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## “ Language Politics” in Contemporary Ukraine: Nationalism and Identity Formation<sup>1</sup>

Tatiana Zhurzhenko

The “language issue” was crucial in the history of Russian-Ukrainian relations and in the long-term process of forming the preconditions for Ukrainian nation-building. Since the mid-18th century, Ukraine’s quest for national self-identification under the rule of the Russian Empire, the Habsburgs, interwar Poland, and more recently the Soviet Union, was represented mainly in terms of saving, preserving, and developing the Ukrainian language. Although it was exposed to the cultural and linguistic influences of other languages (mainly Polish and German), historical, social, geopolitical, and linguistic factors made its relations with Russian the most problematic.

One would have expected this situation to change after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of the Ukrainian state in 1991. But after ten years of independence the problem of the real functioning of the Ukrainian language in all

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spheres of society and of the uneven status of the Russian language has become even more urgent and fraught with dangerous political conflicts. These ten years were in fact wasted on inconsistent and contradictory attempts to introduce market reforms and institutions of liberal democracy while the unlimited power of the new Ukrainian oligarchs and the growing state bureaucracy were left untouched. The only achievement of these years – relative political stability – could not hide the sustained crisis in Ukrainian society, which became explicit with the arising “Gongadze issue” and “Kuchmagate” at the end of last year. Although at first glance this political scandal postponed the urgency of the issue of russification versus ukrainization, it made visible the weakness of democratic opposition in Ukrainian society, the widening gap between political and intellectual elites and the masses, the growing dependence of Ukrainian leaders and their political orientations on the interests and influences of the powerful international players – above all the U.S., but also the European Union and Russia. In fact, this political crisis demonstrated the weakness of the very concept of an “independent Ukraine” and the lack of a political basis for national consolidation. The Ukrainian language, proposed by the intellectual elite as the basis for national identity formation, turned out to be exclusive of many regions and social and ethnic groups. Although one can find both Ukrainian and Russian speakers among the ruling elite and the leaders of the opposition, the “language issue” shows the current political crisis to be a symbolic division between the post-Communist former nomenklatura or pro-Russian oligarchy and the nationally conscious democratic pro-Western opposition.

The potential to politicize this symbolic division becomes even stronger when one takes into account the international dimension of the crisis. Despite all the Russian leaders’ declarations of an intention to develop non-imperialist and equal relations with neighboring countries and the official recognition of the independent Ukrainian state and its borders, Ukraine, according to the statements of those same leaders, belongs to the sphere of special Russian interests. The promotion of Russian language in the “Near Abroad” (i.e., the new states that emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union) is therefore a part of its foreign policy. The federal program of 1996 on “Russian Language” states that “at the state level it is necessary to ensure the support for the Russian language as a powerful social factor for the consolidation of the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), as a stimulant ...

for the realization of the geopolitical interests of Russia."<sup>2</sup> The growing interest of Russian business in the Ukrainian market is another important factor in favor of supporting the status of the Russian language in Ukraine.

At the same time, the clear message from the US and the European Union is that Ukraine should distance itself from Russia in the economic, political, and military spheres to convince the West of its "European choice." In the area of cultural policy, it assumes the promotion of Ukrainian language at the expense of Russian, and this attitude is widely reflected by international foundations and donor organizations in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Diaspora, which is heavily involved in these activities, enthusiastically lobbies for the policy of ukrainization. But the same "Western factor" can work in the opposite way: the growing importance of Ukraine's Human Rights record as a criterion for further cooperation and possible integration with the European Union gives the Russian speaking community a new chance to defend its interests by appealing to the European Council and international public opinion. In this situation, the case of the "Russian speaking community in the Ukraine" becomes part of international dynamics or, one could say, globalization with all its negative and positive consequences. Another aspect of globalization is a certain relativization of the Russian-Ukrainian language dilemma: whichever you choose, it is English which becomes more and more important for your professional career.

This paper deals with the "language debate" in contemporary Ukraine after ten years of state independence. It mainly considers the status and relations between the Russian and Ukrainian languages (and the relations and rights of related linguistic groups) since the real status of the Russian language is completely different from the status of other minority languages and because the relations between Russian and Ukrainian are much more politicized. Starting with a brief historical review of the relations between the Ukrainian and Russian languages in the context of the nation-building process, I will then present the current debate on the status of the Russian language in Ukraine, the so-called ukrainization campaign and the opposition to it. The main arguments on both sides of the debate are summarized in order to analyze how the image of the "Other" is constructed through this argumentation. In the last part I consider the theoretical debates surrounding the concepts of multiculturalism, minority rights, and cultural differences in contemporary political theory and their implications for the situation in the Ukraine.

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<sup>2</sup> Cited from: *Factors of the Russification of Ukraine: Changes and Influences since 1991* (The Romyr Report), Winter 2000. <<http://www.romyr.com>>

*Language and Nation: Ukraine before Independence.*

Compared to Russian, the Ukrainian language is very young. Leaving aside the debates about its historical origins, the process of shaping the modern Ukrainian literary language started at the end of the 19th century and was complicated by the lack of an independent state and territorial unity and also by the economic backwardness of the country. At the turn of the 19th century the territories with Ukrainian populations were divided among three countries, Russia, Austria, and Hungary, and were therefore subject to three different laws regulating the Ukrainian language.<sup>3</sup> Under Austrian rule 13% of the Ukrainian population<sup>4</sup> (mainly East Galychyna and Bukovina) enjoyed relatively good conditions for the Ukrainian language due to the rather liberal Austrian constitution of 1867, which allowed regional administration to use local languages in public life and schooling. However, Ukrainians were the minority (belonging mainly to the lower classes) in the territories where they lived. Therefore, in Galychyna, for example, they suffered from the restrictions imposed by the Polish administration. Nevertheless, Ukrainian primary schools were widespread, the Ukrainian press was well developed, and the Ukrainian-speaking intelligentsia willingly used the language as a banner for national consolidation and liberation. Under Hungarian rule in Transcarpathia, the most backward of all Ukrainian territories, the Ukrainian language existed as a mixture of local rural dialects and had very little chance of developing under the conditions of total magyarization. In the Russian Empire, where 85% of the Ukrainians lived, Ukrainian language rights were also strictly limited. Publication of books, journals, and newspapers was restricted; theater performances were subject to complicated regulations; schooling in Ukrainian was prohibited; and the language of the juridical system and the local administration was Russian. Concerned about their territorial integrity, the top officials of the Russian empire considered Ukrainian nationalism and separatism as most dangerous given the size of population and territory and its strategic political and economic importance. Secession of the Ukraine would threaten the very existence of the Empire.

