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## The Problem of a National Identity: Should Language Be a Trump Card in State-Making?

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Among the key problems that new states and states-in-the-making face today is that of a national identity. Should it be ethnic or civic, based on common history, political traditions or language and culture? Should the identity be defined geographically or genealogically? Should *jus soli* or *jus sanguinis* be defined as the foundation of citizenship claims?

National values mirror the political, social and ethnic history of the people. When people are united by a mutually comprehensible language, common traditions and customs, collective consciousness and shared identity, we see their collective culture in terms of ethnicity. When common political traditions and histories prevail over the “voice of blood,” we are talking about political nationalism, or national identity based on civic, rather than ethnic values. The tag-of-war between the two concepts of nationhood — one civic and another ethnic — has been going on since at least the early XIXth century. In the writings of Johann Gottfried von Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s *Addresses to the German Nation* the notion of a nation as *Volks*, or a genealogical unity delineated by blood ties is coming strong in opposition to the cosmopolitan ideas of British- and French-influenced republicanism.

The main manifestation of genealogical unity, according to Fichte, is language. “Those who speak the same language,” — preaches Fichte in

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the Thirteenth Address, — “are joined to each other by a multitude of invisible bonds by nature herself, long before any human art begins . . . ,” and because the bonds of language, as the bonds of blood, are primary and immutable, the nationhood can only rest on them, and not on some other artificial construct: “Thus was the German nation placed — sufficiently united within itself by a common language and a common way of thinking, and sharply enough severed from the other peoples — in the middle of Europe, as a wall to divide races not akin” (Fichte, 1808).

Therefore, a particular language, according to Fichte, becomes a substitute for blood ties — the main representative of a vitality of a nation and its right to be considered as such amongst other nations and states of the day. In ethnic nationalist pronouncements, the ethnic language, or a dialect, or anything spoken that distinguishes the current group from the others, becomes the main, if not the only, determinant of a nation — a trump card for the claims of national identity and, consequently, a trump card for the right of national determination, together with its common concomitant — the construction of a sovereign, separate state.

As Eli Kedourie (2004: 58) observed,

This theory has had immense political consequences. The world is a world of diversity, and humanity is divided into nations. Language is the external and visible badge of those differences that distinguish one nation from another; it is the most important criterion by which a nation is recognized to exist, and to have the right to form a state on its own.

Thus, ethnic nationalism is inescapably tied to the prioritization, if not idolatry, of a “true” language of the land; in other words, the predominant language of a particular community at the present stage in its history. By contrast, civic nationalism, also known as patriotism, relies less on language and culture and more on a common sense of shared citizenship, civic duty and political allegiance to the state. In Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “civic profession of faith” we see the roots of this doctrine, as nationalism itself appears as a political doctrine, dependent on the “will

of the people.” According to Hans Kohn’s (2005: 249) reading, for Rousseau, “the nation and the nation-state were nothing ‘natural’ or ‘organic,’ but a product of the will of individuals . . . men united as a nation by free declaration.” Hence, the two types of nationalism, popularized in Hans Kohn’s writings as the civic and the ethnic, have very different views on the relationship between the nation, on the one hand, and the nation’s language and genealogy, on the other hand. For ethnic nationalists, a nation is based on the right of blood, *jus sanguinis*, and the main manifestation of national belonging is a particular language of the group. For civic nationalists, a nation is based on the free choice of individuals inhabiting a particular territory, on *jus soli*, rather than *jus sanguinis*. The national belonging comes from a sense of commonality based on common history and good-neighbourly relations within a community that may speak more than one language. There is nothing predestined about the nationhood; it has to be co-created through joint efforts by various groups and individuals occupying the same stretch of land together.

The battle between two notions of nationalism and national identity continues to this day. In western scholarship, it became customary to associate the tradition of civic nationalism with western democracies, while ethnic nationalism has been considered an abode of late developers in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. There have been also some attempts to reconcile the two, including the idea of the concocted nature of the very idea of “civic nationalism.” In the next section we will look at the arguments of those opposing the division between the two types of nationalism based on the premise that the ethno-linguistic core of a nation is inescapably present in any modern “civic” nation.

### **Ethnic and civic factors in statehood and nationality**

In Taras Kuzio’s (2002) article “The myth of the civic state: a critical survey of Hans Kohn’s framework for understanding nationalism” the author makes the claim that the division of nationalism into its “ethnic” and “civic” varieties has been essentially wrong, as all modern states combine the two elements together and progress from the predominantly

particularist, culturalist and, yes, xenophobic and inherently racist variety to the more universalist, liberal and inclusive variety of predominantly political, civic-based nationalism. Allegiance to democracy and belief in civic values, claims the author, can go together with ethnic nationalism and racism, and states can revert to their earlier, ethno-centered, pre-civic phases of development during times of crisis.

The postcommunist East is basically the same as the West, states Kuzio, taking an aim at the criticism of the postcommunist “nationalizing policies” by such scholars as Rogers Brubaker or Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan. Hence, the newly independent states in Eastern Europe, whether or not they are adopting homogenizing policies, “are merely mirroring the examples set by the West from the eighteenth century onwards” (Kuzio, 2002: 32). Since the West is seen as a paragon of humanity, in Kuzio’s thinking repetition of the West’s darker ages should excuse forceful assimilation of the national minorities in postcommunist Europe today. Furthermore, “few national groups voluntarily assimilated from the eighteenth century and the majority of civic states pursued homogenizing policies until the 1960s” (Kuzio, 2002: 31). And if they could do it then, so can modern Estonia and Latvia, Poland and Hungary, Ukraine and Romania.

