

The Ukrainian Language Policy

By Jan Kagel

Russia has always had a strong influence on Ukraine. The first historical recording of Russian settlers coming into Ukraine was in the 16th century and new waves of Russian settlers continued well into the 19th century. Due to its proximity, close cultural and ethnic similarities, and Ukraine's strategic position on fertile farmland resting between Russia and its historical antagonists in Europe, Ukraine was kept in the direct sphere of influence of Russia both politically and culturally. This began under the Tsardom of Muscovy, continued under the Russian Empire, and later under the Soviet Union.

In an effort to create a politically unified empire, it seemed advantageous to have all people speaking one language. As a result, it often came to be that Ukrainian was systematically suppressed by the Russian and Soviet governments. Especially during the reign of the Russian Empire, Ukrainian language schools were closed and the use of the language was strongly discouraged. In the Soviet Union, the Russian language was the main political language in all of the union's competent entities. Even though the Ukrainian language was officially considered equal to Russian, it was very often discouraged, especially in official business or political matters.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was finally free to develop its own language policy. But during the centuries under Russian control, influence, and waves of settlement, the majority of Ukrainians spoke Russian in their everyday lives and many were native Russian speakers. In regions like Kiev, the capital of the newly formed state, Ukrainian had almost completely vanished. Most of the newspapers, television programs, and radio stations were all in Russian. Slowly but surely, the Ukrainian population had been "Russified".

In an effort by the Ukrainian government to reestablish Ukrainian as the main language and undo the "Russification," it began a process today known as "Ukrainization." Even though just barely over half of Ukraine primarily speaks Ukrainian, it is still considered Ukraine's only official language.

Russia is commonly viewed by Ukrainians as having been the historical oppressor of Ukraine and thus the Ukrainization movement is seen as an attempt by the government to correct a historical wrong and create a unified nation by removing the language barrier within its population. Even though the Ukrainian language is part of the Slavic language family, as is Russian, the two languages are not mutually comprehensible, and there are only certain words that are similar enough to be understood.

The Ukrainization policy has been implemented by increasing the number of schools, institutions, and media outlets using the Ukrainian language, and by subsidizing Ukrainian plays and other cultural events. Additionally, a lot of signs and external advertisement are being switched to Ukrainian. While families who spoke Russian at home continue to freely do so, there is a strong push to turn everything that the state has control over to Ukrainian.

The Ukrainization movement has sparked a heated debate in Ukraine, as a great part of the Russian-speaking population feels that the Ukrainian language is being forced upon them. Supporters of the idea to make Russian a second official language say that Ukrainization degrades Russian speakers to second-rate citizens and that a Russian speaker is no longer considered to be "a true Ukrainian." Some Ukrainian regions and people have been speaking Russian for many generations and feel unfairly treated by the government's new language policy. A linguistics professor at Kiev's Shevchenko University says that, "When we voted for independence, no one told us we would be forced to change our age-old identity, to unlearn our native tongue and speak a different language. That wasn't part of the original deal."

There are other examples of countries with more than one dominant spoken language. For example, even though the United States has a very large Spanish-speaking population, English remains its only official language. This is in strong contrast to countries like Switzerland, which has four official languages, all historically a major part of the country's identity. While in Switzerland multiple languages coexist in harmony and enriching the culture, in countries like Belgium, Dutch and French-speaking populations compete for political influence.

If the Ukrainian government makes Russian Ukraine's second official language, it will be forced have all of their public and internal announcements and documents in both Ukrainian as well as Russian, a potentially economically costly, but also potentially politically valuable move. Whatever policy the government adopts over the next few years, Ukrainian and Russian will continue to have strong influences in the country for many years to come.



translation
interpreting
localization

t. 617.731.3510
f. 617.731.3700
e. info@languageconnections.com

www.LanguageConnections.com
2001 beacon street
boston, ma 02135

Reference:

1. The Christian Science Monitor
<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2010/0315/Ukrainian-vs.-Russian-language-two-tongues-divide-former-Soviet-republic>
2. www.TryUkraine.com
<http://www.tryukraine.com/society/ukrainization.shtml>
3. Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_language_in_Ukraine
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_language