Under these conditions the Ukrainian language was virtually eliminated from all spheres of public life, and was given the official status of a Russian dialect unsuit-

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<sup>3</sup> See: Yuri Shevelov, *Ukrainian Language in the first Part of 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (1900-1941), Suchsnist, 1987 (in Ukrainian).

<sup>4</sup> Numbers from: Yuri Shevelov, op. cit., p.11.

able for political and academic life. Even among the Ukrainian intelligentsia there were many who considered it as mainly a rural, poetic, and folkloric language and supported the idea of bilingualism. A limited vocabulary (particularly concerning scientific and technical terminology) based on rural origins, regional differences and strong influence of local dialects, and underdeveloped and shaky grammar rules are traits that characterized Ukrainian at the beginning of the 20th century. To some extent, the language reflected the mainly agricultural state of Ukrainian society. Ukrainian was the language of the peasants and of those very narrow strata of intelligentsia which came from the peasants and served their interests: priests, teachers, sometimes doctors. "Capitalism in Ukraine spoke Russian," and the bourgeoisie and the new technical intelligentsia were largely alienated from Ukrainian, which caused the lack not only of state but also of economic support for national cultural development. Because of political obstacles for inter-regional communication and cultural differences, the development of the Ukrainian language in eastern and western territories was divided into two isolated processes. This situation continued until almost the end of the Second World War, when western territories were attached to the Soviet Ukraine.

The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, the creation of the first Ukrainian government, Tsentralna Rada (Central Council), and finally the proclamation of an independent Ukrainian People's Republic gave Ukrainian language its first historical chance. The years 1917-1921 were a period of high political instability during which the regime changed several times and most of the territory was beyond the control of the central authorities. The official status of Russian-Ukrainian interstate relations remained uncertain until 1922, when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was created. Civil war and external military intervention did not allow Ukrainian leaders to pay much attention to the language issue, but in general this political and cultural shift was of course in favor of the Ukrainian language. But with the establishment of Soviet power over most of the Ukrainian territory (only the western regions remained under Poland) and the emergence of the Soviet Union it became clear that the idea of an independent Ukrainian state would not be realized and the official policy turned again to some version of Russian-Ukrainian bilingualism. The position of the Communist party concerning the "question of nationalities" in the former Russian Empire was based on the idea of the "nation's right to self-determination" but internal and external threats to the new regime required strengthening centralization and control over the leadership in Soviet republics. In fact, Lenin was very much concerned about political compromises with local leaderships and national movements, stressing common interests and often accusing the

Party emissaries in the Ukraine of "Russian chauvinism." Communist party leaders in Ukraine were mainly Russians, the working class spoke Russian, and the memory of the recent war with the nationalist government fueled hostility toward the Ukrainian language, despite the official "internationalism." The Party's *Realpolitik* was "not to impede peasants from speaking Ukrainian," but the start of industrialization in fact strengthened the position of the Russian language in the cities.

This rather unclear policy, mainly determined by pragmatism, mysteriously changed some years later. A new wave of ukrainization – the most serious in Soviet history – was initiated in 1923 by the Communist Party leadership in Moscow and put into effect from 1925 to 1932. The reason for it can be found in the changing international environment and the new focus on supporting anti-imperialist struggle in the colonial world. Soviet republics were supposed to demonstrate the successful solution to the nationalities question. As the Ukrainian historian Yuriy Shevelyov stressed, "ukrainization was not a popular movement of Ukrainians against Moscow rule, but rather the next turn of Kremlin politics."<sup>5</sup> Forceful measures were implemented to ensure the official status of the Ukrainian language: special courses for administrative officials were opened, the school and higher education system changed to Ukrainian, and linguists and philologists started the serious work of modernizing terminology and ordering grammar. The end of the 1920s was also marked by the rise of modern Ukrainian arts and literature. The whole atmosphere of the 20s favored various projects of modernizing (and westernizing) Ukrainian culture. It was the first attempt to conquer the urban cultural space, which was usually the fortress of Russian speakers.

In the early 1930s, with the total change of political climate and the beginning of Stalinist terror, the ukrainization campaign was stopped on orders from Moscow. Party leaders responsible for it were dismissed or arrested (the leader of the Communist Party of the Ukraine, Mykola Skrypnyk, committed suicide in 1933), and thousands of representatives of the Ukrainian intelligentsia were accused of "bourgeois nationalism" and repressed. The social basis of further Ukrainization was eventually eliminated by a deliberately organized famine among the rural population. Because of the expropriation of wheat by the authorities, millions of peasants died of starvation. Ukrainian linguists were accused of nationalist sabotage, and some changes in grammar and lexicon were initiated to shift the Ukrainian language closer to Russian.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.137.

In 1939 and 1940 the Western regions (Galychyna, West Volyn and Bukovina) were attached to the Soviet Ukraine. This caused a new political shift and some concessions to the Ukrainian language, but soon the war with Nazi Germany cut this tendency. The situation favored the revival of Russian patriotism and traditions of pre-revolutionary statism and Russian military glory, which culminated in Stalin's famous speech in 1945, celebrating "the great Russian people." The war served as an excuse for repressions against ethnic minorities which were "not loyal enough" to Soviet power. Western Ukrainians had a particularly bad record because of collaborating with the Nazis against the Soviet army. Some military groups continued to resist Soviet authorities until the end of the 1950s, and this struggle cost many lives on both sides. Millions of Ukrainians were forcibly moved to Siberia. Many who did not accept Soviet rule and tried to avoid political repression emigrated to the West. Since these years, the fear of Ukrainian nationalism has never left the Moscow leadership, and it was this that later caused the particularly extensive repressions against Ukrainian dissidents.

