

By Nicolai Petro

## How do you solve a problem like Ukraine?

Analysis: Kiev should stop banning Russian films and TV programmes and start talking to Russophone Ukrainians, says Nicolai Petro

*Як Ви будете вирішувати проблему на зразок української?*

*Аналіз: Київ має припинити заборону російських кінострічок та ТВ-програм і розпочати діалог з російськомовними українцями, говорить Ніколай Петро.*

*В статті автор доводить свою думку, стосовно якої намагання нинішньої української влади поєднати Україну має насправді своїми наслідками ще більший розкол. Про існування двох різних частин України говорить і колишній президент Віктор Ющенко, про це свідчать і нещодавні соціологічні опитування на Заході та Сході країни. Російськомовні громадяни України на азі відчують себе нелояльними і тому з обережністю відносяться до ініціатив центральної влади. Окрім того, хоча цього влада чи ні, забороняючи до показу російські фільми, програми та мультфільми, вплив Росії на масову свідомість багатьох українців буде продовжуватися. Тому автор пропонує українській владі налагодити культурний діалог з російськомовними українцями, тим самим домогтися єдності громадянського суспільства шляхом включення до нього цих російськомовних громадян. Простіше кажучи, влада має зробити вибір між націоналізмом і лібералізмом.*

*<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/27/ukraine-russia-solve-nicolai-petro>*



Not long ago, former Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko gave a wide ranging interview in which he offered the man who now sits in that seat some advice.

President Petro Poroshenko must understand, the ex-leader said, that half the country is against the imposition of the Ukrainian language, opposes the idea of a single national church, and does not want to join any military alliance.

With a candour that only a former politician can afford, Yushchenko acknowledged that Ukrainians live in two distinct countries. There are parts of Ukraine today where, he said, “our language practically does not exist, our memory is nonexistent, our church is absent, our culture is absent.”

His solution? To impose “spiritual unity” on the country. During his time in office Yushchenko insists he did just that, which might explain why his initially high popularity rating fell to under 5% by the end of his term.

Perhaps this is the consequence of the approach that politicians such as Yushchenko have taken towards those Ukrainian citizens they consider “utterly foreign”. It is a strategy that intellectuals such as Elena Styazhkina, professor of history at Donetsk National University, euphemistically term “positive, peaceful colonisation”.

At a TEDx conference in Kiev last year Styazhkina clarified her meaning, adding: “the Donbass will not return to Ukraine because the Donbass does not exist. It will be either Ukraine, or nothing at all”.

The most recent example of this colonisation is the introduction of a law, about to come into effect, which bans the showing of “any Russian films, documentaries, serials, or cartoons” made since January 2014 or any productions portraying “the aggressor country” (Russia) in a favourable light made after August 1991 (the time of the Soviet coup).

The current war effort has certainly succeeded in rallying popular support behind the government in Kiev, and the censorship imposed on Russian media and cultural outlets no doubt also helps.

But if colonisation of Russophone Ukraine were a realistic possibility, would we not have seen more progress on national consensus since independence, especially during the Yushchenko era?

A poll conducted last December by the Ukrainian news website Zerkalo Nedeli highlights the fact that the government’s efforts, instead of healing Ukraine’s wounds, are creating new rifts.

Asked what had been the three most significant developments in their country over the past year, it found little consensus between respondents in western Ukraine and those in Donbass:

- **71%** of those in western Ukraine included the deaths of the “heavenly 100” during protests in Kiev that overthrew the previous government, compared with just **15%** of those living in Donbass.
- Fewer than **3%** of western Ukrainians but more than **30%** of those in Donbass rated the self-declaration of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics in their top three.
- More than **31%** of western Ukrainians and fewer than **13%** of those in Donbass included the invasion of Russian troops into Donbass.
- In western Ukraine, **18%** rated the signing of an agreement with the EU among their top three, compared with just **1.5%** of those in Donbass.
- The Russian occupation of Crimea appeared in the top three of more than **35%** of those living in western Ukraine and less than **20%** of those living in Donbass.
- There was somewhat more agreement on the deaths of thousands of Ukrainians during the war: 44% of respondents in the west versus 56% of those in Donbass rated this among their top three.

From this survey, it is apparent that recent events are already being mythologised very differently in different parts of Ukraine.

“Peaceful colonisation” is therefore likely to run into serious difficulties. The most obvious is resentment arising from the implication that any Ukrainian who feels a kinship for Russian culture or prefers to speak Russian is somehow disloyal. This would surely transform the current conflict into a conflict over Ukrainian identity.

A second problem will be increasing western frustration at the restriction of minority cultural and religious rights. Some European politicians are already on record as saying they cannot understand why federalism, used by many multi-ethnic states to preserve national unity, is rejected out of hand by Poroshenko. Moving further from cultural equality for minorities to some form of ethnic democracy would invariably be seen in the west as a step away from European values.

Finally, there is the unavoidable fact that Russia will continue to have a tremendous cultural impact in Ukrainian society, where nearly everyone speaks Russian. Short of shutting down the internet and isolating itself from the world, there is little that Ukraine can do about this.

A better solution than colonisation would therefore be to establish a cultural dialogue with Russophone Ukrainians. A true dialogue of equal citizens might lead to the development of what Ukraine currently so obviously lacks – a unifying civic culture that encompasses both the Russian and Ukrainian speaking communities.

This is where Ukrainian elites have a fateful choice to make. They can try to resolve the problem of national unity by adopting nationalistic symbols, rallying people around an “eternal enemy” (Russia) and making the new national identity a litmus test of loyalty. Or, they can forge unity through the incorporation of Russian speakers into a new civic patriotism in which Ukrainian identity is defined by its civic virtues rather than by culture or ethnicity. Simply put, the choice is between nationalism and liberalism.

Both are quintessential European values, but they lead to very different political systems.

Moreover, given Russia’s overwhelming cultural presence in Ukraine, building a national identity at the expense of Russian identity would prove especially difficult, like trying to build Canadian identity around anti-Americanism and a refusal to speak English.

Finally, there is the issue of the heritage of Ukrainian liberalism. As philosopher Myroslav Popovych points out, the country’s liberal intellectual tradition rests on illustrious names such as Mykhailo Drahomanov, Maksym Kovalevsky, Bohdan Kistiakivsky, Mykhailo Tuhan-Baranovsky, Mykola Vasylenko and Volodymyr Vernadsky. But there is precious little that is distinctively Ukrainian about this tradition. It is, in fact, the liberal intellectual tradition of the Russian empire at the end of the 19th century, a heritage shared by both Russians and Ukrainians alike.

I regard this common heritage as a distinct advantage for modern day Ukraine. First, because it promotes a rule of law that is based on individual rather than collective rights. Second, because it counters the cultural isolation from Russia being sought by the most virulent Ukrainian nationalists. Finally, because it can rebuild ties with today’s Russian intelligentsia on the basis of shared values.

So far Poroshenko seems bent on repeating Yushchenko’s mistakes. But while his nationalistic rhetoric may help the war effort, what happens after the conflict ends? In the long-run integral nationalism runs counter to Ukrainian national unity, stable democracy, and even EU and Nato membership. Ultimately, there is no alternative to a national dialogue that sees Ukraine’s bicultural and bilingual identity as a strength, rather than as a weakness.

And if the west is truly interested in the success of Ukraine, then it should recognise that it too has a vital stake in expanding liberal discourse in Ukraine, and in overcoming the nationalistic rhetoric that can only further divide the nation.