

PREFACE

In 2009 I published a monograph on the history of nationalism and language politics in modern central Europe (Kamusella 2009). Four years later, Andrea Graziosi invited me to the international conference on ‘States, Peoples, Languages: A Comparative Political History of Ukrainian, 1863–2013,’ held in 2014 at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As I had done earlier in my book, the conference’s participants were expected to take a synoptic look at the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of central and eastern Europe, which was unprecedentedly tragic, mainly due to the imperial-cum-nationalist-cum-totalitarian project of fitting linguistically defined groups of people (‘nations’) to ‘their’ territories (‘nation-states’). The process also entailed constructing, unmaking or refashioning ‘languages’ so that they would serve ‘more appropriately’ the national projects at hand. As a result, in the twentieth century a person repeatedly moved between countries without ever leaving one’s village. The morning after another declaration of independence or annexation, a subject of a suddenly defunct empire discovered she lived in a state that was not hers. Even worse, because of some half-remembered religious affiliation her husband was declared an ‘alien,’ even though his family had lived in their home town for centuries. Following another unexpected border change, a civil servant might find out that he was actually illiterate, because now the administration was to be conducted in a language and script of which he had no command. In this brave new modern world

all were compelled to finish elementary school. A peasant daughter came back home crying, since the teacher had derided her for speaking her national language incorrectly. At the same time, in the distant capital the government commissioned a team of besuited professors to work out yet another sweeping reform, this time to rid the national language of ‘ugly foreign’ words, phrases, pronunciations, syntactical constructs and spellings that were ‘totally alien’ to the ‘true character’ of ‘our’ nation.

However, Andrea, the conference’s organizers and I silently assumed that this national-cum-linguistic madness of imagining polities in line with equally imagined languages and nations had been largely concluded after the fall of communism in 1989 and the breakup of the Soviet Union two years later. The wars of Yugoslav succession, rounded up with the split of the Serbo-Croatian language, appeared to be an anomaly that would soon be consigned to the yellowing pages of historical monographs on the ‘dark twentieth century.’ The highly destructive post-Soviet Armenian-Azeri, Georgian, Chechen or Tajik wars were conveniently seen as non-European conflicts. They took place too far away from Paris, Brussels or London to be noticed. In the West (meaning Europe and North America) history seemed to have reached its ideological end. A widespread consensus emerged that democracy is the ultimate system of governance and statehood organization, while capitalism is democracy’s counterpart in the economic sphere. Nothing better could ever be invented. And after the long centuries of unceasing warfare and conflict in search of an ideal system of economic and political organization, at last people could now take a rest from politics and get on with their lives without fearing that another conflagration might be lurking around the corner (Fukuyama 1992).

All of us were brutally shaken out of this daydreaming and our sheer complacency at the turn of 2014. History caught up with us, again. In November 2013 a popular movement began swelling in Kyiv (Kiev) and across Ukraine against President Viktor Ianukovych (Yanukovych 1950–). Without consultation, he had first imposed Russian as an auxiliary language on Ukraine in such a fashion (known well from neighboring Belarus) that made it the country’s *de facto* official language, to the immediate diminishment of Ukrainian (Moser 2013). But the decisive turning point arrived when at Moscow’s insistence Ianukovych radically reversed the country’s course of integration away from the European Union (EU) toward Russia’s Eurasian Economic Community (upgraded in 2014 to the Eurasian Economic Union) (Russia 2013; Ukrainian

2013). Despite the government's use of special forces and live ammunition, the protesters prevailed (Serediuk 2015). In February 2014 the discredited Ianukovych administration collapsed, while the President and many members of his government sought refuge in Russia (Bachman and Lyubashenko 2014).

Immediately afterward, Russia's 'little green men' (or Russian soldiers without any insignia on their uniforms and equipment) appeared in Ukraine's Crimea. These Russian operatives harassed the Ukrainian police and soldiers in the military bases either to join them or to leave the peninsula. The Russian annexation of Crimea conducted by stealth (now known as 'hybrid war') was swiftly completed in March 2014. An accession treaty between Crimea and the Russian Federation was signed to lend some legitimacy to this annexation (posed as an 'incorporation') of the former by the latter (Berezovets' 2015). With this act, one of the foundations of stability and peace in postwar Europe was laid to rest, namely Article III of the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which provides that no international borders in Europe may be changed unilaterally. After breaching this crucial principle of the inviolability of international borders in Europe, no one really paid attention to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, in which Britain, Russia and the USA had guaranteed the territorial integrity of Ukraine, alongside that of Belarus and Kazakhstan, in exchange for the three post-Soviet countries' decision to give up to Russia their stockpiles of nuclear warheads inherited from the Soviet Union.¹ In April 2014 a Russian military onslaught on eastern Ukraine commenced and continues to this day in the form of simmering trench warfare between the Ukrainian army and 'separatists' under the repeatedly denied control and command of the Russian military (Sakawa 2015).

