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AGNOSTICISM OR BIAS? A REPLY TO ALEXANDER MAXWELL'S ANALYSIS OF PUTIN'S 2021 ESSAY "ON THE HISTORICAL UNITY OF RUSSIANS AND UKRAINIANS"

Abstract
In the first 2025 issue of *Nationalities Papers*, Alexander Maxwell published his article "Vladimir Putin, Normative Isomorphism, and the Language/Dialect Dichotomy." In this paper, Maxwell analyzes Putin's narratives of the history of the Ukrainian and Russian languages, as presented in Putin's 2021 essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." Based on a seemingly "agnostic" approach, Maxwell tends to renarrate traditional all-Russian concepts without any criticism. His bias is based on both methodological inconsistency and a striking lack of philological expertise. His repeated invectives against linguists should not go unanswered.

Keywords: Slavic dialects and languages, Ukrainian language, Russian language, agnosticism, normative isomorphism.

Alexander Maxwell from Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand is known as a researcher of the Slovak linguistic renewal in the 19th century, the historical development of different views on Slavic languages and dialects since the 19th century, and the history of Panslavism in the Habsburg Monarchy. In *Nationalities Papers* 2025 (pp. 1–13) he has now published "Vladimir Putin, Normative Isomorphism, and the Language/Dialect Dichotomy" (Maxwell, 2025), a study that is in large parts identical with Maxwell's "Popular and Scholarly Primordialism: The Politics of Ukrainian History during Russia's 2022 Invasion of Ukraine" (Maxwell, 2022). Maxwell's 2022 paper defends Putin's essay against various critics from the field of history, although it is, in Maxwell's words, "not meant to exonerate Putin" (Maxwell, 2022, p. 165). Maxwell's 2025 paper, which focuses on issues with a linguistic dimension, calls for the present replica from a philologist.

Maxwell (2025) departs from the "agnostic perspective" that "the language/dialect dichotomy is a genre of politics" (p. 11). Citing well-known linguistic authorities, he argues that agnosticism "has the best claim to be the genuine linguistic position" (p. 2). Maxwell assesses that "professional politicians" often invoke this "language/dialect dichotomy" (p. 1), as Putin did in his 2021 essay. He assumes that the relationship between Ukrainian and Russian can be described from the following positions: "The 'splitter' position posits a distinct Ukrainian language, while the 'lumper' position treats Ukrainian and Russian as the same language, whether by classifying Ukrainian as a dialect of Russian or by classifying Ukrainian and Russian alike as dialects of some greater East Slavic whole" (p. 2). Maxwell's own "agnostic perspective," finally, allegedly "views both lumper assertionism and splitter assertionism with equal skepticism" (p. 2). In reality, his approach is more biased than equally skeptical, as will be shown below.

At the beginning Maxwell claims that "the dialect continuum stretching across the territory of the Ukrainian Republic shows gradual, continuous change, and no sharp linguistic discontinuity coincides with Ukraine's political border with the Russian Federation" (p. 2). His description suggests that some ancient "dialect continuum" goes from Ukrainian to Russian dialects on the territory of Ukraine, but this is not confirmed by linguistic facts (see Shevelov, 1979): Migrants from Russia brought Russian varieties to the territories of Ukraine only since the second half of the 17th century, and they largely concentrated in urban settlements (Moser, 2022). On the other hand, migrants from Ukraine brought Ukrainian dialects to many territories of modern Russia, up to the Pacific Ocean, most notably, to the Kursk, Voronezh, Belgorod areas, and to the vast territories of Kuban' (up to the present, most of these groups have been assimilated). No Ukrainian-Russian dialect continuum has developed whatsoever. If Maxwell has in mind the undeniable fact that the percentage of Russian speakers is higher in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine than in the western ones, this has nothing to do with the linguistic term "dialect continuum." Maxwell's next argument, the spread of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism (p. 2), actually has little relevance to the discussion of the dialect/language dichotomy, since the term "bilingualism" by definition implies the notion of two languages. Finally, it remains unclear what the phenomenon of "Surzhyk" (a name for highly heterogeneous mixed Ukrainian-Russian varieties) contributes to the language/dialect discussion (p. 2), since the existence of these varieties is not an argument against the existence of either Ukrainian or Russian or any dialect of these languages as such.

