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## Linguistic Conversion in Ukraine: Nation-Building on the Self

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**Abstract:** *Linguistic conversion is the choice that some Ukrainians have made to categorically change their everyday linguistic practices, to speak only Ukrainian in all contexts. In a country where most people are at least passively bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian, this move has more symbolic than practical implications for day-to-day communication. This symbolic significance is key as the issue of language choice has been central in debates about Ukraine’s policies and its cultural and political orientation. Linguistic conversion is an assertion of agency through active construction of one’s personal identity, which has the potential to shift the overall linguistic landscape and narratives of belonging in the country. This article draws on life-story interviews as well as published accounts of linguistic conversion of people of both Russian and Ukrainian ethnic descent to examine the circumstances and motivations that have led them to make the choice to speak only Ukrainian. Their stories illuminate the factors shaping ideologies of national belonging in Ukraine.*

“Poroshenko’s linguistic coming-out” was the topic of an article in the *Ukrains’ka Pravda* media outlet in December 2018 (Romanenko 2018). The “coming-out”—rendered via the Anglicism *kaminhaut*—referred to the Ukrainian president’s admission that he did not speak Ukrainian before 1997. He had grown up in the Odesa oblast, speaking Russian, with Russian as the medium of instruction in his schooling, and with some exposure to *surzhyk* (a varied mixture of Ukrainian and Russian) in his grandmother’s village. Language is often taken as symbolic of a person’s allegiances, so the fact that the Ukrainian president did not actually speak Ukrainian until relatively

late in his life was presented as potentially controversial news. Shallowness of linguistic affiliation could be taken as corresponding to shallowness of one's patriotism. Poroshenko nevertheless chose to publicize his Russian-language background in order to promote the idea that a Russophone adult in Ukraine can and should become fluent in Ukrainian. He was not so different from previous Ukrainian presidents and other politicians who had mostly Russophone upbringings, but he was the first to announce this fact publicly.

Poroshenko's linguistic "coming-out" underscores the fact that language continues to be a key issue in contemporary Ukrainian politics and social dynamics five years after the Euromaidan protests. Most people in Ukraine are at least passively bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian, but there are conflicting tendencies in this bilingualism: language both does, and doesn't matter (Bilaniuk 2016). On the one hand, in many contexts language choice can be transparent and unnoticed, with people speaking whichever of the two languages they prefer in a regime of non-accommodating (also called "receptive") bilingualism (Bilaniuk 2010). On the other hand, language is politicized and seen as a security issue, with Russian sometimes viewed as the "language of the enemy" and Ukrainian as the language of patriotism. The latter view is challenged by the fact that many soldiers in the Ukrainian military fighting against the Russia-backed separatists in the Donbas are Russophones. As President Poroshenko declared,

"... in the war zone 62% of the military service-people who take arms to defend their country, Ukraine, are Russian-speaking. And that is the best response to Putin, who came with the supposed aim of freeing Russian speakers. No. We are defending our Ukrainian land. And those who speak Russian love Ukraine no less than I love it in Ukrainian" (Kostiuk 2015).

The language situation in Ukraine is complex, with political and cultural loyalties not necessarily aligning with linguistic practices. A trend that is my focus in this article is what I call "linguistic conversion": the decision to radically change one's daily linguistic practices, switching from Russian to Ukrainian as part of a personal act of patriotism and contribution to nation-building. While there is no comprehensive data on how many people have

undergone such a conversion, there is evidence that it is a growing trend (Crosby and Sereda 2018). Internet sites publicize conversion stories, and television talk shows have featured the linguistic transition stories of celebrities (e.g., “Alena Vinnitskaia” 2017, “Dmytro Karpachov” 2017). Complete linguistic conversion represents an extreme choice, but in recent years many people have increased and broadened use of their Ukrainian language, which has accompanied a deeper sense of “Ukrainianness” (Kulyk 2016, 2017, 2018). What I report here is based on interviews and fieldwork I conducted in Ukraine in 2009, 2016, and 2018, as well as on online news reports, blogs and public social media postings.

Linguistic conversion is a term that can be applied to a subset of “new speakers,” people who decide to learn and use a particular language as adults, often as part of a revival movement for an endangered language (Woolhiser 2013, Hornsby 2015, Jaffe 2015, Pujolar and Puigdevall 2015). The term “new speakers” can refer to a wide range of competencies and degrees of use, including newly-acquired language knowledge and new spheres of interaction (Jaffee 2015: 25–27). In Ukraine, new speakers include those who had limited exposure to the Ukrainian language through school or the media prior to undertaking to become a full-time speaker; they therefore had to devote significant effort to language learning. It also includes those who had learned Ukrainian in childhood, but only used it at home or in limited situations due to what had been perceived as its low social prestige, and who have since chosen to broaden their use of Ukrainian to all contexts. The people whom I focus on here are an extreme case of new speakers that I call “linguistic converts” because of their decision to leave behind their previous language of daily use, switching to using the “new” language in all contexts. Regardless of the degree of new learning required, they are united in the fact that their linguistic choice was a concerted, life-altering step, an assertion of their agency in constructing their own identity and that of their society. They are participating in deliberate language change (Thomason 2007).

