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### **From Russification to Ukrainisation: A Survey of Language Politics in Ukraine**

Throughout the twentieth century, inhabitants of Ukraine experienced many drastic changes in linguistic identity<sup>1</sup> as a result of the establishment of the Soviet Union working to “unify” Russia with its neighboring countries, and then once more when Ukraine gained its independence in 1991. As a result of shifting language policies, a situation has presented itself in which there are some Ukrainians who claim Ukrainian as their native language, but not all. Others who feel they are ethnically Ukrainian speak Russian as their native language, and some even speak a variety of mixed language, which many native Ukrainians refer to as *surzhyk* (Bilaniuk, 25). These very categories—both ethnic and linguistic—are further stressed by history and current politics. Since Ukraine’s independence, the political awareness of the current linguistic situation has led to an exclusive use of Ukrainian in an effort to help it reemerge as the official language of the state. This overview of the current linguistic situation in Ukraine incorporating both nationalistic and geopolitical sentiments demonstrates several reasons for current language policies. Ultimately, this paper will analyze the far-reaching consequences of these policies for all Ukrainian citizens.

In the earlier part of the twentieth century, the Soviet Union absorbed Ukraine into its empire. As part of its goal to unify the then new Soviet State, there was an assimilation of daily practices, including economic, religious, and linguistic ones. Molchanov writes about this campaign stating that “the Russian ‘nationality’ accordingly embraced not only ethnic Russians, but all eastern Slavs (69).” Furthermore, “by tying ethnicity to territory, the Soviet regime gave

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<sup>1</sup>Linguistic identity is the identity a person develops that is based on the language or dialect one speaks.

a push to the nation-building process even when people did not ask for this favor (77).” Ukraine already had a native language very similar to Russian. Nevertheless it was still distinct and thus was not to be overlooked.

Focusing on the linguistic assimilation, the citizens of Ukraine felt great pressure to adopt Russian as their primary language as it was then mandated by the state. These pressures led to a mixing of the Ukrainian and Russian languages, thus creating a “hybrid” language, which natives negatively referred to as “surzhyk.” While a large number of Ukrainian citizens spoke *surzhyk*, it was not looked upon favorably because it was still not considered to be a “pure” language (Bilaniuk, 112). Ukrainians who were not quite proficient in Russian still felt the pressure from the state to use it. As such, they were given no choice but to use *surzhyk*, despite the negativity towards it.

During the Soviet campaign of “Russification,” the bilingualism of Ukrainian and Russian led to the establishment of a diglossic<sup>2</sup> situation. Bilaniuk delves into this explanation, stating that Ukrainian was associated with “provincialism, lower education, unculturedness, and weakness,” while Russian was associated with “centrality, better and higher education, high culture, and strength (38).” Diglossia was also heavily enforced by the citizens in addition to the government. Ramet documents an instance where a priest went to Kiev to give a sermon and chose to deliver it in Ukrainian: “He was removed shortly thereafter and sent to a village church. The use of the Ukrainian language in the cathedral in the capital of Ukraine appears to have been more than regime officials and representatives of the Moscow patriarchate could stomach (147).” Diglossia was enforced by the government without exception. This can be seen by the fact that

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<sup>2</sup> A diglossic situation occurs where a community uses two languages regularly. One is usually a “preferred” or “prestigious” language, while the other is also used regularly but not viewed as highly.

the use of the language was seen as more “provincial,” thus actually resulting in the speaker being sent to a provincial location.

The continued enforcement of Russian as the elite language and the continued pressure on Ukrainians to become proficient in Russian caused a powerful language shift in this generation. According to the Oxford Business Group, over the course of the twentieth century, most Ukrainians became bilingual in both Ukrainian and Russian, and only 67% spoke Ukrainian as their first language (7). This means that as a result of the Soviet Union’s Russification campaign in Ukraine, nearly one third of Ukrainians shifted their first language from Ukrainian to Russian. However, D’Anieri, Kravchuk, and Kuzio further explain,

Russification policies certainly had powerful effects, decreasing the use of the Ukrainian language and the level of Ukrainian national sentiment, but they never completely achieved Russification, despite being applied extremely coercively over decades; and indeed, those policies spurred the resentment that helped promote the movement for Ukrainian independence (264)

Russification was enforced rather strongly, as can be seen in the Soviet census of 1989. Fournier quotes this in saying that “31% of the [Ukrainian] population (including 11% ethnic Ukrainians) claimed Russian as a native tongue (419).” This large number is no longer describing specifically bilingualism, general ability, or even primary language of use. Instead, they are describing their native language. Despite bilingual abilities, the Russification process of the Soviet Union was so intense that 11% of surveyed Ukrainians replaced Ukrainian with Russian as their native tongue.

