

Your essay was a productive intervention on behalf of Ukraine's future, which was appreciated by many in Odessa. The liberal Anglophone press has been reluctant to criticise Ukraine's internal politics for fear of inadvertently supporting Mr Putin's claims. But war radicalises politics.

Since Russia's invasion in February 2022 a dangerous narrative has gained momentum in Ukraine calling for the eviction of everything Russophone from the country. A minority of radical ethno-nationalists has taken advantage of war trauma to insist that the Russian language itself carries Russia's murderous imperialism, and that all traces of it must be erased. This dangerous ideology, presented as patriotism, has circulated in Ukrainian social and mass media, largely unopposed.

It is based on a political lie because murderous imperialism can be articulated equally well in Japanese, German, Italian, English and Russian. It is dangerous because Russian is spoken on both sides of this war, by Russian murderers and Ukrainian defenders and victims alike.

This poses a serious social and political threat. Millions of Ukrainians, including soldiers, speak Russian. So attacks on “Moscow-mouthed” speakers of the “enemy tongue” alienate millions of Ukrainian citizens and could even provoke civil war. The Kremlin may well have spent billions on the Ukrainian right. After all, the division of enemy societies along ethnic lines is the crux of General Valery Gerasimov’s doctrine of “hybrid war.”

More surprising is the endorsement of this attack on the Russian language by Ukraine’s own government under a president who won election on a stridently liberal, anti-ethnic platform. Since the invasion a slew of discriminatory, unconstitutional laws have banned the use of Russian across educational, cultural, service and information spaces. Russian no longer exists even as a school subject. A bill proposing to outlaw Russian speech in school corridors is under review. One cannot publish or send Russian-language books, including by Ukrainian writers. Contrary to Mr Putin’s narrative, these are the consequences rather than the causes of his war.

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