My choice of the term “linguistic conversion” intends to evoke parallels with religious conversion, as the experience of categorically changing to a different language in one’s daily life entails deep

ideological commitment. Like a religious conversion, a linguistic transition can be a deeply spiritual transformation. The people I interviewed during my fieldwork, and others who have shared their stories publically, have referred to their linguistic transitions as a “breakthrough in consciousness,” a “rebirth,” a “transformation of identity,” and the achievement of a “feeling of wholeness.” My findings resonate with those of Gapova (2017) in her study of a parallel phenomenon in Belarus, which she also refers to as “conversion,” in which the decision to speak Belarusian goes hand in hand with a new sense of ethnonational identity. In Ukraine the connection between language and ethnonational identity is part of some, but not all people’s experiences of linguistic conversion. The connection is not essential, and as some of the examples in this article show, people who identify as ethnic Russian may choose to speak Ukrainian as an act of support for the construction of a civic Ukrainian political identity. Polese and Wylegala (2008: 805) also use the term “conversion” in discussing the shift that people have made from a Russian to a Ukrainian identity, but as they note, for some the experience is “not a ‘conversion’ but rather a case of the informant having gained consciousness of himself and thereby understanding that he was Ukrainian.” In the case of language choice, the experience is not only internal, but necessarily involves public performance and the reactions that it elicits. Those who change their daily speech from Russian to Ukrainian encounter reactions from family, friends, and others familiar with their previous linguistic habits, and those reactions underscore that a change has taken place.

People have been making the switch from Russian to Ukrainian especially since the fall of Soviet power in the late 1980s and Ukraine’s independence in 1991. The trend gained followers after the 2004 Orange Revolution and especially picked up momentum since the 2013–2014 Euromaidan protests, which are often referred to as the “Revolution of Dignity.” The year 2014 was a breaking point, when many Ukrainians felt betrayed by Russia when its military forces invaded and annexed Crimea and then led and supported separatists in the eastern Donbas region in a war against the Ukrainian government. For many, at this moment, Russia

became an enemy, and the Russian language became a symbol of foreign occupation. For some, it spurred their decision to change their daily language regimen. Yet the language situation in Ukraine is complex, and many people whose sense of Ukrainianness strengthened after 2014 continue to use Russian or both languages. Studies show that overall, language use in Ukraine has become a weaker indicator of political allegiance than before 2014 (Sasse and Lackner 2018, Bureiko and Moga 2019).

During my field research I encountered many linguistic converts of both Ukrainian and Russian ethnic backgrounds. My 2005 book *Contested Tongues* includes the life stories of some individuals who took on linguistic self-transformations, among them former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Borys Tarasiuk, whose mother was Russian and father Ukrainian. I interviewed many other linguistic converts in the years since, both young and old, including students, musicians, journalists, poets, and scholars who had grown up speaking Russian. During my field research into cultural activism in 2009, I was surprised how many of the people who were most active in publically supporting Ukrainian had grown up speaking Russian, and how many also had ethnic Russian parentage. For some, deciding to speak Ukrainian correlated with a profound new conviction about their role as Ukrainian citizens, often spurred by a key event or encounter in their lives or an influential piece of writing. For others it was a more gradual realization that their willpower and discipline could help rectify the problem of the second-rate status of things Ukrainian, and of their country as a whole. Activist movements and social media platforms have urged linguistic conversion from Russian to Ukrainian by publicizing the trend and offering support.

In Ukraine a change in language use is usually referred to as a *perekhid* (*perekhod* in Russian)—literally, a crossing over, a transition. When referring to language use, *perekhid* is often translated in English as “switch.” A campaign begun in 2007 by the NGO *Ne Bud’ Baiduzhym* (Don’t be Apathetic; abbreviation NBB) to encourage broader use of Ukrainian was titled “Zroby podarunok Ukraini! Perekhod’ na ukrainsku!” (Give a gift to Ukraine! Switch to Ukrainian!), using the informal imperative verb form *perekhod’* of

the verb *perekhodyty* (to switch, to cross, to transition). “Perekhod’ na ukrainsku” also became the name of an activist group founded in November 2015, with a Facebook page where stories of people’s transitions to Ukrainian were shared: [facebook.com/perekhodnamovu](https://facebook.com/perekhodnamovu). The group also produced videos in support of Ukrainian and organized free language classes and events, including a 25-day Ukrainian “language marathon” in honor of the twenty-five years of Ukraine’s independence. The physical crossing from one side to another was symbolized in their logo, designed by Oksana Fed’ko, showing a cartoon version of the Beatles’ Abbey Road album cover with the road crossing stripes in the colors of the Ukrainian flag. In first presenting this logo in June 2016, the group’s Facebook post stated, “Bitlz pohanoho ne poradiat’ ;)” (The Beatles wouldn’t give bad advice ;)), notably invoking non-Ukrainian cultural authority figures to promote Ukrainianization.

