Borderland speech

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Women sing traditional Ukrainian music at an Epiphany celebration on Komsomolska Island. Some rights reserved by Peter Haden

In early March the Ukrainian men's national soccer team played a match against the United States. Scheduled long before the political upheaval in Ukraine, the game (moved to Cyprus for security reasons) began as usual with the playing of national anthems. The members of the Ukrainian team stood with their arms wrapped around each other and sang the Ukrainian national anthem in Ukrainian. Later, at a press conference the coach spoke about Ukrainian unity and solidarity—in Russian.

Ukraine is a borderland between West and East, a confluence of languages and cultures. Russian president Vladimir Putin has sought to exploit language difference as he seeks to exert control over Ukraine. When the Ukrainian parliament, in one of its first acts following the ouster of Viktor Yanukovych as president, repealed a 2012 law that allowed the use of Russian as an official language, Moscow asserted that Russian-speaking Ukrainians were in danger and used the parliamentary action as part of an excuse to invade Crimea. But acting president Oleksandr Turchynov refused to sign the bill into law and urged an immediate redrafting that would take minority languages—Russian, Hungarian, and Romanian—into account.

As this tussle demonstrates, language is a key to power. Maintaining Ukrainian as the official language is important for Ukrainians who were persecuted for speaking their language during times of Russian and Soviet domination.

But language isn’t everything in Ukraine, and Putin’s attempts to inflame Ukrainian-Russian divisions run counter to data that suggest that language isn’t necessarily a divisive factor. In 2012, one survey indicated that more than 90 percent of respondents in western Ukraine and more than 70 percent in the Russian-speaking East considered themselves “patriots of Ukraine.” A more recent poll, in February of this year, found that in the farthest reaches of Ukraine, along the Russian-Ukrainian border, only one in four individuals wanted to unite with Russia and cease being Ukrainian.

The western Ukrainian city of Lviv—where anti-Russian sentiments are pronounced—actually protested against the new law favoring Ukrainian by declaring a day devoted to speaking Russian. The nightly news broadcast there was in Russian instead of Ukrainian, the mayor gave a speech in Russian, and a publishing house devoted to publishing in Ukrainian released its first-ever book in Russian. The mayor said (in Ukrainian), “Our position is that all decisions should be made when the moment is right. You should throw seeds on warmed-up ground. Not on asphalt that is covered with blood.”

The best political outcome of current tensions would allow Ukraine to develop, independently, its unique role as a bridge between languages and cultures in the region, setting an example for borderlands everywhere. “Lviv is open to the world,” its mayor said in Russian. Then he repeated those words in Ukrainian, Polish, and English.