DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 18.07.2022 | Nina Frieß

# In the language of the enemy

## The war in Ukraine fought under the Kremlin narrative of protecting the 'Russkiy mir' has Russophones asking: who does the Russian language belong to?

On 23 February 2022, one day before the war started, an open letter appeared in the Russian weekly literary journal *Literaturnaja Gazeta*. The letter came from Russian writers, expressing their full support for a special military operation in the Donbas region and eastern Ukraine. In hysterically emotive language they asked, 'Who are playing the victims here? Our [Russian] troops who have not deliberately killed a single civilian? Or those who continue to wage a linguistic war on the Russian language, as well as an information war on the Russian collective consciousness?'

For the authors of this letter, the answer was easy: 'the West', which has banded together with Ukrainian 'Nazis' against Russia, is responsible for everything. By the start of March, 500 Russian writers had signed the letter according to its authors. Even if there are no supposedly renowned authors among the signatories, it soon becomes clear that Russian cultural creatives are being co-opted by the Kremlin. In claiming to defend the Russian language and culture in and outside of Russia, they are justifying the incipient war against Ukraine.

## The Kremlin's claim over the Russian language

This rhetoric isn't new as, time and again, Russia has escalated military action under the pretence of defending Russians and Russian speakers, be it in Georgia in 2008 or in Ukraine since 2014. It's important to note that, in doing so, Russia is claiming ownership of the Russian language to some extent. Nowhere else is this made so perfectly clear as by state cultural foundation Russkiy Mir ('Russian world'), founded by none other than Vladimir Putin.

Up until 2021, the foundation's aims could be seen on the German version of its website, but they are no longer accessible. They read: 'The

core objectives of the foundation are to popularise the Russian language, *which is the national property of Russia* and the most important component of Russian and world culture, and to support Russian-language programmes within the Russian Federation and abroad.'

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The 'Russian world' is broadly defined, as exemplified by the quote: 'Russkiy mir includes not only Russians, not only inhabitants of Russia, not only our fellow countrymen in foreign countries near and far, emigrants, expatriates, and their descendants. It also extends to foreign citizens who speak, learn, and teach Russian and all people with a sincere interest in Russia and her future.' This sweeping claim that the Kremlin represents all these people's interests was formulated by the foundation and has been embedded in Moscow's politics for years. For many Russian speakers, this comes across as a threat. After all, not every person who speaks Russian, whether in or outside of Russia, wants to be associated with the Kremlin.

## Owning their language

In particular, this claim concerns those whose most powerful tool is language, namely, writers. So, it's not surprising that it's Russian-speaking authors who, since 2014 at the latest, have led the discussion on how people should think about the Russian language, its usage as a literary language, and Russia herself.

These topics are fiercly debated in Ukraine, which is home to a large number of Russian speakers. After 2014, many Russian-speaking authors, including poets Iya Kiva and Boris Khersonsky, decided to write more frequently or even exclusively in Ukrainian, a trend that has understandably gained steam since the war began. For example, the platform 'Poetry of the Free' was set up by the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture in March as a place to gather poems on war for the sake of posterity. The majority of the over 20,000 texts, which anyone can upload to, is written in Ukrainian.

***Language doesn't belong to politicians; it belongs to people.***

Of course, not all Russian speakers are prepared to concede their language to the Kremlin. Back in 2017, Ukrainian poet Alexander Kabanov published an anthology under the title *In the*

*Language of the Enemy: Poems about War and Peace* in which he reflected, in Russian, on the war in eastern Ukraine. The main thesis of the anthology is that language doesn't belong to politicians; it belongs to people. Kabanov made this clear in an interview on 16 May 2022: 'Russia does not have a monopoly on the Russian language. Giving our Ukrainian Russian to Putin would be the same as giving German to Hitler. I personally don't plan to surrender my language to anyone.'

## The Russian language cannot belong to one country

This trend can also be seen in other countries, like Kazakhstan. As the largest country in central Asia, Kazakhstan has a large number of Russian speakers even 30 years after its independence was declared. Not just ethnic Russians but also many Kazakhs and members of ethnic minorities use Russian as a lingua franca. There is a living Russophone literature and culture scene which, for years, has been investigating how the Russian language could be preserved, but this scene is now between a rock and a hard place.

While the Kremlin wants to declare Kazakhstan's Russian speakers for themselves, Kazakh nationalists want to limit the influence of the Russian language. In his 2019 essay *The Russian Language – This is Kazakhstan*, Yuriy Serebriansky, one of the leading representatives of Young Russian Literature of Kazakhstan, considered whether the heated discussion around the usage of the Russian language in Kazakhstan could be de-escalated if the Russian language were seen as something that belonged to the Russian-speaking citizens of Kazakhstan, and not just Russia.

When the war kicked off, the young Russophone literature scene in Kazakhstan stood almost unanimously in solidarity with Ukraine – demonstrated not only by taking part in rallies and making statements on social media, but also in literature. Kazakhstani literary journal *Daktil* dedicated its March edition 'to the Ukrainian people and everyone who is undergoing adversity'. It continues: 'We stand for world peace. Say no to war!', which may come across as a hackneyed phrase, but in a time when any mention of war is officially forbidden, at least in Russia, this is a political statement. It also shows that Russian-speaking Kazakhstanis are not prepared to bow down to the linguistic demands of the Kremlin.

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ROAR, short for *Russian Oppositional Arts Review*, is an international cultural project which collects and shares Russophone opinions on the war. Launched by Israeli author Linor Goralik, who was born in Dnipro in Eastern Ukraine, ROAR is an online platform for Russian and Russian-speaking creatives who consider themselves and their art to stand against that segment of Russian culture which serves the 'current criminal political regime in Russia'.

ROAR gives them the chance to make their voices heard in opposition of the war and to show that they – as Russians and Russian speakers – do not want to be associated with Putin. Created by a decentralised global volunteer collective, ROAR embodies the argument that neither the Russian language nor Russian culture can belong to any one country. And like many other projects, it shows that there is and will continue to be a Russian and Russian-speaking culture far removed from the warmongering, Kremlin-worshipping propaganda.

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