The changes in the political climate caused by Stalin's death and then the general democratization of public life led at the end of the 50s to a remarkable national cultural renaissance. Young poets, writers, and artists (the so-called *shestidesiatniki* or generation of the 60s) initiated a broad interest in Ukrainian language and literature among the population. Poetry readings, public lectures, and celebrations of cultural events attracted students and intelligentsia both in Eastern and Western Ukraine. The names of some Ukrainian writers and artists, suppressed by Stalin's regime, were reincorporated into Ukrainian culture as a consequence of these first democratic acts of re-remembering. The relatively "liberal" and pro-Ukrainian party leadership (N. Khrushchev and later P. Shelest) tried to keep these activities under control in order not to frighten Moscow, but at the same time provided some kind of protection for them. On the other hand, some political and administrative decisions were made in the same period that were in fact favorable to further russification. Insofar as "the construction of Communism" was announced as the primary task, the priorities of nationalities politics needed reconsideration. In 1961 the Congress of the CPSU announced a policy to eliminate ethnic differences and develop a new community – the Soviet people. According to the law of 1958, Ukrainian language lost its compulsory status in schooling. Parents could choose the language of teaching for their children and usually favored more prestigious Russian. Public opinion, awakened by the young intelligentsia, perceived these politics as anti-Ukrainian. However, the wave of national cultural renaissance had one peculiar feature. The national policy of the Communist Party was usually criticized from the point of

view of Marxism and Leninism, without breaking with Communist ideology. A new generation of intelligentsia committed to Ukrainian language and culture grew up in Soviet society and believed in its values: internationalism, democracy, and humanism. What they wanted was to purify these values of distortions and bureaucratization. As the historian of the dissident movement Lyudmila Alekseeva points out, "the aim of the *shestidesiatniki* was the democratization of the Soviet system and the suspension of russification, and they believed in the possibility of achieving this under the conditions of Soviet system."<sup>6</sup> Ivan Dzyuba's *Internationalism or Russification?*<sup>7</sup> (1965) was written from this standpoint as an addendum to his letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine. He argued that Lenin's principles of nationalities politics in the USSR were distorted by Stalin and later Khrushchev, and that the idea of a "fusion of nations" into a homogeneous "Soviet people" and the treatment of "national cultures" (cultures of nationalities) as secondary cultures contradicts the very idea of Communism. But such initiatives of independent re-interpretation of the official Soviet ideology were of course not acceptable to the Party leadership. The first arrests of Ukrainian intelligentsia started in 1965, and in the beginning they only fueled public solidarity for the national cause. But after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and in the worsening political atmosphere, any open manifestations of national feeling became almost impossible.

"Russification" was of course not an openly declared policy in the 70s and 80s, and to be just, Soviet authorities were not against the Ukrainian language itself. They encouraged translations from the languages of other nationalities of the USSR and foreign languages (of course, only selected "ideologically correct" texts). Publications of books, journals, and newspapers in Ukrainian were subsidized by the state (and this fact partly explains the paradox of the decline of the Ukrainian media and publishing industry after the collapse of the USSR). What the Soviet authorities were concerned about was the danger of turning the language into a banner of the national consolidation of Ukrainians against the existing political regime. This threat to the Communist system was very real, particularly in Western Ukraine, and was becoming more and more real in other regions. The official ideology of interna-

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<sup>6</sup> Ludmila Alekseeva, *The History of the Dissident Movement in the USSR*. Vilnius/Moscow (Vest) 1992, p.15 (in Russian).

<sup>7</sup> Ivan Dzyuba, *Internationalism or Russification?* Kyiv (KM-Academia) 1998 (first publication as a separate volume in Ukraine; in Ukrainian).



tionalism in the USSR encouraged inter-republic migration and cross-ethnic marriages. The Soviet leadership encouraged ethnic Russians to relocate to Ukrainian lands and supported Ukrainians moving to the eastern and northern territories of Russia. These factors plus the continuing reduction of teaching in Ukrainian led to a change in the balance that did not favor Ukrainian speakers, but rather it led to a hidden russification. By 1991 ethnic Russians composed 22.1% of the total population compared with 8.2% in 1926. 60% of them in 1991 were immigrants. By 1987 72% of the schools in Ukraine taught in Russian, 16% in Ukrainian, and 12% had a mixed curriculum.<sup>8</sup>

The growing dissident movement in Ukraine, concerned about human rights and having a lot in common with Russian dissident groups, was mainly focused on the facts of ethnocide of Ukrainians, discrimination against the Ukrainian language, and oppression of cultural life. As L. Alekseeva pointed out, the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, while maintaining good relations with the Moscow Group, was concerned only about Ukrainian national problems and narrowed its activity to the issue of the "equality of nationalities."<sup>9</sup> It did not respond to the issues of religious repressions, the rights of Jews, or social and economic rights. It is the "russified" Eastern Ukraine where human rights protection movement in its "pure" form as well as attention to social and economic rights were more visible. The cruel repressions against Ukrainian dissidents and the general political stagnation resulted in the radicalization of the nationalist movement and the revival of the idea of secession from the USSR. Shared only by marginal extremist political positions in the 80s, this idea in fact served as an important ideological resource of mass mobilization for Ukraine's independence at the time of the Soviet collapse.

### *The "Language Issue" after 1991.*

Ukrainian received the status of a single state-language in 1989 as decreed by the law "On Languages in the Ukrainian SSR." The new Ukrainian constitution confirmed this status in 1996 and conferred responsibility on the state to ensure "universal development and functioning of the Ukrainian language in all spheres of social life on all territories of Ukraine" (Article 10). According to the Ukrainian constitution, the people of the Ukraine are divided into three categories: the titular na-

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<sup>8</sup> The Romyr Report, Winter 2000 (see note 2).

