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Low Speech Style of Public Political Discourse in Post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine

1. Introduction

It is common for a political leader’s linguistic peculiarities in public speeches to manifest themselves in popular culture. Some well-known instances of this include George W. Bush’s use of nonsensical words like “misunderestimated” and Bill Clinton’s infamous statement, “I have not had sexual relations with that woman.” In post-Soviet Eastern Europe, Russian President Vladimir Putin has become a quintessential example of this phenomenon, using a number of coinable phrases that have become popular enough to even have their own Wikipedia pages.¹ These famous outbursts have received an overwhelmingly positive response from Russians, and have thus contributed to Putin’s popular public image. However, for other politicians in this region of the world, such as former president Viktor Yanukovych of Ukraine, such language use has been less successful.

Putin’s use of prison slang and a “sub-standard, low, colloquial style”² of discourse during his political career as president of the Russian Federation has become famous and contributed to his popularity. This is largely a result of specific conditions in Russia at the beginning of the twenty-first century. After the lawlessness of the Yeltsin years immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union, which included widespread criminal activity, inflation, political disarray, and a dangerous conflict with Chechnya in southern Russia, Russians elected a tough, proactive, and earnest leader who was not afraid to put an end to the chaos. Putin’s use of low-level speech exemplified those qualities. However, he used this style of language in extreme moderation, in turn making his vulgar outbursts appear as moments of sincerity that were paired

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¹ Wikipedia “Mochit’ v sortire”
² Reznikov, 89.
with a largely diplomatic, intellectual speech style. This has prevented Putin’s “common speech” from being used to paint him as a criminal or of low status. The strategic pairing of intellectual speech with vulgar rarities is backed by his personal history: a troubled childhood that was transformed by an impressive education, which led to the acquisition of a respectable career before going into politics.

Viktor Yanukovych, the fourth president of Ukraine, is also known for his use of common speech, but has received a different response from Ukrainian citizens than that of Russians to Putin. Instead, Yanukovych’s use of vulgarisms has only reinforced his reputation as a corrupt leader and has drawn attention to his criminal past. Yanukovych’s political campaign in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, when comments by pro-Western journalists about Yanukovych’s speech style were first made, was rife with corruption. During the scandal surrounding the presidential election, which would lead to what is known as the Orange Revolution, Yanukovych was associated not only with the corrupt regime of his predecessor and sponsor, Leonid Kuchma, but also with a fraudulent election that ensured the victory of Russian-backed Yanukovych over the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko. In addition, Ukraine has a long history of a complicated language policy and linguistic culture. In the early twenty-first century, Ukraine was still finding its footing as an independent sovereign state. Thus, Yanukovych’s vulgar use of his native language, Russian, compounded with his near inability to speak the language of his people, Ukrainian, drew attention to the unresolved language problem in the country. Yanukovych’s personal narrative includes a childhood spent in poverty that led to a criminal record, which only further solidified his scandalous image.

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3 Bilanuk, 197.
Therefore, although there are clearly a multitude of factors in the creation of a political image, the differences in the political climates, historical contexts, linguistic and cultural environments, and personal narratives of these two politicians are largely responsible for how vulgarisms in public discourse contributed to a positive public image for Putin and a negative one for Yanukovych.

It is important to note that this paper analyzes the factors behind public response to public discourse that was spoken only in Russian. In present-day Ukraine, both Ukrainian and Russian are spoken in the media and in political settings. However, in order to streamline research and analysis, this paper focuses on Yanukovych’s use of low-style Russian in public discourse and excludes his use of Ukrainian vulgarisms. Although extensive research has already been completed on Putin’s language use, little to none has been done on Yanukovych’s public discourse in Russian. Politicians’ use of Russian in Eastern Europe outside of Russia has largely been ignored by linguistics.

2. Vladimir Putin of Russia

I. Development of Public Discourse During and After the Soviet Union

One important factor that contributes to Putin’s use of vulgarisms receiving a positive response from his country is that Russia was already primed to accept a low speech style in public speeches before his presidency. This resulted from a shift in the quality of political public discourse after the fall of the Soviet Union. In Soviet times, political discourse could be described as the “clichéd, wooden language of official speeches, documents, and newspapers [that] assumed such a degree of dominance that it came to symbolize, in the Gorbachev-era revolts against that system, all that was wrong with it.”

