

Memory and Language

UKRAINE'S DIVERGENT POLICIES ON TWO CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

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Among the many challenges faced by the Ukrainian government after the victory of the Euromaidan, two issues have the highest potential for dividing society and thus weakening the country in its ongoing confrontation with Russia: memory and language. In these two domains, the government has had to reconcile the active minority's call for a radical break with imperial legacies and the majority's call to preserve the existent milieu. Ukrainian activists have been insisting that in view of the war with neoimperial Russia, Ukraine must cut all ties with the Moscow-led "Russian World." However, Kyiv policymakers hold into account that any such policy shifts could impact the loyalty of many citizens who support ideologies and practices brought about by Russian/Soviet imperial rule and which have been maintained during the two-plus decades of half-hearted Ukrainian independence.

Although both memory and language are highly contentious issues, the government chose very different courses for each. It pursued a rather radical nationalist agenda for the memory domain, even though a large part of the population opposed this, particularly those who disapproved of the Euromaidan and resented its consequences. In the language domain, the authorities have largely refrained from making any resolute changes in favor of Ukrainian, mostly out of fear of alienating those who wished to continue relying on Russian. The structural asymmetry of policymaking in the two domains can be explained by political expediency and actors' misperceptions of public preferences.

A Split in Identity Policies

The best-known aspect of post-Euromaidan **memory** policies has been the adoption and subsequent implementation of the so-called de-communization laws. The adoption of

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these laws in April 2015 caused considerable domestic and international controversy. One provision denounced communist (as well as Nazi) ideology and prohibited the “propaganda” of its symbols. Another glorified a long list of “fighters for Ukraine’s independence” and made it a criminal offence to deny the legitimacy of their struggle.

A number of intellectuals, politicians, and activists (in Ukraine and abroad) protested the uncritical embrace of these formations and warned that the imposition of one historical narrative as legally binding could result in limitations on free speech and historical scholarship. They argued that the glorification of World War II Ukrainian nationalists who fought against the Soviet regime but also at times participated in anti-Semitic pogroms and anti-Polish ethnic cleansing, would alienate ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine and harm Ukrainian relations with Poland and other Western partners. Notwithstanding these warnings, President Petro Poroshenko signed the bills into law. In December 2015, the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission announced that the laws were in violation of its standards and called for a revision, but the Ukrainian authorities have not followed its recommendations.

The implementation of the laws included, first and foremost, the removal of monuments and names related to communism. Numerous monuments to Lenin and other communist figures were toppled in the central, southern, and eastern regions of the country (they were removed from the western regions in the 1990s). The names of streets, town squares, villages, etc., across the country were changed from communist names to neutral names or names linked to new nationalist narratives of Ukrainian history (often as a way to propose continuity between the past and present anti-Russian struggles).

If local councils did not change names from the ground up, the parliament would impose changes by fiat, which sometimes provoked protests from conservative residents. In addition, the law on the prohibition of communist propaganda provided legal ground for the ban of the Communist Party, which the Ministry of Justice initiated in 2014 due to the party’s involvement in separatist activities. The court’s verdict in December 2015 ultimately outlawed the party, leading to the reconfiguration of Ukraine’s electoral field.

In contrast, there has been no consistent policy in the **language** domain. If anything, the government refrained from resolute action, most likely out of fear of alienating Russian-speakers who, it was believed, would oppose the active promotion of Ukrainian because it would lead to the curtailing of the use of Russian. After an unfortunate attempt immediately after President Viktor Yanukovich’s political demise to revoke the supposedly Russification-oriented language law that he had insisted on adopting in 2012 for electoral purposes, the post-Euromaidan leadership seemed to conclude that that law was there to stay because abolishing it would ignite a political confrontation playing into Kremlin hands. The Ukrainian Constitutional Court, which is dependent on

and usually honors requests from the presidential administration, refused to consider, for more than two years, an appeal made by Ukrainian-language supporters to annul the law. In recent months, the court finally started hearing the appeal but it has not yet delivered a verdict. In the meantime, Ukraine's parliament has refrained from adopting a new language law to replace Yanukovich's discredited one. It is only very recently that several bills were submitted by pro-Ukrainianization parliamentary deputies but it is far from certain if any of them will become a law.