Anyone making a change in their life is an activist of sorts. Here I delve into the life stories of individuals who have made the switch to Ukrainian to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations that lead people to make this choice. I first focus on two people, both ethnic Russians, who worked as activists in support of Ukrainian, Oksana Levkova and Denys Samyhin. I then present the stories of two lead singers of popular rock bands, of Ukrainian and mixed Ukrainian-Russian ethnic heritage, respectively: Vadym Krasnookyi, of *Mad Heads XL*, a frequent participant of NBB’s campaigns, and Serhii Vasyliuk of *Tin’ Sontsia* (or *Sun Shadow*). I then discuss the case of “re-conversion”: a young woman who converted to Ukrainian for three years, from 2012 to 2015, and then made the choice to convert back to Russian, as well as an older couple who converted to Russian in the 1950s and then re-converted back to their native Ukrainian after 2014, when they were both in their eighties. These stories showcase the complex roles that language can play in people’s constructions of their identity and their sense of belonging to a Ukrainian nation.

### Oksana Levkova: Portrait of an Activist

Oksana Levkova is the director of the NGO *Ne Bud' Baiduzhym*, an organization founded in 2005 that has spearheaded various campaigns to urge people to make the switch to Ukrainian. Oksana's story was one of growing up immersed in the Russian language and in Soviet-Russian culture. Indeed, she first felt disdain for Ukrainian language and identity, until both life circumstances and revelations about history and politics compelled her to embrace and champion a Ukrainian identity and to make the switch to speaking only Ukrainian in her daily life.

Both Oksana's mother and father were ethnic Russians who were born in Starokostiantyniv, Khmel'nyts'ka oblast. Oksana was also born in Starokostiantyniv, in the mid-1970s, while her father was stationed at the large military air base there. Russian was the language of her home and of the Soviet military community more broadly. When Oksana was very young, her family left Ukraine; in a practice typical for military families, they moved frequently during her childhood, staying in garrisons where Russian language prevailed. In addition to Ukraine, they lived for five years in Hungary and for five years in the Russian Far East, in Khabarovskii Krai. Oksana spent most of her teenage years in Russia until 1992, when she moved back to Ukraine at the age of seventeen. She recalls that, at that point, she "detested everything Ukrainian" and even begged her mother not to call her "dotsia" (a Ukrainian diminutive for "daughter"), since she did not want to be a "seliuchka" ("a hick" or "unsophisticated villager").<sup>1</sup>

Back in Ukraine, Oksana had to complete two more years of school. The main language of instruction was Russian, but there was a required Ukrainian language class. Oksana recalled telling her parents, "I don't want to learn that hick language Ukrainian! Yuck!" According to her, the children of other military families, many of whom expected to return to Russia soon, also hated Ukraine and resented having to study the Ukrainian language in school. Her

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<sup>1</sup> I provide the English translations both from my own interviews and other non-English sources.

Ukrainian language teacher was uninspiring, and Oksana recalled that the curriculum was all rural themes and “the laments of victimized Ukrainian serfs.” Ukraine was “just still crawling out from the Soviet past” in the 1990s. Nobody in her town had even heard of new writers like Iurii Andrukhovych and Oksana Zabuzhko, and their works were certainly not in the school curriculum. As Ukrainian was being used more and more in official capacities, however, Oksana soon came to associate the language not just with the village, but with bureaucracy and formalities as well.

After completing school, Oksana wanted to go to university to study journalism. To pass the entrance exams, which were in Ukrainian, she had to study the Ukrainian language and history very intensively. She was admitted to Ivan Franko National University of L’viv, and there all of her classes and tests were in Ukrainian, but it was life outside of classes that led to a radical shift in her thinking. In L’viv, Ukrainian was used in all aspects of daily life, in the dorms, cafes, and on the streets. She recalled one specific moment that was “wildly enlightening” (*prozrinnia shalene*): she overheard a student talking to her boyfriend on the telephone at the main desk in the dorm, speaking in Ukrainian, telling him how much she missed him and loved him, and calling him by diminutive names “Myroslavchyk” and “Myros’o.” These were names that Oksana had previously thought of as ridiculous, “villagey,” and embarrassing. But here a young urban woman was using these terms in earnest and speaking about love, in Ukrainian. For Oksana the moment was mind-blowing. It was the first time she witnessed that Ukrainian could be used to talk about love. She saw it as a desired language and as a language of desire.

During her years in L’viv (1997–2002), Oksana discovered for herself a Ukrainian language that was alive and in demand. Gradually, she came to speak more and more Ukrainian herself. The rich cultural life was a major influence, as she attended many concerts, art exhibits, and plays and eventually participated in theatrical productions herself. Her fellow students were very creative people, writing poems, plays, and even whole novels in Ukrainian. She looked up to her Ukrainian-speaking university

professors and to contemporary Ukrainian performers like Ruslana, whom she saw as cultural authorities.