<sup>9</sup> Ludmila Alekseeva, p.37.

tion (Ukrainians), the core nations, and the national minorities. The Russian language, which is still very influential in Ukraine, automatically gained secondary status, and a campaign to introduce the Ukrainian language into the educational system and state structures began. However, up until now ukrainization has been rather "soft." This is not due to a conscious political strategy but mainly because of the administrative capacities of the new Ukrainian state, which were not sufficient for radical reform. In addition, the unstable political leadership could not formulate a clear language policy. In Eastern and Southern Ukraine (both historically Russian-speaking) ukrainization faced hidden resistance, and hence was not very successful and rather superficial. The state tried to promote the Ukrainian language mainly through bureaucratic measures, which were efficient only to some extent. The percentage of Ukrainian language schools reached 75.5%, and that of higher learning in Ukrainian 66% by the end of the 1998-99 academic year. During the same period the percentage of newspapers printed in Ukrainian fell from 68% (1990) to 39.6% (1998), and the percentage of Ukrainian language magazines dropped from 90.4% to 11.5%.<sup>10</sup>

President Leonid Kuchma came to power in 1994 due to support from Eastern Ukraine. He had promised that the Russian language would be granted a special status and that relations with Russia would become closer, but he later shifted to a more "pro-Ukrainian" position presenting himself as a promoter of the "national idea." However, in Western Ukraine he never gained strong political support because of his image as a "pro-Moscow" politician. This policy or absence of a clear policy became a subject of criticism from Ukrainian nationalists on the one side and the Russian-speaking intelligentsia on the other. By the end of 1999 new appointments in the Ukrainian government were made. Ivan Drach took the position of the Head of State Committee on Information, Television, and Broadcasting and Mykola Zhulynsky became Vice Prime Minister in charge of the nation's cultural program. Both were active promoters of ukrainization. The new government's project to expand the Ukrainian language fueled the fears of the Russian-speakers. At the same time, the Constitutional Court made a decision regarding the use of state language in Ukrainian society. This decision, more political than juridical, was in fact an attempt to expand the compulsory usage of the state language to institutions like local self-administration bodies and municipal higher education. The danger of the decision was stressed in the special opinion of one of the constitutional judges,

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<sup>10</sup> The Romyr Report, Winter 2000 (see note 2).

Mironenko, who argued that according to the constitution, Ukrainian is the official and working language of the state but not necessarily of society or private persons.<sup>11</sup> The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted to this decision of the Constitutional Court with an official note to the Ukrainian Embassy in Moscow expressing concerns about administrative measures against the Russian language and culture in Ukraine. Another issue in the recent language debate was the ratification of the European Charter of Minority Languages by the Ukrainian Parliament in December 1999. According to the Charter, the Russian language can be considered as having in fact equal status with the Ukrainian language in the regions (administrative units) where the Russian-speaking community exceeds 20% of the population. Moreover, a new situation has emerged, since now Russian-speakers can use democratic and human rights rhetoric (and consequently the authority of Western liberal ideology) against Ukrainian nationalism. But the Charter had no chance of being implemented, for after six months the ratification was abandoned by the Constitutional Court on the grounds that mistakes were made during the procedure of ratification – although the true reason was political. Finally, the political polarization around the language issue became dramatic in May 2000, when the popular Ukrainian composer and singer Igor Bilozir was attacked in a café in Lviv and later died from his injuries. The cause of the fight was the “language issue.” Bilozir was singing a Ukrainian song when a group of drunk people who wanted to hear Russian pop music records attacked him. This rather banal crime was interpreted by extremist nationalists as a crime against the Ukrainian culture and nation and led to an escalation of anti-Russian hatred. As a result, Igor Bilozir became a national hero, like his predecessor Volodymyr Ivasuk, another Ukrainian composer who was killed in 1979 supposedly on the order of the KGB. All these events of the past two years initiated a new wave of politicization of the language issue.

Currently the population of Ukraine, which is about 50 million, speaks mainly two languages: Ukrainian and Russian. According to one recent sociological survey (January 2000)<sup>12</sup>:

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<sup>11</sup> *Russian-Ukrainian Bulletin*, Nr. 5., February 2000, Moscow/Kyiv 2000 (In Russian).

<sup>12</sup> E.I. Golovaha, N.V. Panina, *Bilingualism in Ukraine: Real Situation and Perspectives. A Sociological Survey*, in: *Russian-Ukrainian Bulletin*, Nr. 6/7, 2000, Moscow/Kyiv, pp.142-147.

People consider as their native language:

Ukrainian – 63.8 %  
Russian – 35.1 %  
Other languages- 1.2 %

But the language of communication in the family may differ from their native language:

Ukrainian – 39.1%  
Russian – 36.0 %  
Russian/Ukrainian (depending on situation) – 24.8 %  
Other languages – 0.2 %

In fact Ukraine is a bilingual country. Despite all the historical transformations, the changes of the political system and of state borders, despite significant progress made by the Ukrainian language and despite the efforts of ten years of independence, the contemporary situation in a way reproduces the old pattern from the beginning of the 20th century. The language split actually has two dimensions: a regional division between Western and Eastern Ukraine and a social division between the urban and rural populations. What makes Ukraine different from other former USSR republics such as the Baltic states is that the Russian language is widespread and still dominant in culture, science, business, and other spheres (except, possibly, politics). The ruling political and administrative elite remains to a large extent Russian-speaking, and Ukrainian is used mainly for political rituals. And again, as a century before, capitalism speaks Russian, reflected in the well-known term "new Russians" ("new Ukrainians" simply do not exist). Loyal to the state and not opposing its ukrainization policy, the new middle class is ready to pay for their children's education in Russian, which is still more prestigious and presumably of better quality (not to speak of the business elite committed to English). In the case of the Ukraine, Russian can hardly be considered as a national minority language.

Three points are crucial for the situation with regard to language politics in Ukraine. First, it is mainly language differences (not so much ethnic, religious, or even cultural) that constitute the grounds for political tensions in Ukrainian society. Up to now religious differences played only a marginal role, and some confessional tensions between members of the Ukrainian Orthodox and the Greek Catholic churches had only a regional importance. Although cultural differences do exist be-

tween the eastern and western regions of Ukraine, they are traditionally articulated first of all as language differences. In this context the issue of language has become crucial. As was shown above, for the Ukrainian nationalist intelligentsia language was the main focus of struggle against the Austrian authorities, the Russian Empire, and then against Soviet rule. It is no wonder that the very idea of the Ukrainian nation has been constructed by constant attempts to defend the Ukrainian language and to save it from vanishing – first of all in opposition to Russian.