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4 Gorham, 25.
public speeches during this period of Russian history were designed to mask any form of responsibility, as seen by a lack of subjects in sentences, while still promising a brighter future.\(^5\) For example, in 1967, Andrei Kirilenko, the Party Secretary overseeing the Soviet economy, stated,

> A rise in popular welfare is assured among us by the way of the raising of wages; the conduct of the line to preservation of stable state retail prices for basic goods and the lowering of prices of certain types of goods to the degree of the creation of necessary conditions and the accumulation of resources; reduction and abolition of taxes.\(^6\)

This statement, instead of containing active statements with transitive verbs, is filled with nominalized verbs, such as “the conduct,” “the lowering,” “the creation.” This detaches any agency from the projections of the future that Kirilenko has stated; instead of saying that “the party will conduct,” or possibly “we will conduct,” the subject is completely eliminated from the statement. The use of nominalized verbs therefore does not only remove the government from making any promises it cannot keep, but also creates a formal linguistic style that engenders a disconnect between the audience and the speaker. This type of dry, formal speech was common in Soviet speeches throughout the history of the USSR, and decreased in frequency only after Russia’s transition to a democracy.\(^7\)

In addition to this, “discursive elevation, elongation and enlargement all decreased as power transferred from a self-appointing Politburo through a partly elected Congress of People’s Deputies and onward to an elected president and legislature governing only the Russian rump of

\(^5\) Anderson, 49.

\(^6\) Подъем народного благосостояния обеспечивается у нас путём повышения заработной платы; проведением линии на сохранение стабильных государственных розничных цен на основные товары и снижение цен на отдельные виды товаров по мере создания необходимых условий и накопления ресурсов; сокращения и отмены налогов. Ibid. Translation by Anderson.

\(^7\) Ibid., 46.
the Soviet State.”\footnote{Ibid.} This can be seen specifically in the use of grandiose adjectives and nouns in reference to both future plans and the current state of the USSR. There is a measurable decrease in usage of the five most common Russian spatial predicates: *vysokii, bol’shoi, krupnyi, shirokii, velikii* (translated as “high, big, large, wide/broad, great”).\footnote{Anderson, 46.} There is additional proof of this in the decrease of temporal metaphors. These spatial and temporal cues express expectations of improvement and of permanence. Political discourse also became less abstract, and therefore less grandiose, as a result of a decrease in the number of nominalized verbs, which were previously popular in Soviet speeches.\footnote{Ibid.}

One possible reason for this shift of speech style from one of abstractness to concreteness and simplicity was Russia’s transition from a socialist state to a democracy. The transformation of a Soviet state into a post-Soviet led to upheaval of all of the political, economic, and social aspects of the country. Language was not the only element that changed. It is important to note, however, that during this transformation of society, “both political and cultural correctness took a back seat to the urgency of democratic, spontaneous self-expression, however noncanonical.”\footnote{Gorham, 47.} More specifically, as a result of glasnost’, although total freedom of speech was not granted within the country, Russian citizens gained greater access to information and, in turn, a greater exposure to less eloquent speech. In fact, even in 1989, on the brink of the collapse of the Soviet Union, citizens had already become proponents of a call for “new civic rights and responsibilities in the realm of free and meaningful dialogue.”\footnote{Ibid., 76.} Thus, the concept of *svoboda slova* (freedom of...
speech) came to a head during this period and would later play a leading role in the language culture of the early years of Yeltsin’s presidency.

The introduction of freedom of speech into Russian society in the panicked and chaotic end of the 20th century, paired with the end of rigid Soviet-era discourse, translated into a surge in the popularity of vulgarisms and low-speech style in public Russian speech. Viktor Erofeev wrote in an essay on this topic that “the syllables of blya-blya-blya and yob-yob-yob echo through the air above Russian like the bleeps of a sputnik. Decode these sounds and you have a general distress signal, the SOS of national catastrophe.”\(^\text{13}\) The mid-1990s became an era of a booming industry of books and dictionaries on Russian cursing, known as mat, and the criminal argot of blatnaia muzyka.\(^\text{14}\) This was part of trend of romanticizing Russian vulgarisms. As politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky stated in response to his colleague calling for laws forbidding the use of mat, “Russian is the most expressive language in the world! But we have a hatred of our own tongue. We reject the wealth of the language, and this has led to a rejection of Russian wealth in general. We need to rehabilitate mat.”\(^\text{15}\)

Thus, the wooden and overly formal style of public discourse in Soviet Russia devolved into a more vulgar, vernacular Russian during the birth of the new Russian Federation. It is important to note that Russian politicians did not immediately utilize this lower-style Russian in official speeches. However, the newfound prevalence of this style of speech in public spaces nonetheless signified that, as a result of a rising popularity of Russian vulgarisms in society, Russia in the 1990s was already primed to accept this type of language in political discourse. Common-speech was no longer kept behind prison walls or whispered on the street. Instead, by

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\(^{13}\) Gorham, 82.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 83.
\(^{15}\) Quoted in Erofeev, 48.
the beginning of the twenty-first century, it had proven to be a legitimate dialect that was even discussed and debated by politicians. With this style of speech already engrained in modern Russian culture, it would presumably be less of a shock for a politician to use a vulgarism in public discourse than if a Soviet official had done so. Therefore, the development of this trend in Russian public discourse is an important factor in why Putin was able to use vulgar and common words that had never before been uttered by a top-ranking Russian official in an official setting.