The Ukrainian government was reluctant to revise laws or executive provisions regulating language use in particular areas, even those where the situation of the titular language was particularly worrisome. Two legislative provisions that the parliament did adopt by no means resulted from any comprehensive program of Ukrainianization, even if their passing demonstrated the considerable weight of Ukrainian-language supporters in the parliament. The first was the new Law on Civil Service that was adopted in December 2015 and which stipulates that civil servants are obliged to master the state language (Ukrainian) and use it when on duty. While seemingly trivial, the confirmation of the exclusive role of the state language in the public sector demonstrated the prevalence of supporters of Ukrainian over those deputies who wanted the new act to reflect the 2012 law provision allowing the use of so-called regional languages (meaning first and foremost Russian) alongside the state language. Because the newly adopted civil service law excluded the use of Russian, it presented a challenge to many public servants who primarily rely on Russian in their work and to those with low proficiency (or low esteem) of Ukrainian. It remains to be seen how strictly the law will be implemented, but based on previous experience (pre-and post-Euromaidan), it does not bode well for actually expanding the usage of Ukrainian.

Second, amendments were made to Ukraine's broadcasting law that took effect in November 2016. The law requires radio stations to play 35 percent of their songs in the titular language, a move intended to remedy its nearly complete marginalization (by Russian) in this domain. Although the champions of Ukrainian language overcame resistance from the "radio lobby" that argued there were simply not enough Ukrainian-language songs to fill the 35 percent quota, the adopted law turned out to be less ambitious and have less impact than originally planned. The amendment only covers radio and not television. Television remains the most popular information source in Ukraine and the Russian language prevails, particularly during prime time.

It is clear that the status and use of the titular language has not considerably improved since the Euromaidan, notwithstanding the new government's declarative support for its development, which differs markedly from Yanukovich's focus on the rights of Russian-speakers.

Why the Different Approaches?

Although many in the Ukrainian government think that the differing state approaches about memory and language reflect the attitudes of the population toward the two issues, in fact, both are contentious to roughly the same degree. In both cases, the general population is divided over the appropriateness of radical change, though the pro-Euromaidan segment predominantly supports a resolute course. A nationwide survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in September 2014 (half a year after the Euromaidan) revealed that 39 percent of the entire sample “fully agreed” or “rather agreed” that “Ukraine must be cleansed of symbols of the Soviet past,” while 33 percent resolutely or hesitantly disagreed.² Among respondents who indicated a “positive” or “rather positive” attitude toward the Euromaidan (just over half of the sample), the level of agreement with the above statement was as high as 64 percent, and disagreement was as low as 13 percent. Similarly, while 33 percent of all respondents indicated a generally positive attitude toward the WWII Ukrainian Insurgent Army (one of the most controversial entities on the list of “fighters for Ukraine’s independence” in the 2015 law), in the pro-Euromaidan subsample, this share amounted to 60 percent.

On the language issue, based on the same survey, while 40 percent of all respondents wanted Ukrainian to be used “more than now” and 50 percent would rather keep its scope “same as now,” for the Euromaidan supporters the respective figures were 64 percent and 33 percent, a clear preference for change. In the entire sample, 46 percent believed that the primary task of state language policy was to promote the expansion of Ukrainian in all social domains, while 34 percent wanted the state to “resolve” the issue of the status of Russian (which in the Ukrainian context means “enhance” rather than “downgrade”). In contrast, the pro-Euromaidan segment clearly preferred the promotion of Ukrainian, with 70 percent for it versus 14 percent for “resolving” the issue. On some aspects of state policy, the pro-Ukrainianization attitude prevailed in the sample as a whole. For example, 59 percent agreed that public servants were obliged to answer in Ukrainian (at least to citizens addressing them in Ukrainian) and a further 23 percent preferred the obligation to be limited to territories with a Ukrainian-speaking majority.