After proclaiming the idea of a modern civic state a “myth” the author utters what sounds like a practical-political device to the ethno-culturally homogenizing, yet somehow “civic” and “liberal-democratic” implicit racists of our times: “Evolution from ethnic to civic nationalism is only likely to take place after the core ethnic group is self-confident within its own bounded territory to open the community to ‘outsiders’ from other ethnic groups” (Kuzio, 2002: 36). Before that, a section of the article has been devoted to the detailed description of imperialist, colonialist and genocidal policies of the West that made its cultural “self-confidence” possible: from the overseas colonial pursuits and slave trade to the extermination of Native Americans to the assault on political and civic rights of the US black population in the post-war period. If this is advice that politicians in newly independent states are to follow, the future of these countries is very bleak indeed.

What is wrong with this argument? While the idealization of Kohn's framework and the uncritical assumption of the validity of the geographical division of Europe in the north-western area of "good" civic nationalism and the central-eastern area of "bad" ethnic nationalism are both good targets for criticism, this does not justify the wholesale abandonment of the dichotomy that proved itself, time and again, quite useful in our understanding of the ideal-typical varieties of state- and nation-building and the corresponding real-world policies that actually conform to this or that type as described.

While the reality of the civic state is more complex than its ideal-typical model, such states do exist in today's world. They are based on inclusiveness, the promotion of inter-ethnic peace and tolerance, the acceptance of immigrants and respect of the culture or cultures of "outsiders," to use Kuzio's terminology, which the state by its various policies attempts to reconcile with the culture of the majority. Conversely, the ethnically exclusivist, culturally chauvinistic and discriminatory attitudes toward minorities also exist today, and represent a growing challenge to the ideals of civically inclusive, culturally accommodationist liberal democracy. Waiting until these chauvinistic states and polities naturally grow into more civic (or civilized) ones after finally getting "self-confident within their own bounded territory" means tolerating human rights abuses for an indefinite period of time. Encouraging, under the pretense of sage understanding, the reverse movement of a modern civic state back to its earlier "ethnic base" in times of crisis cannot but bring to mind memories of the solutions adopted in inter-war Europe in such countries as Germany, Italy, or Hungary, or, in the post-war period, in apartheid South Africa.

The falsity of Kuzio's argument becomes even more pronounced if one considers nations where no "core ethnic group" can be easily identified, or nations with two or more core ethnic groups sharing the same territory for substantial periods of history. The "core" ethnic group's "own bounded territory" is much more a mythological construct than the idea of a civic state. Are core ethnic groups in the USA, Canada or Australia aboriginals or European settlers? Is Scotland part of the "own

bounded territory” of the English nation? What do we consider a “core ethnic group” in Catalonia: Spaniards or Catalans? Who are the outsiders in Belgium — the Flemish or the Vallon? The thesis of all civic states having an ethno-cultural core fails to emphasize profound differences between policies building the nation predominantly on the basis of an all-encompassing political, civil community versus their opposite — policies attempting to build the nation by elevating one of its ethnic constituents over the rest of society. It also fails to acknowledge that an ethnic nation is as much a product of social construction as a political nation, and the judgement of which ethnic group is “core” and which is not is far less obvious than ethnic primordialists of all sorts would like us to believe.

### **Is language the core of national identity?**

People who believe in the inseparable bond between the nation and one “core,” “titular” ethnicity are obviously living in a dream world, or in the past, depending on one’s perspective. Before the start of globalization, there were very few mono-ethnic nations in the world remaining. These days, with the sole exception of North Korea, there are none. All countries have minorities. According to the United Nations Guide for Minorities, minorities constitute between 10 and 20 percent of the world population, or up to 1.2 billion people. Most countries are also multilingual, either officially or as a matter of fact.

This poses the question, what is the role of language in the constitution of a national identity? Is it an absolute condition of success for a nation-building project today to have one dominant language for a state? Some people say, yes. Appearing recently on National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition,” syndicated columnist and twice-presidential candidate Pat Buchanan claimed the following: “Anybody that believes that a country can be maintained that has no ethnic core to it or no linguistic core to it, I believe is naive in the extreme” (NPR, 2016).

However, language is an elusive entity. A compendium of the world’s languages called *Ethnologue* now lists 7,097 languages in the world. Ten years ago, there were 6,912 “living languages.” At the turn of the cen-

tury, there were 6,809; in 1992, the number was 6,528; and in 1969, only 4,493 (Lewis et al., 2016; Erard, 2005). How to explain this growth against the fact that, as all linguistic experts know, near a dozen languages disappear off the face of the Earth every year? One fourth of the world's languages are now considered seriously endangered, and more than 400 languages have already died since 1970 (Vidal, 2014). At the same time, more and more languages are being added to the compendium.

There are two explanations. First, not all of the existing languages have been studied in detail, and, as they are, the compendium will continue to grow. Second, new languages are being born and claimed as their own by populations that were indistinguishable from some “ethnic core” with an already established language only yesterday. The reason for such a development is simple: as long as language remains a key qualifier for nationhood, there will be those who would like to claim a separate language status in the hope of carving out a separate state for themselves from the existing political entities on the map. After all, language is a malleable thing. A Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich once said: “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” The OECD experts agree, observing that, technically speaking, there is no difference between a language and a dialect: “the distinction is of a political nature” (Della Chiesa, Scott & Hinton, 2012: 19).

A case in point is the situation with the successor states of the former Yugoslavia. Until the division of the Yugoslav federation, most of its population spoke Serbo-Croatian. After the emergence of an independent Croatia, the Croatian language was claimed to be separate from the Serbian. Earlier, the only difference between the two was the use of different scripts: Cyrillic in Serbia, and Latin in Croatia. The vocabulary was essentially the same. Only after the collapse of Yugoslavia and the internecine wars of independence did two separate languages — Serbian and Croatian — emerge. The deliberate work on separating the two newly born languages' vocabularies continues at present. The same is true for the Bosnian language, which was only standardized in the 1990s — 2000s, and predominantly for political reasons. Based on one of the

dialects of Serbo-Croatian, the Bosnian language employs a variety of Turkish, Arabic, and Persian loan words.