II: Political Climate in Russia During and After the 1990s

The political climate in Russia before Putin came to power is an important factor that must be addressed to further understand the process behind the codification of Putin’s famous phrases into popular culture. In 1991, amidst of the disintegration of the USSR, Gorbachev resigned as President of the Soviet Union and Yeltsin became president of what would soon become a new state. After the Soviet Union officially fell in December of 1991, the old communist regime had to be rebuilt with democratic blocks. Lilia Shevtsova states in Russia: Lost in Translation, “despite the hostility between Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev and their seemingly opposing goals, it was to be Yeltsin who completed what Gorbachev had unintentionally begun—the final destruction of an empire, a superpower, a one-party state.”

Despite the successful transformation of the old system into a capitalist one, Yeltsin’s presidency was fraught with corruption and disaster. By the end of 1992, inflation caused prices to go up by 2,323 percent. During this time, Russian oligarchs took advantage of the privatization of sectors of the national economy, acquiring much of the country’s wealth, while about 50% of the country lived below the poverty line. In addition to this, a civil war with Chechnya, a separatist

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16 Shevtsova, 2.
18 Lynch, 104.
republic in southern Russia, began at this time. This was a war marked by the failure of Russian armed forces to subdue the Chechen separatists, and the response of Chechen forces through terrorism and guerilla warfare.\textsuperscript{19} Despite a peace treaty in 1996, war broke out again in 1999,\textsuperscript{20} proving that the Chechen conflict was far from over.

Putin restricts his usage of vulgarisms to specific topics, the most prominent one being the Chechen conflict. In doing so, Putin reflected the distress that had been dwelling in the hearts of Russians since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and his blunt word choice confirmed his hardline policy against the sources of Russia’s corruption and instability.\textsuperscript{21} Some language analysts have even argued that Putin’s seemingly spontaneous bursts of vulgarisms are not accidental, but instead strategically planned for his public image.\textsuperscript{22}

At the end of Putin’s second presidential term in 2008, Russian news agency \textit{RIA Novosti} published a list of twenty of Putin’s famous expressions that have reached proverbial status in Russia.\textsuperscript{23} The first expression on the list, which also marks Putin’s entrance onto the national political arena, was made in the summer of 1999 at a televised press conference in Astana, Kazakhstan. Putin stated in a response to a question about terrorism in Russia as a result of constant conflict with the Northern Caucasus,

\begin{quote}
Russian airplanes are striking and will continue to strike the terrorist bases in Chechnya, and this will continue no matter where terrorists might be. …We will follow them everywhere. …So if we catch them in the toilet, please pardon the expression, then we’ll waste them in the outhouse once and for all. That is all, the question is closed.\end{quote}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Evangelista, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 84.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Gorham, 135–136.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 138.
\item \textsuperscript{23} RIA Novosti.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Российские самолеты наносят и будут наносить удары в Чечне исключительно по базам террористов, и это будет продолжаться, где бы террористы ни находились. . . . Мы будем преследовать террористов везде. . . . Значит, вы уж меня извините, в туалете поймаем, мы
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The phrase “мы и в сортире их замочим” (“we’ll waste them in the outhouse”) instantly caught the attention of the media and the nation as a whole. In fact, it became the official declaration of the second Chechen war. Although Putin’s statement originally received some negative feedback from a few journalists, it nonetheless became quite popular in the media and shed some light on Putin as an up-and-coming political figure. Pollster Yurii Levada stated, “with that comment [Putin] enchanted the people, showed his decisiveness, his approachability. And many people believed that he would really be able to achieve what nobody else had been able to do thus far.”

According to language analyst Michael S. Gorham, journalists and op-ed writers began using the phrase in topics other than Chechnya and terrorism, such as Putin’s 2004 electoral reforms, criticism of government corruption, and even commentary on aggressive advertising strategies. The phrase eventually reached a large enough degree of fame to have its own Wikipedia page.

Putin also famously stated in connection with the Chechen conflict that he would like to invite radical Islamists to come to Moscow if they were “ready to have a circumcision,” stating, “I will recommend that they do the surgery for you in such a way that nothing will ever grow again.” This discourse is abrasive and informal, which in turn adds a shock factor to Putin’s speech and is easily remembered. It is clear that Putin strategically uses these “juicy phrases” as a way to draw the nation’s attention to specific issues, utilizing colloquial speech as a tool to engage his audience.

и в сортире их замочим, в конце концов. Все, вопрос закрыт окончательно. Ibid. Translation by Marshall.

25 Reznikov, 88.
26 Ofitova, 200.
27 Gorham, 133.
28 Vikipedia, “Mochit’ v sortire.”
29 Reznikov, 89.
III: Putin’s Personal Narrative

On Putin’s official biographical website, it is clear from the details given of his youth in Leningrad (today’s Saint Petersburg), that Putin wants to show the world that he was a rebel growing up. The portion dedicated to his grade school years has the title “School Days” and is immediately followed by a sub-header reading, “I was a hooligan, and not a Pioneer.” A Pioneer was a member of the communist party’s youth organization, which properly socialized children, and Pioneers were most often associated with being model citizens. Putin’s biography goes on to quote Putin, as he says, “I was always late to my first lesson.” An interview with his fifth grade teacher that follows confirms his rebelliousness. This troubled childhood therefore gives Putin the credibility to use a low style of speech in a way to connect with average Russians, showing that he grew up just like them.

