

Chapter 6

Language, Ethnicity and Cultural Boundaries in Ukraine: A Response to the Papers and Debate

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It is very possible that the comparison between 'Project Ukraine' and 'Project Yugoslavia' will seem to some incorrect, both academically and politically. Contrary to Yugoslavia, federalism as a model for the Ukrainian state was never seriously considered and discussed; the idea of a centralist state dominated the national liberation movement through the decades and was eventually fulfilled in 1991. Besides, as a Ukrainian scholar specialised in Ukrainian Studies, I am supposed to believe in the genuine origins, historical continuity and the future of 'Project Ukraine'; from the teleological nationalist point of view it cannot share the fate of such 'artificial', supranational constructions as Yugoslavia or the USSR. At the same time, the papers in this volume reminded me of an obvious thing: the mainstream history of the successful (or failed) nation-building project is always only one of the potential narratives, which could be written under different circumstances. If Ukraine as a state disintegrates in the near future (and the question of the territorial unity of Ukraine has been on the political agenda since the birth of the independent Ukrainian state in 1991), I can easily imagine two (or probably more?) different histories telling us about the different origins, national destiny and identity of Galicia, Donbas, or Transcarpathia. No doubt, significant regional differences in the real status and functioning of the Ukrainian language (as well as the actual predominance of Russian in the East and South) would be also institutionalised.

Project 'Ukraine' and Project 'Yugoslavia' Compared

If we look at the Ukrainian case through the Yugoslav lens, there were some similarities in the historical preconditions for both 'national projects'. Towards the end of the 19th century there were significant religious, cultural and linguistic differences between the Ukrainian lands. The Ukrainian 'ethnographic territory' was divided between the Russian Empire and the Habsburg monarchy (where Ukrainians in Galicia were under the political and cultural domination of the Poles); Transcarpathia belonged to Hungary. In Western Ukraine (in Galicia in particular) the Roman Catholic faith formed the core of national identity, while Eastern and Central Ukraine was Orthodox. True, the population of 'imagined Ukraine' was not so ethnically diverse as in the Balkans. In the West, there were clear ethnic differences among Ukrainians

themselves (*polischuki, lemko, boiko*), but this was not the case in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, colonised since the 18th century. Other ethnic minorities were not considered 'autochthonous'; most of them appeared in Ukraine owing to the colonisation of these lands by the Russian state. Like Balkan peoples, Ukrainians had long-term historical contacts with the Ottoman Empire; today there is also a Tatar Muslim minority in Crimea (which is often considered by some politicians as a potential source of ethnic conflict, especially since the Kosovo war).

The process of the formation of standard language stimulated by the growing resistance to the Russian and Polish linguistic assimilation started relatively late, and it was complicated by the political division of Ukrainian territory, different legal conditions and mutual isolation. Linguists pointed out the conflict between two processes of literary language-creation in Western Ukrainian and Eastern Ukrainian lands. Although the dominant view from both sides was that only one all-Ukrainian literary language should exist, based on Central Ukrainian (Poltava-Kiev dialects), significant differences between Western and Central Ukrainian versions remained. Moreover, owing to incomplete standardisation, administrative restrictions (which were especially tough in Russia) and lack of education in Ukrainian, the written and spoken language of the intelligentsia was heavily influenced by local dialects. At the beginning of the 20th century, some intellectuals warned about the danger of developing two parallel Ukrainian languages, or even two Ukrainian nationalities on one ethnographic base, like Serbs and Croats.¹

The East–West division of Ukrainian lands was dramatically reinforced in the inter-war period, when the cultural contacts between the 'two Ukraines' were almost completely interrupted. After the years of revolution, which were marked by intensive communication and mutual influence, the development of the Ukrainian language went on again under very different political circumstances on both sides of the 'Iron Curtain'. In Soviet Ukraine, the relatively liberal communist regime of the 1920s made possible a 'national revival' followed by intensive work by linguists on standardisation of the Ukrainian language and delimitation from Russian: so-called Russisms were often replaced with neologisms, constructed on the basis of folk dialects. But with the changes in the political climate at the end of the 1920s, the 'linguistic border' with Russian was softened again, often by means of direct political intervention, and this tendency found ideological ground in the pan-Slavic aspirations of late Stalinism.