The Macedonian language is another case in point. It emerged as a separate language only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was codified in 1945. The difference between Macedonian and Bulgarian, on the one side, and Macedonian and Serbian, on the other side, is not yet fully clear. Until 1945, Macedonians were considered Bulgarians in Bulgaria, Serbs in Yugoslavia and “Slavic-speaking Greeks” in Greece. Bulgaria still considers local Macedonians as Bulgarians, thus denying them the status of a minority. In Greece, the Macedonian language was long outlawed, and, although not outlawed today, is not officially recognized. The language is still characterized by a variety of local dialects, and socialization of the majority into one standard version is an ongoing business. So is the creation of a national literature. Accepted norms of literacy allow for certain variation. Finally, the language territory of the Macedonian language is wider than the territory of the FYROM (“Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” — a new term that is officially used nowadays by many international organizations): Macedonian dialects are found in the south of Albania and the north of Greece, while clearly separating them from the neighboring Bulgarian and Serbian vernaculars appears near impossible (Shirokova & Gudkov, 1977: 333–335).

At the time of codification, the so-called ethnic Macedonian language existed only in the form of local dialects and professional jargons, with perhaps a few zones of common language emerging around notable cities. There was practically no literature in Macedonian, and different scripts were used for written communication. It was only when the People’s Republic of Macedonia was created as part of the former Yugoslavia that one standard Macedonian language started being taught in schools, and used in official communication and news media. Numerous classes of standardized Macedonian were open for the general public, in parallel with new Macedonian radio stations, newspapers, theatres and the like. In the late 1960s, the government opened the first-ever Macedonian TV channel, and in 1968 the local Orthodox church was encouraged to conduct its liturgies in Macedonian (Usikova, 2005: 102–105).

Clearly, in such cases as the Croatian, Bosnian or Macedonian languages, it was not the language that served as a foundation of national identity; rather, it was the creation of the separate nation state that pushed the separation of the newly formed languages from the pre-existing common vernacular. In other words, Romantic notions notwithstanding, the nation state does not “naturally grow” from the primordial ethno-linguistic identities that have to be somehow accommodated politically. Historically and logically, the process develops the opposite way: it is the state that decides which of the pre-existing linguistic and ethnic groups to claim as “its own” and which to abandon or marginalize as “minorities.”

Going back to Yugoslavia, as it emerged after World War II, the eponymous federal republic comprised six national units: Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia included two autonomous regions populated largely by Albanians (Kosovo) and Hungarians (Voivodina). Bosnia and Herzegovina was in a category of its own, as it was the only one founded not on the basis of ethnic, let alone linguistic, distinctiveness, but based exclusively on the tradition of historical geography, i.e. on the lands that once constituted a province of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The creation of Bosnia and Herzegovina pursued a concrete political aim: to form a new nation out of local Turkized Serbs, ingraining them with the stable self-identification as “non-Serbs,” as Muslims. In the process, the very notion of “Muslimness” in this part of the world had been transformed into a designation not so much religious but ethnic *par excellence*, which it remains today.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is unique in the sense that this is perhaps the only place on Earth where an external religion imposed by foreign conquerors became the name of a newly created ethnic group. After the 1971 census in the former Yugoslavia “Muslims” became an ethnonym. The Muslim “ethnicity” is treated as such, as an ethnicity, in modern Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Muslims became a state-forming “nation” of an independent state. From this moment on, and quite expectedly, local pundits have been occupied with the task of “proving”

the uniqueness and independence of a separate “Bosnian language,” which in reality is nothing more than, at most, a Serbian dialect infused with few Arabic, Turkic and Persian words. Those were borrowed out of necessity to introduce a religious lexicon and the terminology necessary to practice Islam. However, the addition of a few words does not create a new language, different from the one it was before the adoption of a new religion. For example, the Russian language did not grow into some form of Greek after Eastern Slavs adopted Eastern Orthodox Christianity, even though its lexicon was significantly enriched with borrowed Greek terminology. By the same token, when Poles accepted Catholicism, they did not start using Latin in their day-to-day communication.

What the Yugoslav examples show is that ethnicity is often defined artificially, by state fiat. The language that the state chooses as the marker of state-bearing nation may not be even used by that nation at the time. The example of Hebrew, deliberately revived by the state of Israel, comes to mind here. The choice of this or that language as an official language of the state is not predetermined by any “objective” factors, but rather contingent on many historically unique twists and turns that bring a particular political clique into a position of power in this or that country, forcing it to choose its allies and designate its enemies based on any number of provisional characteristics, language included. Thus, a group that eventually appears as ethnic “majority” may not have been necessarily the most numerous or the most “authentic” local group at the beginning of the state-building project: its “authenticity” and “majority” status itself may well be a product of a deliberate ethno-political design by the so-called “nationalizing” state.

The relationship between a particular language and the state is often precarious: on the one hand, the officialization of the language eases the job of governance and streamlines administration; but on the other hand, in a de-facto multiethnic country privileging one language over the rest always carries with it a risk of alienating a sizeable group of the population. It is equally precarious to attempt a reversal of the already completed or near-completed language shift: once the community had

already switched, in predominant numbers, to the daily use of another language, appeals to historical memory and ethnic pride might be successful in steering some cultural sentimentality, yet damaging and disruptive if the majority of the population, now settled in its new linguistic identity, is forced to switch back to the language of their ancestors. The predominant use of English in modern Ireland is one case in point, and the predominant use of Russian in Belarus is another. In these, and many other similar cases, the decline of aboriginal languages, sad as it might be, would be impossible to reverse nation-wide without substantial social dislocation.

Forceful imposition of one state language on a bi-ethnic, bilingual, or multilingual society can be successful only under one of two conditions: it must be either a language of an absolute majority of the population, and evenly spread across the country, or a language of a determinate, politically predominant group capable of crushing the other groups' resistance and supporting the imposition of the language with a variety of strictly observed rewards to supporters and sanctions on non-compliers. In the absence of a natural ethnic predominance or an effective political diktat, the bilingual society is better governed on the basis of two state languages — cf. Canada, Finland, Kazakhstan or Sri Lanka — and the multilingual state would naturally gravitate toward a language-based federation — a model implemented in Belgium, India, Russia or Switzerland.