However, despite this mention of Putin’s hooligan days, his personal website pairs this information with multiple stories from his childhood that reveal his potential, energy, and wholesome character. In further confirmation of his moral fiber and intelligence, Putin’s biographical website goes on to emphasize his impressive college education and work credentials. He studied law at the prestigious Leningrad State University, completing his degree in 1975, and then continued on to study at the KGB School No. 1 in Moscow, jump-starting his career as a foreign intelligence officer. Putin’s work in Dresden, Germany led him to receive a bronze medal for “faithful service to the National People’s Army.” In addition to this, he is the

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
first Russian head of state fluent in a foreign language.\textsuperscript{35} The website strives to show that Putin matches and even exceeds the educational background and intellectual credentials of prior Russian politicians in an effort to prove that he can be trusted to make smart and informed decisions for people who do not share his educational credentials.\textsuperscript{36}

Additionally, Putin, in contrast with many previous Soviet and post-Soviet leaders, often speaks quite intelligently and eloquently in official public settings. One example of this can be seen in a speech that Putin gave to the State Duma in 2014, in which he stated,

People in countries with developed economies and many countries with developing economies have become used to constant consumption growth, the expansion of life and cultural opportunities. That is good but it is possible to ensure the continuation of such growth in the modern world only through the introduction of a new technological order, and that is a great obstacle in many parts of the world.\textsuperscript{37}

Putin, in this address to members of the Russian federal government, speaks in a traditionally formal style. It can be seen that when talking about the abstract concept of consumerism in today’s world, Putin utilizes the same style as Soviet leaders in the past have done, speaking grandiosely with nominalized verbs such as “the expansion of” and “the continuation of.” There is also a minimal use of subjects. And when talking about the “new technological order,” Putin opts for a passive adverb followed by an infinitive, translated as “it is possible to ensure” instead of saying “we can ensure” or even the more dramatic “I can ensure.” Thus, Putin proves that he has a firm control over various styles of speech that make him both appealing to the common man and worthy of respect by state officials.

\textsuperscript{35} Reznikov, 87
\textsuperscript{36} “Biografiia.”
\textsuperscript{37} Для населения развитых стран, да и многих развивающихся государств, привычным стал постоянный рост потребления, расширение жизненных и культурных возможностей. Это неплохо. Но обеспечить продолжение такого роста в современном мире можно только с выходом на новый технологический уклад—а вот с этим во многих частях света заминка. Putin. Translation by Amanda Marshall.
Putin combines formal and common speech patterns, resulting “in a style that could be characterized as very reserved, intelligent, and witty, enabling Putin to react quickly, often spontaneously, to unexpected and awkward questions.”\(^\text{38}\) It is therefore incredibly important that although Putin utilizes vulgarities to connect with the populace, he still balances this common slang with the public discourse of a well-read, composed politician. In regards to the frequency in which Putin has used prison slang in his public discourse, Gorham states,

> Ascribing to Mr. Putin a mastery of this “low” style, of course, does not necessarily mean that Putin himself is a product of this new Russian vulgate. Far too many of his public pronouncements feature the dry bureaucratese of a polished technocrat to conclude that the Russian people have chosen a leader cut from the same vulgar cloth. And he can be exceedingly diplomatic when he wants.\(^\text{39}\)

Thus, on a purely linguistic level, the successful use of Putin’s prison colloquialisms can be attributed to the low frequency in which Putin uses them.

3. Viktor Yanukovych of Ukraine

The success of Putin’s use of vulgar Russian, contributing to his positive image as a strong and earnest leader, has not been shared by politicians of other Eastern European nations that have used low Russian speech in the official public sphere. Viktor Yanukovych, the former president of Ukraine, is one example of a politician whose use of vulgarisms and slang has been detrimental to his career. Factors that are largely responsible for the negative response of the Ukrainian populace to Yanukovych’s vernacular discourse include: the history of Ukrainian language policy as compared to that in Russia; the circumstances of Yanukovych’s entrance onto the global political arena in his 2004 presidential election campaign; and lastly, Yanukovych’s

\(^{38}\) Reznikov, 87.

\(^{39}\) Gorham, 138.
rebellious childhood that left him with both a criminal record and unreliable educational credentials.

I: Development of Language Policy throughout Ukrainian History

The history of Ukraine greatly differs from that of Russia. Since the foundation of Kievan Rus’, the question of Ukraine’s sovereignty and the unity of its populace as one people has been greatly contested:

Ukraine’s history must be seen as part of a greater dilemma of eastern and central Europe. During all their tenuous modern existence, the states of eastern and central Europe have been pawns in the international system. Before 1914 the ‘non-historical peoples’ were long subject to three central European dynastic empires: The Romanovs, the Hohenzollerns and the Habsburgs. After the collapse of the multi-ethnic monarchies in World War I, these nations have been most directly the pawns of either the German Reich or the Soviet Union.\(^\text{40}\)

The long, contested history of Ukraine is reflected in the history of its language policy and culture, which has stretched from the beginning of Ukraine’s history to the current century, when Yanukovych became president of the country.

