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Ukraine's ethnic kitchen

Language is a divisive issue in Ukraine's ethnic melting pot

Kiev is a city that never hurries. It is already old and has taken its well-deserved place in history – indeed, in several histories, the most important of which are the history of Russia (*Kyivan Rus*) and the history of Ukraine. Kiev has, too, its Orthodox ‘Vatican’, the Monastery of the Caves to which, for centuries, pilgrims have made their way – in the Soviet era they were called ‘tourists’. It has its great river, the Dniepr, in which the first Orthodox Christians drowned the pagan idols.

The historical conservatism of Kiev is unconquerable, and paganism lives on to this day – and has a greater influence on the daily existence and social life of the citizens than do the various versions of Orthodoxy. The idols and Scythian ‘images’ have evolved into enormous memorials and monuments which, like the idols of yore, still receive their ‘sacrifices’ – in the present, humane, days, flowers and wreaths with ceremonial ribbons of mourning. Each important monument had its day. Formerly, in the centre of Kiev, in the main street, the Kreshchatyk, there were two monuments to Lenin, the ‘summer’ and the ‘winter’ one. Flowers and wreaths were laid at both, irrespective of the time of year. The ‘winter’ Lenin wore an overcoat, the ‘summer’ one a light, three-piece suit. Lenin himself never visited this city, and did not like what he had heard of it: it lacked the revolutionary spirit. Perhaps that is why the new powers that be decided that two Lenins in one Kiev was altogether too much. One of them was sacrificed and, in its place, a new monument was erected. This is several times bigger than the Lenin monument and, as conceived by those who commissioned and constructed it, is intended to defend Kiev from Russia; or, in official and more politically correct parlance, simply to defend Ukrainian



Kiev: Lenin in winter, abandoned in the yard behind the Kiev History Museum. Credit: Tim Smith

independence from everyone and everything. High on a lofty Corinthian column stands a Ukrainian maiden with a garland in her hands, intended to represent the peace-loving nature of Ukraine. This monument was erected a few weeks back, and immediately acquired the nickname 'My second mother'. This nickname is interesting, in that it embodies the information that there is also a 'First Mother' in Kiev – the 'Mother Country'. It is the largest monument in Ukraine. An enormous titanium-alloy woman armed with a sword stands above the Dniepr and meets the trains arriving in Kiev from the direction of Russia. Add to this the fact that the nickname of the current Ukrainian president, Leonid Kuchma, is 'Papa', and we have a passable 'outdoor' family portrait.

The monuments of Kiev are a special subject to which I shall return. First, I should like to dwell a little on the rhythm of this city, of its sweet unhurried conservatism, which 90 years ago played a bad joke with the history of the Russian Empire. It was here, at the Kiev Opera House, that a student terrorist killed the only real reformer in the Tsarist government, Piotr Stolypin, who had tried to reform Russian agriculture. Many people believe that had he lived and carried through his reforms, the October Revolution would never have happened and Russia would have been gradually transformed into a normal European constitutional monarchy, and would, in all probability, have 'set free' its non-Orthodox colonies. What would have happened with the Orthodox colonies, I will not attempt to say. But in any case, it was here in Kiev that a revolutionary's bullet put a full stop to the bright future of the Russian Empire.

In those days, subjects of the Empire did not have their ethnicity entered in their identity documents. Instead of this 'fifth point' of the Soviet internal passports, the Imperial ones had 'religion', and the population of Kiev consisted of two-thirds 'Orthodox' Christians and one-third 'Jews'. The Orthodox went to church, the Jews to their synagogues. There were, of course, some Muslims, There were also Karaims – a small ethnic group of Crimean origin – and at the centre of Kiev they had their place of worship, the Kennassoy, built by the famous Kiev architect Vladimir Gorodetsky. All these ethnic groups lived together in peace and friendship. The only one that lived in compact communities were the Jews who, for the most part, dwelt in the Podol and Syrets quarters and in the area of today's Victory Square, formerly known as the *Yevbaz* (Jewish Bazaar). The other inhabitants of Kiev – Russians, Ukrainians, Armenians, etc. – lived in mixed communities and were known simply as 'citizens'. Ethnicity had no significance for them; Kiev and the communal life of a great city made them one. It was only later, in 1919 during the Civil War, that 'Ukrainians' came to Kiev in the shape of the bandit-anarchists of Semen Petlyura, clad in 'national' plumage.