In addition to cultural influences, the political dimension also played a key role in Oksana's shift in perceptions of society and language. In a Facebook post she explained,

[t]he desovietization of my mind began with the morning stories of Grandma Maria, a custodian in the student dorms of the Ivan Franko L'viv University. Every day at 7 am she washed the corridors, walls, and stovetop in the communal kitchen of the fifth floor, and I followed her with my mouth agape and listened to all the details of how the red commissars tortured her father, a soldier of the UPA [Ukrainian Insurgent Army]. I had grown up in a successful Soviet military family, and so I had not been told that the party and Lenin were evil, because both of them promoted career growth for all ambitious military people of the USSR. (Levkova 2017)

Oksana described her shift in worldview as a “most painful rupture” (*naiboliuchiishyi rozryv shablona*),

...that is, when in 1992 you arrive from dear mother-Russia to a very non-Ukraine-oriented military town in the Khmel'nyts'ka region, you at first confirm your attitude towards Ukraine as to something inadequate and lame, and then in 1997 you hear, from the lips of a living grandmother (not a textbook!) a proud nation speaking to you, and you find yourself compelled to believe in it. (Levkova 2017)

After completing her university studies, Oksana went on to do graduate work in journalism, researching the transformation of political values in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia and traveling in all three countries to research their press cultures. In our interview, she explained that the more she traveled abroad, the more she fell in love with Ukraine. Freedom of expression was an important part of this sentiment:

These countries were like native countries to me, but I came to see how much easier it is to breathe in Ukraine, especially for journalists, because I truly could say what I wanted in newspapers, on TV, and on radio. In Russia and Belarus I understood that everything is clamped down; there is no freedom of speech.

When I interviewed Oksana in 2009, it had been four years since she had decided to speak exclusively in Ukrainian. When I asked why she had made this choice, she explained,

Because now I know for sure that the more monolingual [Ukrainian-speaking] people there are, the more quickly we will cease to be just a piece of Russia in the world's awareness. [...] When we have to save the nation, when the threats to national security are so obvious, then you need a homogeneous language regime.

She explained further that children would learn Russian anyway, due to its large presence in everyday life, and so it was all the more important for schools, businesses, the media, and government to operate in Ukrainian. By speaking only Ukrainian in everyday life, she was doing her part to support Ukraine's sovereignty.

When I asked Oksana about her identity, she said she was too busy to think about it much. Upon my request that she try to explain, she said:

I am a Ukrainian because I create for Ukraine, and I live and work [in Ukraine], and I like the people here. [...] Here it is interesting for me to fight, and there is something to fight for, something worth saving. [...] But yes, my past is Russian-speaking, in my past yes, [I was] a Russian, well, by blood a Russian. But you see, there is the theory of the political nation and there is the theory of the ethnic nation. If you take the theory of the political nation, then the nation is all those people who conceive of themselves as belonging to Ukraine, not by blood, not on a genetic level, but mentally. I conceive of myself mentally as a part of Ukraine, and I plan to live here.

Oksana expressed gratitude to fate that she was born in Ukraine, acknowledging a potential essentialized connection between birthplace and nationality, but tying her conscious choices and actions to the establishment of her national allegiance.

Including Oksana Levkova, four out of five staff members at the NBB Kyiv office in 2009 were former Russophones who converted to Ukrainian. They included one activist from Slavutych, in the Kyiv region, and two from the southern city of Kherson. Only one staff member, from the western Ukrainian city of Ternopil', had grown up as a Ukrainophone Ukrainian. Additionally, many of the

volunteers and performers who participated in NBB activities were also adult adopters of Ukrainian, having grown up with Russian as their main language. I now turn to one of their stories.

### **Denys Samyhin: Agent of Change**

I met Denys Samyhin in 2009 by chance when we had overlapping appointments to interview rock musician Oleh Skrypka, a prominent proponent of the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian culture who grew up Russophone in Russia. Denys was a journalist and co-director of a public relations agency. Weeks after this chance meeting, in another wonderful case of fieldwork serendipity, we recognized each other at a music festival, and I found out that Denys was the primary author of NBB's "Give a Gift to Ukraine! Switch to Ukrainian!" booklet. He had researched and written the booklet "hot on the heels of his own transition," and he agreed to share his story.

A half year before the birth of his first child, Denys decided that the day his child was born would be the day he switched to Ukrainian. It was in 2005, right after the Orange Revolution. Until then, Denys had been Russophone. He was born in Russia in 1980, and his parents were both Russian, with family roots in the Krasnodar region and the cities of Urzhum and Penza. His father was in the military. From age three to six, his family lived in Kazakhstan; later, they moved to the Ukrainian port city of Odesa. While the family lived there, his father served on the Soviet space control-monitoring ship "Kosmonaut Yuri Gagarin" until 1989. At that point his parents separated, and his father returned to Russia while Denys remained with his mother in Odesa.

