

World Europe [Ukraine crisis](#)

The Ukrainian Tiktoker fighting Russian one word at a time

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TALKING POINTS

- The official language of Ukraine is Ukrainian, the native language of 67.5 per cent of the population. Russian is the native language of 29.6 per cent of the population.
 - The nation's capital used to be known as Kiev, but that is derived from the Russian language. The city is now known by the preferred Ukrainian spelling Kyiv.
 - The country is known as Ukraine, its name since independence in 1991. It was known as the Ukraine in the Soviet era.
 - The use of Russian and Ukrainian is a fault line in the wars since independence.
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Kyiv: War or no war, Andrii Shymanovskiy believes he wields one of the most powerful weapons against Moscow: the Ukrainian language.

Just over a year ago, the 23-year-old Lviv-based actor and Ukrainian-language instructor began to post [TikTok videos](#) explaining the nuances of his mother tongue - once largely secondary to Russian in Ukrainian life, but increasingly a centrepiece of efforts to emphasise a distinct Ukrainian identity and culture.

The videos attract millions of views with their breezy style and comic riffs on Ukrainian life. They also, however, touch one of the core complexities in the struggles with Russia - and within Ukraine itself.

Below, he plays a Ukrainian language instructor who rewards people in the street who pronounce words correctly with chocolate bars.

Language is at the nexus of Ukraine's cultural and political crosscurrents. For some, the Ukrainian language is a source of the country's character and should dominate public life. Others give greater weight to Ukraine's multilingual mix of Ukrainian, Russian and other languages as part of the nation's essence.

Moscow, however, has used the language issue to paint the Kyiv government as ethnocentric "fascists" bent on tyrannising Ukraine's Russian-speaking population. That view is widely rejected in Ukraine, including among many in Russian-speaking areas. Still, a Ukrainian law

aimed to increase the use of Ukrainian has given the Kremlin further fodder for its propaganda campaign.

Meanwhile, the amount of Ukrainian heard on the streets of Russian-speaking bastions such as the capital, Kyiv, and Kharkiv in the east appears to be steadily rising.



Even the name of the capital, Kyiv, is politically sensitive. The name Kiev is derived from the Russian pronunciation. GETTY

“I think that at this time, the only weapon I have is the language itself,” said Shymanovskiy. “I help to preserve at least our identity, the identity of our people.”

Shymanovskiy describes his work as a counterweight to centuries of Russian domination in Ukraine, during which the Ukrainian language was suppressed or pushed to the margins.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin says the reverse is true - claiming it's the Russian language being suppressed and Russian speakers becoming marginalised in Ukraine. Russian is hardly under threat, though. Russian speakers still make up a large portion of the population, and the Russian language continues to heavily influence popular culture.

Yet the allegations of a linguistic siege played a central role in Moscow's justification of its 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula, where the majority of the population is Russian-speaking.

Ukrainian language activists sang the national anthem outside parliament in 2020, when the parliament was considering a law that would permit Russian speakers to be educated in Russian. AP

It was also a cornerstone of the Kremlin's narrative at the beginning of the conflict between Russian-backed militants and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine, which has lasted nearly eight years and killed close to 14,000 people.

In recent months, Russian officials have returned to lambasting the Ukrainians' language policies. "They are simply pushing out Russians and the Russian-speaking population from their historical territories," Putin said at his annual news conference in Moscow in December.

At the heart of Russia's criticisms are a claim that all Russian speakers belong to a "Russian world" of shared language, culture and history, and should be defended by Moscow. Putin also wrote in an extensive essay last year that Russians and Ukrainians are "one nation."

But in Ukraine, demographics do not appear to be on Russia's side. Many young people in Ukraine - with no memory of the Soviet Union but steeped in Ukraine's 2014 pro-Western revolution - are switching to speaking primarily in Ukrainian.

In this TikTok, Shymanovsky is asking locals if they work on improving their Ukrainian.

Some of the most popular clubs and trendier sections of traditionally Russian-speaking Kyiv - where tattooed patrons sip craft beers - are now zones for Ukrainian speakers. Attempts to converse in Russian can occasionally earn a withering look or sharp criticism not to "use the language of the occupier".

Shymanovskiy was among the first of a growing movement among Ukraine's 20-somethings to create Ukrainian-language content on social media and support the Ukrainian language in general. His TikTok channel, in contrast to the rising anxiety in the country over a possible invasion, avoids the subject of war.

Instead, he is seen donning a pink wig, singing, rapping and giving flowers to people who speak Ukrainian. “There’s more negative than positive news in Ukraine right now,” he said. “I don’t want to deepen this.”

“The only weapon I have is the language itself.”

Andrii Shymanovskiy

Moscow’s claims that Russian speakers in Ukraine are being discriminated against as a group belie a multilayered linguistic reality. Various surveys indicate that about half the population speaks mostly Ukrainian at home and about 30 per cent speak mostly Russian in their households (with the rest speaking both or other languages such as Hungarian, Romanian and Crimean Tatar). But firm data is hard to come by.

Most Ukrainians are bilingual in everyday life. Language also doesn’t necessarily determine one’s political loyalties: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is standing against Putin, is a native Russian speaker.

At a recent training in Kyiv for one of the volunteer battalions preparing to defend Ukrainian cities in case of a Russian invasion, the chatter among the reservists was a hodgepodge of Ukrainian and Russian - with some speakers switching between languages in mid-sentence.

Geography also doesn’t help settle matters. Descriptions of Ukraine’s east as largely Russian-speaking, and its west as dominated by Ukrainian, are an oversimplification. Large parts of the countryside speak Ukrainian or a mix of Ukrainian and Russian known as Surzhyk.

The Russian and Ukrainian languages are closely related and share many common words, but are nevertheless distinct. Russian speakers can have difficulty understanding Ukrainian, and vice versa.

However, Russian still dominates many areas of Ukrainian media and culture, despite Ukrainian being designated as the country’s sole “state language.”

A language law, passed under Zelensky’s predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, aims to establish Ukrainian as the country’s dominant mode of communication in businesses, schools and the media.

Service industry workers, for example, must speak to clients in Ukrainian, unless they’re specifically asked to speak in Russian. Television stations must broadcast all films and series in Ukrainian. The law went into effect in 2019 and is to be introduced in stages, but authorities have been selective in which elements they enforce.

The law has been a target for Russian officials, who point to it as evidence of Kyiv’s persecution of its Russian-speaking minority. The European Union’s Venice Commission and watchdog organisations such as Human Rights Watch have also criticised portions of it.

“An open war has been declared against the Russian language, Russian-speaking education,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told a group of educators in St Petersburg in September.

Shymanovskiy supports the law, saying that the Kremlin would always “find a reason for propaganda” regardless of what the Ukrainians did. He believes the law helps unite the country. The conflict being fought in eastern Ukraine - a region with a high concentration of Russian speakers - proves his point, he said.

“Where there was the greatest absence of the Ukrainian language, war came there,” he said.

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