They came and began the pogroms, first against the Jews and then others. And, in the eyes of Mikhail Bulgakov, who was living then at 13 Andreyevsky Spusk, they at once became 'typical Ukrainian nationalists'. Bulgakov remembers them as people who wanted to destroy the life of Kiev. He remembers and detests them. Until then,

Bulgakov had never given any thought to the origin of the people who lived together with him in Andreyevsky Spusk; one and all they loved their city and enjoyed their life there.

Until this life was cracked by Revolution, until someone blamed the Jews for causing this crack, and it became possible to attack them. That is the start of division by ethnicity. And it went further: into Russians, Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars. With the establishment of Soviet power, everything reverted to the past and, overflowing with enthusiasm for the task of building socialism, the question of ethnicity disappeared and was dissolved in common brotherhood.

Then came World War II, and multi-ethnic Kiev suffered a terrible blow. Virtually the entire Jewish population – about 200,000 people – were rounded up by the Nazis and shot at Babi Yar. After the war, anti-Semitism was the unofficial policy of both Stalin and Brezhnev; as a result, by the end of the twentieth century, most of the remaining Jews of Kiev were in Israel, Germany, the USA and elsewhere. The city where the famous Jewish writer Sholom Aleichem lived and worked for so long had lost its Jewish accent.

But before this, from 1945–46, in the centre of Kiev the majority of people spoke German. These were German prisoners of war rebuilding the Kreshchatyk. They made the Kreshchatyk solid and majestic and, it would seem, their mastery and talent gave the Kievans an architectural inferiority complex, which can be observed to this day; it is Turks and builders from western Ukraine who work on the most important buildings in the centre of the city. Kievan construction firms mainly work in the suburbs, building mundane apartment blocks.

There are cities where people are born and then move away for a better life (for example, Odessa, where a whole generation of Soviet writers were born in the 1920s–30s). There are cities to which people come. To Kiev they come for life. It has everything necessary for psychological and physical comfort. Within its limits of being southern, unhurried and provincial, it is welcoming. It is, of course, sluggish. This cannot help but have its influence on the current owner of the city, Ukraine. For ten years now, the latter has unhurriedly been awakening, trying to raise itself on its elbows after its long Soviet hibernation.

Any attempt to hurry things up, to change the rhythm of the city and the country, has run into terrible opposition. Here people would have to live to be 100 to accomplish in one lifetime what in more dynamic