Denys described the environment in the new district of Odesa where he lived as "maximally Russified. There was nothing of Ukraine there." He went to a Russian-language school, and he did not remember being taught any Ukrainian until the fourth grade, around the beginning of the country's independence. Denys recalls that,

there was a wave of enthusiasm, and I sensed that teachers were starting to take it [teaching the Ukrainian language] more seriously, to approach it

more creatively. We had competitions, telling about what we read in Ukrainian, and I tried then. I had never spoken Ukrainian. The system was built in such a way that we had never encountered Ukrainian, and then, boom, in an instant, there is the idea that this is our native language, that we should be able to speak it. Nobody is explaining the meanings of words, we're just expected to know. And they're starting to lecture to us in Ukrainian, with terminology—*pidmet, prysudok* [subject, predicate].

The sudden expectation of knowledge of Ukrainian would have been less of a problem for many children in Ukraine, who, even if they grew up in Russophone urban environments, were exposed to Ukrainian when visiting relatives in villages, which are predominantly Ukrainophone throughout the country. Children who had grandparents in a village often spent the summer with them (as rural locations were seen as a healthier environment) and, as a result, had ample time to pick up the language. Denys did not have this opportunity, as all of his relatives were in Russia. He said that he could have been exempted from Ukrainian class because he was from a military family, but his mother did not know what else to do with him for that hour and figured that he might as well stay and learn.

Attending Ukrainian language classes was at first something “unreal” for Denys—“as if two different planets had come into contact”—since he had encountered so little of the language previously. As with Oksana Levkova, he and his friends initially felt disdain for Ukrainian. “When we were fifteen, amongst us boys Ukrainian language was a topic for jokes. The Ukrainian language—what is this, Chinese? What is it good for? We have to study it, but nobody wants to.” Denys was very proud of the fact that he was Russian: “It was considered prestigious. Ukrainians were even a bit embarrassed to say they were Ukrainian. But I was always proud: *ya russkii!* [I’m Russian]. My last name, Samyhin, is typical Russian, ending in ‘-in.’ Oh, yes.”

Soon, however, Denys developed a competing interest in Ukrainian culture, partly influenced by new Ukrainian performers like Oleh Skrypka of the rock group *Vopli Vidopliassova*, or *VV*. He told me that his friends laughed when he told them he was going to buy Ukrainian music: “they were like, what, are you joking? What

Ukrainian music?” But the cultural landscape was changing. In his words,

It was 1996, VV had just returned from France and recorded their first video clip, “Vesna.” And this song, well... Ukrainian culture was interesting to me because it seemed so distant, so inaccessible. Something higher than what we have. I felt that Ukrainian culture was somehow elevated, that it had some sort of ideals. It was not like us, it was a different world, and I wanted to get to know it.

When I asked Denys how he reconciled his pride in being Russian with this regard for Ukrainian culture as “higher,” he first answered that “it’s a paradoxical situation,” making reference to opposites attracting. Upon further consideration, he explained that it was because Russian was so strongly associated with everyday Soviet life:

Everyone is speaking Russian all around. Even bums are speaking Russian, all sorts of unpleasant people are speaking Russian, there is the *blatna* [criminal culture] music in Russian, and if you are a creative person, and you want to rise up, you are looking for something new, you find a new sphere where you can develop, to show that you are not like everyone else. I believe that this was such a moment. You are not like everyone else, you want something different, bigger, better. [...] Now our material situation is more or less improved, but right after the fall of the Soviet Union, we all fully felt that we are not successful, that we don’t have anything, that everything here is bad. For so many years people kept being told that we are building communism, we are heading to a communist future, people made such big sacrifices. [...] After all of this collapsed, nothing was sacred, all of this was wrong, we built a terrible society. [...] All the life that they believed in was ruined. People realized that there were no ideals, it was just words, in reality everything was decided by those in power. So there was a yearning for something else, a different society, a desire to build a new country, to build a Ukrainian nation.

Denys’s vision of the Ukrainian language giving access to a different world also had practical ramifications. In 1996, when Denys was sixteen, he dreamt of becoming a journalist. “I wanted to go to Kyiv to study, and I felt that since the state language is Ukrainian, I should figure it out.” He ended up attending the Institute of Journalism at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, where

instruction was in Ukrainian. Students were encouraged to speak Ukrainian in the institute corridors, but outside of classes, most of them spoke Russian, which was the case in much of urban Kyiv at the time.

During his journalism studies in Kyiv, Denys met his future wife, a fellow student. She was from the Kyiv oblast and her native language was Ukrainian, but there were only a few friends with whom she spoke Ukrainian in the city. She and Denys spoke Russian with each other then, but she did help him with Ukrainian for his assignments when his knowledge was lacking. They married after the Orange Revolution, which had a huge impact on Denys:

The Orange Revolution was an upheaval that changed everything. I was very active in it, I gave everything I could at the time. I felt it [the election fraud] as a colossal unfairness. [...] I remember that I said to myself, if [Viktor] Yanukovich wins, I am going to make a super effort and switch to Ukrainian, as a response for what they have done. Yes! [laughs]. But [Viktor] Yushchenko won. Then, when our child was on the way, I wanted her to be raised in a Ukrainian-speaking environment, and my wife agreed. It was good that she knew Ukrainian well. [...] I first switched to Ukrainian with my wife. Like I wrote in the booklet, you can practice with someone you are close to, and take a break if you need to, it has to be your choice. [...] If someone had tried to force me (*naviazuvav*), I would not have switched. Why? Because language is a very intimate thing. I am sure this is a physiological thing, you can't just say you didn't study it enough, go learn it. At age twenty, one person can learn new languages easily, and others not. It can only work if it is your decision; only then can it bring satisfaction and benefits.

