

Let Me Reinststate My Agency: Russian Language Manipulations in Ukraine

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Still from *Dima, Dmitry, Dmytro. Glory to the Heroes* (2021) – directed by Clemens Poole, an American artist and director based in Ukraine.

The film uses archival footage from the childhood of Dmytro Chepurnyi, a Ukrainian curator, in Luhansk in 1995. The semi-historical narrative comments 'on a complex exploration of identity, culture, and the power of archives in contemporary Ukraine', viewed from the foreign gaze of the director but narrated by the main hero of the movie twenty-six years later, in 2021 – distributing agency in a complex way between the hero and the director. While objectifying the figure of the Ukrainian curator, the director also explicitly acknowledges the colonial influence of cultures such as his own on those such as Chepurnyi's. The film also wrestles with the question of language; in it, the Russian-speaking Dmytro accepts the Ukrainian language as his native language after moving from Luhansk to Kyiv.

Propaganda frame-ups concerning (non-)Russian speakers

As someone born and raised in the Donetsk region, I would like to shed some light

on the language situation in the eastern regions of my country, since language has been central to Russia's manipulative claims to be 'defending the rights and will' of the local people. Both Russian and non-Russian-speaking communities, deprived of agency, have become the subjects of narratives built by the Russian state to justify their repeated military invasions.

On 17 April 2014 – six days after Russia began its occupation of a large part of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions – several Russian TV channels streamed a special programme called *Direct Speech with Vladimir Putin*, where Putin blamed the Ukrainian government for nationalistic persecution of the Russian minority in Ukraine who, according to the opinion of the Russian state, are the indigenous dwellers of the south-eastern regions of Ukraine.¹ Claims about the necessity of defending Russian speakers in Donbas, and of responding to the will of the people living in Crimea to become part of the Russian Federation, have been the main justifications of all of Russia's military actions over the last eight years.² Moreover, the statement about protecting the people in need – that is, in need of being rescued by Russia – is reiterated by Russian presidents in committing all the crimes they have committed in Russia's neighbouring countries.

On 24 February 2022, while giving a speech about the launch of a 'special military operation to *demilitarize* and *denazify* Ukraine',³ Putin emphasised nations' rights to self-determination as stated by the UN charter. He also reminded viewers that 'during the creation of the USSR and after WWII, the people living in the territories of contemporary Ukraine were never asked about their own vision of how to plan their life, whereas at the core of Russian politics is the freedom for everybody to define their future.' As a Ukrainian citizen from the Donetsk region, I want to use Putin's reminder to reinstall my own agency. But before that, let me discuss the *oppressed development* of my own identity.

The oppressed development of a language identity

I was born in Bohoiavlenska, a small village situated 65 kilometres away from the administrative centre of the Donetsk region. This village, which was around 35 kilometres from the collision line (where the Russian-occupied administrative units meet those under Ukrainian control), remained unoccupied after Russia invaded it in 2014. Right now (as of 17 June 2022), Russia is moving the occupied border further west, and Bohoiavlenska is the last administrative unit situated right on the borderline with Pavlivka, the town from which Russia's army is shooting my village almost every day.

The eastern regions of Ukraine are often misleadingly understood as Russian-speaking – or even Russian-sympathising – by people abroad because of the propagandist media outlets paid by the Russian government. Although I am from these regions, it's important to clarify that Russian was never my mother tongue, nor is it the mother tongue of the majority of those living in the rural areas here. The literary Ukrainian, though, is often not a household language of these people either, because they mostly speak *surzhyk* – a term used to describe the idiom created by the confluence of Ukrainian and Russian languages in Ukraine.⁴

1. Office of the President of Russia, 'Direct Speech with Vladimir Putin', 17 April 2014, available at: kremlin.ru (last accessed 29 June 2022).

2. See, for example, Office of the President of Russia, Speech by Vladimir Putin at VTB Capital Investment Forum 'Russia Calling!', 12 October 2016, available at: kremlin.ru (last accessed 29 June 2022).

3. See also RIA Novosti, 'What Russia Has to Do to Ukraine', 3 April 2022, available at: ria.ru (last accessed 29 June 2022). In this article, RIA Novosti (a state-owned news platform) states that the denazification of Ukraine is at the same time its decolonisation, as they see it as necessary to free Ukraine from European influence.