If a multiethnic population is forced to deal with the imposition of a sole state/national language that is not backed by either predominant numbers or predominant force, the state is bound to collapse or yield to the forces of ethnic separatism, which has been demonstrated on a number of occasions in various parts of the world. The most recent example of such failure is the civil war in Ukraine, which will serve as our case study for the next section of the article.

### **Ethnicity and language in Ukraine**

The significance of the ethnic factor in Ukraine's politics was defined by the country's multi-ethnic, multicultural composition and the co-

existence of two ethno-linguistic communities of relatively equal strength — the Russian-speaking (Russophone) and the Ukrainian-speaking (Ukrainophone) population. The ethnic and linguistic divisions in Ukraine have never coincided perfectly: in addition to the Ukrainophone Ukrainians and the Russophone Russians there were millions of Russian-speaking Ukrainians and representatives of other groups, as well as a not negligible group of Ukrainian-speaking Russians.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Ukraine was home to a 11.35 million strong Russian diaspora, which represented more than 22 percent of the population. Many other people considered Russian language and culture as their own, and more than 50 percent of the population used Russian in their day-to-day communication (Arel and Khmelko, 1996). In this situation, it would be natural for Ukraine's ruling class to choose the pathway of development based on a recognition of two ethno-linguistic nations — Ukrainian and Russian — inhabiting the territory of the same country. Such a course might have led to the creation of a federal Ukraine or could be based on a unitary model with large autonomous rights for the oblasts, but most importantly, it would acknowledge both the Russian and Ukrainian languages as official languages of the state. The Russophones would be allowed to preserve their language, culture and ties to the historic homeland, while the Ukrainophones would find new sources of pride in being an eponymous state-bearing nation fully benefitting from the affirmative action policies of the new regime.

Two famous examples immediately come to mind as good and influential precedents: the Swiss Confederation and Canada. Among the four national languages of Switzerland — German, French, Italian and Romansh — the last is almost unspoken these days but still preserves its official status, mostly as a sort of historical heritage. Geographically speaking, on Swiss soil the German region is mostly spread in the east, north and center, the French in the west, and the Italian in the south, but such stratification has no influence on their equal status at the national level. The same situation can be seen in Canada, where English and French both have official federal status and coexist on all levels of legislation and in governmental services.

Unfortunately, this course of action was not chosen in Ukraine. The central executive and the parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, though indecisive on economic reform and human rights issues, emerged united in their desire to relegate Ukraine's Russians to second-rate citizens' status.

The Ukrainian communists-turned-nationalists had several constituencies to please. First and foremost, postcommunist nationalism was the local cadres' affirmation of their right to do what they please with the territory that fell into their lap almost by default through the collapse of the central authority in Moscow. What Mikhail Gorbachev called the "parade of sovereignties" was simply a reconsolidation of the local oligarchy's grip on power, capital, and resources that they were originally authorized to manage on behalf of the center.

Secondly, post-independence administrations had to deal with a nationalist opposition and decided to steal their slogans and platforms. Democratization was dangerous to the power of the oligarchy, while Ukrainianization was not. The promise of a Russophone Ukrainian nation was sacrificed to the ambitions of the powerful who also wanted to be rich and rule unchallenged.

Thirdly, Ukraine's government soon found itself subservient to the Ukrainian nationalist diaspora in the West. Diaspora returnees and influencers from abroad invested significant resources in rewriting the history of Ukraine as a history of constant victimization at the hands of the "Russian enemy." This invented history completely ignored the well known facts of the successful co-optation of the Ukrainian elites by both the Russian empire and the USSR, and the state's encouragement of the decades-long Ukrainianization campaign in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic from the 1920s to 1930s and then again from the 1950s to 1960s.

Nonetheless, Ukrainianization notwithstanding, by the mid-1990s, the Russian language was the preferred means of communication for close to 60% of the population, including more than 17 million Ukrainians. While Ukrainian-language classes at schools were scarcely populated, the Russian-language schools had waiting lists. The three major ethno-linguistic groups in Ukraine at the time were Ukrainophone Ukrainians (40%), Russophone Ukrainians (33–34%) and Russophone Russians (20–

21%) (Arel and Khmelko 1996: 86).

Linguistic divisions overlapped with territorial: most Russian speakers lived in Ukraine's east and south, while the western regions of Galicia and Volhyn have been historically devoid of any significant Russian influence. There is little wonder that the language question became a staple in Ukraine's electoral cycle (Molchanov 2002: 227–230; Wolczuk 2014). Election after election, people voted in large numbers for closer ties to Russia and Belarus, and for giving the Russian language an official status, while nationalist elites and their more radical constituencies did everything in their power to thwart these aspirations.

Federalism could be one way to solve the problem. It could mean Ukraine's opting for closer affiliation with both the EU and the Eurasian Union, providing a sort of a bridge between the two. Instead, authorities in Kiev chose the path of cultural assimilation and discrimination against the Russian-speaking population, while promoting Galicia-based Ukrainianness for the whole country. Ukraine's "European choice" was couched as an anti-Russian project. The ruling elite's insecurity was at the bottom of a decision that split Ukraine apart.

The so-called Maidan revolution of February 2014 threw out the notoriously corrupt President Viktor Yanukovich and erased the legislative legacy of his administration. The country's moderate political and economic ties to Russia that Yanukovich had supported fell victim to the process. So did his party's attempts to support the language rights of Russian speakers in the areas of their condensed settlement. A choice of anti-Russian nationalism as a state-building platform broke Ukraine's cautious attempts to steer a middle-of-the-road course between Russia and the West. The Poroshenko government followed the Western lead and sought to demonstrate its loyalty to the West primarily by loud anti-Russian rhetoric and anti-Russian culturally assimilationist policies at home. Ukraine's association with the European Union was conceived and implemented in a way that has been harmful to Russia's economic interests, while plans to open up to NATO's presence on Ukrainian soil represent a direct security threat that no government in Moscow would be able to ignore.

