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'People in liberated Kherson are greeting Ukrainian soldiers in Russian': Hanna Perekhoda on Ukrainian identity, language and Donbas

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Ukrainian socialist Hanna Perekhoda was born and raised in Donbas. She is currently a PhD candidate in history at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, where her research examines debates over the Ukrainian question among the Bolsheviks. Perekhoda has written widely on Ukrainian history, including "[When the Bolsheviks Created a Soviet Republic in the Donbas](#)" and "[Ukraine and Its Language in the Political Imagination of the Russian Nation and Empire](#)". She is also an activist with the Swiss-based Committee of Solidarity with the Ukrainian People as well as the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine. Below, Perekhoda answers questions from Federico Fuentes regarding Russia's relationship with Ukraine, the role of language in the conflict and the realities of the Donbas region.

On launching his invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin argued that Ukrainians do not exist, that the Ukrainian state was a mistake, and that he was simply taking back what was rightfully Russia's. Could you briefly outline how the relationship between Russia and Ukraine has developed overtime? How much has the nature of this relationship been a motivating factor in Putin's war?

To understand the war that Putin is waging against Ukraine and its people, it is necessary to consider the self-perception and perception of the world that was forged within the Russian political class, and the place they reserve for Ukraine in it. For Putin, Ukrainians and Russians are "one and the same people", while the distinct national identity of Ukrainians is the result of a conspiracy plotted by those who want to weaken Russia. Tsarist elites also believed rival powers were fueling Ukrainian national sentiment to weaken Russia. Two centuries later, Putin expresses this same obsession, which shapes both his rhetoric and political action.

In fact, this is also the reason why Western observers were unable to believe that this current war could possibly happen. Why would Putin finally embark on a war on a scale not seen in Europe since the end of World War II if there was strictly no economic gain for him? Perhaps it is because the people who rule Russia are not homo economicus and do not calculate wins and losses in the manner that proponents of the realist approach in international relations imagine.

As the well-known expression goes, "Russia did not have an empire, it was an empire". Its colonies were neither geographically nor politically separated from the imperial core. Borders, both physical and symbolic, were therefore blurred. In such a context, how can one define the limits of the Russian nation? This difficult question has turned out to be fateful, as much for Russians, who are trying to

figure out where their borders end, as for the peoples subjected to Russia's deadly embrace. This war demonstrates how dangerous empires that want to become nation-states are. Control over Ukraine is a cornerstone of the project of the Russian Empire but also – and above all – of the project of the Russian Nation as formulated by its most prominent historians and intellectuals in the 19th century. I want to insist on this double role. Without Ukraine, Russia would never have become an imperial power and would cease to be a great state stretching across Europe and Asia. But, at the same time, for Russian nationalist elites, their nation is incomplete, if not impossible, without Ukrainians within it. As with Russian nationalists of previous eras, Putin sees the separate existence of Ukrainians as leading to an inevitable destruction of the body of the Russian nation. In this sense, the national narrative of Ukraine and of Russia are in total contradiction and mutually exclusive. Ukraine as a political community can only survive outside of Russia, because Russia denies its right to exist.

Ever since the 19th century, Russian elites have developed a paradoxical attitude towards Ukraine. On the one hand, they take for granted that Ukrainians are an integral part of Russia; for them, Russian-Ukrainian relations are not a problem in themselves. On the other hand, both the tsarist and Soviet authorities after their Stalinist turn, suppressed any manifestation of separate Ukrainian political identity. They claimed that Ukrainian nationalism was a phenomenon limited to a few intellectuals but the massive nature of the threat posed by Ukrainian political identity was acknowledged because Ukrainian culture and language were consistently repressed. At times of crisis, as was the case in 1917 or in 1991, the sudden appearance of Ukrainians – who are not even supposed to exist! – with their separatist claims came as a shock for Russians. Suddenly, the “Ukrainian question” was seen as a matter of life and death for Russia. Confronted with Ukraine breaking away to forge its own destiny, Russia's ruling classes were horrified and stunned at how quickly their world was falling apart. It turned out that their “one and the same people” was a product of their wishful thinking that had never existed anywhere other than in their imagination. In this sense, the current Russian war in Ukraine can be seen as an extreme manifestation of the struggle that Russian nationalists, attached to the idea of the “one and the same people”, are waging to reconnect with their past in order to gain a foothold in the present and project themselves into the future.

But while I want to emphasize that history is important, it cannot fully explain the reasons for this invasion. Contrary to what Putin believes, history is not a fate: Russian elites could have easily developed a different vision of their nation. History is a source of repertoires of practices and discourses that can be reactivated by ruling classes to pursue the political objectives of the moment. Just as Nazism was not the product of the German spirit, Putinism and his invasion of Ukraine is not the simple product of some historical inertia. The ideas of Putin and the Russian ruling classes may be a product of the past centuries, but Putin's political regime, which has enabled these ideas to be reactivated, is a product of the past twenty years.