The second point may seem contrary to the first: it is not language differences that create tensions and conflicts, but rather various political forces (and the state itself) articulate these differences and formulate the positions of the language groups, and unfortunately they do so very often in terms of mutual hostility, exclusion, and the incompatibility of the groups' simultaneous free development. Language problems become politicized not so much because of the urgency of these problems, but because transitional processes in post-Soviet countries have their own logic. A core element of this logic is the growing gap between elites and masses and the alienation of the masses from political life. According to sociological surveys, the majority of the population supports the idea of "special relations with Russia," and the idea of Russian-Ukrainian bilingualism in its various forms is still supported by a significant part of it. But for the political elite, shaping Ukraine's pro-Western image created through symbolic distancing from Russia becomes more and more important (which does not exclude growing economic dependency). Accusing the masses of "political backwardness" and a lack of "national consciousness" (almost Bolshevik terms!), the ruling elite is interested in instrumentalizing and mobilizing history and the social and political sciences for the purposes of nation building on the basis of language and ethnic identity. In some sense, language can be considered as a predictor of other interests, first of all of the economic interests of the Ukrainian regional elites and their geo-economic and geopolitical orientations.

Third, the issue of closeness or difference between Russian and Ukrainian, which is the subject of political discussions, can hardly be solved in a neutral and objective way. In contrast to the Canadian case (English/French), which is discussed below, these languages are quite close to each other. Ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians basically understand each other. But what political implications does this have? Does it favor mutual understanding and communication and perspectives of bilingualism, and does it make the life of Russian speakers easier than, say, in Estonia? Or does this closeness deepen the inferiority complex of the propagators of Ukrainian language and provoke new campaigns of linguistic cleansing and distancing from Russian? Under the conditions of russification in the Romanov empire

Ukrainian peasants developed so-called "Surzhyk" – a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian. (Surzhyk is a term which initially came from the mill industry: a mixture of wheat and rye, rye and barley, barley and oats and so on).<sup>13</sup> In the same way, millions of Ukrainians who moved to the cities because of industrialization adapted to the dominant Russian language. This distorted language (different in every region) serves as an inter-linguistic mediator and also poses additional difficulties for the full-fledged functioning of Ukrainian. The "closeness" or "difference" between Russian and Ukrainian was (and still is) an issue of political struggle and negotiation.

### *Constructing Identities with the Rhetoric of "Language Politics".*

In discussing language politics<sup>14</sup> it is very difficult to avoid identifying with the position of one or another group, and group identification is usually inseparable from claims of objectivity and "historical justice." This paper focuses on analyzing the arguments of both sides on the level of political discourse, where the process of constructing the "Other" as an important source of one's own identity takes place.

Let us consider from this point of view the arguments of the "Ukrainian speakers":

1. The argument of Russian-speakers as a people with no identity. Russian speaking people do not constitute a homogeneous group with common interests. They are not Russian speakers but a russified population deprived of their ethnic roots and their "natural" Ukrainian identity. They have lost their origins as ethnic Ukrainians but cannot be considered as Russians either. They refer to the "Great" Russian culture as a source of identity but actually have nothing in common with it. They are not Russian-speaking but "Soviet-speaking" people who have lost their identity. Another side of this argument is that Russian-speakers are not represented in civil society and are rather passive politically. There are no NGOs or political

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<sup>13</sup> Yuri Shevelov, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the Working Papers of the conference "The European Charter of Regional Languages or Minority Languages (1992) as a Legislative Basis for Guaranteeing Human Rights in the Cultural and Linguistic Spheres of Ukrainian Society," February 26, 2000, Kharkiv 2000 (In Russian); *Russian-Ukrainian Bulletin*, Nr. 6/7, April 2000, Moscow/Kyiv 2000 (In Russian).

parties of the Russian-speaking population, but only some marginal groups who pretend to do so but in fact represent the private interests of their leaders.

This argument marginalizes Russian-speakers in two discourses: in the contemporary Western discourse of democratic values and human rights, and the (for Ukrainian society) more traditional discourse of Russian "universal" culture. Being culturally marginal, they are deprived of cultural heritage – both Russian and Ukrainian – and that is why they have no group identity and consequently no right to refer to democratic norms and human rights. Obviously, it is the Ukrainian nationally-oriented intelligentsia who monopolized human rights rhetoric during the decades of Soviet rule. Access to this human rights rhetoric becomes a new side of the struggle between Russian speaking and Ukrainian-speaking elites.

2. The argument of the imperial status of the Russian language. Russian speakers cannot be considered a national minority, since they pretend to keep their imperial status. If the Russian language obtains the status of a second state language (or equal status with Ukrainian), the dominance of the Russian language and culture would be inevitable. Therefore Ukrainian needs some kind of affirmative action policy (tax privileges for media and publishing, state support for education in Ukrainian, and probably some advantages for Ukrainian speaking specialists). In this context nationalists assume that "even the market could be discriminatory;" therefore the Ukrainian language could not survive without state support. The current situation is considered a tragic consequence of Russian imperialist cultural intervention, and a result of the violation of nation-building processes by external factors. Therefore the development of the Ukrainian language is possible only at the expense of Russian. This is a typical postcolonial syndrome, and clearly Russian speakers are treated as the main obstacle to the restoration of national identity and national culture. They are considered not only as a potential force which could be used by Russia for political pressure on Ukraine in a potential future conflict, but as a shameful reminder of the colonial past. To externalize former colonial and Communist experience, Russian speakers have been represented as "the Others," excluded from the nation as its potential enemies. At the same time, they are "the Others" who are included in the Ukrainian identity in a negative way, as nationally unconscious, spiritually "enslaved" Ukrainians.