Over the last two years, Ukraine's assault on the Russian language, culture and history has been simply unprecedented and can only be compared with the traditionally Russophobic policies of the Baltic states. Ukraine's predominantly Russian-speaking South and South-East justifiably fear the rise of Ukrainian ethnonationalist fascism, personified in the spectacular promotion of the Right Sector guerrilla commanders to positions of national political significance. One of the first laws of the new government prohibited the use of Russian in the areas of Russian minority concentration; all communication now had to be conducted in Ukrainian. The Russian language has been squeezed out from schools, radio and TV networks. Pro-Russian demonstrations are suppressed, even as Ukrainian nationalists are free to occupy government buildings, intimidate judges and dump legislators they dislike into the garbage bins. While some of the key figures of Mr. Yanukovych's old elite were assassinated in the first months after the revolution, others chose to emigrate, fearing for their lives.

All of this set the stage for the secession of Crimea, much helped by the presence of Russia's forces there and swiftly embraced by Russian legislators. The South-East (Donbass) secessionists were thwarted by Ukraine's armed forces, leading to a protracted civil war in the industrial heartland of the country. Once again, Donbass separatists drew on significant Russian supplies of money, weapons, volunteers, and military advisers.

The current situation has been characterized by ethnic animosity, whipped up by Ukraine's state-owned and private, yet affiliated with the government, TV channels. After the start of a war against the pro-Russian separatists in Donbas by the Poroshenko government, the 'othering' of Russia has been elevated to new heights. Russophobic and not infrequently racist pronouncements typically characterise speeches of the right-wing nationalist groups, such as the proto-fascist Svoboda ('Freedom') party, the Right Sector, the Patriot of Ukraine, the Ukrainian National Assembly-Ukrainian National Self Defense (UNA-UNSO), the Stepan Bandera 'Trident' ('Tryzub') and others. The leader of Ukraine's Radical Party, Oleh Lyashko, demanded that 'Moscow invaders and

their accomplices' be executed by hanging (Baltija.eu, 2014; Lozovy, 2014). The website of 'Tryzub' carries an appeal to 'dam the Kryvyi Rih quarries with corpses of the moskali (Banderivec n.d.), while the website of UNA-UNSO promises to dump the bodies of dead Russians into the Kerch Strait until such time that they form a bridge to 'reunite Kuban with Ukraine' (UNA-UNSO n.d.).

The Ukrainian ethnonationalist militias, e.g. the Azov battalion, whose members also brandish Nazi and SS insignia, have been at the forefront of the war with the Donbass separatists. For many of them, the war is nothing else than an implementation of the 'Ukrainian racial social-nationalism,' which, among other things, demands 'the racial cleansing of the nation' (Biletskiy n.d.). Ethnic Ukrainians, as Mr. Biletskiy says, form 'one of the biggest and one of the very best kind' parts of the 'European White Race — the Creator of a great civilisation and the highest human achievements.' The 'historical mission' of the Ukrainian nation, he goes, is 'to lead the White Peoples of the world in a final crusade for their survival — a crusade against the Semite-led subhumanity' (Biletskiy n.d.). The recent absorption of the Azov battalion into the ranks of the National Guard of Ukraine and Biletskiy's promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel both show Kiev's tolerance, if not acceptance, of the neo-Nazi pronouncements of its armed supporters.

### **Who plays the language trump card in Ukraine**

These days, Russophobic attitudes in Ukraine are *de rigueur*. As soon as the Donbass Russophone separatists proved themselves capable of resisting the onslaught of Ukraine's regular army, top politicians in Kiev have never stopped, referring to them as "non-humans" (former Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk went further with his "subhumans" and "filth" statement). In the Ukrainian nationalist view, Russians are "not a people, but a rabble;" Putin is a "d—head"<sup>‡</sup>; and the people who insist on their right to maintain a separate Russian ethnic identity in Ukraine

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‡ That figure of speech was used by then-Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Andrii Deshchytzia, on June 14, 2014 in front of video cameras and widely shared across the Internet.

are “bastards,” “imbeciles,” “potato beetles,” “cockroaches” and the like. Official Kiev accordingly denies these people any roots in their local soil or history (Molchanov 2015).

Yet only recently the Ukrainian and Russian peoples were considered “brotherly nations,” a substantial part of the population of Ukraine wanted to live in the same state with Russia, and a favorable opinion of Russia and the Russians was voiced by four out of five citizens of Ukraine. Twenty five years of Ukrainianization in public schools and the state-controlled media did little to change that perception; as late as February 2014, 78 percent of Ukrainians confirmed that their attitude towards Russia was “very good” or “mostly good” (Ligostova & Deynychenko 2015).

The war with Russia-supported separatists in East Ukraine has changed all that, and the post-Maidan government’s language politics was the primary cause of the war. This language politics itself was created and promoted by three main constituencies: (a) the domestic literary elite (writers, journalists, academics, etc.), who had to compete with their Russian counterparts for Ukraine’s audience; (b) West Ukrainian nationalists, especially those from less industrialized and more parochial parts of the country; and (c) the Ukrainian overseas diaspora, who managed to position themselves as intermediaries between Ukraine and the West. Given Ukraine’s dependency on the West, the last group becomes especially important.

It must be said that Ukraine’s ties to the West are asymmetrical in nature and resemble a postcolonial state’s relationship with its former metropole. Western domination can be seen especially in the inordinate amount of influence that the Ukrainian diaspora in the Anglo-American world exhibits over political developments in Kiev. The largest Ukrainian diaspora groups in the West reside in Canada (1.2 million) and the USA (1 million). Organizations as the Ukrainian American Coordinating Council, the Ukrainian Federation of America, the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation and the like have played a decisive role as lobbyists for diaspora interests, shaping both the substance and the direction of US-Ukraine relations. In Canada, the

Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC), together with the Ukrainian National Federation of Canada, the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association and several dozen other organizations of nationalist persuasion, has sought to “influence policy decisions of the governments of Canada and Ukraine” (Ukrainian Canadian Congress n.d., *Engaging Ukraine*).