Taking these facts into consideration, it is possible to understand why there was an effort to reclaim Ukrainian as the national language of Ukraine after national independence was reached in 1991, even though there was a very mixed linguistic population by this time. Since 1991, a linguistic campaign to once again strengthen Ukrainian as the major language has arisen.

Tatiana Zhurzhenko of Kharkiv National University in Ukraine describes the current language situation and its interplay with politics:

What is going on now is a kind of attempt to reconstruct ethnicity, but if you look at the numbers, at what language people use in everyday communication, it is actually Ukrainian speakers who are the linguistic minority, not the Russian speakers. Most of the people who speak Russian in the Ukraine identify themselves as Ukrainians, but Russian-speaking Ukrainians. It is this kind of double-identity that is part of people's everyday reality, but the whole discourse is about forcing these people to choose between two identities and the implication is that if they see themselves as Ukrainians, they should come back to their original language (Busch and Kelley-Holmes, 161)

The assimilation of ethnic identities that the Soviet Union promoted is currently causing conflict in Ukraine among the general population. Those who successfully became Russian speakers and see themselves now as Russian-speaking Ukrainians, as Zhurzhenko notes, are being asked by the minority of Ukrainian speakers to return to the Ukrainian language if they want to be seen as true citizens of Ukraine. At present, the diglossic situation has changed and has been replaced by a system that focuses on political identity and allegiance.

This contestation of linguistic identity had a resurgence of political identity ties even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Fournier discusses Russia's effort to have the category of "Russophone" added for ethnic identity purposes to Ukraine's governmental paperwork as an additional option for citizens to mark. However, rather than the country and citizens benefiting from the recognition of another identity, Fournier argues that this actually pulls the citizens further apart: "Russia claims the supremacy of a linguistic identity through the preservation and perpetuation of the 'Russian-speaking' identity... In doing so, it 'extends' Russian identity into Ukraine, symbolically pushing back the border... (423)." Via the creation of this additional category, Russia is still reaching into Ukraine and "symbolically pushing back the border,"

thereby influencing the citizens of Ukraine. These attempts maintain the linguistic divergence in Ukraine and prevent the creation of a linguistically solid nation.

It is this continued crossing of boundaries and extended linguistic influence from Russia that result in Ukraine's attempts to curb this process. Major attempts on behalf of Ukraine's government have included multiple laws passed in order to reinforce Ukrainian as the only officially recognized national language. Fournier discusses this by stating that "since the late 1980s Ukrainisation's aim has been to put a halt to Russification and reverse it through a reappropriation of the 'indigenous' Ukrainian language (420)." The Ukrainian government has made steps towards this through efforts such as the Language Law of 1989, which made Ukrainian the official language of the country (Fourmier, 420), and several successive restrictive media and language policy laws.

As is frequently the case, media has played a significant role in influencing linguistic practices in Ukraine, despite myriads of official laws and policies passed to make Ukrainian the official state language. In their attempt to reverse the Russification process, Ukrainian linguists and legislature affectively employed the media as a vehicle to reinstate Ukrainian as the primary language of this country. Stephen Velychenko writes, "the legacy of over 200 years of direct Russian rule is reflected still today fifteen years after independence as public life, business and the media are largely Russian-speaking outside Ukraine's three westernmost provinces." It is obvious that Ukrainian language campaigns would not be as successful if the media in Ukraine remains Russian-speaking. Bremmer, in his attempt to illustrate this phenomenon points to specific statistics from Simferopol and Kiev. According to Bremmer's research, Simferopol Ukrainians make use of as much of (and at times more) Russian media than Ukrainian. Eighty-eight percent of Ukrainians in this city claim to be primarily Russian speakers, and in Kiev, 94%

of the citizens say that they primarily use Russian, not Ukrainian, in their daily activities (268). Subsequently, it is possible to understand Ukrainian language policy makers' various concerns.

Stating language preservation as a primary reason for the implementation of such laws, Ukraine made it mandatory for all broadcasting stations, including both radio and television, to use Ukrainian as an involved language in all programs. As reported by Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, "The ruling comes into force on 19 April [2006]. Local broadcasts in other languages will only be allowed in areas with a significant ethnic-minority population." They also report that Borys Kholod, the executive in charge of the television and radio council, made this decision after sifting through surveys showing high numbers of people still calling Ukrainian a "minority" language, and subsequently Russian, their native language. Perceiving this as a threat, Kholod commented that "if Ukraine wants to survive as an independent nation, it has to protect its language (Radio Free, Radio Liberty)." Tchilakhava, the executive of the National Committee on Nationality and Immigration in the Ukraine said that Russian has become such a prominent language in Ukraine that "even future philologists -- lecturers in Ukrainian language and literature -- prefer to talk amongst themselves in Russian (Radio Free, Radio Liberty)." Situations such as these illustrate the need for better language policy.