Nevertheless, the East–West division of Ukrainian lands remained historical and cultural rather than linguistic. During World War II, Ukrainians (and their hopes for national liberation) became hostages to the Soviet Union's struggle with fascist Germany, and, like Serbs and Croats, had to fight against each other. But contrary to the Yugoslav case, this tragic experience did not reproduce ethnic/linguistic cleavages; rather it strengthened cultural and ideological ones. After the incorporation of Western Ukraine into Soviet Ukraine, the old boundaries were relatively softened due to the intensive processes of administrative unification, standardisation of the educational system, urbanisation, and migration of specialists and the labour force. Some of these policies of the state were violent and far from democratic, but one cannot deny that the

ideal of united (*Soborna*) Ukraine was fulfilled under Soviet rule. Whether the Ukrainian SSR was a stage in the 'prenatal' development of the nation, or rather an unlucky victim of the communist 'abortion', contemporary Ukraine unavoidably bears some features of its Soviet past.

Old Boundaries into New

Contrary to the Yugoslav case, which seems at the moment to be a closed chapter, the Ukrainian story becomes especially interesting here and open to various interpretations. Can this embryonic nation of 'the people of Soviet Ukraine' be considered as an important stage in the process of nation building, an undeniable part of national history, with rather positive gains (elements of multicultural citizenship, some economic, political and cultural infrastructure of the modern nation)? Or is this 'United Ukraine',² which the post-communist political elite got as a farewell gift from its Stalinist predecessors, a deadlock in the nation-building process and an obstacle to democratic reforms? Was so-called 'Soviet identity' a pure ideological construction forcefully imposed on people in the process of their denationalisation, and, if so, why it is still attractive for many of them? Should this part of the population be renationalised, reconstructed as an ethnic minority (minorities)? How dangerous are the post-Soviet forms of supranational identity (pan-Slavic or Euroasian) for the future of the nation?

Dramatic clashes over the interpretation of Soviet history and heritage reproduce the old historical boundaries, but this time they are also invested with some linguistic meaning. The main cultural and political boundary goes today between the 'russified' East and the 'true Ukrainian' West. The boundaries between Russian-speakers and Ukrainian-speakers are mutually constructed by political entrepreneurs who claim to represent the interests of these linguistic groups. These social constructs seem rather artificial if we remember that the overwhelming majority of the population in Ukraine understand and to some degree use both languages. What differs of course is the sphere of functioning of both languages, and this correlation depends not only on region, but also on social stratum, profession, generation, type of education (technical or humanities) and so on. Actually, what is politically constructed today as a single split inside the Ukrainian nation, is a plurality of various linguistic subcommunities, which are in permanent remaking.

To leave aside the political context, people in Ukraine are normally bilingual to various degrees, and their language competence in various spheres depends on various factors. But language never exists outside of politics. In the nationalising state, the idea of congruence of language, nation and state territory becomes a factor of internal boundary-creation. Actually there are two principles of boundary-drawing, each conflicting with the other. The first one, which equalises language and ethnicity, dominates the Ukrainian political discourse. It assumes that Ukrainians who speak Russian are the victims of Russification and will enthusiastically return to their mother tongue if certain conditions are created by the state. (The education policy that draws the number of Ukrainian schools according to the degree of people who define their nationality as Ukrainian comes from this assumption.) In this approach double or multiple identity is not acceptable, and all those people with mother tongues different

from Ukrainian have to be redefined as ethnic minorities.³

The second and more liberal approach assumes that there are ethnic Ukrainians who speak Russian as a first language, or people of other ethnic origins who consider themselves Ukrainians but speak Russian. (It is sometimes used in sociological surveys, when people are asked about their language of preference.) This second approach reflects the fact noticed by Andrew Wilson that in Ukraine 'ethnic and linguistic boundaries are exceptionally fluid' (p. 125). But with the 'language issue' remaining the focus of public debates, and being politicised in the current crisis, the linguistic boundaries are going to be reified. It is not the language itself that divides Kuchma's regime and his political opposition; rather, the language serves as a marker to distinguish 'true patriots' from 'oligarchs'.