Also in April 2014, a fast-track citizenship law was promulgated in Russia enabling any native Russian speaker to apply. The fear is that in this manner Moscow silently usurps the 'right of intervention' in the border areas of Belarus, Estonia, Latvia and Kazakhstan, where substantial numbers of Russian-speakers live, should the interests of these 'Russian minorities' in the Kremlin's opinion be somehow 'endangered' (Brennan 2014; New Citizenship 2014). What has happened to Ukraine may be repeated in other neighboring countries if the Russian leadership decides that these countries have crossed the 'thin red line.' In 2007, the post-Soviet Russian concept of 'near abroad' was replaced with (or joined by) the 'soft power' geopolitical idea of the *Russkii Mir* ('Russian

World') that consists of *all* the globe's Russian-speaking territories (Fond 2016; Nikonov 2010). So, language is back as the litmus test of belonging to a nation and as an instrument for furthering imperial and territorial ambitions. The short-lived end of history is over.

In mid-2014, when I embarked on my transatlantic trip to Cambridge, Massachusetts, the momentous shifts in the geopolitical landscape of central and eastern Europe were still sinking in. The organizers, rightly fearful of any politically motivated meltdown of the conference, emphasized that the recent events should not be discussed. We, as scholars, were requested to squarely focus on the conference's topic, that is, language politics and engineering as pursued in the past, be it in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, or elsewhere in Europe, with only limited forays into the post-Soviet period, and definitely not beyond the 1990s.

I was flying to the USA via Shannon Airport in Ireland. In order to lessen the distinctly unwelcoming impact of immigration checks awaiting passengers in the USA, Aer Lingus moved the onerous process to Shannon. In this way passengers can face up to the indignity before boarding their flight, when they are still full of energy. A virtual US border check was set up at the Irish airport. Passengers were swiftly processed through it. I handed my passport to the US border officer on duty. He flipped through it dexterously, finding my US visa in no time. Then the officer requested my conference invitation and the program. Upon having read the conference's title, he asked me, 'Do you know, Sir, that Russian is Crimea's main language?'

Feigning indifference, I replied in a noncommittal fashion, 'Well, I have never been to this place.'

'You're going to talk about language and Ukraine at the conference, won't you?' The officer would not let his pet line of investigation die.

'Indeed, that's the topic, but we'll discuss the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.' I genuinely became apprehensive that for some reason he might turn me away from the flight.

'People in Crimea are Russians and exercised their democratic right in the March referendum to join Russia,' the officer opined. I quickly glanced at his shoulder badge; the officer's surname was Azov. Was I mistakenly taking a flight to Moscow? But no, his uniform was positively American. There was nothing Russian or post-Soviet about it. However, his English was shaky and heavily accented. I took a risk and

proposed, ‘*Mozhem gavarit’ na russkom, kak Vam luchshe*—we may speak in Russian, if that is easier for you, Sir.’

It was as though the officer had just been waiting for such an offer. He continued, in fluent Russian, with his lecture on Russia’s long-standing right to Crimea, arguing that the vast majority of the peninsula’s population were *always* Russians, and claiming how Nikita Khrushchev had committed a terrible mistake by gifting Crimea to the Ukrainians in 1954. The Soviet leader’s political instinct had failed him, because ‘you just may not trust these Ukrainians.’ It fell to Vladimir Putin to correct his predecessor’s glaring error, ‘to put things right, as they should have been in the first place.’

I was nodding and uttering some friendly noises. Other passengers in the line, quite disinterested, were impatiently waiting for their turn. I just wanted the border officer to move me on and let me off the hook, so that the surreal situation would end. Afterwards, I thought no one would ever believe me that a US border officer scolded me *in Russian* for *not* endorsing the Kremlin’s stance on the annexation of Crimea. And indeed, few did. I still wonder who this Mr. Azov was: a Russian who won a green card in a US visa lottery? Or maybe a Soviet Jew whose family had left for Israel after 1989, but then had had a change of heart and moved to the USA? Another possibility could be that the US border force outsourced the service in Shannon to local private contractors. Mr. Azov may have been a disgruntled ethnic Russian, for instance, on a Latvian passport, who had landed gainful employment in Ireland, courtesy of his EU citizenship.