It is very interesting to compare these arguments with those of the "Russian speakers":

1. Arguments based on similarity and common origins of the Russian and Ukrainian language. Russian language and culture are not foreign to the Ukraine. They became "Ukrainianized" in a positive sense, that is, they became part of

Ukrainian culture in a larger sense. (That is why it sounds so striking that Russian literature will be taught at school as a foreign literature.) Ukrainianized Russian can be considered an independent cultural phenomenon, part of Ukrainian culture, and moreover as a mediator of communication between Russians and Ukrainians who can easily understand each other. We cannot neglect the existence of a "Russian speaking Ukrainian culture" and the shared cultural and language due to the history of both cultures. The Ukrainian people are bilingual and both languages have their common historical roots in Kiev Rus' (the Old Slavonic language). Russian speakers prefer to emphasize the mutual influence of both cultures, sometimes rejecting the very notion of "russification." From their point of view, Soviet policy cannot be considered anti-Ukrainian since the Ukrainian Communist nomenklatura took an active part in these politics; it was mainly anti-democratic. "Russification" is nothing more than an ideological stereotype, so why should it be treated as something different from other cultural influences?

This kind of argumentation, which comes from the ideology of "Slavic brotherhood," proposes a different model of constructing the "Other." It suggests sharing the universal values of "Ukrainianized Russian culture" as a ground for cultural communication, constructing the "Others" as similar to "us," but inevitably eliminating cultural and linguistic differences. A shared past presupposes a shared future, and these paternalistic (or one could call them neo-imperialistic) relations are doomed to be reproduced again and again.

2. The argument of "progress" and "rationalist approach." Russian speakers insist that they represent the interests of the highly developed eastern part of Ukraine, where the main industrial and scientific centers are located. Limitation of the sphere of operation of the Russian language would lead to scientific, industrial and social backwardness. The Russian language has a developed scientific terminology, 80% of library materials are still in Russian, and the publications market is dominated by Russian books. Russian is still the language of international communication in the former USSR, and is one of the most spoken languages in the world. Therefore limiting Russian cannot be considered a rational policy for the future of the Ukrainian nation. Another modification of this kind of argument represents the current language situation in terms of urban-rural relations. The politics of ukrainization can be seen as revenge by the first-generation urbanites, who had been forced to abandon their native Ukrainian in order to adapt to urban life. Now these people constitute the main force interested in the politics of ukrainization.

The progress argument is typical of the classical Western-centered discourse of rationality. We should admit that as long as world dynamics are still being deter-



mined by the logic of modernization and market globalization, this argument is quite powerful. But this mode of constructing the "Others" – as culturally backward people who require the leadership of the superior rationalized culture – reminds one of a well-known Western-centered imperialist attitude. At the same time, this mode of constructing the "Other" reproduces an old urban-rural social split inherited from the Soviet model of catch-up modernization.

From this analysis of arguments we can draw some preliminary conclusions. First, contemporary language politics in Ukraine can be analyzed as a field of political battle for the right to use a new political language: the language of democratic values and human rights. Language politics can be seen as fight for symbolic power, a competition of different interpretations of the key values of democracy. The enormous symbolic power of such kinds of notions and norms was demonstrated during the Kosovo war. But even in peaceful times, being treated as an "oppressed minority" can offer considerable advantages.

Second, the "language debate" is not only about "form," but also about "content." It requires a radical reinterpretation of the Soviet past and Soviet history (and not only Soviet). In the framework of the nationalist project, the Soviet past is inevitably considered as a kind of "shameful spot" on Ukrainian history, as an artificial external interruption of the processes of nation-building. In this debate Ukrainian-speakers use the term "Soviet" as a label for Russian speakers as anti-national and anti-Ukrainian, and Russian-speakers are doomed to use "old-fashioned" versions of Soviet history in order to construct their identity.

Third, what the nationalist project did not take into account is now evident: national culture is not coherent and homogeneous. In independent Ukraine a hierarchy of cultures (and languages) has emerged and Ukrainian has turned out not to be dominant. Here the question of state interference in cultural processes inevitably arises. References to the Ukrainian state are very important in the "language debate." The state is constantly accused by both sides of being bureaucratic, anti-democratic, and even totalitarian for not taking into account the interests of "oppressed groups." And both sides blame the state for representing the interests of nomenklatura capitalism and not paying attention to the issue of language. These appeals to state authorities may also be considered a sign of the weakness of civil society in Ukraine.

Due to the obvious fact that the rhetoric of the language debate in Ukraine is now determined to a significant extent by liberal and democratic discourse, it might be interesting to consider the theoretical debates surrounding concepts of multiculturalism, minority rights, and cultural differences in contemporary political theory.

How can the situation in the field of language politics in the Ukraine be interpreted from this point of view?

*The Contemporary Liberal-Communitarian Debate and "Language Politics" in Ukraine.*

During the last two decades the theory of liberal democracy has been faced with the global challenges of the post-colonial world: mass migration to developed countries, market globalization, and claims for recognition from various ethnic groups and national minorities. The Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka<sup>15</sup> is one of those who try to incorporate the problems of cultural (ethnic, language) difference into the liberal paradigm. It is well-known that in mainstream liberal theory, one of the main mechanisms for accommodating cultural differences is protecting individual civic and political rights. The proponents of this "benign neglect" approach insist on "separation of ethnicity from the state" (as the state has already been separated from religion). Kymlicka argues that this traditional liberal approach based on universal individual rights should be reconsidered in order to accommodate group-specific "community rights." He focuses on three groups of such rights: (1) self-government rights, which are a form of devolving political power to a political unit controlled by the members of a minority; (2) polyethnic rights, which are intended to help minorities to express their cultural differences; (3) special representation rights, which are a response to the systemic disadvantages of some groups in the political process (often connected with the politics of "affirmative action"). Only the third group of rights can be considered as temporary, not the first and second ones, "because the cultural differences they protect are not something we seek to eliminate."<sup>16</sup>

In opposition to proponents of the "benign neglect" approach Kymlicka argues that the state cannot remain ethnically neutral and avoid deciding which culture will be supported (by deciding, for example, the language of public schooling). State interference into these issues is not only unavoidable, but there are even important arguments for it. Kymlicka identifies three main arguments in defense of group-specific rights as a means of accommodating cultural differences: the equality