An often repeated claim is that, since the Maidan rebellion in 2014, Russian-speakers have been discriminated against and the Russian language banned in Ukraine. How accurate are such statements?

During the 20th century, and especially after the imperial turn of Stalinism, Russian became the dominant language in all areas of public life in the Soviet Union: economy, administration, culture, media, education. The colonial division of labor between the city and the countryside also persisted, guaranteeing urbanized Russian and Russified Soviet citizens a privileged social position along with access to income, skills, prestige and power in the peripheral republics. During this process, more and more Ukrainians abandoned their language and culture, which became markers of cultural inferiority that hindered social mobility. Soviet modernization was accompanied by the

strengthening of the dominant imperial culture, which in turn perpetuated significant structural inequalities between Russian and Ukrainian speakers. The post-Soviet Ukrainian elite has neither the will nor means to correct these structural deficiencies. Instead, their opportunist policies have largely sought to manipulate language identities, without putting into question the status quo.

From 2004 onwards, the various oligarch clans in competition for power artificially fed the socio-linguistic divide to mobilize their respective electorates around questions of identity. In 2012, pro-Russian political forces passed a law to supposedly ensure the protection of minority languages. But their campaign sought to only “defend” the Russian language, which meant, as it quickly became clear, defense of Russian soft power in Ukraine. Russian-speaking Ukrainian culture, with its own history and identity separate from the Kremlin’s political priorities, did not receive any substantial support. Instead, the pro-Putin, Russian imperialist and anti-Ukrainian discourse was given a blank cheque. When President Viktor Yanukovich was impeached in 2014, parliament tried to repeal the law. Although this decision was never ratified, Russia took the opportunity to express concern about discrimination against Russians by what it called the “fascist junta” in Ukraine – an argument that was also used to justify Russian interference in Crimea and Donbass in order to “save the Russian speakers from genocide” according to Moscow. In 2018, parliament adopted a law requiring that Ukrainian be used in most aspects of public life and obliging state officials and public sector employees to speak Ukrainian when communicating with customers. This may seem surprising to people from Western Europe, where similar processes of linguistic homogenization took place more than a century ago (and, let it be said, often in a much more violent form). But the situation of Ukraine, having obtained its independence only thirty years ago and having remained under Russian political and cultural domination until 2014, cannot be compared to that of nations that have had their own nation-state since at least the nineteenth century.

Now, faced with Russia’s invasion and the inhuman treatment of civilians by the occupying army, the inhabitants of the country feel themselves to be first and foremost Ukrainians, including those who speak Russian. People in Kherson are greeting Ukrainian soldiers and celebrating the liberation of the city, and in 99% of cases they do it in Russian. Thousands of Ukrainian soldiers defending their country are Russian speakers.

From the outside, the impression we get is that Putin’s invasion has created a totally understandable hatred of all things Russian in Ukraine. How do you see this situation?

Even before the war, Putin’s state claimed an absolute monopoly on Russian language and culture, and considered use of the Russian language as being the same thing as identifying with Russia. Indeed, since the early 2000s, Russia has promoted the conception of the “Russian world”, relying on Russian speakers in neighboring countries to carry out a special mission, one that, of course, they have not consented to. This mission consists of absolute loyalty to the Russian state and unconditional support for all of the Kremlin’s decisions. The Putin state has used the medium of Russian culture to spread conservative, irredentist and Russian nationalist ideology among Russian speakers in neighboring countries. But, if in the 2000s, the “Russian world” was above all a tool of soft power, from 2014 it became the engine of Russian military aggression, whose objective is to erase Ukraine from the world map.

Perhaps investing the imperial language and culture with a decolonial content could be an option for Ukrainian society. But such a scenario could only be possible once Russia stops imposing its power over the Russian language spoken by millions of people who do not see themselves as sympathizers of Putin’s political project. It is quite difficult to argue that Ukrainians “must be more tolerant” towards things associated with Russia when Russian political elites deny nothing less than the right of Ukrainians to exist and frequently make statements that can be considered as incitement to genocide. The inhabitants of Ukraine, independently of the language they speak and the culture they

share, are currently subject to bombings, rape and murder, perpetuated not by Putin but by ordinary Russian soldiers. This will, of course, leave an open wound and a gap between the two peoples for years to come. A Ukrainian whose friends or family were killed by an ordinary Russian soldier will probably not be very receptive to the idea that “not all Russians are bad”. However, those of us Ukrainians who are not personally affected at the same level and are still capable of taking a critical distance and projecting ourselves into the future, must not perpetuate indiscriminate hatred. On the contrary, we are privileged enough to be capable of building bridges between Ukrainians and those Russians who want to be in solidarity with our fight against their state. I must admit that the necessary precondition is a will of these Russians to take responsibility for their own society and to have a minimum of humility. Even the most “open-minded” Ukrainians lose their patience when they see some Russian “fighters against the regime” who not only refuse to work on the transformation of their society but also do not give a damn about Ukrainian demands and priorities, presenting themselves instead as the main victims of this war.