Maxwell further argues that "perhaps particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, perceptions of political legitimacy have been strongly influenced by an ideology Tomasz Kamusella has eloquently called 'the normative isomorphism of language, nation and state'" (p. 2; citing Kamusella, 2021). He concludes that "proclaiming the existence of a Ukrainian 'language' justifies an independent state," whereas "denying Ukrainian the status of a language denies the existence of a Ukrainian nation and thus the legitimacy of a Ukrainian state" (p. 3). In response, one might ask to what extent the ideology of "the normative isomorphism of language, nation and state" is alive and well in 21st-century Central and Eastern Europe and, especially, in the post-Soviet space. While radical nationalists adhere to it in many states (and not only in Central and Eastern Europe), Russia's official "Russkiy mir" ideology is one of its most aggressive variants. But Maxwell does not even mention it.

According to Maxwell, "the historical record [...] abounds with Ukrainians proclaiming

themselves 'Russian' in some linguistic or cultural sense, while expressing political loyalty to another state" (p. 3). He chooses the example of Galician parliamentarian Mykola Hlibovytskyi of the "Old Ruthenian club," who declared in 1908 in the Austrian Parliament "that his native language was Russian, not Ukrainian, while simultaneously insisting that his Russian ethnicity was compatible with Austrian loyalty: 'Russisch heißt nicht Rußländisch' (p. 3; with the quote from Hlibovytskyi, 1908, p. 4716 [actually: p. 4717])." Hlibovytskyi repeated this argument several times during a heated parliamentary debate. He actively supported his colleague Dmytro Markov, who had recently delivered the first speech in the Austrian Parliament in literary Russian, a language that had no linguistic basis and no official status on the territories of the Habsburg Empire. Hlibovytskyi's statements should be interpreted in their concrete political context; it is not obvious that they can simply be taken for granted.

Maxwell's other example from the "historical record" is Oleksii Nikiforov, a Ukrainian soldier who declared in a 2015 interview that he was Ukrainian, despite being a Russian by nationality and having a poor command of the Ukrainian language (p. 3). Nikiforov had not only served in the Ukrainian army in Crimea, as reported by Maxwell. He had actively refused to collaborate with the Russians in 2014 and is thus an outstanding representative of millions of Ukrainians who once declared Russian as their native language or even Russian as their nationality, but who do not want to be annexed by Russia and have nothing against the Ukrainian language.

In the following, Maxwell downplays various attempts to prove that Ukrainian is not a dialect of Russian, made by journalists and by linguists, including "Western linguists, who really ought to know better" (p. 4). He insists that his own "agnostic position is [...] correct: there is no objective way to say whether, for example, Ukrainian is 'really' a language or 'really' a dialect" (p. 4). Nowhere does he add that this is also true for any other language, including Russian. He also fails to mention that the dialect/language dichotomy has a linguistic foundation anyway: Whereas attempts to describe Russian as a dialect of Ukrainian (which are perfectly legitimate from an agnostic perspective) are not doomed from the outset, possible attempts regarding English or Chinese are.

At this point, Maxwell comes up with the observation that "between 1917 and 2000 only three encyclopedias categorized Ukrainian as a 'dialect' (or other subcategory) of Russian," whereas "27 encyclopedias recognized Ukrainian as a 'language,' and another two acknowledged a distinct 'Ruthenian' or 'Little Russian' 'language'" (p. 5). Then he emphasizes that "Slavists have only recognized a distinct Ukrainian 'language' only [sic] since the early 20th century" (p. 5). He mentions that some other languages (Macedonian) have been recognized more recently (p. 5), but does not explain why encyclopedias should be considered the only or the most important source of "the emergence of Ukrainian." Maxwell himself writes that "from 1800 to 1850 the notion of a 'Ukrainian language' was an eccentric view" (p. 5), which primarily means that the idea of Ukrainian as a language had developed earlier. And there is more to it than that: In 1834 Izmail Sreznevskii, one of the leading Russian Slavists of the 19th century, wrote about the perspectives of the Ukrainian language as follows: "As of today, it need not to be proven to anyone or anything that Ukrainian (or, as others prefer labelling it: Little Russian) is a language and not a dialect of Russian or Polish" (cited after Moser, 2017, pp. 40–41; in the original: "языкъ Украинскій (или какъ угодно называть другимъ: Малороссійскій) есть языкъ, а не нарѣчіе — Русскаго или Польскаго"). Under the name "Ruthenian," Ukrainian and Belarusian