Perhaps I will never know, but the US border officer made sure that I would never forget this Kafkaesque moment. He let me know *the* truth. The conversation happened at the moment when after taking most of Ukraine’s Sea of Azov littoral, no one was sure whether the Russian forces and the pro-Russian insurgents would press further westward with an eye to seizing all the intervening Black Sea coast between the Azov port of Mariupol’ and the annexed Crimea. The Ukrainian army was demoralized and in disarray. Volunteers began coming to its aid, among others, the Azov Battalion, named after its first military objective, namely, to win back for Ukraine the occupied Azov littoral. On the last day of our conference, Friday June 13, 2014, this battalion participated in the successful Ukrainian operation to win back Mariupol’ (Vasovic 2014). Fittingly, the Azov Battalion made this port city its seat

(Lazaredes 2015). Suddenly, the name ‘Azov’ became pregnant with so many conflicting meanings.

St Andrews, UK

Tomasz Kamusella

NOTE

1. Maybe North Korea’s communist dynasty of Kims is not as bonkers as it looks like at first glance. As long as a polity—however unlikeable—possesses nuclear warheads readily mounted on intercontinental ballistic rockets, it can rest assured that no one will dare to threaten its sovereignty and territorial integrity. From this vantage point, Kyiv made a terrible geopolitical mistake by shipping its share of the Soviet nuclear arsenal to Russia. However, looking at the matter through the prism of peace and stability in postcommunist Europe, it was a very good decision—not that any western or eastern power cares to remember and appreciate it now. Hence, with the privilege of hindsight, in the future no state with nuclear missiles is likely to give them up for the sake of greater human good as defined by the laudable idea of the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

REFERENCES

- Bachman, Klaus and Igor Lyubashenko (eds.). 2014. *The Maidan Uprising, Separatism and Foreign Intervention: Ukraine's Complex Transition* (Ser: Studies in Political Transition, Vol 4). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Berezovets’, Taras. 2015. *Aneksiia: Ostriv Krym: Khroniky „Hibrydnoi viiny”* (The Annexation of the Crimean Peninsula: The Chronicles of the ‘Hybrid War’). Kyiv: Brait Star Publishing.
- Brennan, C. 2014. Federation Council Approves Bill Requiring Russian Language for Residency. 16 Apr. *The Moscow Times*. <http://themoscowtimes.com/news/federation-council-approves-bill-requiring-russian-language-for-residency-34042>. Accessed 23 Dec 2016.
- Fond "Russkii mir" (The Foundation Russian World). 2016. www.russkiymir.ru/fund/. Accessed 23 Dec 2016.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

- Kamusella, Tomasz. 2010. The Twentieth Anniversary of the German-Polish Border Treaty of 1990: International Treaties and the Imagining of Poland's Post-1945 Western Order. 2010. *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 25 (3–4): 120–146.
- Lazaredes, Nicholas. 2015. Ukraine Crisis: Inside the Mariupol Base of the Controversial Azov Battalion. *ABC News*, 24 Mar. www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-13/inside-the-mariupol-base-of-ukraine's-azov-battalion/6306242. Accessed 23 Dec 2016.
- Moser, Michael. 2013. *Language Policy and the Discourse on Languages in Ukraine Under President Viktor Yanukovich* (25 Feb 2010–28 Oct 2012) (Ser: Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society, Vol 122). Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag.
- New Citizenship Shortcut for Russian-Speakers of Soviet, Imperial Ancestry. 2014. *RT*, 21 Apr. <http://www.rt.com/politics/russian-citizenship-ancestors-language-764/>. Accessed 22 Dec 2016.
- Nikonov, Viacheslav (ed.). 2010. *Smysl i tsennosti russkogo mira. Sbornik statei i materialov kruglykh stolov, organizovannykh fondom «Russkiy mir»* (The Meaning and Values of the Russian World: A Collection of Articles and Materials of the Round Tables, as Organized by the Foundation *Russkii Mir* {Russian World}*). Moscow: Russkii mir. russkiymir.ru/events/docs/%D0%A1%D0%BC%D1%8B%D1%81%D0%BB%D1%8B%20%D0%B8%20%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%20%D0%A0%D1%83%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%20%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%202010.pdf. Accessed 23 Dec 2016.
- Sakawa, Richard. 2015. *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*. London: I B Tauris.
- Vasovic, Aleksandar. 2014. Ukrainian Forces Reclaim Port City from Rebels. *Reuters*, 13 Jun. www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-mariupol-idUSKBN0EO0KP20140613. Accessed 23 Dec 2016.

*Between curly brackets I put these elements of translation that do not feature in the original title but are either intended or entailed by the context, and as such necessary for improved comprehension.

The Un-Polish Poland, 1989 and the Illusion of
Regained Historical Continuity

Kamusella, T.

2017, XXIX, 133 p. 5 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-60035-2