Spoken varieties of a mutually intelligible Ukrainian date back to the early eighteenth century, when the language was regarded as “Little Russian.” During this time period, Eastern Ukraine was under the control of the Russian Empire, while the Austrian and Hungarian Empires ruled over Western Ukraine.\(^\text{41}\) This was the age of Peter the Great, who, striving to bring Russia closer to the West, helped to spur the creation of the modern Russian literary language to establish Russian as a prestigious language among the national elite. This was the beginning of the increasing prestige of Russian as the national language, which led to the subsequent decline

\(^{40}\) Von Hagen, 658.
\(^{41}\) Bilaniuk, 74.
of the linguistic status of Ukrainian. Since the 1730s, “Little Russian” was associated with the lower classes and, in the literary sphere, it was reserved for “low style” comedies. On the other hand, Russian began to permeate into Eastern Ukraine and became a part of elite culture in towns dominated by ethnic Russians and Jews. In 1897, only 13.2% of the population in Russia’s Ukrainian provinces were ethnic Ukrainians. This, however, did not have an effect outside of urban areas. In the countryside, despite minor Russian immigration, the vast majority of the population continued to speak local “low style” dialects of Ukrainian.42

The influence of the Russian Empire over Ukraine meant that, “the Ukrainian language was often devalued and persecuted as part of strategies to assimilate ethnically Ukrainian territories.”43 Tsarist decrees in 1863, 1876, and 1881 made it illegal to publish and import Ukrainian books and to educate youth in Ukrainian.44 In fact, in 1863 the tsarist Russian minister Valuev stated, “there was not, is not, and can be no distinctive Little Russian language.”45 It is also important to note that as a result of foreign rule over Ukraine, there were almost no Ukrainian-speaking members of the aristocracy or bourgeoisie. It was mandatory to switch from Ukrainian to the language of the ruling state in order to advance one’s career or status. This solidified Ukrainian as a “low” language associated with poverty and ignorance.

With the exception of the 1920s, when the Ukrainian language experienced a period of “affirmative action” (ukrainizatsiia), the pattern of linguistic repression continued through much of the Soviet era. The Russian language was seen as a symbol of the revolution, and communism as a whole, while Ukrainian came to symbolize dissidence and anticommunist sentiment. Then, as a result of rapid Soviet industrialization, these stereotypes solidified. Russian represented the

42 Moser, 18.
43 Bilaniuk, 74.
44 Ibid., 75.
45 Markus and Senkus, 46.
progress of the proletariat in urban regions of the USSR, while Ukrainian was the language of the villages and thus of backwardness. The concept of “Russification” became vital for Soviet leaders from the 1930s onward as a way to repress Ukrainian national aspirations. Soviet linguistic theory held Russian in the highest degree over all other languages spoken within the Soviet Union:

The great Russian language, which as a result of the victory of the Great October Socialist Revolution has received a new, socialist direction in its development, has become the source of enrichment and flowering for the national languages. The progressive meaning of the Russian language has grown immeasurably as a result of the liquidation of state privilege and the establishment of equality of all languages and the socialist cooperation of all nations. Comrade Stalin teaches that the Russian people “is the most prominent nation of all the nations that comprise the Soviet Union.”

In other words, the early Soviet years meant the solidification of the Russian language as being superior to that of any other Soviet language, including Ukrainian. There is even direct evidence of attacks on the Ukrainian language, such as Khvylia’s 1933 article, “To Destroy the Roots of Ukrainian Nationalism on the Linguistic Front.” This article once again established Ukrainian as inferior and unwanted. The Ukrainian people were repeatedly denied any sense of pride in their native tongue and, in turn, their national identity.

On the eve of the collapse of the USSR in 1989, Ukrainian was made the official language of the Ukrainian SSR, to which the USSR in 1990 countered by declaring Russian the official language of the Soviet Union. By 1991, the question of language was a key component in national identity when Ukraine received its independence. What was once a “peasant language” quickly grew to become the official language of Ukraine. Over the course of the next

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46 Bilaniuk, 79.
47 Lomtev, 136.
48 Kocherga and Kulyk.
49 Bilaniuk, 94.
twenty years, there was much progress in and a subsequent backlash against the codification of Ukrainian into all aspects of society, including its use in intellectual works to bolster its prestige.\textsuperscript{50}

