

Eurasia Daily Monitor -- Volume 4, Issue 28

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**TOLERANCE REDUCES NEED FOR RUSSIAN LANGUAGE LAW IN UKRAINE**

**Taras Kuzio**

Although Ukraine's Party of Regions introduced a new draft language law to parliament last fall, interest in the bill will decline following the unexpected death of key party ideologue Yevhen Kushnariov last month. Elevating Russian to an official or second state language requires a change to the 1996 constitution, and the ruling Anti-Crisis coalition is short by 60 votes.

The Party of Regions and Communists are alone in their support for elevating the status of the Russian language. A large proportion of the centrist camp that backed the Leonid Kuchma regime continues to support the 1989 law and 1996 constitution that make Ukrainian the sole state language but provides for official tolerance of local language diversity.

National Security Council secretary Vitaliy Hayduk, head of the Industrial Union of Donbas, a rival to Renat Akhmetov's Systems Capital Management, which backs the Party of Regions, is opposed to making Russian a second state language. "We should proceed very cautiously, without going to extremes. We should not sensationalize the situation, either," he warned.

The language issue has had little saliency, except during the 1994 and 2004 presidential election campaigns. The Razumkov Center warned on the eve of the 2004 elections that the language issue in of itself would be unlikely to head to "serious social conflict," but they added, "politicization of this question could lead to negative consequences." Party of Regions leader Viktor Yanukovich and his Russian political advisors politicized the issue in the 2004 elections.

In a 2001 Razumkov Center survey only 7% of respondents believed that the Russian language was a critical issue, placing it 24th out of 30 issues. In January 2002, only 1.6% said that the inclusion of language in a party's program would influence whether or not they would vote for it.

A 2006 survey found similar results. Of the ten most acute problems facing Ukraine, the Russian language was mentioned by only 8%, a figure due primarily to the 25% interest level in the Crimea and Donbas. North and east of these two regions only between 2.5% and 4% saw it as an issue. Two-thirds of the 8% who consider the Russian language an issue

reside in the Donbas and Crimea, two areas that are bastions of support for the Party of Regions and Communists and ironically where Russian is not in any way challenged, let alone threatened.

The Razumkov Center and other think tanks found that Ukrainian- and Russian-speakers each number about 40%, the other 20% percent use both languages. The latter could be the crucial swing vote in Kyiv and central Ukraine. The language issue has therefore never generated more than a third in favor of elevating Russian to a second state language.

One reason why the language issue is not a priority for most Ukrainians is that tolerance of language diversity is different from the election rhetoric of politicians intent on capitalizing on the language issue. The Russian language dominates in Ukraine's print and Internet media, while television has a greater degree of Ukrainian-language content.

The top three Internet sites in Ukraine are *Ukrayinska Pravda*, *Obozrevatel*, and *Korrespondent*, all receiving between 43,000 and 48,000 hits per day. Of these, only the first appears in both Ukrainian and Russian while the latter two are solely in Russian. Language choice does not appear to be linked to political allegiance, as the first two are sympathetic to the Orange camp, while the latter is published by an American who publishes the Kyiv Post.

*Korrespondent* magazine, the print version of the web site, is a Ukrainian attempt to emulate Western newsweeklies, such as *Time*, and is aimed at New Ukrainians. A new Russian-language glossy news magazine, *Fokus*, is edited by a well-known former journalist from the Ukrainian-language 1+1 channel and a 2006 parliamentary candidate of the Reforms and Order (Pora) bloc.

It is no coincidence that these two magazines are in Russian, nor that all of Ukraine's glossy journals are aimed at New Ukrainians. These include an entire range of Western women's and lifestyle magazines reprinted in Russian. Indeed, the only woman's magazine in Ukrainian is the flimsy, Soviet-era relic *Zhinka* (Woman).

Use of the Russian language is dominant in the 18-49 age group, while Ukrainian is stronger among the 50-59 population. Yet, New Ukrainians and young people, whose source of print information is in Russian, backed the Orange Revolution. Young people do not support elevating Russian to a second state language, perhaps because they tend to back Orange parties, such as Our Ukraine, Yulia Tymoshenko and the Socialists whose voters support Ukrainian as the sole state language.

All of Ukraine's leading print newspapers are in Russian (*Fakty*, linked to Viktor Pinchuk, *Segodnya* (Party of Regions), *Kievski Vedomosti, 2000*, (Social Democratic Party-United) and were staunch supporters of the Kuchma regime. The Orange camp also has invested as much in Russian publications as in Ukrainian ones, such as *Kyivskiy Telegraf* (Andriy Derkach, Socialists).

Our Ukraine has a greater number of Russian- than Ukrainian-language publications: *Pravda Ukrainy* (Petro Poroshenko, Our Ukraine), *Izvestiya v Ukrainy* and [www.glavred.info](http://www.glavred.info) (Oleksandr Tretyakov, Our Ukraine), *Delovaya Stolitsa*, and *Vlast Deneg*. Two newspapers sympathetic to the Tymoshenko bloc are also in Russian: *Gazeta Po-Kievski* and *Vecherny Vesti* and a third, *Svoboda*, is published in both languages.

Ukrainian-language newspapers with large circulations are only made available thanks to the state, such as parliament's *Holos Ukrainy*. Ukrainian-language publications linked to Our Ukraine include only *Ukrayina Moloda* and *Bez Tsenzury*, which have small circulations compared to the Russian-language media. The Socialists still have close ties to the large circulation *Silski Visti*.

The language ambivalence reflected in these attitudes to media language mirrors the support for the legal status quo on languages and tolerance of diversity. Parliament is unlikely to pass the latest draft language law.

(Razumkov Center National Security and Defense 2003 Yearbook; *Ukrayinska Pravda*, December 6, 2006; December 2006 poll by the Ukrainian Sociological Service for the Ukrainian Democratic Circle, January 4; *Zerkalo Nedeli*, October 28-November 3, 2006)

--Taras Kuzio