varieties had been distinguished from "Muscovite" varieties much earlier: In 1584, Adam Bohorič published his *Arcticae horulae succisivae de Latino-Carniolana Literatura ad latinae linguae analogiam accomodata unde Moshoviticae, Rutenicae, Polonicae, Boemicae et Lusaticae linguae, cum dalmatica et croatica cognatio, facilè deprehenditur* (Bohorič, 1584; in "Google Books," "Rutenicae" is omitted). In 1647, Juraj Križanić introduced himself to a Russian envoy in Warsaw with the following words: "ego de natione Illyrius Croatus sum [...] ad cognoscendam omnem proprietatem Illyrici sermonis, existimavi mihi esse necessarium cognoscere praecipuas eius dialectos. Et iam calleo Croaticam, Sarbliacam et Carnicam: huc autem veni ut apprehendam Polonicam et Rutenicam. Sed inter omnes maxime desidero assequi vostram Moscoviticam" (quoted after Podtergera, 2009, p. 453). "Ruthenian" and "Muscovite" are separate dialects; the language they refer to is "Illyrian."

Maxwell correctly notes that "scepticism about the distinctiveness of the Ukrainian 'language' indeed predates Ukraine's military confrontation with the Russian Federation" (p. 5), but he does not ask who exactly propagated this opinion. Instead, he patronizes scholars who have called a spade a spade when they have described some of the amply documented and contextualized textual evidence (and not Russophile views per se, as Maxwell claims) as examples of "certain Russian chauvinist traditions" or "totalitarian, anti-democratic, anti-Western (and often anti-Semitic) ideology" (pp. 5-6; referring to Moser, 2016, pp. 586, 588).

In his analysis of Putin's 2021 essay, Maxwell argues that "by denying Ukrainian linguistic distinctiveness, Putin denied the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state" in the first half of his text (p. 6). He largely quotes Putin's version of all-Russian narratives about "one language (which we now refer to as Old Russian)," which "bound together" "Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory – from Ladoga, Novgorod, and Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov" in the Middle Ages, or about "people both in the western and eastern Russian lands" who "spoke the same language" in the early modern period (p. 6). Maxwell leaves all this without any comment; his "agnostic approach" shows no trace of genuine "skepticism" toward "lumper assertionism."

Then Maxwell renarrates that Putin, referring to the "incorporation of the western Russian lands into the single state" in the 18th century, spoke only of "language similarity" (in the original: "языковая близость") (p. 6). A less superficial reading of Putin's essay reveals that his argument was based on Iosyf Rutskyi's report to Rome in the early 17th century, in which Rutskyi had argued that the "written language" (in the original: "письменный язык") of the Russians of Muscovy and the Ruthenians of Poland-Lithuania was "identical," while "differences in the vernacular [in the original: "разговорный язык"] were insignificant," like the differences between the varieties spoken by the inhabitants of Rome and Bergamo (Putin, 2021). Notably, Putin did not add the essential fact that this "written language" was neither Russian nor Ukrainian, but Church Slavonic [!]. But at least Putin referred to the distinction between "written language" and "vernacular," unlike Maxwell, for whom only the simplistic (and ultimately invalid) "language/dialect dichotomy" seems to count.