4. A similar phenomenon

This form of language is characterised not just by the occasional usage of words from both languages, but by phonetic, morphological and grammatical forms of layering within words.⁵

From early childhood, however, I remember meeting only Russian-speaking people on the streets of the urban parts of the region, as well as an attitude towards those of us speaking *surzhyk* that cast us as non-educated people from the villages who hadn't even succeeded in learning the language. I grew up with a huge amount of pressure and shame regarding my identity and my birthplace, which were immediately revealed after hearing me speak. This pressure produced the subconscious need to learn the language of the dominant force, so as to feel equal in encounters with the people with access to the resources I needed, namely higher education and work opportunities.

In some years, when I had to move to Kyiv to study at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, I had to embrace my double-language background – literary versions of Ukrainian and Ukrainian-influenced versions of Russian – while forgetting the local linguistic deviations of my native tongue. Hesitating between patriotism (speaking Ukrainian) and inverted progressiveness (speaking Russian), I chose to always switch to the language of the person speaking to me. I left myself no space to take responsibility for my own choice. As I became friends with mostly Russian-speaking people from Kyiv and its suburbs, I soon mastered Russian on the level of my private life (Ukrainian remained a language for work and education). So, it was not even a question of responsibility. I was reproducing the policy of identity-erasure – criminally enacted by Russia in my home regions – in a place where it was not applicable anymore. I was reproducing the need to speak Russian in order not to be a villager among my friends from the 'big city'.

Industrial colonialism in Ukraine under the Russian Empire

The prevalence of the Russian language in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions can be traced back to the colonising industrial politics of the Russian Empire since the eighteenth century. For a long time, the lands of eastern Ukraine were not urbanised – and there were mainly Ukrainian people living there, speaking Ukrainian – until the English engineers Charles Gascoigne and John Hughes opened factories in Luhansk (1797) and Donetsk (1869), leading to the formation of the cities around these industries. This prompted a massive labour migration from Russia, involving the partial replacement of the national composition of these areas. There is a corresponding name for the areas encompassing the Donetsk and Luhansk regions: it is Donbas, a toponym for the Donetsk coal basin, the site of the ecology-destroying but highly profitable resources that dazzled the internal oligarchy and international capital owners over the following centuries.

These circumstances led to the distinction between the Russian-speaking urban areas and Ukrainian-Russian linguistic mix in the surrounding villages. According to Volodymyr Skliar's analysis of the 2001 census, the urban environment of the eastern region was formed under the influence of ethnolinguistic processes of the Soviet era, which, in addition to the mass migration of Russians, involved their

is *trasianka* in the Belarusian language, an idiom that emerged as a mix of Belarusian and Russian. The US version of this language phenomenon is *span-glish*, which is used by Latin Americans as a mix of English and Spanish, etc.

5. Some linguists compare *surzyk* with pidgin and creole, as the Russian-Ukrainian language assimilation was produced by unequal interethnic and interlanguage relations in the course of Russia's colonial and semi-colonial relations with Ukraine. Other researchers, however, do not see this similarity between these language formations, as pidgin is created on the basis of genetically distant languages (mostly European languages and dialects of Oceania, Latin America, Africa, and so on), whereas *surzhyk* is based on two related languages, both of which have a national status. See Larysa Masenko, *Surzhyk: Istorii formuvannia, suchasnyi stan, perspektyvy funktsionuvannia* (Surzhyk: History of its Formation, Contemporary State, and Perspectives of Functioning), in Gerd Hentschel and Sjarhej Zaprudski (ed.), *Belarusian Trasjanka and Ukrainian Suržyk: Structural and Social Aspects of their Description and Categorization*, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag der Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, 2008, pp. 1–34.

transformation into a dominant minority. This led to assimilation processes among the rural Ukrainian-speaking population, despite their numerical superiority,⁶ and that is how *surzhyk* was created.