Part of the reason why post-Euromaidan Ukrainian political parties do not respond to the pro-Ukrainianization attitude of their constituencies is that they misinterpret what the public prefers, probably because they get caught up in noisy discourses rather than focusing on sociological data (which reveal public opinion). This is demonstrated by the occasional statements of politicians, and is confirmed in my interviews with several political consultants working with coalition parties. Influential policymakers tend to

² The survey was funded by a grant from the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta. All figures in the text are based on the author’s analysis of the raw data.

believe that the current laissez-faire policy approach better reflects the preferences of the Ukrainian population in general (and the pro-Euromaidan segment) and that the aggressive promotion of Ukrainian would provoke discontent among Russian-speakers. While accepting the argument of some popular bloggers that insistence on the exclusive use of Ukrainian amounts to disrespect for Russian-speaking patriots defending Ukraine in the Donbas, these policymakers downplay the counter-argument of Ukrainian-speakers who find the continued prevalence of the former imperial language unacceptable, particularly in view of Ukraine's current war with neoimperial Russia.

Looking at social media (Facebook) discussions about language and memory policies in Ukraine, for pro-Euromaidan writers (often highly educated and politically active urbanites), language does seem to be more contentious than memory. Most discussants support a somewhat radical break with the Soviet past, not least because the "Russian World" continually and aggressively asserts its continuity in the Ukrainian region (and often beyond). The apparent difference between the two domains hides both the strong preference for some kind of Ukrainianization, at least among Euromaidan supporters, and the considerable opposition to de-communization among other segments of the population.

This misperception of public preferences explains why Ukraine's new government has not initiated any substantive changes in language policy, limiting its support for the titular language to the declarative appreciation of its symbolic value and the endorsement of its exclusive legal status. In a bit of a twist, Poroshenko has placed emphasis on the importance of English, declaring it the main language of opportunity and therefore a language worth actively learning and using. Prominent figures in the government do not usually publicly object to initiatives calling for the expansion of Ukrainian because they do not want to be seen as indifferent to the national language, which could tarnish their reputations. Such was the case with the law introducing language quotas for music on radio stations (a project initiated by language activists and Ukrainian musicians); it was eventually supported by all coalition factions in the post-Euromaidan government.

In view of the lukewarm attitudes of political actors toward the language issue, their pursuance of a consistent memory policy is assisted by the government's designated body that was set up to deal with this domain: the National Institute of National Memory, which is charged with both the elaboration of legislation and supervision of its implementation. In contrast, language policy was assigned to several agencies whose leaders have different views on the topic and about what priority it should be on the government agenda. While this structural asymmetry existed long before the Euromaidan, the new government gave the memory domain a boost when it appointed Volodymyr Viatrovysh, an energetic manager and staunch supporter of the nationalist narrative, as the National Institute's director. He thus became the main driving force of the adoption and implementation of de-communization laws and other memory-related

legislation. It would take great effort, and the government obviously did not consider it necessary, to create a special agency for language matters.

Conclusion

It is too early to tell whether the difference between the Ukraine government's courses on memory and language is igniting a conflict between groups that hold opposing views or whether it serves to dampen their viewpoints. While social network discussions vividly demonstrate incompatible positions and heated emotions, they cannot be taken as a reliable indicator of public opinion, and no comparative survey data on popular attitudes to state policies in the two domains is available. So far, political forces seeking to mobilize their constituencies against the incumbent government have not utilized these issues. They prefer, for the time being, to focus their criticism about low living standards and the unabated war in Donbas. It remains to be seen whether memory and language will reemerge in future electoral campaigns in the same way the issues were featured in confrontations between rival elites following the Orange Revolution.

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