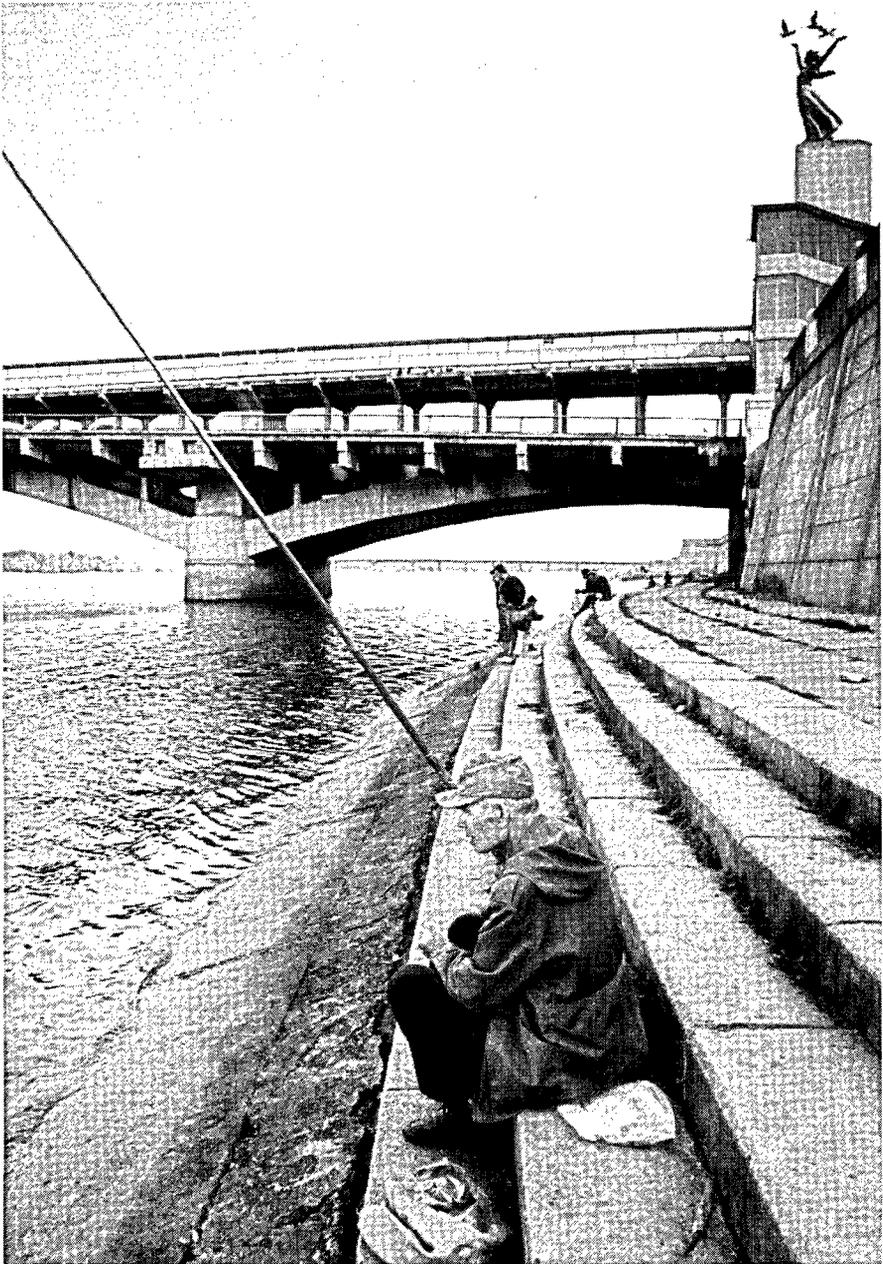
cities is achieved in 30–50 years. Here it has taken the embassy of The Netherlands six years to get permission to put up a new building. Here people would rather build something eternal and non-functional than the reverse: memorials, replicas of ancient cathedrals and monasteries. Here they consider it easier to build underground than on the surface. Here there is what has to be one of the most beautiful underground railways in the world, enormous marble halls under the city, under the Kiev hills.

The national (ethnic) question in Kiev does not stand up. It keeps being raised, but falls to the ground. To make the city go over to a single official language – Ukrainian – proved impossible. And although after ten years of Ukrainian independence only six out of 200 Russian-language schools remain and the rest have gone over to teaching in Ukrainian, this has not affected the language of the streets.

Some young, desperately ‘nationally conscious’ Ukrainians have recently opened a café in the government area of the city called ‘The Last Barricade’; here Russian is certainly not recommended. It is hard to predict how long the café will last, and whether it will become a centre for young Ukrainophones. If it is true that the fate of something (no matter whether ship or café) is programmed into its name, then this last barricade will soon fall.

A seller who wants to prosper always speaks the language of the buyer, the customer. Hence in the bazaars of Kiev, Georgians and Azerbaijanis cry their raisins and dried apricots in Russian. Hence the professional beggars tell their tales – of burned-out houses, serious illnesses and the untimely death of parents – in *surzhik*, a popular mixture of Russian and Ukrainian. This is a living language spoken by almost everyone in the suburbs of large cities, and hated by the Ukrainophone intelligentsia. *Surzhik* may be called a parody of the Ukrainian language, but one can take a more sympathetic view; not only is *surzhik* a living, functioning and developing language, it reflects the particular culture of the people who speak it. It is the village come into the city with its traditions. It is a *sui generis* Masonic brotherhood, membership of which may be found at every level of the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian society. Because they help each other, they

Kiev: fishing in the Dnipro River. Despite radioactive contamination from Chernobyl further upstream, many still eat or sell their catch. Credit: Tim Smith



want to work together and serve people like themselves who speak the same language. And being aware of the competition in the national market, knowing the difference between the psychology of the people who speak *surzhik* and other Kievans, the professional beggars and cadgers have decided to speak in the language of their largest potential 'customer' or, perhaps more precisely, in the language of their victim – *surzhik*.