Most of these organizations are descendants of the verifiably fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), still in existence today as OUN (b) and KMOUN (Kiev City Organization of OUN). Both were transplanted back to Ukraine from their overseas exile locations soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and, using diaspora financial and organizational resources, had spawned or promoted a number of daughter organizations, such as the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, the State Independence of Ukraine, the Social National Party of Ukraine (currently, Svoboda) and the Stepan Bandera All-Ukrainian Organization “Tryzub” (“Trident”).

In the early years of independence, diaspora returnees sat on the council of advisers to the Ukrainian president, represented Ukraine at the board of the IMF, became consultants to the Ministry of Defense, headed key educational institutions in the fields of public and business management, staffed western embassies, presided over the American Chamber of Commerce in Ukraine and headed NATO’s information and documentation centre in Kiev. Diaspora dollars propelled transformation of the initially moderate Popular Movement of Ukraine (Rukh) into an ethno-nationalist organization fully aligned with the OUN’s ideological platform (Satzewich 2002: 205–206; Kuzio 1997: 218). Diaspora activists took active part in the preparation of the Constitution of Ukraine, spearheaded judicial and legal reforms, and led several projects with Ukrainian legislators, government officials, military commanders, journalists and policy experts. Ukraine’s Ambassador in the USA was happy to report that “many Ukrainians who work in the FBI, CIA and similar agencies provide Ukraine with practical assistance” (Shcherbak 1998).

Ukrainian émigrés found paths to Kiev’s offices of the largest multina-

tional corporations and mediated the disbursement of American and Canadian foreign aid to Ukraine. In 1999, the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, since 1980 under Banderite leadership, received \$180,000 from USAID to run a “nationwide civic information” campaign in preparation for Ukraine’s presidential elections that year. In 2000, the Government of Canada awarded \$2.7 million to the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies to implement the Canada Ukraine Legislative and Intergovernmental Project (Satzewich 2002: 207). In 2004, the diaspora raised no less than \$1 million in support of the “orange revolution” through its own credit unions (Koinova 2009: 56) and organized the disbursement of \$65 million of US money budgeted to the organizations and individuals opposed to the election of a pro-Russian candidate as Ukraine’s president (Associated Press 2004). Since the “orange revolution” of 2004, both Washington and Ottawa have spent millions of dollars on “democracy promotion” in Ukraine. In most cases, diaspora activists became directly involved in these projects’ implementation.

As an official statement by the UCC goes, “the majority of Ukrainians in Canada have considered Russia . . . their historical enemy” (Ukrainian Canadian Congress n.d., *Community profile*). Diaspora influencers write the history of Ukraine as a history of constant victimization at the hands of the Russians. Ukrainian-Canadian parliamentarians sponsored legislation to recognize the famine of 1932–33 that swept across several Soviet republics, Russia included, as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people. Veterans of Ukrainian military formations that fought the USSR in World War II on the Nazi side, once they found themselves in the West, became big champions of the Ukrainian national cause and sought to present all aspects of life under the Soviet regime in light of the alleged discrimination of ethnic Ukrainians by the Russian “colonizer.”

When Russophobic complexes of such magnitude are brought back home, the country is bound to change. Thus, President Yushchenko’s conferral of “Hero of Ukraine” titles upon Nazi collaborators, Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych, provoked protests across Europe. The honours were subsequently withdrawn by Yanukovych. However, these same personae of the two “long-dead Ukrainian fascists” (Snyder 2010)

reappeared to command the allegiances of the striking forces of Ukraine's 2014 revolution — the ultra-nationalist Svoboda and the extremist Right Sector groups.

To any conscientious historian today, the fact that the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists collaborated with not only Wehrmacht, but also Abwehr and Gestapo, is well established. So is the fact of the OUN's participation in anti-Jewish pogroms and massacres of the civilian population across western Ukraine and western Belarus. The OUN(b) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) chief commander, Roman Shukhevych, had distinguished himself by punitive actions against local anti-fascist guerillas and support for the campaign of racist cleansing, which involved killing dozens of thousands of Poles and Jews under the slogan "Ukraine for the Ukrainians!" Both Sukhevych and acting OUN(b) leader, Mykola Lebed, opposed authorizing armed attacks on Germans, while actively assisting Hitler's armies and police forces in the occupied Ukraine to fight against the Red Army and its sympathizers. The organization they led "embraced the *Führerprinzip*, a cult of political violence, racism, and an aggressive anti-Semitism. . . . A typical fascist movement, the OUN cultivated close relations with Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, the Spanish Falange, and the Croatian Ustae" (Rudling, 2016: 31–32).

Against such a background, Kiev's attempts to celebrate the memories of the OUN-UPA as a glorious page in the history of the national liberation struggle look nothing short of sacrilegious to the descendants of Soviet patriots, Red Army soldiers, and World War II victims of the massacres perpetrated by the Nazis and their local Ukrainian nationalist henchmen. Some modern ideologists for the Ukrainian right try to distinguish between the original OUN's fascist inclinations and the personal worldviews of its individual leaders. However, there is no evidence whatsoever to back up the extraordinary claim that willing participants in the Nazi New Order somehow deviated from the chauvinistic, totalitarian, and racist ideology of its main architects.

Even more ominously, contemporary descendants of the OUN(b) confirm their ideological pedigree without any doubt. Svoboda leaders

stated their intentions to liberate Ukraine from the “Muscovite-Jewish mafia” (Blumenthal 2014). The Lviv city council demanded to reinstate Bandera and Shukhevych as “heroes.” The founder of the neo-Nazi Social-National Party of Ukraine and the former leader of its paramilitary wing, the Patriot of Ukraine Andriy Parubiy, who is now the speaker of Ukraine’s parliament, insulted the population of the country’s eastern regions by calling them “descendants of the Moscow invaders” (Lenta.ru, 2016).