With reference to the 19th century, Putin finally introduced the concept of dialects. Allegedly, "living within different states naturally brought about regional language peculiarities, resulting in the emergence of dialects," and "the vernacular enriched the literary language." This was the setting in which Putin presented "Ivan Kotlyarevsky, Grigory Skovoroda [sic, obviously mistakenly instead of Kvitka(-Osnovianenko), M. M.], and

Taras Shevchenko" as "our common literary and cultural heritage." Although Putin acknowledged that Shevchenko "wrote poetry in the Ukrainian language," he placed great emphasis on the fact that Shevchenko wrote most of his prose in Russian, etc. (all quotes from Putin, 2021). Maxwell in all seriousness concludes that this was a "celebration of linguistic differences" and notes that "Putin here essentially argued that diversity leads to cultural enrichment, ironically recalling Western notions of multiculturalism" (p. 7). Maxwell's strange judgment is a surprise for a variety of reasons: its political implications aside, the truth is that both "lumper assertionists" and "splitter assertionists" have always argued that their "languages" should be enriched by their dialects throughout history, even if they deeply despised any notion of linguistic diversity or multiculturalism.

What Putin really had in mind was the concept of a triune Russian-Belarusian-Ukrainian nation. It is true that this idea "can boast a long history" (p. 7), as Maxwell points out. But apart from that, it is likely that many readers will interpret Maxwell's outline as an attempt to legitimize it, since Maxwell basically leaves all instances of "lumper assertionism" without further comment, whereas he accompanies all phenomena of "splitter assertionism," i.e., the idea of a separate Ukrainian language, with critical remarks. This is all the more striking because Maxwell maintains that based on "normative isomorphism," "the triune concept [...] justified through normative isomorphism the annexation of the [!] entire Ukraine" (p. 9).

Furthermore, Maxwell notes that Putin somewhat "acknowledged the existence of a 'Ukrainian language' as early as 1863," when he "admittedly made some excuses for his Romanov predecessors [!, without any irony signal]," who, according to Maxwell's quote of Putin, "had been forced to act because 'leaders of the Polish national movement' had sought 'to exploit the 'Ukrainian issue'," etc. (p. 9). In general, however, Putin began to treat Ukrainian as a language in its own right only in his narrative of "Ukrainianization as the denationalization of ethnic Russians" in the early Soviet years.

At one point in his outline, Maxwell inserts a brief and biased survey of Ukrainian language policy, which he introduces by stating that the recognition of Ukrainian as a language "also justifies the 2022 invasion, but not the annexation of Ukraine as a whole [, ...] only of Ukraine's predominantly Russian south-eastern territories" (p. 7). Notably, the expression "Ukraine's predominantly Russian south-eastern territories" is Maxwell's. But the Ukrainian census data that he himself included in his essay do not support this notion at all, nor do any other surveys: The only administrative unit of Ukraine where the majority of the population declared Russian nationality in 2001 was the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (with the City of Sevastopol). Even if Maxwell is confusing the categories "Russophone" and "Russian," this would be in stark contrast not only to his own arguments (though in line with Russian propaganda), but also to the census data (apart from Crimea, only in Luhans'k and Donets'k Oblasts did a majority of the population declare Russian as their "native language" in 2001). The somewhat more cautious wording of Maxwell's conclusions is no less false: Allegedly, Putin's "splitter assertionism" "justified the 30 September 2022 annexation of territories in Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia in south-eastern Ukraine, since those territories can credibly [!, M. M.; sic: add: *be*] described as 'Russian,' or at least 'Russian-speaking'" (p. 10). Overall, Maxwell's brief survey of recent language policy in Ukraine (pp. 7-8) cannot be described as anything other than sloppy. According to him, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National

Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages "would guarantee various rights for Ukraine's Russian-speaking population," as if, otherwise, the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine would not have had any rights at all. The truth is that such rights have been guaranteed in independent Ukraine from the very beginning (the language law of 1989 even predates Ukrainian independence) and were enshrined in the Ukrainian Constitution in 1996. Maxwell's summary of the complicated history of the Language Charter in Ukraine is also inaccurate. Moreover, it should be noted that Ukrainian language laws, including the 2012 law, by no means affect only the sphere of "local administration." Most importantly, contrary to Maxwell's outline, the 2012 language law was not "repealed after the 2014 Maidan Revolution" at all: This law was in effect until 2018, when it was declared unconstitutional (and not without reason; see Moser, 2013. Based on Maxwell's sketch, readers will not even understand that the Framework Convention and the Language Charter are still in force in Ukraine. They may also wonder why Maxwell's "agnosticism" does not imply further questions about the Ukrainian minority and language rights in the Russian Federation or the history of the Language Charter in Russia (which Russia also signed to become a member of the Council of Europe but did not ratify). Ukrainian language policy is obviously not Maxwell's area of expertise. Nevertheless, he willingly offers his advice: Supposedly, one should first understand that "national states exist without their citizens feeling the need to proclaim a unique 'language'," and second, that, e.g., "Australians are generally happy to consider themselves speakers of 'English,' despite a vigorous sense of Australian national distinctiveness" (p. 11). It remains unclear why exactly the situation of English as a de facto state language in Australia, i.e. the situation of a post-colonial state that after centuries of linguocide has only recently discovered the need to protect indigenous languages and the potential of migration-induced multilingualism, should be a model for Ukraine. Most of the other examples (Switzerland, Canada, etc.) have already been so overused inside and outside academic bubbles that they will not be commented on here.

Disturbingly, even after quoting at length from Putin's narrative of Donbas separatism, Maxwell does not question any of its elements. Readers might conclude that he buys Putin's argument that the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine in response to "a dangerous threat to the Russian people" (p. 8).

Maxwell then returns to the "language/dialect dichotomy" in a discussion of Putin's passages on the early Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia* ("indigenization"). In his 2022 essay (to which he refers in this context), Maxwell argued that "Putin's claim that Soviet authorities foisted Ukrainization on an unwilling Ukrainian populace also finds some support in Western scholarship" (Maxwell, 2022, p. 159). Maxwell was referring primarily to Francine Hirsch, who, rather than providing "evidence of triune feeling among the twentieth-century peasantry" (Maxwell, 2022, p. 159), had cited a report of peasants who, when asked about their nationality, "often did not distinguish among Belorussians, Great Russians, and Ukrainians, but simply called everyone 'Russian' or named the town they were from" (Hirsch, 2004, p. 111). What Maxwell failed to mention was the important fact that this report referred to central Soviet Russia [!], and not Ukraine.

In the end, Maxwell finally does criticize Putin, but only because he took "both sides" in the "language/dialect dispute in a single essay" (p. 10). Supposedly, "Putin calls his own intellectual consistency into question. Does he believe in a separate Ukrainian 'language' or not?" (p. 10). Maxwell criticism implies that, in

his own view, any linguistic variety is either a dialect or a language from the beginning and for all time, which, of course, amounts to primordialism in its most naïve understanding. At the same time, Maxwell is convinced that his "agnosticism" is the only solution and "illustrates the irrelevance of linguistic trivia" (p. 10). In his own words, his agnostic approach "starts with the initial assumption the language/dialect dichotomy is a genre of politics" and "begins with an openly political analysis, disregarding as essentially irrelevant the linguistic facts that so delight philologists" (p. 10). He also believes that "the political valence of the language/dialect dichotomy is more complex than a naïve analysis might anticipate" (p. 10). As has been outlined, Maxwell's "openly political analysis" is based not only on misinterpretations and sloppy quotations, but also on an utterly one-sided approach. Perhaps the only substantial finding of Maxwell's paper is the obvious fact that, whereas even Putin acknowledges the fact that Ukrainian has been developed into a standard language, Maxwell would still find reasons to doubt it.

Given the overall quality of this paper, it is striking that Maxwell feels entitled to patronize his colleagues in linguistics and philology, who "should know better," and that he even believes he knows how exactly "linguists would better spend their time." One does not need to be a linguist or historian to understand that a truly agnostic approach should not start from the premise that Russian is or has always been a distinct language, and at the same time consistently question the legitimacy of Ukrainian. Moreover, genuine agnosticism would have to try to explain why there have been so many attempts to describe Ukrainian as a dialect of Russian, but not vice versa. Finally, it would not accept any category of "some greater East Slavic whole" (p. 2) without asking further questions about its essence.

