

Russians and Russian-speakers

Profile

According to the 2001 census, there are 8,334,100 Russians and Russian-speakers in Ukraine. recorded in the 2001 census Russians dominate industry, administration and education in the urban areas of the east and south. By 1989, although Russians were only in the majority in Crimea, they formed sizeable minorities in many of the other regions - Donetsk (43.6 per cent), Luhans'k (44.8 per cent), Kharkiv (33.2 per cent), Dnipropetrovs'k (24.2 per cent), Zaporozhia (32 per cent) and Odesa (27.4 per cent). The post-independence period saw a reduction in the numbers of Russians in Ukraine, who accounted for 17.3 per cent of the republic's population according to the 2001 census.

The numerical strength of the Russians is reinforced by the importance of the Russian language in the public. The 2001 census indicated that 14.8 per cent of ethnic Ukrainians considered Russian their first language; in Crimea more than two-thirds of the population claimed Russian as its native language. There continues to be extensive bilingualism in Ukraine and many of those who identified themselves as Ukrainian-speakers also know Russian very well. The linguistic boundary between Russian and Ukrainian is in any case fluid, with a hybrid vernacular combining vocabulary and syntax from both languages, known as *surzhik*, widely spoken in the east and south of the country.

Historical context

Significant Russian settlement in the region occurred towards the end of the eighteenth century when the northern Black Sea littoral region was officially opened up to Russian settlement. The Russian conquest of Crimea from the Ottomans in 1783 brought new opportunities for Russian settlement in southern lands. With rapid industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, significant numbers of Russians moved to urban centres in Ukraine. Between 1890 and 1930, 2 million Russians settled in Ukraine, primarily in the east. In the 1930s, a further million Russians moved to Ukraine. The Russian community also absorbed other national groups and minorities, notably Serbs, Greeks and Jews.

Following the Second World War, significant numbers of Russians settled in connection with postwar reconstruction, especially in the eastern industrial regions. In the 1960s there was a surge in Russian immigration. Between 1959 and 1989, the number of Russians as a percentage of the Ukrainian population rose from 16.9 per cent to 22.1 per cent (7.1 million to 11.36 million). In this period, the largest numbers of Russians went to Crimea.

Following independence, fears of separatist activity by Russians caused considerable alarm in Kyiv. The geographical proximity of the heavily Russified east and Crimea to the Russian Federation prompted fears of a possible unification of these areas with Russia. Growing divisions in Ukrainian society were clearly apparent when, in June 1992, the formation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church divided the orthodox religious community, with many remaining loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate.

In general with the exception of Crimea, the main thrust of Russian/Russian-speakers' demands has been towards increased autonomy and protection of the Russian language rather than secession from Ukraine. In a referendum in December 1991, large numbers of Russians voted for independence. The electoral success of representatives from the east and south of Ukraine - including President Kuchma - in 1994 also helped to weaken demands for secession or unification with Russia. However, important divisions remain in Ukrainian society; the most explosive issue is that of Crimea.

Current issues

The Russian-Ukrainian axis in Ukraine emerged as a prominent division in the events known as the Orange Revolution in 2004. The political agendas of presidential candidates Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovich reflected contrasting pro-European and pro-Russian orientations, which served to further politicize the Ukrainian-Russian axis in Ukraine. This trend was certainly exacerbated by media representations both in Ukraine and in the international arena portraying the presidential contest in terms of Ukrainian-Russian divides. Russia's involvement in the form of two visits to Kyiv by President Vladimir Putin during the campaign and two public congratulations on Yanukovich's initial victory further served to polarize the electorate.

In the immediate aftermath of Yushchenko's victory in the repeat elections speculation ensued regarding the possible division of Ukraine or secessions of Russian-dominated areas. This was certainly exaggerated conjecture, over-emphasizing Russians' desires for separateness rather than the extent to which ukrainophone and russophone populations imagine Ukrainian identity in different ways. The adoption of raising the Russian language's status to that of official language as a platform by Yanukovich's Party of the Regions reflected both desires among Russians for raising the profile of Russian culture as a component of Ukrainian politics and an effective campaigning strategy for the Party of the Regions. Following the March 2006 parliamentary elections, numerous regions in the east and south of the country, including Kharkiv and the Crimean capital Sevastopol, attempted to unilaterally raise Russian's status to that of an official language at the regional level. In February 2006 the Crimean chapter of the Party of the Regions also collected signatures in support of a referendum on raising the status of Russian in Crimea. Kyiv resisted these attempts, labelling them unconstitutional as the constitution recognizes only Ukrainian as a state language.

While prime minister, however, Yanukovich opted for a softer line on the Russian language issue. In August 2006 he stated that while he still saw the need for the Russian language to acquire official status, this would involve either a complex legislative process or a referendum, neither of which - in his view - were feasible at present. He suggested instead a law regulating the use of Russian and enforcement of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. This change of tack suggests that promoting Russian was seen as an effective electoral platform rather than an actual policy imperative. Moreover, it may also reflect the fact that the Ukrainian-Russian divide is not as politically decisive as many media representations would predict. According to some analysts, the schematic division of Ukraine as a country divided between east and west along a Ukrainian-Russian axis is overstated. For instance, it has been pointed out that support for Yushchenko within eastern Ukraine in the 2004 election varied significantly. In his native city of Sumy he garnered 79.5 per cent of the vote; in Kharkiv he gained 26.4 per cent and in Luhans'k only 6.2 per cent. Yet all three cities lie close to the Russian-Ukrainian border, suggesting that a monolithic view of eastern Ukraine may be misplaced and may, indeed, support political agendas emanating from the western parts of the country. Critics of the 'two Ukraines' argument suggest instead that ethnic and regional cleavages are cross-cutting rather than mutually reinforcing.