For Denys, switching to Ukrainian in everyday life expressed his commitment to building a nation with certain ideals, and it was a decision spurred both by political and personal events, especially by becoming a parent. In my research I found that parenthood was a common impetus for switching; in fact, it has been cited as a key reason in several conversion accounts posted on the “Perekhod’ na Ukrain’sku” Facebook page. According to Denys, based on people he had met around the country, even parents who found it hard to switch themselves still generally wanted their children to learn Ukrainian well, even in areas of the country where Russian dominated. His family’s choice also had influence on others, even

when parenthood was not in the picture. Denys proudly told me, “after my wife and I switched to Ukrainian, literally two months passed, and my friend and his wife said, ‘We are also going to switch to Ukrainian.’ And they switched. We set the example.”

Denys had even further influence through his authorship of the NBB booklet “Give a Gift to Ukraine! Switch to Ukrainian!,” which serves as a guide for those who want to transition to Ukrainian and features vignettes from Ukrainian history and stories of celebrities who made the switch. One woman even wrote him that it was “the most interesting book she had read in her life, that it had more impact on her than anything else she had ever read.” Just as Denys’s booklet featured the stories of influential musicians, so here I turn to the stories of two popular singers who made the switch from Russian to Ukrainian.

### **Krasnookyi: A Rebellious Rock-n-Roller Finding His Roots**

Vadym Krasnookyi is the leader of the rock group *Mad Heads XL*, which participated in many of NBB’s campaigns by giving concerts and press conferences. I interviewed him in April 2009, six months after he made the full transition to the Ukrainian language in all aspects of his personal and public life. Vadym explained that his self-Ukrainization had proceeded in stages.

Vadym was born in Kyiv in 1976, in an ethnic Ukrainian family who spoke Russian at home. During his childhood he heard and understood Ukrainian, but did not speak it. In Kyiv he went to a Russian-language school, where he recalls that he had an excellent Ukrainian language teacher. As Vadym recalled, “she was an enthusiast, she knew how to cultivate love for the language.” Like many city kids who grew up speaking Russian, he was exposed to a Ukrainian-language environment when he visited his grandparents, who lived in rural areas in eastern and southern Ukraine. When he was a bit older, he occasionally tried speaking Ukrainian there. This experience laid an important foundation for his later conversion.

In 1991, when Vadym began his studies at the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, he started a rockabilly band with his brother and friends. They sang in English, as was often the case with Ukrainian groups

emulating western styles. Of their stylistic choice at the time he said, “of course it is Western culture; in the ‘80s this was something positive, in contrast to false Soviet culture.” The band became popular, and they left Kyiv to work in Europe, primarily Germany. The issue of language was always in the background, as Vadym explained in a public online chat session:

When we began to tour in Europe in the mid-1990s, we always made the point that we were a Ukrainian group. Even though back then we only sang in English and spoke with each other in Russian. Then one time a friend in Spain asked me, why is that? At the time I couldn’t give him a clear answer. And that question gave me no rest until I simply transitioned to Ukrainian. (Krasnooky 2012).

Towards the end of the 1990s, Vadym felt that the group needed a new avenue of creativity: “We achieved what we could with English, we were known in the Rockabilly crowd, in Europe and even in America, but we had hit a ceiling. So we needed to figure out how to move on creatively.” He tried writing songs in both Russian and Ukrainian, as he explained in our interview:

When I started to write in Russian and Ukrainian, I realized that music does change based on the language. Russian didn’t move me; it evoked associations with Russian rock which I don’t really like. It’s been more developed, and right away it starts to resemble someone [else’s work]. But in Ukrainian very often it sounds like it’s never sounded before. You take existing music, you sing it in Ukrainian, and it takes on a unique coloring. And as the melodies and rhythm of the language dictated, the music started to change. Subconsciously, it took on a certain character. [...] I just take the path where my creativity leads me. I have nothing against Russian, it is equally native for me, but in songs, I first sang in English, and then I liked how Ukrainian sounded.