The extermination of the Ukrainian language

Above all, Russian became a noticeable language in the urban parts of this region, in addition to many of the northern, southern and central regions of Ukraine, due to the persistent language-extermination policies conducted by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. The Tsarist autocracy had taken a series of steps toward the Russification of Ukraine until its collapse in 1917. After that its successor, the USSR, proceeded in this process. The best-known cases among them are the Valuev Circular (1863), a decree by the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Russian Empire, Pyotr Valuev, banning the print of Ukrainian literature except for *belles lettres*; Ems Ukaz (1876), a prohibition by Alexander II on printing and importing Ukrainian-language literature and stage performances in Ukrainian; and the Stolypin Circular, a decree by the subsequent Minister of Internal Affairs, Pyotr Stolypin, ordering the closure of all Ukrainian cultural organisations and printing houses, the banning of lectures in Ukrainian, and the prohibition of all non-Russian clubs. Aside from these, a huge number of other restrictions have been implemented in Ukraine, including an order to rewrite Ukrainian government resolutions and regulations into Russian by Peter II (in 1729), the prohibition of teaching in Ukrainian in Kyiv-Mohyla Academy by Catherine II (in 1763), the regular banning of schools with Ukrainian programmes or their switch to Russian (in 1789, 1804, 1832, 1864, 1881, 1938, 1978, etc.) and an order to write academic papers only in Russian (in 1970).⁷ In addition, both predecessors of the Russian Federation forbade the celebration of anniversaries of Ukrainian cultural figures – such as the anniversary of the poet Taras Shchepchenko (banned in 1914) and the anniversary of Kotliarevskyi's poem *Eneida* (banned in 1973)⁸ – and ordered the closure of Ukrainian cultural organisations, including that of the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius in 1847.⁹

6. Volodymyr Skliar, 'Differences in the Ethnolinguistic Structure of the Population of Regional Centers and the Rural Population of the South and East of Ukraine', *Ukrainian Studies Almanac*, issue 5, 2011, pp. 37–42.

7. For a list of Ukrainian language prohibitions, see 'How they fought with the Ukrainian language: Chronicle of prohibitions for 400 years', *Istorychna Pravda* (online journal), 3 July 2012, available at: istpravda.com (last accessed 28 June 2022). There is a lot of scholarly research tracing the Ukrainian language prohibitions written by both Ukrainian and foreign authors. In this article, I have cited only the Ukrainian platforms, scholars and writers, considering these forms of citation to be necessary due to the locality of the phenomenon and as a part of the project of decolonisation.

8. The Ukrainian poem *Eneida* is based on the plot of Virgil's poem of the same name. However, the Ukrainian poem is connected to the events of Catherine II's destruction of the Cossack state, the Zaporizhian Sich.

9. See *Istorychna Pravda*, 'How

Language discrimination policies have even influenced studies of bilingualism, including such phenomena as *surzhyk*. Larysa Masenko, a Ukrainian linguist, describes how a 1980s sociolinguistic survey to study Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism was conducted by the Russian Language Department of the Institute of Linguistics (of the USSR Academy of Sciences) as part of a project entitled 'The Role of Russian as a Means of Interethnic Communication'. Moreover, *surzhyk* has not been well studied due to Soviet narratives of the beneficial effect of the Russian language on the national languages of the Soviet republics.¹⁰

they fought with the Ukrainian language'.

10. See Masenko, *Surzhyk*.

Contemporary linguistic persecutions

When the Soviet Union collapsed and Ukraine gained independence, Russian infringement on the Ukrainian language did not end. Whenever Ukraine took new steps toward reclaiming the governmental status of the Ukrainian language, the Russian administration used these to blame Ukraine for discrimination and violation of the rights of 'indigenous Russian-speaking people'. One of the numerous examples of such an argument was on the day of Zelenskyi's inauguration on 20 May 2019, which was chosen by Russia for a new attempt to include Ukraine's language law – which sought to ensure the functioning of Ukrainian as the state language – as a point of discussion in a UN Security Council meeting.¹¹ The accusations used by Russia for the UN appeal were based on Russia's previously conducted partial denationalisation of our country, discussed above. Similar accusations are regularly used in relation to Russia's other neighbouring countries. It is worth mentioning, as one example, the accusations by Dmytri Medvedev on 8 August 2008 of Georgian aggression against peaceful dwellers of South Ossetia, including 'Russian citizens'.¹² Here, Medvedev was speaking about residents of South Ossetia who had been issued Russian passports in order to construct a documented ethnic Russian population in the region.