We know of numerous representatives of the Russian and Belorussian political opposition, activists and intellectuals, who are now in Ukraine, contributing to its victory in different ways. The only problem they face is the bureaucratic Ukrainian state machine that prevents them from quickly obtaining a Ukrainian passport or any other form of legal status in the country. It is worth noting that Maksym Butkevich, an anarchist and human rights defender who helped Russian and Belorussian refugees in Ukraine, is now in Russian captivity. Most Ukrainians accept and respect Russians who are fighting on their side against Putin’s regime.

You grew up in Donetsk. Could you give us a sense of what attitudes have been in the Donbas towards Ukraine and Russia since independence, and if they have shifted over time? What does the Donbas tell us about the failures of Ukrainian elites’ attempts to cohere a unifying Ukrainian identity post-independence? How do you envisage the situation in the Donbas being resolved beyond the war?

The Donbas industrial region began to be actively populated only from the late nineteenth century. The majority of the population, however, settled there even more recently, as the artificial famine of 1932-1933 depopulated rural areas. This second wave of migration after World War II saw people from all over the Soviet Union, but mostly from Russia, rush to Donbas for jobs in coal mining, one of the most prestigious and well-paid industries. During the 1980s, the accumulation of economic deficiencies in the Soviet economy and the threat of losing their privileged status led locals to support Ukrainian independence, hoping that Donbas would become the dominant region in the economy and politics of the country. However, as post-Soviet states fell prey to wild capitalism, the population lost even the symbolic privilege it felt it held from belonging to the vanguard of a Soviet nation, and found themselves instead a minority inside a country whose culture was until then perceived as “backward”. Civil society was weak and the population radically paternalist and nostalgic for the glory days of the Soviet past.

This situation was fertile ground for local mafias who not only took over complete control of politics, the economy and the media in the region, but also sought to take over political power in Kyiv. They persuaded the local population that “the Donbas feeds Ukraine” and that it was exploited by western Ukrainians, despite the fact that even in the years of crisis wages were twice as high in Donbas as they were in western Ukraine. They did this to cover up the simple fact that it was actually locals – Yanukovych clan and the allied oligarchs – who were their real exploiters. As a result, resentment, anti-Western discourse and demonization of everything Ukrainian were used as means to divide and rule. But, in general, the identities of locals were relatively blurred, that is why they were easy prey for manipulation and political instrumentalization. Donbas became increasingly isolated from the rest of the country politically, economically, and culturally.

Starting in 2009, the Donbas mafia began running the country. The popular Maidan uprising of 2014 put their rule under threat. In response, Yanukovich and his clan provided key resources for the separatist movement in Donbas, hoping to at least preserve power over their stronghold. But even if the Donbas population had a sense of local exceptionalism, separatist desires were extremely marginal and there was minimal evidence of support for an armed uprising. Ambivalence and detachment were the most prominent sentiments among the population, 70% of whom were against anything that increased the threat of destabilization in April 2014. That same month, amid a background of general apathy and disorientation, a Russian ex-FSB [Federal Security Service] officer Igor Girkin-Strelkov, together with several dozen armed people, began taking control of the local institutions, asking Moscow to send “volunteers” to sustain the “rebellion”.

Canadian historian David Marples has demonstrated in his research that, while history and identity can be “baseline” factors, they are not enough in and of themselves to explain the outbreak of war. Existing tensions and grievances were manipulated for a long time by both Ukrainian and Russian elites, but it is unlikely that war in Donbas would have happened without Russian military intervention. Another key factor was the support given by local oligarchs, who tried to play both sides until they were replaced by Kremlin puppets.

The separatist republics in Donbas have become zones of corruption, total impunity, violence and widespread injustice, where the population faces uncertainty, extreme poverty, repression and physical abuse. Ukraine has repeatedly promoted the deployment of an international peacekeeping force to these territories. I think there is a chance that Donbas could one day return to a peaceful life. But in my opinion, this will only be possible after a complete withdrawal of Russian armed forces and subsequent demilitarization of Russia. An economic and environmental reconstruction, along with the creation of the necessary conditions for democratic expression, could probably be achieved under a long-term international mandate of peacekeeping forces.

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