However, the policy makers did not consider that people might not abide by it since the linguistic situation in Ukraine is already quite complex. Stephen Valychenko wrote in 2006 that people were so unwilling to give up speaking Russian that "although since the spring of 2004 national Ukrainian radio and television broadcasters had to use Ukrainian, almost all of them have continued to use Russian." The situation at present depicts an inability for most people to switch to Ukrainian. Fawkes of BBC news reports that "the most popular programmes on the music channel M1 have two presenters. One of them speaks only Ukrainian while the other just

uses Russian.” These stations have found a way to avoid breaking government rules while still managing to maintain the dual linguistic identity of Ukraine.

Another current issue of contestation regarding language policy in Ukraine involves the school system. In an effort to enhance society’s proficiency in Ukrainian, Ukraine has made it mandatory for all children to be instructed in Ukrainian. There is a disagreement over whether the Russian-speaking children should have to attend lessons at the Ukrainian schools that teach solely in Ukrainian. Bremmer conducted a survey in Ukraine where he questioned various Ukrainians about their feelings over their children going to Ukrainian schools. According to Bremmer’s statistics, 91% of Ukrainian citizens in Lviv and 82% of Ukrainian citizens in Kiev want their children sent to Ukrainian schools. However, 79% of Russians who live in the Ukrainian city of Simferopol are against this. Furthermore, 24% of them fully reject the idea of their children ever knowing the Ukrainian language. One such opponent is the mother of an ethnically Russian boy who is attending a Ukrainian school in Ukraine. She stated, “Худшая вещь ввести украинский применяющий силу язык и убирать выбор от людей<sup>3</sup> (Tikhomirov).” In contrast to this comment, people in support of the policy seem to feel they are merely protecting the language.

Paradoxically, the current debate over language has yet again led to a resurgence of *surzhyk*. In fact, it has reached even a somewhat standard use, paving a path to the business world of Ukraine. Bilaniuk discusses this phenomenon:

Before independence, *surzhyk* was mostly seen as the language spoken by lower-class people with little education. Independence led to a new situation, namely, urban Russian speakers in positions of power speaking what sounded like *surzhyk*. As a result of the language law, certain government officials were supposed to speak Ukrainian at

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<sup>3</sup> “The worst thing is to introduce Ukrainian language using force and to take away choice from people.” (Russian translation by C. Seals)

work, and those who did not know Ukrainian well tended to mix Ukrainian and Russian features (146)

This linguistic conflict is still very present in Ukraine, and as such, *surzhyk* is not spoken unnoticed. There are still Ukrainian citizens who complain about the “incorrectness” of *surzhyk*; they prefer to use the “pure” language of standard Ukrainian. One such person is a Ukrainian technician in her thirties: “Take a look at how our whole government speaks: it is unseemly, as much the Russians as the Ukrainians...not literary [standard]... it’s the incorrect grammatical case... If the leaders don’t speak [correctly] then the people won’t either (Bilaniuk, 147).” Her position is not that much higher from the average person, so it would be expected that she represents at least some of the general population’s voice in Ukraine.

Trying to define what is “good” or “correct” Ukrainian became ever more important to Ukrainian citizens after their independence in 1991: “An ideology of the rareness and exclusivity of true, pure Ukrainian emerged, which helped to elevate its symbolic value and dissociate it from the low connotations of its supposedly impure, unrefined incarnations...” While the focus was on Ukrainian, the Russian language was also linguistically analyzed in this way (Bilaniuk, 143). This, once more, evinces the dual linguistic identity present in Ukraine today.

The failed efforts of the government of this newly emerging state to replace Russian with Ukrainian as the dominant language demonstrate that certain policies and laws have not worked as they were intended to. In their incipient state, these policies were meant to purge other languages (including Russian) or at best, shift them to a strictly “minority language.” However, Russian still dominates and Ukrainian continues to inhabit the peripheral sphere of a minority language. The public’s rejection of these policies also shows their lack of interest in giving up the country’s dual identity and the strength of the Russian “minority.” Ukrainian President

Yushchenko states his worry over the failures to reinstate Ukrainian: “I think the Ukrainian language is still hugely under threat... The previous administration didn’t think there was a problem but if we lose our language we lose our culture (Tikhomirov).” Tikhomirov writes, “They [Ukrainian citizens] now hope for a new chapter in the country’s history - where there is less Russian influence and more pride in their native language.” A new law has followed these wishes, as there will again be a legislative attempt at supporting only the Ukrainian language by making changes to the media. As Birch reports, Ukraine is no longer allowing films to be screened that have been dubbed in Russian. Instead, they must be dubbed in Ukrainian. While this is throwing a bit of an uproar in Ukraine, the results remain to be seen. It is clear, however, that from Russification to Ukrainisation, this complicated emergent dual identity of the populace has remained strong.

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