Vadym began writing songs and performing in Ukrainian in 2000. At first, he only sang in Ukrainian and spoke Russian when conversing on stage. Then he made the shift to speaking publicly in Ukrainian as well, including in front of TV cameras:

I somehow understood that there is only one way to change the world around us—through changes within ourselves. I can talk all I want about this, but if I don’t do something about it myself, nothing will change. Earlier

I hosted programs on the radio in Ukrainian, and then came the songs in Ukrainian. At some point I felt the dissonance—I'm singing in Ukrainian and speaking Russian between the songs. And finally the moment came when I switched to Ukrainian in everyday life. Now I speak Russian only with those who don't understand Ukrainian. (Hai 2011)

Six months after he made the switch, Vadym told me that his wife still spoke Russian with him, but she understood Ukrainian and switched to it once in a while. Such non-accommodating bilingualism between spouses is not unusual in Ukraine (Bilaniuk 2005). Vadym recounted how other people reacted to his shift to Ukrainian:

The first people to notice the change were the musicians of our group. They thought, “the captain's got a fever” and viewed my decision with irony. Our trombonist Valerii Chesnokov decided to make a bet with me. He thought that I'd only manage to stick with it for a few days and then I'd go back to speaking Russian. If I lost, I would give him my honorarium from a concert. If he lost, he would have to speak with me in Ukrainian. Which is what he does now. (Hai 2011)

As Vadym explained further in our interview,

Russian still dominates in Kyiv, so speaking Ukrainian is a defiance, a challenge to society [*vyklyk suspilstvi*]. [...] The rebellious rock-n-roller [*rokenrol'nyi buntivnyk*], he is still within me somewhere in principle, probably less than before, because my current philosophy does not entail some sort of forceful influence on the surrounding world, but with my example I can influence, now more than before, since I am a public person.

For Vadym Krasnooky, linguistic conversion to Ukrainian was a gradual process, motivated by a combination of creative, social, and political factors, although he occasionally also invoked an essentialist discourse connecting land and ethnicity to justify his choice: “Why did I need to do this? First of all, for the harmonious relationship with the energetics of this land. People who refuse the language of their ancestors, who ruin these connections, they ruin their health. And isn't that why our whole country is so sick?” (Hai 2011)

## Serhii Vasyliuk: Encountering the Other, Self-Othering, and Heeding the Call of Roots

Serhii Vasyliuk is the lead singer of the folk metal band *Tin' Sontsia*. He shared his story with me in an interview in 2009. Born in Kyiv in 1983, he grew up in a Russophone family. One of his grandmothers was ethnic Russian, and his other grandparents were Ukrainian. He began school around the time Ukraine gained its independence and attended a combination of Russian- and Ukrainian-language secondary schools. The historical narratives and symbols of Ukrainian ethnic identity revived after independence had a profound impact on Serhii. He remembered being moved when seeing men in Cossack garb in the city center in the 1990s, identifying with this culture as “his own.”

Ultimately an encounter with a Russian in the center of Kyiv made Serhii feel the contradictions between his Russian language use and Ukrainian identity. It was in 2002, when he had already begun singing and playing guitar and written some of his songs in Ukrainian. He had come out to play in support of the sellers of Ukrainian flags, buttons, and other insignia who were being ousted from the central square, Maidan Nezalezhnosti. When a young Russian asked him, “*O chem vy tut poete?*” (“What are you singing about?”), he explained that he felt he “would be the lowest brute” (*ostannoiu skotynoi*) if he, as a protester, were to answer in Russian. And so he proceeded to speak in Ukrainian, thus initiating a permanent change. His linguistic conversion was catalyzed by an encounter with an Other, a Russian traveler in this case, when he needed to represent his cause.

For Serhii, conversion to Ukrainian was part of a deeply spiritual experience. He said it is like believing in God, although he pointed out that often atheists have had a similar experience as well. He expressed a sense of an organic link to a Ukrainian identity, but in his case, it went beyond language to historical symbolism, both Cossack and pagan. He also highlighted a self-Othering aspect of changing language use: language is one of the bases of one’s concept of self, he explained, so no matter how patriotic a person may feel, starting to speak another language is a transformation of identity, a

breaking of tradition—a breaking of habitus. It is a sudden becoming-different and, in his view, people are often afraid to become different. Of the individuals presented in this article, Serhii had the most background and practice in Ukrainian language, but this prior exposure did not change the momentousness of the personal transformation that he felt in undertaking to speak only Ukrainian in everyday life.

### **Changing Political Attitudes and Re-conversion**

Linguistic conversion is not necessarily a unidirectional process, and people who do convert may make the conscious choice to “switch back.” So far I have only met one such person, in 2018, but her story presents a trajectory that may well apply to others, which proceeds from belief in, then to disillusionment with, what she calls “nationalist” politics.