11. Mykola Holomsha, 'When the Language Subsidies, the People Disappear', *LB.ua* (online newspaper), 16 July 2019, available at: lb.ua (last accessed 27 June 2022).

12. Office of the President of Russia, 'Statement on the situation in South Ossetia', 8 August 2008, available at: kremlin.ru (last accessed 29 June 2022).

For centuries, Russia has been skilfully mastering how to prematurely violate the rights of the people of neighbouring states, in order to later accuse these countries of precisely what the Russian government did itself – namely, creating an artificial Russian-speaking ground for the further manipulation of the rights of its neighbouring countries. For exactly this purpose, on 24 April 2019, Putin established a simplified procedure for gaining Russian citizenship in the occupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and on 25 May 2022, right in the middle of the active war phase, he gave the extended order to include the people from the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions in the procedure as well. On 4 June 2022, Petro Andriushchenko, adviser to the mayor of Mariupol, announced that nearly 5,000 schoolbooks on Russian language, literature and history were delivered to the 4th School in Mariupol in exchange for all the Ukrainian books. Right at this moment, we are observing how the Russian state meticulously designs and consolidates its propaganda narratives, using them to shape the identity of Ukrainian students. We are watching Russia's attempts to colonise our consciousness by artificially feeding it with 'the high values and culture of the Russian Federation'. Ukrainian language, Ukrainian history and Ukrainian culture are powerful enough to make Russia frightened, so Russia is trying to eradicate it by the root, or reappropriate it to be owned by them.

The double-discrimination of *surzhyk*

To return to the status of an assimilated idiom of rural Ukraine, linguistic studies more often concentrate on its harms – seeing it as corrupting the linguistic systems of both Russian and Ukrainian – than on its benefits. Yet *surzhyk* serves as a powerful tool of resistance. This idiom is much more complex than just a ‘contaminated’ language; it is preceded by a long historical and political context, and by both territorial and individual diversity. It is so alive that its lexemes can vary from village to village – for example, my grandmothers living in neighbouring villages with less than 10 kilometres’ distance between them use different word forms for naming the months of the year or kitchen utensils. Therefore, each version of the idiom is unique, but at the same time it serves as a collective precedent against the ‘denazification’ and ‘decolonization’ of the Russian war machinery.

Still, the persecution of rural Ukrainian language forms is two-sided, as it is perpetrated by both Russian and Ukrainian speakers. For Russian speakers, *surzhyk* is a language of non-educated villagers, whereas for Ukrainian speakers it is evidence of Russian pressure on the country’s state language. Nevertheless, we should not overlook that this discrimination is a product of Russian imperialism, the imperialism which made this bilingualism exist in the first place. Without Russian interventions, Ukraine would have no *surzhyk*; there would be no Russian language presence at all – and therefore no need to ‘defend’ Russian speakers and no ground for the propagandist misuse of cultural discourse.

A Ukrainian writer, Ostap Ukrainets, has put forward important observations on the local language peculiarities overlooked by the inherited methods of Stalinist linguistics. Ukrainets notes the presence of archaic lexemes in *surzhyk* that are reminiscent of Russian terms or even completely coincide with them.¹³ This lost archaism shows that apart from the influence of Russian on Ukrainian, *surzhyk* is also formed on the basis of languages belonging to a common language family. Hence, there is a parallel influence of Ukrainian on contemporary Russian as well, and not simply the opposite. Thereby, the metanarrative about the one literary standard of the language that was created in Soviet discourse is not relevant anymore, because paying no attention to local language diversity leads to Ukrainisation on the model of Russification.¹⁴

Putin, however, along with his predecessors, made a serious miscalculation: by expanding the boundaries of the Russian language, they in fact made it impossible to belong to the Russian nation. For a long time, Russian has been an international language: the language of certain regions of Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Armenia and other sovereign countries. Therefore, arguments about Russian citizenship on the basis of language have lost their ground, because Russia’s imperial politics have undermined its attempts to appropriate *decolonisation*. In the end, in trying to decolonise Ukraine, the Russian state instead de-imperialised itself.

13. Ostap Ukrainets, ‘Anti-Russian Ukrainian’, *Zbruc* (online newspaper), 12 July 2021, available at: zbruc.eu (accessed 28 June 2022).

14. Ibid.

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