That said, it should be emphasized that Maxwell's alleged methodological novelty is primarily knocking on open doors: Hardly any modern philologist would disagree with the truism that the distinction between languages and dialects is not a purely linguistic matter. Most would concur, however, that certain dialects have been successfully developed into written and standard languages throughout history (including the standard varieties of English). They would argue that this is true not only for Modern Standard Russian, but also for Modern Standard Ukrainian, which does not really need Maxwell's approval.

Moreover, historical philologists are aware that, in contrast to Maxwell's rather simplistic "language/dialect dichotomy," the relationship between dialects and languages has by no means always been treated as a genuine dichotomy in the past, and that the two terms have regularly been used interchangeably. Ample evidence could be provided. Here are just three examples: 1. In 1805, Oleksii Pavlovskyi completed his "Grammar of the Little Russian dialect" (original title: "Грамматика малороссійскаго нарѣчія"), which was published in St. Petersburg in 1818. His intention to point out "the most significant differences that alienated the Little Russian dialect from the pure Russian language" (Pavlovskii, 1818: cover page; "показаніе существеннѣйшихъ отличій, отдалившихъ Малороссійское нарѣчіе отъ чистаго Россійскаго языка" in the original) seems at first glance to be a clear confirmation of the dichotomy. However, in his preface, Pavlovsky explained that he found it useful to study this very "Little Russian dialect" as a "language that is, so to speak, neither dead nor alive" (Pavlovskii, 1818, p. V: "заняться симъ, такъ сказать, ни мертвымъ ни живымъ языкомъ"). 2. Ivan Mohylnytskyi, a Greek-Catholic cleric from Przemyśl, wrote in 1823: "The Ruthenian language (dialect) was always separate and independent from other dialects,

particularly from Slavonic, Polish, Russian (Muscovite, long ago)" (quoted after Moser, 2016, p. 173; in the original: "языкъ (діалектъ) рускій," "діалектовъ [...] славенского, полского, россійского (московского давнѣйше)"). Mohylnytskyi's study, or its most important parts, were published in Polish (1829), German (1836), and Russian (1838 and 1857) translations, thus contributing to the intellectual discourse of the 19th century on a fairly broad basis. 3. Finally, the Galician Russophile Hlibovytskyi, to whom Maxwell refers in this paper (p. 3; see above), cited Vatroslav Jagić, who, on the basis of his own interpretation of traditional historical linguistics, wrote of "remarkable features of an internal unity" of "all Russian [here meaning 'East Slavic'; M. M.] dialects vis-à-vis the other Slavic dialects" and quickly added: "whoever does not like the term 'dialect' can say 'language' instead – in scholarship this is a minor matter" (quoted after Hlibovytskyi, 1908, p. 4716; in the original: "merkwürdige Züge einer inneren Einheit"; "alle russischen Dialekte gegenüber den übrigen slawischen Dialekten, – wem der Ausdruck nicht gefällt, kann dafür Sprache sagen, in der Wissenschaft ist das Nebensache").

One can at least agree with Maxwell's statements that any kind of "linguistic similarity across a political frontier" should not "justify territorial claims" and that "a sceptical attitude toward splitter assertionism [...] need not imply sympathy toward the Russian invasion" (p. 11). In any case, philologists are unlikely to feel inclined to ask Maxwell how they should "better spend their time."

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Анотація

У першому випуску *Nationalities Papers* за 2025 р. опубліковано статтю Олександра Максвелла «Владімір Путін, нормативний ізоморфізм і дихотомія мова / діалект». У цій статті Максвелл аналізує наративи про історію української та російської мов, описані в есеї Путіна «Про історичну єдність росіян і українців» (2021). Ґрунтуючись на, здавалося б, «агностичному» підході, Максвелл повторює звичні російські наративи без будь-якої критики. Його стаття позначена як методологічною непослідовністю, так і відсутністю філологічної підготовки. Численні закиди Максвелла на адресу лінгвістів не повинні залишатися без відповіді.

Ключові слова: слов'янські діалекти і мови, українська мова, російська мова, агностицизм, нормативний ізоморфізм.

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