Like in all newly emerged nation states, language plays a special role in the reconstruction of ethnicity in post-Soviet Ukraine. But this role is obviously different in (re)-constructing different ethnic groups. For the 'indigenous' Ukrainian ethnos, having 'special rights' to the territory of Ukraine as a 'core nation', language is the first and most reliable sign of ethnicity: 'true Ukrainians speak Ukrainian'. But not the other way around: Russian speakers are not at all automatically categorised as ethnic Russians (otherwise Ukrainians would be a minority in their nation state). Part of the Russian-speakers (many of them avoid the choice between the two ethnic identities and prefer regional or (less and less) 'Soviet' ones) are qualified by the power discourse as 'Russified' Ukrainians. This means they have to 'become' Ukrainians, to come up to reach their 'true' ethnic identity. In other words, the 'post-imperial Russian-speaking population' should be carefully differentiated into ethnic Russians and 'potential' Ukrainians.

Significantly, the language is not decisive in the reconstruction of other ethnic minorities (Jews, Greeks, Koreans and others); rather, they are defined as cultural, not linguistic, communities. These minorities, which do not threaten the dominant identity of the titular nation, are an important attribute of the image of a democratic state. They are officially granted cultural and linguistic rights, even more willingly since most of them still contribute to the 'Russian-speaking' side. The competition for their souls still continues, as the leaders of the Russian-speaking groups often claim that they represent the interests not only of ethnic Russians, but also of Russian-speaking people of all nationalities who live in Ukraine. Crimean Tatars represent a special case, because this ethnic minority is constructed on the crossroads of various discourses. On one hand, they were a people repressed by the Stalinist regime and later rehabilitated, who finally got a chance to enjoy historical justice and come back to their lands (and the only ethnos apart from Ukrainians which is officially recognized as 'autochthonous'). The Ukrainian state supports them with the modest resources available, although it is 'imperial Moscow' which is responsible for the former repressions. On the other hand, Tatars with their higher birth rates will possibly change the 'demographic balance' in Crimea, which is already not favourable for ethnic Ukrainians. In any case, it is their religion (and their cultural and geopolitical orientation to the Muslim world) rather than their language that makes them a culturally different, special ethnic group.

The Problematic Russian-Ukrainian Border

What makes Ukraine different from the 'normal' nation state is exactly the lack of clear boundaries: what is supposed to be Ukrainian (identity, language, history, geopolitical choice etc.) is hopelessly mixed with (or rather contaminated by) Russian. In the logic of 'unfinished nation-building' the coexistence of two cultures and languages in Ukraine is perceived not as an asset but as a weakness. 'If the French language disappeared in France one day, the whole country would be paralysed. If Ukrainian disappears one day, people will use Russian and nobody will notice it' – this is a popular example which illustrates the abnormality of the Ukrainian nation. It is the symbolic status of Ukrainian language and culture that seems to be the main problem here, and obviously it can be improved only at the expense of Russian. That is why the 'Canadian option' (formal parity of English and French) usually proposed by Russophones is not acceptable to Ukrainophones, and Russian seems to have no chance to be accepted as a second state language.

'Linguistic equality', which is the slogan of some Russophone groups, cannot be accepted by Ukrainophones. The existing status quo for them is a result of unjust historical circumstances: of Russian colonial expansion, administrative repressions against Ukrainian language and culture, and Soviet policies of ethniccide and even genocide. That is why this status quo cannot be accepted as a 'zero level' for the new democratic negotiations between two linguistic groups, and why it should even be 'played back' by affirmative action policy. These measures are even more needed under market conditions, which favour Russian media and mass culture.