The complex history of Ukrainian language policy in Ukraine is especially important for modern Ukrainian politics because it is representative of the plight of the Ukrainian people. It amounted to a Ukrainian national movement after the fall of the Soviet Union. More specifically, …in the case of Ukrainian after independence, what needed correction was an array of historical shortcomings: the lack of political unity of a Ukrainian state during long historical periods, domination by neighboring states and their languages, suppression of the use of Ukrainian, and concerted manipulation of Ukrainian standards to make them closer to Russian. At issue was not just the struggle of Ukrainian versus Russian (or other languages) but linguistic purity and the maintenance of boundaries between languages.\textsuperscript{51}

That is, Ukrainian independence meant little without a coherent concept of a common history or language. In the decades following 1991, the idea of a national identity was brought up often in national discourse, especially when compared to Russia. As a native speaker of Russian from Eastern Ukraine that was leading a Russian-supported campaign, Viktor Yanukovych’s presidential campaign in 2004 was destined to be controversial and pin him against those seeking closer ties to Europe. Through the eyes of pro-Westerners, Yanukovych’s explicit linguistic ties to Russia linked him, from the very beginning of his campaign, to those who had oppressed Ukraine and the Ukrainian language for hundreds of years. This is an important reason why Yanukovych’s use of colloquial Russian would cast him in a negative light.

Unlike the linguistic environment in Russia, in which bilingual tensions did not exist and a culture of mat was already established, Ukraine was fighting for the linguistic legitimacy of its native language. Based on the history of its linguistic culture and policies, Ukraine was in no

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, 96.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 100.
place to accept the vulgate of a language that represented the oppressors. Ukraine had an additional language factor that did not exist in Russia, which helps partially to account for why the Ukrainian people were not ready to accept Russian colloquial speech in political public discourse.

**II: Political Climate in Ukraine During and After the 1990s**

This section focuses on Viktor Yanukovych’s language use immediately before and during the Orange Revolution, a movement of mass protests against the outcome of the 2004 presidential election.52 To best understand Yanukovych’s language use in the context of this period of Ukrainian history, it is essential to understand the Orange Revolution in the larger context of Ukrainian political history as well as how it developed after the fall of the USSR.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was granted independence in 1991.53 With its new identity as a sovereign nation, Ukraine began to experience sudden and drastic changes not only socially, as was described earlier in terms of national and linguistic identity, but also politically and economically. Independence from Russia meant severed business connections that had previously existed with other former Soviet states and the formation of a brand new national business system resulting from privatization. Ukraine also established a national currency, the hryvnia, which soon experienced high inflation in reaction to these sudden economic changes.54 On the political spectrum, Ukraine underwent a complete transformation of its governmental structure. At first, Ukraine was surprisingly successful in establishing itself as a democratic state. By 1998, Ukraine had experienced two peaceful and successful transfers of

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52 Aslund et. al., 39  
53 The Library of Congress.  
54 Ibid.
power. However, the national political climate began to take a turn for the worst as the twentieth century came to a close. Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma, after his reelection to a second presidential term, “used a variety of means to foil serious competition. By 2001 . . . one could no longer speak of Ukraine as a ‘democracy’ without adding substantial qualification.”

More specifically, Kuchma’s tactics involved “restrictions of civil liberties, harassment of the opposition, and control of the media.”

The downfall of Ukraine’s democratic practices was first established in 1996 with the adoption of a new constitution. Kuchma introduced a draft that immensely expanded presidential powers. When the Rada spoke out against it, Kuchma “threatened a referendum to adopt an even less balanced arrangement,” which ultimately led to the Rada agreeing to pass the constitution into law. The original constitution could only be amended through the constitutional process, but it is clear that Kuchma successfully used his own political influence to circumvent it.

Kuchma’s corrupt reputation was solidified after 1999 with a series of scandals that attracted international attention. In 2000, the suppression of antigovernment voices came to light with the abduction and murder of Heorhiy Gongadze, a major opposition investigative journalist. A bodyguard of Kuchma’s, Major Mykola Melnychenko, turned over tapes of more than a thousand hours of recordings in which Kuchma “demanded Gongadze’s abduction, discussed the criminal harassment of political opponents, engaged in high-level corruption, and revealed himself to be the center of a criminal and corrupt system of rule.”

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55 D’Anieri, 4.
56 Ibid., 4.
57 Ibid., 5.
58 Ibid., 84.
59 Aslund et. al., 32–33.
60 Aslund et. al., 33.
Major political parties protested as part of a movement calling for Kuchma’s impeachment under the movement “Ukraine without Kuchma.” Key leaders who would later take part in the Orange Revolution joined the protests. However, the demonstrations were to no avail. This was in part because a large portion of Ukraine’s middle class did not join in the protests out of fear of supporting “radical” opposition. More importantly, however, “the Kuchma government cowed potential proponents from the business elite from supporting opposition groups through tax harassment and criminal processes.”61 Perhaps the most famous example of this suppression was the incarceration of former deputy Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who spent time in jail from February to March, 2001.62