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<sup>15</sup> Will Kymlicka. "Justice and Minority Rights," in: *Contemporary Political Philosophy. An Anthology*, London 1997.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.

argument, the role of historical agreements, and the value of cultural diversity. The first argument comes from the obvious fact that "some groups are unfairly disadvantaged in the cultural market-place"<sup>17</sup> and vulnerable to majority decisions. The principles of *laissez-faire* in the area of culture are not sufficient from the point of view of ethnic groups and national minorities. The minority should be given the same opportunity to protect its language and societal culture as the majority has. It does not mean, as Kymlicka stresses, the rejection of the very idea of a cultural market-place. "Once the societal cultures of national groups are protected, through language rights and territorial autonomy, then the cultural market-place does have an important role to play in determining the character of the culture."<sup>18</sup> The second argument comes from the fact of historical agreements. Some nations such as Canada were created by such agreements between two or more communities. By determining the terms under which people decided to create a common state, these agreements often give rise to certain group-differentiated rights. For example, Quebecois leaders agreed to join Canada only on condition that jurisdiction over language and education is guaranteed to the provinces. The third argument comes from recognition of the value of cultural diversity. From this point of view not only the national minority, but the whole society benefits from introduction of group-differentiated rights by expanding cultural resources, experience, and quality of life. This argument appeals not to the obligation but also to the interests of the majority. Nonetheless, Kymlicka warns that this argument is more applicable to intracultural than to intercultural diversity, especially if the cultures are totally different. In this case the development of a minority culture does not create more options for members of the majority group and can even have an opposite effect.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, Kymlicka argues that despite some problems, liberal theory "can and should accept a wide range of group-differentiated rights for national minorities and ethnic groups, without sacrificing their core commitments to individual freedom and social equality."<sup>20</sup> One of the main reasons why so few liberals support these

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 370.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>19</sup> In my opinion, besides the equality argument (which is central to the language debate in Ukraine) the cultural diversity argument is also extremely important. The reason is that the Russian and Ukrainian cultures have benefited from each other and created a common cultural heritage which cannot be neglected.

<sup>20</sup> Will Kymlicka, op. cit., p. 380.

rights is that they assume a country contains only one nation. They come from the idea of a nation-state with "shared" cultural language, but in fact most states are multinational or polyethnic.

It is helpful to compare Kymlicka's liberal approach with the ideas of another contemporary Canadian political philosopher, Charles Taylor,<sup>21</sup> who can be identified as a communitarian. Taylor appeals to the value of reciprocal recognition as a main condition for the formation of individual and group identity in modern society. The clash of claims for equality and claims for distinctness determines the contemporary situation because both individuals and social (ethnic) groups struggle for equal recognition of everyone's authenticity. Therefore "difference-blind" liberalism can hardly offer a neutral ground on which people of all cultures can coexist. The key question for Taylor is the question of "survival," for it is exactly this aim which ethnic groups and national minorities are mostly concerned with. Here Taylor's critique of Kymlicka refers to the following argument. Kymlicka is "firmly within the theory of liberal neutrality" when he admits additional resources or rights for disadvantaged groups on the ground that integral and undamaged cultural language is one of the basic human needs. "Kymlicka's reasoning is valid (perhaps) for *existing* people who find themselves trapped within a culture under pressure and can flourish within it or not at all. But it doesn't justify measures designed to ensure survival through indefinite future generations. For the population concerned, however, that is what is at stake."<sup>22</sup> For instance, for the sake of survival of the French-speaking cultural community in Quebec some restrictions were imposed on what are considered to be individual rights: francophones or immigrants cannot send their children to English-language schools, a business with more than fifty employees is required to be run in French. The violation of individual rights in the name of collective goals of survival contradicts the very idea of procedural liberal society (Dworkin), which has no particular substantive view about the ends of life. Taylor insists that it is not just a matter of having the French language available for those who might chose it (it can be ensured by a federal bilingualism policy). "Policies aimed at survival actually seek to *create* members of the community, for instance, for their assuring that future generations continue to identify ... as French-speakers."<sup>23</sup> As Taylor

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* Princeton University Press 1992.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

argues, procedural liberalism, insisting on the uniform application of the rules without exception and being suspicious of collective goals, cannot accommodate the realities of multicultural society which include more than one cultural community that wants to survive.

Let us try to apply this discussion between liberals and communitarians to the contemporary situation in Ukraine. The main peculiarity of this situation is that there are three major linguistic groups based on two languages: Russian-speaking Russians, Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, and Russian-speaking Ukrainians.<sup>24</sup> Ukrainian nationalists usually interpret it in terms of disadvantages of nation-building. For example, Mykola Ryabchuk writes: "The weakest and vaguest sense of national identity is that of the Russophone Ukrainians who are rather 'Ukrainian' in political terms, and rather 'Russian' in terms of culture. Both Ukrainians and Russians compete for the support of this group, and both claim it to be their own. On many levels, this competition looks like a civil 'cold war,' with hardly predictable results."<sup>25</sup> Apparently, this scenario of "cold war" is based on a presumption shared by both liberals (implicitly) and nationalists (explicitly): "since 1991, the Ukrainian nation has existed as a nation-state."<sup>26</sup> The second assumption also suits both liberal modernization theory and nationalism: the Ukrainian nation and national identity is still pre-modern; or, more precisely, the modern Ukrainian nation formed in Western Ukraine coexists with the pre-modern "malorussian" ethnos in Eastern Ukraine, which has not a national, but a "local" (medieval) identity.<sup>27</sup> (But how can one explain in this case that it is precisely "post-modern" nations which now face problems of flourishing of local identities, multiculturalism, and polyethnicity?)

