, even the names of cities, villages, streets and squares that referred to such slogans. According to the historian and activist Volodymyr Viatrovykh, who inspired the law, by October 2016 Ukraine's toponymy had undergone a complete process of decommunization, including in the Donbas region.

The de-Russification of Ukrainian toponymy implied also the removal from railways and airports of any information board written in Russian; all information had to be

given only in Ukrainian and English. Free Ukrainian language courses for civil servants working in the Donetsk regional administration were organised, and from January 2017 Ukrainian became the only language of official and interpersonal communication in public institutions.

2017 Education Law

Ukraine's 2017 education law made Ukrainian the required language of study in state schools from the fifth grade on, i.e. at the basic secondary and upper secondary levels, education in minority languages in kindergarten and primary school remained unchanged, but at secondary level, students could only learn their native languages as a separate subject. Additionally, from grade five onwards, two or more subjects could be taught in any of the languages of the EU.

The 2017 education law provoked harsh reactions in many countries. The Romanian parliament condemned the law and warned that Ukraine could not proceed towards EU integration without respecting the language rights of national minorities. The Russian Duma and Federation Council also condemned the law lamenting the violation of the language rights of the Russian-speaking minority. Hungary–Ukraine relations rapidly deteriorated^{7*}) as the law was accused of being nationalistic and needlessly provocative. However, the president of Ukraine, Petri Poroshenko, defended the law, claiming that "The law ensures equal opportunities for all ... It guarantees every graduate strong language skills essential for a successful career in Ukraine".

On 7 December 2017, the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) stated that criticism of the law seemed justified, as the shift to all-Ukrainian secondary education could infringe on the rights of ethnic minorities. Moreover, according to the Venice Commission, allowing certain subjects to be taught in the official languages of the EU could discriminate against speakers of Russian, the most widely used non-state language. The Commission formulated seven recommendations to the Ukrainian Government to amend the law, six of which have been implemented according to the present President Zelenskyy.

2016 Ukrainian language quotas in radio broadcasting

In June 2016, a new law was enacted requiring Ukraine's radio stations to play a quota of Ukrainian-language songs each day. At least a quarter of a radio station's daily playlist had to be in Ukrainian, rising gradually to 30% and then 35% a year after that.

The law required TV and radio broadcasters to ensure at least 60% of programs such as news and analysis are in Ukrainian. The law entered into force in November, the national day for Ukrainian Language and Literacy and President Poroshenko hailed the law calling on people to share their favourite Ukrainian song on social media, but the pro-Russian Opposition was saying people had the right to decide for themselves what to listen to, and in which language.

According to *The Economist*, the passage of a law downgrading Russian in Ukraine could have helped "spark war in that country"; Vladimir Putin has used it as evidence that Ukrainian nationalists are bent on wiping out Russian culture there.

In May 2017, Verkhovna Rada enacted a law prescribing a 75% Ukrainian-language quotas in all television channels operating in Ukraine.

Conclusion

There is in my view no doubt that the language question plays a central role and the blatant show of de-russification displayed by the Ukrainian government has angered many Russian speakers and among them Vladimir Putin.

In his famous article on the “Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” he writes:^{8*})

“Most importantly, people both in the western and eastern Russian lands spoke the same language.”

“The incorporation of the western Russian lands into the single state was not merely the result of political and diplomatic decisions. It was underlain by the common faith, shared cultural traditions, and – I would like to emphasize it once again – language similarity.”

“(It was.....communicated to Rome that people in Moscovia called Russians from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth their brothers, that their written language was absolutely identical, and differences in the vernacular were insignificant.”

“All the things that united us and bring us together so far came under attack. First and foremost, the Russian language. Let me remind you that the new “Maidan” authorities first tried to repeal the law on state language policy. Then there was the law on the “purification of power”, the law on education that virtually cut the Russian language out of the educational process.”

The war of words intensifies

As time progressed the World witnessed nervously how diplomatic activity increased during the year 2021 in the form of repeated pleas – in some cases personal - to President Vladimir Putin by the leaders of every sizeable European country and the European Union itself.

Towards the end of November 2021 British diplomats issued a warning to Russia: “UK diplomats issued a direct plea to the Russian president to hold back 90,000 troops stationed on Ukraine's border, sources revealed..... According to official UK sources, Mr Putin is considering either a temporary incursion into eastern Ukraine or a wider invasion of the country.”^{9*})

In December an observer with Sky News comments: “One Western diplomat observed to me that he may even have passed a tipping point already, given a mass mobilisation of troops and military kit close to Ukraine's border, coupled with a ramping up of false claims about Ukrainian aggression.”^{10*})

“Ominously, the Russian leader has met diplomatic efforts by Western powers to defuse the crisis with impossible security demands”^{11*})

Among these demands, two are repeated again and again at every possible opportunity. They are 1. that NATO pull back its presence in the Baltics and Eastern Europe, and 2. that Ukraine and Georgia be permanently barred from joining the military alliance.^{12*})

Sky News reports on the US response to the Russian demands that “it reiterates what (has been) said publicly for many weeks and, in a sense, for many years”, Blinken [said at a news conference](#). “That we will uphold the principle of NATO’s ‘open door,’ and that’s ... a commitment that we’re bound to.”^{13*})

Among the Western leaders no one has put more effort into trying to defuse the tense situation than the French president Emmanuel Makron. The two president have met several times over an extended period of time and the French leader, whose country holds the European Union’s rotating presidency, is now one of the few outsiders with a view into [Putin](#)’s mindset. He acts as an emissary of the 27 member states, but his relentless push for dialogue also reflects France’s post-World War II tradition of carving out its own geopolitical path and its refusal to blindly follow the United States.^{14*})

It’s become clear over the past several weeks that Putin was on the war path even as he denied it, sitting across from Macron at a very long table during his last visit to Moscow. Macron wanted to believe him, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said after critics claimed the French president has fallen into the old trap of appeasing Putin’s Russia. “The president is not naive,” Le Drian said on the eve of Russia’s invasion. “He knows the methods, the character and the cynical nature of Putin.”^{15*})

The Russian war machine rolled into Ukraine on the morning of February the 24th 2022.

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15*) Ibid