Kievan beggars earn in one day the average monthly salary of a teacher. Professional beggary and cadging returned to Kiev after the long hiatus of the Soviet era and at once became one of the more profitable forms of business for the 'managers' and team leaders of the cadgers. They bring in disabled people missing an arm or a leg from the provinces, take them to the suburbs of Kiev and establish them in private houses. The business is usually run by Gypsies who, every morning, take the disabled to work the busy spots and underpasses in the city, where they collect alms until evening. Then the team leader drives up, collects the takings and takes the invalids home to rest till next morning. Not long ago, in a private flat in Moscow, police arrested a group of disabled from Kiev, brought there by an enterprising team leader. Apparently, the professional beggars of Moscow saw this competition as a threat and tipped off the police.

Can a city be ethnicised, made monoglot or monoethnic? Certainly it can. But only by ethnic cleansing and massive punitive measures. Thank God, this cannot be done today in our country and it seems the current ethno-linguistic equilibrium of Kiev will be preserved. And Kiev, as of old, will speak to all in the language of stones, golden onion domes on the churches, and monuments. And, as of old, a monument to the eminent Ukrainian philosopher Hryhorij Skovoroda, who wrote his poetry in Latin and refused to take service at the court of Catherine the Great, will stand in the Jewish Podol. And opposite Kiev University, the monument erected back in tsarist times of the most famous Ukrainian in the world, Taras Shevchenko – who wrote his poetry in Ukrainian and his prose and diaries in Russian – will still stand.

When I was a child, there was a story doing the rounds among my contemporaries: a Japanese shows a Russian his clenched fist and asks, 'What have I got here?' The Russian doesn't know. The Japanese tells him, 'TV. Now guess: how many of them?'

This story came back to me quite recently when I went to a bookshop to buy a map of Ukraine. When I got back home, sitting in my armchair, I asked myself: 'And how many Ukraines are there on this map?' And I answered myself, 'At least two and a half.' Two and a half, that is, if you divide Ukraine ethno-linguistically. If you divide it socially or politically, you will get many more. But for me, as a man of letters, a person who earns his living by letters and words put together in novels and tales, it is first and foremost the ethnic-linguistic criteria that interest me. And they interest me first and foremost because as a writer (a trader in words), I write in my mother tongue, Russian. And today, the Russian language has no official status in Ukraine; Pushkin and Tolstoy are taught as foreign literature.

Throughout the ten years of independence, not a single statesman has set himself the task of creating a single nation, or uniting the citizens of Ukraine into a whole. The paradox is that when Ukraine was Soviet, it was more whole and monolithic than it is now. The present ethnic face-off is reflected in the policy and aims of individual but fairly influential political parties. If the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, UNA-UNSO, and other groups and parties come out in favour of enforced Ukrainianisation and the ousting of Russian from Ukraine, then the Communist Party of Ukraine, the socialists and even some centrist parties will come out openly in favour of giving Russian the status of a second official language. The Russian and Ukrainian languages have become blind weapons in a senseless political struggle and this means that the people for whom one or other language is their mother tongue will be drawn, actively or passively, into this struggle, into linguistic and political argument. In a country where out of almost 50 million inhabitants at least 12 million speak Russian, any kind of 'linguistic action' is, quite simply, dangerous. Dangerous, because it is much easier than carrying out economic reforms and creating a civil society in which all can feel they are citizens fully valued and with full rights.

Linguistic confrontation recently took on a completely new form in Crimea, to which some 200,000 Tatars, deported under Stalin, have returned. The *Mejlis* (parliament) of the Crimean Tatars has signed a document on cooperation with the National Movement of Ukraine – yet another party with a national/ethnic agenda. Now, in Russophone Crimea, Ukrainian fighters against Russian influence, and 'Russification' in general, have a remote-controlled 'weapon'. The Crimean Tatars do

not, in any case, have the best of relations with the local government (mainly communists) which pays only lip service to the capital. The local government has its own interest in having enemies in the form of the Crimean Tatars.

It is not hard, then, to understand the logic of the Tatars in looking for support outside Crimea. It is all too easy to imagine what that support may lead to – a worsening of relations between Tatars and Russophones in Crimea.

Linguistic scholarship in Ukraine has gone even further by inventing the term ‘titular nation’: translated into the vernacular, this means ‘being considered indigenous to that territory, the dominant nation shall have more rights’. The first hierarchical division of the nations of present-day Ukraine has already taken place: they have been divided into ‘titular’ and ‘non-titular’ – alien. It may seem ‘normal’ to Ukrainian adherents of nationalism to assimilate other ethnic groups. But in any normal society in a similar situation, it would be a matter of integrating the different groups into a single multinational and multicultural society. □

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