This did not help to ameliorate the worries of Ukraine’s ethnic minorities and only served to harden the stance of the Donbass separatists, most of whom now vow to continue resisting Kiev until it acquiesces to a recognition of the region’s sovereignty. It did not start like that. As late as mid-2015, more than a year after the start of the resistance movement, both self-proclaimed “republics” of East Ukraine were still ready to remain as constituent units of the Republic of Ukraine. All that they requested was an official status for the Russian language, an enhanced autonomy, a special regional economic regime conducive to the region’s trade with Russia and guarantees that Ukraine would remain a neutral, non-aligned, non-bloc country.

Since Kiev has not been willing to entertain any of these demands, the bloody conflict in the country’s east continues. The more the government of Ukraine insists on its right to impose the language of the “state-bearing nation” on non-Ukrainians, the more alienated and restless the Russian “super-minority” will become. Unless the current language policies are revised or reversed, the country is on its way to territorial disintegration and collapse. To understand why such egregiously bad politics persisted through two and a half decades of independence and led to the current state of affairs, we need to look at the historical origins of alienation that pitted the early leaders of the Ukrainian nationalist movement against the Russian state and its people.

### **The dark shadow of history**

The present-day vilification of Russia and pro-Russian citizens of Ukraine did not appear out of the blue. Rather, it was grown by several

post-independence administrations bowing to the historically Russophobic attitudes of their western mentors. In the more than twenty years since independence, the trampling of Ukraine's Russian heritage under foot reached notable proportions with the closing of scores of Russian-language schools, banning of TV channels and radio stations, the firing of educators and state employees who failed to meet stringent language requirements, and severely restricted opportunities for higher education in Russian (cf. Molchanov 2002).

This hostile attitude towards Ukraine's most ethnically and culturally kindred nation has its roots in the early anti-Russian movement that emerged at the start of the local nationalist mobilization in what was then called Little Russia (Malorossiiia)<sup>§</sup>. This south-western periphery of the Russian empire was one of its most vulnerable parts, the land traditionally most exposed to foreign conquests and the subversive "divide and conquer" influences of hostile powers. Consequently, Ukrainian nationalism grew in part under the impact of such influences, while also reflecting the alienation of the Ukrainian small gentry and petty bourgeoisie from the institutions of the Russian state.

From early on, the Little Russian gentry and later, members of the Ukrainian political class, had developed into what John Morrison (1993: 679–680) describes as a "permanent inferiority complex and a lack of confidence in negotiating with Moscow." This resulted in a perception "that any deal with Russia is a potential trap, however favorable to Ukraine its terms might appear." Hence, Putin's attempts to bring Ukraine into the Customs Union with Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan were met with a sense of distrust: if, back in 2013, Moscow was willing to cough up \$15 billion in loans and lock in its gas prices at a level 30 percent below the European average, there must have been a catch of some sort. The Maidan activists saw the offer as subversive of Ukraine's

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§ In Slavic languages "mala/malo" (originally meaning "little" or "the lesser one") does not necessarily have any humiliating connotations (like "minor" for instance). Contrary, it often sounds more as "nucleus", "authentic" or "original": see "Malopolska" ("Lesser Poland"—the historical area of Polish territory including the old capital of Krakow), and "Mala Strana" ("Little Quarter"—an old historic district in Prague, the capital of Czech Republic).

sovereignty and freedom of international association. Two years later, a similar, if not poorer, arrangement with Western creditors to ease repayments of Ukraine \$18 billion debt was greeted with near-universal enthusiasm: Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk described it as a blow to the “enemy”, Russia (BBC News, 27 August 2015).

Thus, accepting financial help from just about anyone but Russia is a “victory.” Repairing the national budget with money coming from Moscow is a “betrayal.” It would be naïve to call this reasoning illogical or counterintuitive: it is reflective of paradoxes in the nationalist mind.

Although the lands of the future Ukraine were at various times dominated by nearly a dozen foreign states — Mongols, Lithuanians, Poles, and, in some parts, Austrians, Hungarians, Romanians, Crimean Tatars and Turks — it was Russia that became construed as the principal enemy of Ukrainian freedom in the eyes of Ukraine’s nationalist intellectuals. The paradox of the situation lies in the fact that, for the Russians themselves, Ukrainians have never been perceived as foreigners, but rather, as a branch of the greater Russian tree, a marginally different part of the same “all-Russian” ethnoses.

Russia’s “otherness” for Ukraine can be explained precisely by the degree of ethnic closeness and the successful cooptation of the Ukrainian elite into the ranks of the Russian imperial nobility. At the start of the Ukrainian nationalist mobilization its standard-bearers encountered the rather difficult dilemma of a disinterested “Little Russian” population that seemed content with its identity — and the de-facto subaltern status of the Ukrainian literary elite. Once a separate Ukrainian identity, still called the Russian (“ruski”) in Galicia and other eastern regions of the Habsburg empire, had entered the stage circa the 1830s, a question arose: what to do with this separateness, once discovered? The answer was easy in Ukraine’s western lands, dominated by non-Slavic ethnicities and the traditionally Ukrainophobic Polish *szlachta*. Ukrainians had to fight for their cultural and national self-determination. But what about the country’s core, now safely within the dominion of Ukraine’s ethnic and religious brethren — the Russians?

Having Ukrainian identity evolve so close to the Russian one and

within the envelope of the Russian state presented Ukrainian elites with a choice between assimilation and revolt. Assimilation into the “Little Russian” and, eventually, “Great Russian” identity was not without its rewards and became a path that Ukrainian aristocrats, clergymen and literary elites treaded for centuries. The revolt started with Taras Shevchenko and continued with a host of intellectuals whose small-gentry envy of the imperial elite translated into blaming Russians for all the real and alleged misfortunes of the Ukrainian people. The solution they found to the problems of national development was to reject all “alien” (Russian) influences, “purify” the national spirit and separate the “Little Russian dialect,” as Ukrainian was called in the official documents of the empire, from the dominant Russian language. These were seen as inevitable first steps on the road toward political autonomy.