The refusal to compete with Russian culture and the quest for state protectionism is characteristic of the Ukrainian post-colonial situation. Since, from a certain point of view, Ukrainophones are indeed a linguistic minority in Ukraine, these claims are easy to understand. At the same time, these claims assume that Ukrainians as a titular nation (the 'indigenous ethnos' on this territory, 'the core the people of Ukraine') have special linguistic and cultural rights, which should be given priority. These claims are also grounded on certain historical narratives, which assume that there were Ukrainians, a Ukrainian identity and Ukrainian language before forceful Russian external interference. Moreover, according to the more recent constructions of this type, this interference cut Ukraine out of 'Europe', to which it naturally had belonged. This projection of popular Huntingtonian concepts into history takes an important place in the national imagination by distinguishing 'Asiatic' Russia from 'European' Ukraine. As Andrew Wilson argues, 'The myth of Europe versus Asia places a very clear boundary marker between Ukrainians and Russians, widening the otherwise relatively narrow cultural gap.' In the context of European enlargement and the absence of any perspectives of accession for Ukraine in the foreseeable future, Russian cultural influence (external and internal) is seen as a source of Ukrainian problems. Significantly, it is represented not so much by ethnic Russians, but mainly by Russian-speakers, whose continuing presence symbolises exactly this unwanted mixture of Russian and Ukrainian cultural elements (Little Russianism), and the very lack of clear boundaries of the Ukrainian nation.

The fact that Ukrainian identity is distorted is not the only problem for

building the nation state and 'dissoluted' in other cultural elements; from this point of view, the presence of Russian-speakers also perpetuates the cultural dominance of Russia and makes possible its political interference. That a significant share of the population prefers Russian newspapers and TV channels means that the Ukrainian audience (and public sphere) is split, and Russia can impose its cultural and political influence. Massive participation of Russian business in Ukrainian privatisation and active lobbying of its interests by the Russian government also can be seen as a dangerous openness of Ukraine to the East. Cultural, economic and political distancing and 'delimitation' from Russia is considered a necessary condition for successful nation-building, and in this context the new Ukrainian–Russian interstate border is invested with special meaning.

The present state border between Ukraine and Russia coincides with the former administrative line between the Ukrainian SSR and the Russian Federation, which was eventually established in 1927 (with the exception of the Crimea, which was transferred to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954). At the beginning of the 1920s, Ukraine was in a border dispute with Russia, claiming some parts of the Kursk and Voronezh regions inhabited by a Ukrainian-speaking population (in 1918 these claims included also the Kuban region). As a result of a compromise, Ukraine got approximately one-third of the claimed territories, but lost Taganrog and the Shakhty district in Donbas. The position of Ukraine was grounded on the principle of 'ethnographic territory' (defined mainly by language), and the most famous Ukrainian academics of that time were engaged in justifying these claims. In contemporary Ukrainian literature it is common to mention that Ukraine ceded part of its ethnographic territory under the 'imperial' pressure of Russia. But the very fact that the Russian–Ukrainian border was not just voluntarily drawn on the map, as were other internal Soviet administrative borders, but negotiated between two governments, proves that the Ukrainian SSR had some state sovereignty and bargaining power in these negotiations.

Although Russia officially recognises the territorial integrity and present borders of the independent Ukraine, and the disputes over the Crimea and the Black Sea fleet seem to be solved or not politically relevant, the issue of the Ukrainian–Russian border again came into the focus of political debates during the last two years. The present status of the border, which is still relatively open and permeable (Ukrainians and Russians can travel with their internal passports and without visas) is increasingly seen by the Ukrainian political elite as unacceptable. One of the articles in the central Ukrainian newspaper *Den* was titled 'Ukrainian–Russian border as a symbol of unfinished nation-building', and this title reveals the core of the problem. Although both sides, Russia and Ukraine, successfully reached an agreement on the delimitation of almost the whole length of the inter-state border (the status of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait is still being discussed), on the issue of demarcation (marking the boundary on the territory) they maintain different and hardly reconcilable positions. Russia sees the borders inside the NIS Commonwealth as 'internal' and considers their demarcation superfluous. Ukraine insists on the demarcation of the Ukrainian–Russian border and on observing the principle of the equal status of all state borders. For the

Ukrainian political elite, a 'normal' border with Russia would symbolise the success of the nation- and state-building process and demonstrate Ukraine's 'European choice' to the West. But the economic dependence on Russia and the business interests of the ruling elite also affect the Ukrainian 'border policy' and render it ambivalent.

Actually, both Russia and Ukraine are moving to the more regulated and restrictive border regime, which is legitimised from both sides by the need to fight illegal migration, smuggling and criminal business (trafficking of drugs and weapons). Only in the case of Ukraine, this process is invested with the additional meaning of building the 'normal' nation state and its 'normal' borders. Naturally, the changes in the regulation regime of the Russian–Ukrainian border are largely determined by the European enlargement process. The EU already proposed some assistance to Ukraine in arranging its border with Russia according to international standards. In this way, the logic of European enlargement reinforces nationalist fantasies and fears in Ukraine, which are reflected in the old joke: 'The misfortune of Ukrainians is that God has put the Carpathians on the wrong side'.

