

Ukraine Has Civil Rights Problems that Relegate Russians to Second-class Status - US Expert

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Ukraine has a "civil rights problem", with "wartime policies" that "effectively relegate Russian speakers to permanent second-class status", and many Ukrainians "across the political spectrum", including "former officials" and "intellectuals" worry that such policies, after peace is achieved, will "alienate, criminalize, or deport a significant portion of the country's population." Moreover, in a survey taken six months before the war, over 40 percent of Ukrainians nationwide ("and nearly two-thirds in the east and south"), [agreed with Putin that Ukrainians and Russians are "one people."](#)

Who is making these claims? Oh, it must be one of those "pro-Russia propagandists", right?

No, it is in fact Nicolai N. Petro, a professor of political science at the University of Rhode Island, [writing for Foreign Policy](#).

Professor Petro was a US Fulbright scholar in Ukraine in 2013-2014, and served in Washington as the State Department's special assistant for policy on the Soviet Union under President George H. W. Bush, and as temporary political attache at the American Embassy in Moscow.

Petro writes that "freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and minority rights" are all areas of concern in Ukraine. Regarding the first one, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), one of the largest denominations in the country, is, he notes, the target of a crackdown, with [holy sites](#) having been seized even years before 2022 and [clergymen being judicially harassed](#) over their alleged links to Moscow.

Regarding the second and the third (press and minorities), a March 2023 law gave further censorship powers to the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting: by 2024, it will further increase the minimum percentage of Ukrainian language on television from 75 to 90 percent, entirely prohibiting the use of non-Ukrainian languages in certain contexts. The main target of such policies is of course the Russian language, spoken by millions of

Ukrainians. [According to](#) Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council, “the Russian language must completely disappear from our territory, it being an aspect of hostile propaganda and the brainwashing of our population.”

Commenting on such measures, Ukrainian philosopher Sergei Datsyuk [stated](#) “it will be unclear which is more dangerous for us, war with Russia or internal civil war” (Oleksiy Arestovich, former presidential advisor to Zelensky made similar statements). Those are serious concerns, but one should keep in mind that such “internal civil war” in fact already started almost a decade ago, in Donbass.

As Petro sums it up:

“in Ukraine, the freedoms of religion and the press are deeply intertwined with the issue of minority rights, specifically with the treatment of the country’s largest minority, Russophile Ukrainians—those who identify themselves with Russian heritage, be it through language, culture, history, or religion.”

He adds:

“the vast majority of Russophile Ukrainians refuse to categorize themselves as a minority. They see themselves simply as Ukrainians citizens, and as such, they argue, they have a constitutional right to speak any language and espouse any religion or culture they wish, not just the ones endorsed by the state. But Ukrainian law [does not recognize Russians as indigenous to Ukraine](#), or even as [a minority](#) within Ukraine. They therefore have no claim to legal protection of their cultural heritage and language, a direct contradiction of Article 10 of the Ukrainian constitution.”

Professor Petro, and the aforementioned Ukrainians are not alone in their concerns about the civil rights of the Russian minority in Ukraine. As I’ve [written](#), the European Commission for Democracy through Law, better known as the Venice Commission, also worries about the matter.

At its June session, the Venice Commission analyzed the (new) Law on National Minorities (Communities) of Ukraine, and, among other things, [concluded](#) that,

“to ensure full conformity” with international standards, “a number of provisions of that Law should be reconsidered”, including those pertaining to “the right to organise events in minority languages”, to “publishing books and to bookshops”, “the right to access to mass media in minority languages”, and “the minority language school-system.”

However, in the [words](#) of Olga Stefanishyna (Ukraine’s Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration),

“There is no Russian minority in Ukraine. It does not exist!”

According to the 2001 Ukraine’s census, which is to date its only census since its 1991 independence, [ethnic Russians were 17.3% of the Ukrainian population](#) – that is, over 8 million people.

Ukraine is in fact a strongly Russian-Ukrainian bilingual society, with a high degree of intermarriage, and, to further complicate things, many people can declare themselves

ethnically as either Russian or Ukrainian, depending on context.

As I [wrote](#) back in 2020, regarding the Donbass war (which has been going on since 2014), one's political stance could sometimes be a better predictor – regarding one's attitude towards the conflict – than language or ethnicity. And the main dividing issue there was and is the Maidan. It has always been about 2 possible Ukraines: one is a European nation, closer to the West and the US while, at the same time, proud of Stepan Bandera and of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) which during World War II sided with Nazi Germany and committed war crimes against [Poles](#). The other is a natural ally of Russia and part of the “Russian world” (culturally) and is also proud of its Soviet heritage.

The “Russian Question” in Ukraine therefore does not pertain merely to “ethnic Russians” (self-identified or otherwise); it also involves the issue of Russophones and Russophiles.

As researcher Volodymyr Ishchenko [writes](#), there has always been in Ukrainian politics a “large camp” calling for “closer integration with Russia-led international institutions rather than with those in the Euro-Atlantic sphere”. This “pro-Russian camp”, after the 2014 Maidan was “marginalized”, and according to Ishchenko the “pro-Russian label” became “inflated” to the point of being used to describe (and discredit) any discourse that raises questions about the “pro-Western, neoliberal, and nationalist” stances which have “dominated Ukraine’s political sphere since 2014, but do not really reflect the political diversity of Ukrainian society.” All such “pro-Russian” political parties have in fact [been banned](#) in 2022, including the Opposition Platform for Life, which had come second in elections and held 44 seats in the Parliament.

In March 2022 students demanded political scientist [John Mearsheimer](#) be “[canceled](#)” due to his alleged “Putinism”.

The fact that Nicolai N. Petro’s [piece](#) was published in Foreign Policy thus far without any attacks against him is quite interesting. Now that it is becoming increasingly clear to the Western political elite and media that a “[land for peace deal](#)” is the only way to Kyiv. And maybe there will finally be a wide and honest discussion on some [inconvenient truths](#) about post-Maidan Ukraine.

The truth is that even after peace is achieved, as long as the Russian minority remains marginalized there and as long as [NATO expansion](#) continues, there will still be room for tension and conflict – internally and internationally.

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