

A New Law To Limit Teaching Russian and Other Languages Will Further Divide Ukraine

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Editor's Note: This article is part of an ongoing series

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/series/15/education>) about education policy in various countries around the world.

For many years, the issue of language has been a persistent point of social tension inside Ukraine, as the country contends with the nature of its relationship to Russia. After long downplaying the matter, Ukraine's parliament brought it front and center last week with a new law that restricts the teaching of Russian and other minority languages in schools—eliciting outcries in capitals from Moscow to Budapest. In an email interview, Nicolai Petro, the Silvia-Chandley Chair in Peace and Nonviolence at the University of Rhode Island, explains the nature of minority language rights inside Ukraine, the impact of the new law, and what can be expected in Ukraine's relations with its neighbors going forward.

WPR: How has Ukraine, a fairly multi-ethnic state, traditionally handled minority rights, and in particular minority language rights?

Nicolai Petro: While Ukrainian is the only officially recognized state language of Ukraine, minority language rights and



Students listen to a teacher of the Tatar language at a Tatar school, Crimea, Oct. 31, 2014 (AP photo by Alexander Zemlianichenko).

minority rights more broadly are guaranteed by several laws.

Article 10 of the Ukrainian constitution says that the state “guarantees the free development, use and protection of Russian and other languages of national minorities of Ukraine.” This emphasis on Russian was a concession to the importance of these cultural ties in the eight predominantly Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine, which are concentrated east of the Dnieper River.

There is also the language law of 2012 (http://zib.com.ua/ru/print/11083-zakon_o_principah_gosudarstvennoy_yazikovoy_politiki_tekst.html), which says that the state must offer classes in the language of national minorities, if there are a sufficient number of requests by parents. The first post-Maidan Revolution parliament of 2014 immediately voted to rescind this law, but then-acting President Oleksandr Turchinov never signed the bill. As a result, it is still in force today.

In addition, Ukraine has ratified both the European Council’s 1995 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which oblige it to support minority languages. One of the languages Ukraine is obliged to support (<http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/search-on-treaties/-/conventions/treaty/148/declarations>) under the charter is Russian.

WPR: How were languages taught prior to the passage of the language law, and what were the arguments for and against the law?

Petro: In the Soviet Union, both Ukrainian and Russian were taught throughout the curriculum, although in institutions of higher education subjects were most often taught in Russian. Students could, however, request that their exams and coursework be submitted in Ukrainian.

Despite persistent efforts to promote the use of Ukrainian since the collapse of the Soviet Union, this pattern has survived. Linguistic preferences of instruction now typically reflect local preferences—Russian in the east and south of the country, Ukrainian in the west and much of the center.

The new education law seeks to improve students' knowledge of Ukrainian by limiting their ability to study in certain other languages. Two of these languages—Hungarian and Romanian—have compact populations in western Ukraine that share close economic and cultural ties to the respective countries. Russian is targeted because it is so widespread (<https://iz.ru/news/666745>). According to a 2016 survey, more than 60 percent of Ukrainians speak Russian at home, or with their friends and relatives. Likewise, 78 percent say they would like their children to be able to speak Russian.

The new educational reform law, however, stipulates that as of next year, recognized national minorities may study in their native language only until the fourth grade. By 2020, all subjects beyond the fourth grade will have to be taught in Ukrainian.

English, along with the languages of the European Union and the languages of certain “native peoples,” will be permitted as elective subjects after the fourth grade, though apparently Russian will not (<https://strana.ua/articles/91169-kakie-izmeneniya-ozhidajut-ukrainskie-shkoly-posle-prinjatija-radoj-reformy-obrazovaniya.html>). As of next year, textbooks will no longer be printed in Russian, and there will be no more public schools for national minorities.

The list of so-called native peoples of Ukraine has not been specified, though the groups most frequently mentioned by the law's sponsors are the Crimean Tatars, Krymchaks, Karaites and Gagauz. If the total population of Ukraine is assumed to be 45 million, then these groups make up roughly 0.7 percent of that total.

Supporters of the law say that it is needed to promote the Ukrainian language, especially in regions such as Transcarpathia, where as many as 60 percent (<http://vybor.ua/article/obrazovanie/zakon-podryvayushchij-ustoi-obrazovaniya-i-gosudarstva.html>) of minority students fail to pass the standardized national exam of the Ukrainian language. Critics of the education law, however, are more concerned with preserving cultural pluralism within Ukraine.

WPR: How big an impact will the law have, and what have the reactions been so far, both within Ukraine and abroad?

Petro: Although the public options for education in Russian have gradually shrunk, the demand for it remains high. As of May 2017, more than 30 percent (<http://vybor.ua/article/obrazovanie/zakon-podryvayushchiy-ustoi-obrazovaniya-i-gosudarstva.html>) of schools in the Donetsk, Luhansk and Odessa regions were Russian-language schools, as were more than a quarter of the schools in the Kharkov and Zaporozhye regions.

In the capital, Kiev, only seven Russian-language public schools out of a total of 519 remain. Given that roughly a quarter of Kiev residents claim Russian as their native tongue, the competition for entry (https://m.lenta.ru/articles/2016/09/01/ukraina_denznaniy/) to these schools can be fierce. It is telling that among privately funded schools in Kiev, 41 percent (<http://vybor.ua/article/obrazovanie/zakon-podryvayushchiy-ustoi-obrazovaniya-i-gosudarstva.html>) teach primarily in Russian.

Opposition to the new law has rallied the leaders of many ethnic communities within Ukraine and led to harsh criticism by Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece and Romania, whose foreign ministries have signed a joint letter to the Council of Europe and the OSCE expressing their strong opposition to the law. The U.S. Embassy in Kiev, by contrast, publicly congratulated Ukraine on Twitter for “moving forward w education reform.”

Russia, for its part, has expressed its reservations in a rather muted fashion, no doubt fearing that taking a strong position would only serve as a rallying point for Ukrainian nationalists, and yield nothing for the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine.

Indeed, the problem for Russian-speaking Ukrainians is that they do not conceive of themselves as an ethnic minority within Ukraine. In their minds, they are simply Ukrainians, and speaking Russian has always been part of their Ukrainian identity. This new law effectively denies them the right to define themselves as Ukrainian.

But while the law provides more fuel to the political opposition in eastern and southern Ukraine, it is unlikely to lead to massive, organized protests. Most Russian-speaking Ukrainians will simply teach their children Russian at home and send them to relatives in Russia during the summer.

The danger in the long run is that, rather than leading to a more unified Ukraine, laws like this one that use language as a litmus test for loyalty will encourage a bifurcated social identity. Instead of encouraging Russian speakers to think of themselves as bilingual Ukrainians, it will deepen the divide between the language of individual communities and the language of the state, further exacerbating social tensions.

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