Are these assumptions not based on the implicit idea that Kymlicka mentioned: one state contains one nation? And the second idea: one nation based on one "shared" (homogenized) culture? The mainstream "difference-blind" liberalism criticized by both Kymlicka and Taylor seems to support the position of Ukrainians who recently became a "state-forming" nation. But paradoxically the marriage of

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<sup>24</sup> This idea of three major groups was proposed by Andrew Wilson in: Andrew Wilson, *Ukrainian Nationalism in the 1990s: A Minority Faith*, Cambridge University Press 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Mykola Ryabchuk, *From Malorussia (Little Russia?) to Ukraine: Paradoxes of Late Nation-Building*, Kyiv (Krytyka) 2000, p. 293 (In Ukrainian).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Ukrainian nationalism with liberalism does not look happy. It is rather the Russian-speaking community which tends now to defend liberal principles of the cultural market-place and keep the existing status quo, and it is Ukrainian speakers who insist on an affirmative action policy supporting "state language" and speak about discrimination of the cultural free market. It is even more paradoxical if we recall that it is Russian speakers who are usually accused of having a post-Soviet, post-communist identity. In this situation Russian speakers turn out to be "liberals despite themselves" – by the very logic of nation-state formation. Ukrainian speakers concerned with the creation of the Ukrainian nation are doomed by the same logic to reject the *laissez-faire* principle and turn to other ideas: from affirmative action and "positive discrimination" to the communitarian idea of a common goal of "national survival."

But does it mean that the Russian language still maintains its imperial (or at least dominant) status, as Ukrainian nationalists insist? This question can hardly be answered in essentialist terms. What is obvious now is that it is still uncertain who is a national majority and who is a national minority in Ukraine. As Ryabchuk says, Ukraine can be compared with Canada, but it is still questionable where its Quebec will be: in Eastern or in Western Ukraine. Indeed, the role and position of Russian speaking Ukrainians will be decisive. However, the "cold war" metaphor as the only possible scenario and exit from the current situation should not be accepted. The Russian-speaking community has a decisive role, but not because they should take a pro-Ukrainian or a pro-Russian position. Their role is decisive in the sense that the very destiny of the Ukrainian national project depends on them: Will it be civic or ethnic nationalism? Hospitable to cultural differences or not? Friendly, tolerant, or hostile to the majority of Ukrainian citizens?

The degree of similarity between Russian and Ukrainian, as well as the presence of Russian-speaking Ukrainians as one of the main linguistic groups, can be seen from both perspectives. It can complicate the process of self-determination of Ukrainian as a state language and formation of the Ukrainian nation according to the Eastern European model, but from another perspective it can create opportunities for more inclusive citizenship. Provided that Russian-speaking Ukrainians do not identify themselves with Russia but with the Ukrainian state, the best strategy would be not to impose on them a Ukrainian cultural identity, but strengthen their Ukrainian political identity (also by improving the image of the Ukrainian state through real reforms).

But one should admit that this promising potential (and historical opportunity) is very difficult to realize because Russia remains a very important factor (imagined

or real) in Ukrainian national identity formation. Imagined Russia as an imperial power, which still threatens the very existence of the Ukrainian nation, language, and culture is constructed as the "Other" in opposition to which a "true Ukrainian identity is being formed." Following this logic, the semi-Ukrainian, "pre-modern" identity of Russian-speakers contains dangerous hostile elements. Or more precisely, it turns out to be even more dangerous exactly because of its "half-heartedness" (ethnic Russian do not seem so threatening because they can be easily treated as a "minority"). For Ukraine, Russia is an external, geopolitical, but also internal problem because a significant part of the population is russified: this is how Ryabchuk formulates one of the main fears of Ukrainian nationalism. That is why the "Creolic nationalism" of Russian-speaking Ukrainians can be even more problematic for nation-building processes (as Ukrainian nationalists understand it) than the open pro-Russian orientation.

### *Conclusions*

Ukraine is following the model of nation-building typical for Eastern European countries and particularly countries that emerged after the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, though with a significant delay. By using the historical opportunity of the collapse of the USSR, the ruling elite is trying to establish an ethnocentric state based upon one titular nation (nation-state), an attempt of the sort that has been criticized in contemporary political theory. Although successful nation building is a necessary precondition of Ukraine's integration into the European community, forceful imposition of a narrow Ukrainian identity would contradict contemporary European practice in the sphere of ethnic and language politics. In that case, Ukrainian nationalists would risk finding themselves in opposition to democracy and the ideology of human rights, which have served so well to legitimize the project of the national state. Apparently the attempts of Ukrainian political elites to create the image of a European nation will force them to adopt some elements of multiculturalism. But because the process of nation-building is far from completed, it is difficult to say which group will benefit most from this affirmative action policy. Will this policy serve the interests of national minorities or will it help to establish the cultural (and political) dominance of the "state-forming" nation?

Indeed, Ukraine's policy toward ethnic minorities (Crimean Tatars, Turkish Bulgars (Gagauzy), Poles, and Bulgarians) is considered rather effective and democratic in the region and contributes to the "European" image of the state. It shows

that the issue of Russian language and the rights of Russian speakers is not an issue of ethnic and linguistic minority rights in the Ukraine, but of the very concept of "Ukraineness." Should Ukrainian identity be redefined to include the historical experience, cultural, and linguistic differences of Russian speakers as an integral part of the Ukrainian nation? Or for the sake of "historical justice," should one return to the "original" pure Ukrainian identity, and then how far back in history can this starting point be found?

Due to historical experience, for the majority of the Ukrainian population (except in Western regions) language is not the main issue of national identity, and this situation can be considered favorable to "civic" Ukrainian identity and citizenship. The continuing alienation from Ukrainian language is caused not least by the inability of the ruling elite to cope with social and economic crises, corruption, and political scandals and by a general shift to the formation of a police-bureaucratic state. Until now one positive point has been the broad public consensus on the language issue as an internal affair of Ukrainian society. It was largely shared by the Russian speaking community, except for a few marginal radical pro-Russian organizations. In fact, the failure of some attempts at political mass mobilization around particular linguistic interests of Russian speakers has prevented dangerous political cleavages in a disintegrated society. In the new round of politicization of the "language issue," Russian speakers can appeal not only to Russia, but also to European institutions. This can help to balance the international factors of the "language issue" in the Ukraine, but a lot of work ought to be done by the Ukrainian society itself. And hopefully national identity formation can be influenced more by the fact of a common future instead of a divided historical past.