The young woman in question, to whom I will refer via the pseudonym Anya, was born in the mid-1990s in the central Ukrainian industrial city of Kryvyi Rih. Her parents and other relatives all spoke Russian or what she calls “a Russian-surzhyk,” meaning a Russian-dominated vernacular mixed with elements of Ukrainian. She attended a Ukrainian-language secondary school, but in some classes, during breaks, and outside of school, she and her friends all spoke Russian. In 2012, when Anya was in tenth grade, she had to receive extra tutoring in Ukrainian after having done very poorly in the subject. Thanks to an inspiring tutor, she became interested in Ukrainian literature and history and began to adopt patriotic views in opposition to the politics of the government at the time, which was led by Viktor Yanukovich and Mykola Azarov. It was after reading *Zapysky ukrains'koho samashedshoho* (*Notes of a Ukrainian Madman*), a 2010 novel by Lina Kostenko, that Anya felt motivated to try to speak Ukrainian. She explained,

At first I wanted to speak Ukrainian for one week, but it lasted three years, until 2015. I spoke Ukrainian in all spheres of life... Maybe twice in those three years, when I met with my relatives from Russia, it was only with them that I spoke in Russian.

Her parents were fine with her choice, neither for nor against it, but most of her other relatives, friends, and teachers reacted negatively. One teacher chastised Anya for speaking Ukrainian by saying, “khvatit vypendryvat’sia” (“enough with the showing off”), which Anya found particularly annoying.

Anya moved to Kyiv in 2013 to study at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy University. The Euromaidan protests took place during her first year of study there. She actively supported the Euromaidan movement, and her political views were, as she described, “overtly nationalistic” then. By 2015, however, Anya’s views had shifted. She recounted, “Then I decided to converse for one day in Russian, and that has been going on for three years now.” Her conversion to Ukrainian had been so complete that people who did not know her prior to her Ukrainian-speaking phase said that, when she spoke Russian, “it is as if you are not yourself.” Converting back to Russian also took some effort:

Although at first speaking Russian felt like speaking a foreign language, very quickly—in two or three days, whereas it had taken me several months to “get used to” Ukrainian—I felt myself “freer” in composing my thoughts. But I think that it was also influential that “speaking Ukrainian” was no longer an important part of my political agenda.”

Anya’s linguistic choices reflected her trajectory of political attitudes. While she felt freer conversing in Russian, she was no longer categorical about language and at times accommodated to Ukrainian speakers.

An interesting counterpoint to Anya’s story of “reverse conversion” is that of an elderly couple in the southern central city of Mykolaiv, which was related to me by their grandchild. They were born in the 1930s and grew up speaking Ukrainian, but given the circumstances of the time, they converted to Russian as young adults. Only recently, aged in their eighties, did they decide to “convert back” to Ukrainian, surprising their otherwise Russophone family, going back to their native language “before it was too late.”

## Conclusion

People who convert their linguistic usage completely to Ukrainian represent a small but growing population in Ukraine. They are actively changing the linguistic landscape in their country and participating in a growing trend of people expanding their use of Ukrainian in social and cultural spheres previously dominated by Russian (Crosby and Sereda 2018, Kulyk 2016, 2017, 2018). In this article, an examination of the ideologies and motivations of people who took the extreme step of linguistic conversion sheds light on the factors shaping people's language use choices in general. Among the factors that emerged in the cases presented were shattered stereotypes, an appreciation of the creative potential of an underrepresented language, a growing sense of contradictions in existing linguistic practices, and a sense of personal responsibility for the country's future.

Stereotypes of Ukrainian as a language of lower prestige had been widespread in Soviet times, and exposure to previously unknown aspects of Ukrainian culture were decisive in leading some of my interviewees to reevaluate and change their linguistic behaviors. The drivers in the cases discussed above included the discovery of vibrant Ukrainophone urban culture and Ukrainian rock music. For songwriters and musicians, Ukrainian also had appeal as a language with great creative potential, as it had been underrepresented in contemporary popular culture. Also significant were the associations of the Ukrainian language with Ukraine's greater freedom of expression relative to other post-Soviet countries. Speaking Ukrainian became a way for people to feel that they were doing something for the country and taking action in securing their country's sovereignty and forging its future, especially for coming generations. Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism—which used to be very skewed, with many Russophones having little or no competence in Ukrainian in the past—has indeed become more balanced. Even if Russian speakers in Ukraine do not become actively bilingual or switch to Ukrainian themselves, many nevertheless want their children to speak Ukrainian and envision a greater role for the Ukrainian language in the country.

While a sense of personal agency and choice was dominant in my interviews, essentialized connections between Ukrainian language, ethnicity, and nation were also present, according to which people felt that they were “righting a wrong” and bringing language and culture back into alignment. In these cases, people were spurred to make the change after an encounter with someone who pointed out, or otherwise made them conscious of, a contradiction between their language use and ethnonational allegiance. In such instances, both primordialist-essentialist and social constructionist paradigms of the nation intersect in narratives of language choice. Indeed, while people exert personal agency to enact change in constructing their country, they are potentially reinforcing an essentialized ethnolinguistic conception of the nation by creating greater alignment between the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian national belonging. In the future, it remains to be seen whether a perception of Ukrainian as a language of essentialized ethnonational identification or as a language of civic belonging and sovereignty will prevail in Ukraine. Yet as this article makes clear, ethnic Russian citizens of Ukraine who convert to Ukrainian show a building trajectory for the latter option, engaging Ukrainian as representative of an inclusive civic identity.

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