Conclusion

This comparison between the failed Yugoslavia and the newly born Ukraine, focused on language, ethnicity, and their role in the reconstruction of cultural boundaries, is of course rather ambiguous. But regardless of all reservations, it can shed some additional light on the question behind most political debates in Ukraine today: is the formation process of the modern Ukrainian nation irreversible? It still seems that Soviet bonds are mainly what keep Ukrainians together, and in this sense Soviet Ukrainian identity (even if some people actively deny the first element of it, and others have difficulties with the second one) turned out to have a longer life than the Yugoslav one. Ukrainian identity still remains (post-) Soviet and ethnically rather irrelevant, despite all attempts to reconstruct it as an ethnolinguistic and political alternative to the Soviet one. Regional cultural and historical differences were politicised, but Russian ethnic nationalism (as well as Ukrainian radical nationalism in most parts of Ukraine) has received almost no support. The stability of the new Ukrainian state was preserved due to the position of the Ukrainian political elite, who accepted the agenda of 'United Ukraine'; some representatives of the regional elites (especially in the East and in the Crimea) sometimes manipulated the idea of separatism, but in fact were not attracted by the choice of reintegration with Russia or by repeating the Transdnistrian scenario. Part of Ukrainian society, which welcomed state independence, had hopes for the future of the nation, and the other part still experienced the shock of the collapse of the USSR and was difficult to mobilise politically in both a positive and a negative sense, but both attitudes helped to keep the country together.

The other question is that the often-praised Ukrainian stability, which looks like an advantage against the backdrop of Balkan turbulence, becomes a hopeless stagnation when compared to the more successful Central European countries. The current crisis of the Ukrainian political regime, which coincided with (and was intensified by) the first wave of European enlargement, contributes to the tendency of fortifying the cultural boundaries in Ukraine, with language

becoming a marker of political orientations. It seems that (post-) Soviet/Ukrainian identity tends finally to split along the slash line, and this again brings the future of a single Ukrainian nation into the political agenda. This split is reinforced by the illusion of a geopolitical choice Ukrainian society has to make: the choice between a pro-Russian and a pro-European orientation. Being excluded from the European enlargement process in the foreseeable future, Ukraine is drifting politically and economically towards Russia, and this drift is often compensated for by the gestures of 'delimitation' with Russian language and culture. Significantly, Western Ukrainian political and intellectual elites cannot accept the current status of the Ukrainian language and Ukraine's future isolation from united Europe. These elites use the issue of space for regional identities and regional development to bring the idea of federalist reform in Ukraine into political debates. Even the possibility of a 'Galician nation' as a historical, cultural and linguistic entity is discussed, and one of the main hopes behind this project is that this reduced and supposedly more European 'Ukraine' will be more easily accepted by the EU. The question still remains of whether the social and political stagnation can be overcome without losing stability, or in other words, whether post-Soviet Ukrainian identity can be transformed into a modern national one, thus avoiding the reification of language and ethnicity and without fortifying re-emerging cultural boundaries.

Notes

1. To complete the parallel with Yugoslavia, the creators of the Ukrainian language also faced an alternative between the Cyrillic and Latin alphabet, but the eventual choice was made in favor of Cyrillic.
2. 'United Ukraine' is the name of the pro-presidential political block, which represents the interests of the former communist nomenclatura transformed into oligarchs. The irony of contemporary Ukrainian history is that the nationalist dream of *Ukraina irredenta* and *Soborna Ukraina* was stolen by former communists and completely discredited by their policy in the eyes of Ukrainian citizens.
3. Russian nationalist discourse demonstrates the mirror image of this ethnicity construction process by defining three main ethnic groups in Ukraine: ethnic Russians, Ukrainians or Little Russians (which are close to the first ones culturally and linguistically), and 'Galicians' who historically developed very different cultural and geopolitical orientations and are actually part of Western and not of Slavic civilisation.

References

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