

Surzhyk

Andás Máté-Tóth

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#)

SURZHYK

By **András Máté-Tóth**

Prof. Dr. Dr. **András Máté-Tóth** is a theologian and religious studies scholar. He is the Chair of the Department for the Study of Religions at University of Szeged (Hungary/Europe) and head of the MTA-SZTE Convivence research network for religious pluralism (ELKH). He is also a member of the Board of Advisory Editors and a frequent contributor to OPREE.

Surzhyk (суржик) is a Ukrainian term meaning a mixed language. When Ukrainian peasants went to work in the larger cities of Ukraine, they tried to smuggle words from what they considered to be the more elevated Russian language into their own language. A large proportion of Ukraine's population speaks both Russian and Ukrainian. Perhaps this bilingual heritage is diminishing among the younger generation, like the young people of the post-Yugoslav states, who are speaking less and less and less of the language that their parents still understood without further ado, and which made internal communication possible throughout the former Yugoslavia.

However, the term *Surzhyk* means more than the presence of a proliferation of foreign words into one's own language. *Surzhyk* is an unwitting protest against linguistic separatism and chauvinism. Linguists and politicians are able to distinguish clearly and accurately between one language and another, to show what the original vocabulary is in contrast with the foreign words. In real life, however, these either/or distinctions have little validity. *Surzhyk* is spoken in Ukraine, with increasingly English terms interspersed into Ukrainian and Russian mixed languages. This phenomenon is what sociolinguists call translanguaging--the coalescence of all the languages that are used, available, and understood in a given speech community into a single way of speaking, precisely in order to overcome linguistic fragmentation. Just as mixed Russian-Ukrainian marriages, ethnically mixed families, mixed workplaces are the primary feature, so the language is typically *Surzhyk*.

It is not only in Ukraine but increasingly throughout East-Central Europe, that the *Surzhyk* language is becoming dominant alongside the *Surzhyk* culture. It is true that the governments of the countries that regained their nation-state sovereignty thirty years ago are keen to promote the use of the national language. Looking back over decades, even centuries, of defenselessness, this linguistic nationalism is understandable. Understandable are Estonians who make full citizenship conditional on an Estonian language test and an oath of allegiance. The Ukrainian language law, which makes Ukrainian the exclusive language of instruction, is understandable. The Macedonian or Croatian desire to assert their national language

prerogatives is understandable. But the cultural reality is the opposite: young people are no longer building their identity and their future based on their parents' linguistic and national sensibilities. They are no longer fighting for the purity of their own language, but rather for English, without which there is no chance of assertion. Indeed, elements of a wordless global language are proliferating, especially in the social media communication arena, including emoticons and other symbols. It's as if we are moving towards an Esperanto beyond language towards relations of forced global understanding reciprocity.

The challenge is not understanding the language but understanding the person. And if the national language is an obstacle to this, we choose another language. Moreover, mutual understanding within and beyond a country begins even more with starting not from one's own language, separated from the others, but from the fact that we are all cultural mixtures; we all speak a mixed language. Our true human-community language is *Surzhyk*, which is also the monolingual, though unfortunately partly forgotten, heritage of the Monarchy.

Surzhyk is a fundamental provocation. For it is the results, the identity, and the political cohesion of a linguistic-national autonomy that has been sorely lacking for decades, even a few centuries, and which has finally been acquired with great difficulty, that make it relative. The difficulties of coexistence of churches in Ukraine, both side by side and in opposition to each other, can also be traced back to this. It is also worth mentioning the tradition of Jewish ability, known from Galicia, destroyed by the Holocaust but still alive in the survivors, to be both Jewish and patriotic. The current head of state of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky is a prominent representative of this tradition, with almost all his ancestors being Holocaust victims.

The main Christian denominational fault line in Ukraine is between Orthodox Christians and Greek Catholics. Orthodoxy is predominant, especially in the eastern and central regions. Today, there are two major Orthodox churches in Ukraine: The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, headed by Metropolitan Onufry and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which received autocephaly from the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2018, headed by Metropolitan Epiphany of Kyiv. The former Patriarchate of Kyiv and the former Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church were united in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, led by Metropolitan Epiphany and recognized by the Greek churches.

Greek Catholics, however, make up less than 8% of the population of Ukraine, but their influence is strong, especially in Western Ukraine. In Ukraine, there is a fierce struggle between the ecclesiastical authorities of the Kyiv and Moscow Patriarchates. While Orthodoxy, the pure doctrine and the liturgy and its ancient language are basically the same, the Church Slavonic, which is being replaced by the national language with a wave of national revivals, has the same

roots but with linguistic and cultural differences in everyday and holy day life. The religious dimension is also becoming increasingly *Surzhyk* and less segregated.

As the countries of the Central and Eastern European region seek in their own way to come to terms with their national and international situations, they are increasingly in need of rethinking their most basic starting points and redefining them in terms of regional coexistence. Increasingly, they are forced to accept, and increasingly do so by accepting as a possibility, that the condition and the most important language of regional and global coexistence is *Surzhyk*.

The struggle between David and Goliath is now taking place again, says Boris Gudzhak, Archeparchy of Ukrainian Greek Catholics in the US. Goliath is Putin's Russia, many times the size and military might of Ukraine. The reference to the biblical myth expresses Ukraine's hope that Goliath can be defeated, just as the outnumbered heroes of the Eger were once able to defeat the mighty Ottoman army. According to the Archbishop, the Russian soldiers are not motivated; for them this war is pointless. While for the Ukrainian soldiers, Ukraine's very existence is at stake. Now, in this time of war, Ukraine is fighting for its territory, its culture, and its language. Ultimately, however, this struggle, the Russian invasion, and Ukrainian self-defense is a war of the fading past on the threshold of an inexorable future. The struggle of David of regional coexistence against Goliath of separatism and isolationism is the great challenge of the future, in Ukraine, the Baltic, the Balkans, and here in Central Europe no less. It is not yet clear whether David will be or can be the winner in this struggle. Goliath still has the advantage. However, the long-term hope for the survival of the countries and the region is undoubtedly David, the future ruler of the *Surzhyk*.