Ukraine’s ethnic nationalists fought off, and defeated, more Russo-ophile members of the movement, who, like Mykhailo Drahomanov, rejected the idea of political separation from Russia as preposterous (Molchanov 1994). Not only in the east, but also in the west of Ukraine Russophilia had originally been the norm. Many Galician intellectuals of the mid-nineteenth century kept craving unity, rather than separateness from Russia, pledging, in Markian Shashkevych (n.d.) words, eternal bonds to their “Russian hearts and the Russian faith.” In contrast, ethnic nationalists extended their hate of Russia’s absolutist monarchy beyond the realm of the state and onto the very fabric of Russian society. They chose to advance the negative identity of Ukraine as “non-Russia” *par excellence*.

That choice determined the history of Ukrainian-Russian relations for the next two centuries. The Maidan events, the rise of the Anti-Maidan movement in Donbass and Ukraine’s current conflict with the pro-Russian separatists may all be seen as distant echoes of the mid-nineteenth century decision to ostracize Russians as a hostile “out-group” in opposition to which the forefathers of the Ukrainian nationalism wanted to constitute their nation. As the events of the last two years have shown, ramifications of that decision were truly fateful for the Ukrainian body politic and the territorial boundaries of an independent Ukrainian state;

if the Russian element of the Ukrainian nation was presumed to be alien to it, the ensuing ethnonational consolidation could only be bought at the cost of shedding territories where the “alien element” predominated.

In hindsight, the forefathers of Ukrainian nationalism could try to build a separate national identity they sought on a number of foundations beyond language differences that were relatively minor as late as the early nineteenth century. A separate regional identity for the would-be Ukrainians already existed under the name of “Little Russia” — the acknowledged historic core of the Russian empire. Political and socio-economic traditions differed as well: for example, the Great Russian village community — *obshchina* — was practically unknown across the Little Russian lands. Ukrainian ways of doing business were more individualistic and less corporate, while the state-society relations in this western periphery of the Russian Empire exhibited larger degrees of freedom than in the imperial centre. The political culture of the Ukrainian elite had always been oligarchic and prone to competition between several powerful groups, while the Russian body politic gravitated towards centralization and authority.

In short, Ukraine was well positioned to become a separate nation even without the deliberate “ethnicization” of society. As a de-facto multiethnic state, it could continue using Russian, elevating it to the status of its official language, or as a second official language of the state on par with the Ukrainian. It could adopt an ethno-federal model, a consociational model or even a non-declarative, vigorously implemented national cultural autonomy model. Any of those would work to protect its ethnic minorities, especially the Russian-speaking half of the population, and to prevent the hostile politicization of ethnicity. A democratic, consociationalist Ukraine would embrace two state-bearing nations — the Ukrainophone and the Russophone Ukrainians — as equals, thus taking the edge off the potential for interethnic conflict. Unfortunately, it did not happen. Instead, Kiev chose to sacrifice the interests of the Russian-speaking nation of Ukraine to the whims of the ethnocratic nationalist minority and its overseas diaspora patrons (Molchanov, 2003). The loss of Crimea, the civil war in Ukraine’s East, the precipitous plunge in liv-

ing standards and the creeping collapse of governance capacity are among the most tangible results of that fateful decision, still affecting the lives of Ukrainians today.

## Conclusion

Historically, states were not built by languages, but rather the other way around: it was the languages that were developed by states. The value of this or that language for the state was purely instrumental: the business of governance had to be conducted via a common medium. Language was a means of interpersonal and intercommunal communication, not an intrinsic value to be pursued for its own sake.

This has changed with the advent of the Age of Nationalism and the emergence of the idea of a nation-state back in the nineteenth century. However, soon enough nationalism based on ethnicity revealed its limits (and later, its murderous nature) and was replaced by civic patriotism. Whether it is based on multiculturalism, federalism, corporate federalism or the so-called “melting pot” model, the contemporary state promotes inter-ethnic peace, and the best way to do it is to accommodate minority languages as much as reasonably possible. Spanish signs in US public places, or the official French-English bilingualism of the Canadian civil service, the peaceful coexistence of the Dutch and French languages in Belgium or the four official languages of Switzerland all speak to the same reality of linguistic accommodation.

Conversely, the forced homogenization of society, the elimination of minority languages, and state-mandated assimilation all portend trouble. The trouble may not be immediate but it will come sooner or later, unless the assimilationist policies are scrapped for good. If a “nationalizing” state attempts to impose a language that the majority of the population does not speak at the moment, it may often become a sure recipe for national catastrophe. This is precisely the fate that has befallen the post-Maidan government of Ukraine.

To sum up, language has never been a trump card in state making, nor should it be. The last two centuries represent a somewhat exceptional period in this regard. Privileging linguistic factors in the state- and

nation-making processes bred ethnic nationalism, separatism and irredentism, as well as a proliferation of minority nationalisms and their opposites — the so-called “pan-movements,” from pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism to pan-Arabism and pan-Turkism.

Globalization was supposed to reverse this temporary setback with the spread of the English language as a language of international communication in particular. Globalization has also blunted the edge of ethno-nationalist movements and promised a much more tolerant, truly liberal treatment of immigrants, refugees and minorities by their respective host societies.

Unfortunately, the global economic and financial crises of this century have revived the spectrum of ethnic nationalism, together with the idea of “one nation, one state.” In some of the more vulnerable areas of the world the nation is once again being associated with ethnicity, and ethnicity with some ethnic vernacular. The only thing that may grow out of this trend is the proliferation of minority nationalisms with their attendant demands to establish separate states of their own. Globalization is in decline, while the forces of cultural nationalism are on the rise. It is in our common interests to stop these forces in their tracks, restoring the primacy of civic factors in state- and nation-building movements around the globe.

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