This widespread corruption continued for the remainder of Kuchma’s presidency. In the 2002 parliamentary elections, significant falsification in the voting process led to a huge win for the ruling elite’s political bloc Za Iedynu Ukraynu (“For a United Ukraine”), resulting in a pro-Kuchma majority in parliament.63 During the election process, the former head of the National Bank and former prime minister Viktor Yushchenko had formed Nasha Ukraina (“Our Ukraine”) in opposition to Kuchma. Although this movement ultimately failed, the 2002 elections resulted in a polarized political landscape, which set the foundation for the upcoming 2004 presidential election. Yushchenko was an obvious candidate, and since Kuchma had exhausted his two-term limit for presidency, the nation sat waiting to see who would replace Kuchma in opposition to Yushchenko.64 Kuchma chose Viktor Yanukovych, prime minister and former governor of Donetsk Oblast. In the beginning stages of the election season, “the

61 Ibid., 33.
62 Ibid., 34.
63 Ibid., 34–35.
64 D’Anieri, 95.
campaign was full of intrigue.”65 State controlled media almost completely blocked any coverage of Yushchenko’s campaign while giving all of the limelight to Yanukovych. Plans detailing methods for voting fraud and falsification of election results had even been revealed. Then, in September, Yushchenko suffered from dioxin poisoning, which left him with permanent scarring on his face. The mystery of who poisoned Yushchenko was never solved nor was it discovered whether the intention of the crime was to kill Yushchenko or simply scare him. This act of aggression on a national scale further polarized the country.66

As a result of Kuchma’s overt endorsement of Yanukovych and the fact that Yanukovych had held a major position in the government during Kuchma’s presidency, Ukrainian voters saw these two political figures as representatives of the same political agenda, one that overlooked democratic principles when their own power and political plans were threatened. Although it was Kuchma’s face that was behind the murder of a journalist, the alleged poisoning of an opponent, and a general trend of dictator-like practices, as Kuchma’s successor Yanukovych was invariably associated with these criminal acts as soon as he stepped into the limelight. When Yanukovych used language that was informal and sometimes vulgar, his connections to criminality were only further cemented. As a result of Kuchma’s endorsement of and close ties to Yanukovych, many in the nation were already primed to hold Yanukovych’s low speech style in contempt and disdain, rather than see him as one of their own.

Yanukovych’s connection to Kuchma was not the only factor in his association with corruption. Language also was a factor in determining Yanukovych’s associations. The stage for the 2004 presidential elections in Ukraine was set as an East-versus-West, Russian-versus-Ukrainian contest, in which Yanukovych represented an anti-Western campaign backed by

65 Ibid., 96.
66 Ibid.
Russia, and his opponent, Viktor Yushchenko, was a proponent of making closer ties with the European Union and represented a hope for a more democratic government.\textsuperscript{67} The presidential election ended in an illegitimate victory for Yanukovych, which many Ukrainians protested. These protests would later become known as the Orange Revolution. The language used in the campaign reflects the divide between the two candidates: Yanukovych, a native speaker of Russian, would most often speak in Russian, while Yushchenko would speak in Ukrainian.\textsuperscript{68} Although the main focus of the presidential election was the two different political viewpoints of Yanukovych and Yushchenko, language nonetheless played a role in the election process and later the Orange Revolution.

Moreover, Yanukovych, as a native speaker of Russian, did not begin to study Ukrainian until adulthood. Consequently, he has been known to struggle in using the official language of his people. Yanukovych explicitly paired a low-style Russian with improper Ukrainian, rarely venturing into an intellectual or elevated style. During a speech in Donetsk in 2004, Yanukovych called Yushchenko’s electorate “goats that make our lives difficult” and continued to refer to Yushchenko’s electorate as “orange rats.”\textsuperscript{69} In addition to the low-speech style in Russian that he continually used in the public arena, Yanukovych often sounded ineloquent as a result of his constant speech errors, contributing to the image that, unlike Putin, Yanukovych was not an earnest leader who is just like his people, but instead one simply incapable of properly expressing himself. He repeatedly misquoted famous literary works and songs, mispronounced famous names, and misspoke, choosing the wrong words in his speeches, often having to backtrack and restate what he originally intended to say. For example, Yanukovych once called

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{67}] Bilaniuk, 195
\item[\textsuperscript{68}] Moser, 89
\item[\textsuperscript{69}] . . . эти козлы, которые нам мешают жить. Ibid. Translation by Moser.
\end{itemize}
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the famous Russian poet Anna Akhmatova “Anna Akhmatev,” called the esteemed Ukrainian
writer Hulak-Artemov’s’kyi “Hulak-Artovskym,” and misquoted a famous line of
Dostoevsky.  

Additionally, Yanukovych has been known to lack a proper knowledge of geography,
one talking about conflicts over state sovereignty in Montenegro when he meant Kosovo and
also mixing up Slovenia and Slovakia. As Ukrainian author Yurii Andrukhovych wrote in an
op-ed titled “The Color of Freedom and Oranges,” “it is difficult for [Yanukovych] even to
speak—not only Ukrainian, but even his native Russian”. In contrast, Putin paired his
vulgarisms with a dry, bureaucratic speech style and made his voters aware of his education. The
lack of this register in Yanukovych’s public image made his vulgarisms appear to be at the core
of his identity. This added to the image of him as a corrupt criminal rather than as an honest
public servant capable of projecting the professionalism essential to political life.

