

## *Opinion: Ukraine's 2019 Language Law Stands for Protection, not Discrimination*

To be quite honest, I'm angry.

Angry that my canvas shoes get wet when it rains. Angry that my toast gets burned in the toaster every morning. Angry that I keep picking that spot on my left cheek.

And I'm sure we've all got things we're angry about, but I'm 99.9% certain that yours isn't your former coloniser accusing you of discriminating against their language when you adopt a law to prioritise your own.

In fact, unless any Ukrainians are reading this, I'm 100% certain.

The 2019 Language Law of Ukraine does just that: prioritises and protects the Ukrainian language in government, media, and educational spaces. And here's some official legislation, just to make it extra clear: "the status of the Ukrainian language as the only State language implies its mandatory use throughout Ukraine in the exercise of powers by government authorities, as well as in other common spheres of public life determined by this Law".

What does this statement achieve, exactly? Apart from being quite wordy...

Well. By making Ukrainian the primary language of politics, science, literature, as well as in education, this country is taking major strides in decolonising itself from its Soviet past; a process which, in Ukraine's case, needs to begin with its language.

And it really shouldn't have to be more complicated than that, right?

But, as I said, I'm angry. Not just because burnt toast tastes awful.

Why?

In 2022, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov wasn't shy in expressing the Kremlin's opinions on language politics in Ukraine, claiming that this process of increasing the influence of the Ukrainian language in major public spheres is 'discrimination'. Yes. Discrimination.

Just for clarity's sake, here's a quick recap: the Kremlin stripped Ukraine of its national and cultural identity. Ukraine experienced the suppression of said identity. When Ukraine became

independent from the Kremlin, it attempted to gain control of what it lost. The Kremlin then accuses Ukraine of discriminating against the Russian language.

NOTHING, and I repeat, NOTHING about the Language Law has the goal of suppressing the Russian language in Ukraine.

In fact, let's bring it back to the official legislation: "persons from among national minorities of Ukraine shall be guaranteed the right to study at communal educational institutions, in order to receive preschool and primary school education, in the language of the respective national minority of Ukraine, along with the State language".

Rather than, as Lavrov claims, discriminating against Russian, the Law simply gives the Ukrainian language more acknowledgement than ever before. It literally is that simple. We are witnessing a once (and still) severely oppressed language taking a step closer to freedom from the USSR's colonial grasp.

Let's just take a detour to the West for a second to prove that this isn't a totally unique phenomenon: we all thought Canada was just Justin Trudeau and maple syrup. Or maybe you don't base a country off its stereotypes and know that Québec's Bill 96 (2022) declares that "the only official language of Québec is French". Preservation and protection of French in a rapidly spreading Anglophone world "limits the use of English in the courts and by civil servants", as discussed by Canadian news outlet CBC.

Bill 96, like the Language Law, is not free from international controversy, where, as CBC reports, six months is the length of time given to immigrants to learn French. Could *you* learn a language in six months? Admittedly, this does seem harsh, but the decision was made in the best interest of the preservation and protection of the French diaspora in Canada.

If you don't yet view the Kremlin as self-absorbed (plus many other profanities), then you need to re-read the previous paragraphs. Otherwise, you should probably just isolate yourself from society. Or just understand that the *Ukrainian* language is part of *Ukraine* and its identity, not Russia's.

I get it. Fully understanding the magnitude of such language politics is near impossible, especially when no one has ever threatened the language you speak or has discriminated against you because of it. Trust me, I'm English – historically, we're experts in colonialism and discrimination. That's probably not something for the résumé.

But what it means to make Ukrainian the official State language in the public sphere is to undo around seventy gruelling, abusive years of Kremlin control. Rather than an act of discrimination, the Law is re-asserting the Ukrainian language in its culture and history. Being branded a ‘peasant language’ by your former coloniser doesn’t do much good to your country’s pride.

These words rile me up, truly. It probably hasn’t even crossed the Kremlin’s mind that they discriminate against Ukraine with ‘peasant language’ rhetoric regularly.

This Law is an attempt to rid Ukrainians of any shame they possess for speaking their own language. And we probably do just have to accept that the Kremlin will always have a problem with that.

Add in the factor of Russia’s full-scale invasion on Ukraine (2022-), and the likelihood of the Kremlin suddenly deciding to acknowledge the individual beauty of the Ukrainian language, culture, and history is the definition of far-fetched.

But the Kremlin doesn’t represent the entire Russian-speaking population, contrary to what they probably think. Sasha Dovzhyk, a native Ukrainian writer who grew up with Russian as a first language, is, like many others, choosing to distance herself from it: “Russian is my mother tongue and liberation means ripping it out of my throat”. Language politics isn’t just some government spat over a Law. It’s *real* people with *real* stories.

Taking the next step by making the language official in government and public settings allows Ukraine to delve even deeper into its own language, culture, and history.

I do feel some form of catharsis now. But I won’t stop being angry — even though my shoes will dry, burnt toast isn’t that bad anyway, and the spot on my left cheek will heal.

What won’t heal are the physical and mental wounds Russia has inflicted on Ukraine to attempt to hold them and their language hostage once more.

Slava Ukraini!