III: Yanukovych’s Personal Narrative

Yanukovych, like Putin, also had a rebellious childhood as a result of poverty. He was
born and grew up in the Donetsk oblast in Eastern Ukraine. In an interview, Yanukovych stated,
“My childhood was difficult and hungry. I grew up without my mother who died when I was
two. I went around bare-footed on the streets. I had to fight for myself every day.” He was
quoted another time stating, “I came from a very poor family and my main dream in life was to
break out of this poverty.” Although Yanukovych’s childhood has a measure of tragedy and
thus emotional appeal, this innocence factor is lost in his teenage years. At the age of 17,

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70 Leshchenko.
71 Ibid.
72 Andrukhovych, 2004
73 Williams,
74 BBC News.
Yanukovych was sentenced to three years of incarceration for participating in a robbery and assault. He was later convicted for a second time on charges of assault. Yanukovych was sentenced to two years of imprisonment and did not appeal the verdict. Unlike Putin’s “hooligan days” of being late to class, Yanukovych has a significant criminal record, complete with jail time. Additionally, he does not have a website that counters his past criminality by reinforcing his credibility, intelligence, and determination.

The factor of Yanukovych’s hometown alone pitted him against those in favor of the Ukrainian language and thus only further cemented any use of Russian, especially in a vulgar form, as a hindrance to his campaign. More specifically, “Yanukovych’s background from Donetsk . . . turned nationally conscious Ukrainians against him. Donetsk has long had an association as Ukraine’s ‘Belarus,’ where discrimination is rife against nationally conscious Ukrainians and the Ukrainian language.” Yanukovych’s childhood therefore visibly connected him with being against the Ukrainian language. As a result of his assumed disdain of Ukrainian, his only proof of linguistic excellence would be the other language spoken in this region: Russian. When Yanukovych failed to prove any eloquence or sophistication in this realm through his constant low speech style, he was destined to be portrayed in a negative light.

Furthermore, unlike Putin’s exceptional academic background, Yanukovych graduated from the Donetsk Polytechnic Institute, specializing in automobiles and automobile industry, a path much less esteemed than graduation from Leningrad State University. Afterwards, Yanukovych worked for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, thereby launching his political career. Thus, he lacks an impressive intellectual background that could counter his

75 Rossiiskaia gazeta.
76 Aslund et. al., 63.
77 Lenta.ru.
criminal record, like Putin’s education and knowledge of German countered his rebellious childhood. Yanukovych therefore does not have the same commanding power that Putin does. His educational background does not provide him with a public image that elevates him above the average person.

4. Conclusion

The political, economic, social, and linguistic factors that shaped the history of both Russia and Ukraine are different from one another. There are countless nuances in each country that created a near-perfect environment for Putin to use vulgarisms in a positive light in Russia, while Yanukovych’s low-speech style was viewed negatively in Ukraine. This paper has found three main factors to be responsible for the success of Putin’s common-speech and the failure of Yanukovych’s speech style to garner the same success.

When it comes to the case of Putin, Russia’s transition from the highly stylized Soviet public discourse to a lower speech style primed the country to accept a Russian politician’s vulgarisms. Secondly, the chaotic period directly following the fall of the USSR meant that Russians were inclined to support a no-nonsense leader that was willing to do whatever was necessary to provide stability and security. Using colloquialisms, and sometimes even prison slang, allowed Putin to connect with his constituency on an emotional level, giving him the authority to fix the problems that had remained unsolved since the fall of the Soviet Union. Thirdly, Putin’s “rough” childhood is paired with an impressive education, intellectualism, and career, proving that Putin is equipped to make the correct decisions for his people in complicated situations.

On the other hand, for Yanukovych, the history of Ukrainian language policy and the flourishing of Ukrainian national and linguistic movements after Ukraine’s independence
hindered any success resulting from the use of Russian vulgarisms during the Ukrainian presidential election of 2004, when Yanukovych famously made comments in low-style Russian. Secondly, Yanukovych’s connection with the corrupt regime of his predecessor and his connections to Russia in the presidential election directly tied his vulgarisms to criminality. Lastly, Yanukovych’s “rough” childhood involved spending time in jail and is not paired with an impressive educational background.

Linguistic analysis of a politician’s public discourse can help us understand the source of a politician’s power and their plan for their country. Equally important is understanding the reaction that a national populace has to a political leader. This provides insight into the political and social climate of that country. Therefore, analyzing the speech of Putin and Yanukovych sheds greater light onto the connections between each individual country’s past and its present, in addition to aiding in the prediction of these two countries’ future actions. In conclusion, this paper, by analyzing low-speech style in Putin and Yanukovych in the post-Soviet sphere, seeks to create a larger understanding of the nature of these two figures’ political situations and the reasons for their approval ratings.

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