



STATE SECURITY VS FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION:

STATE REGULATION OF CULTURAL CONTENT IN THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE IN UKRAINE

Ukraine's centuries-long status as part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union had a significant impact on the attitude of Ukrainians toward Russian culture and cultural products created in Russia at large. The Russian cultural content has been, for the most part, accepted by Ukrainians as their own or, at least, something that is very similar. This perception has been reinforced by the fact that most Ukrainians are fluent in Russian, unlike in the languages of other neighboring countries.

The state policy of Ukraine reflects this reality. For a long time, the curriculums of educational establishments heavily emphasized the study of Russian authors, and many Ukrainian artists looked toward the Russian market which had a larger audience and more financial opportunities. The Ukrainian market has been dominated or heavily influenced by the presence of cultural products of Russian authors: cinema, music, literature, TV, and other infotainment.

Before the occupation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas in 2014, Russia used to have a significant influence both on the political landscape in Ukraine and on other spheres: identity, popular culture, and creative industries. After 2014, changes took place in the state regulation of various cultural aspects: the processes of de-Communization have been largely aligned with the processes of de-Russification. Besides, the Ukrainian state has changed the educational curriculums and introduced Ukrainian content quotas for radio stations, book publishers, and TV channels. At the same time, these measures have been introduced gradually, and they cannot be considered radical. Russian cultural content is still very much present in Ukraine and its influence has been significant.

The full-scale invasion by Russia that started on February 24, 2022, has likely had a radical effect on the coexistence of Russian and Ukrainian cultural content in Ukraine. Still, there is no consensus in Ukrainian society about the role of Russian culture. More and more activists are convinced that the consumption of Russian content should be strictly limited, including by means of strong state policy and bans. At the same time, many consumers are against those measures and believe that either the market can take care of itself or the state should instead encourage Ukrainian cultural content.



METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted **with the financial support of PONARS-Eurasia**. As part of the research, 3 focus groups were held in December 2022: 2 with those who consume Russian cultural content or those who used to do so but no longer do and 1 with cultural activists that promote or create Ukrainian cultural content.

Focus groups were held both online via videoconferencing and on-site. Focus group took place throughout December 2022, according to the guides corresponding to the two different groups (see annexes #1 and #2), and participants' confidentiality has been preserved. The audio recording of the focus group discussions has been transcribed in a way that omits personal identification data. The quotes have been slightly modified (depersonalized) to ensure that participants cannot be identified and improve comprehension. All recommendations are based on data collected during the research and do not necessarily reflect the views of the research authors.

The term *Russian cultural content* refers to books, cinema and TV series, music, TV shows, etc. that are produced by Russia or its historical predecessors, such as the USSR and the Russian Empire; the language of such content is typically Russian.

Also, six questions were included with the financial support of PONARS-Eurasia into the nationwide survey conducted by Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation together with the Razumkov Center Sociological Service from December 13 to December 21, 2022, under support of MATRA Program.

The survey was conducted using face-to-face method in the following regions:

- Volyn, Zakarpattia, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Rivne, Ternopil, Chernivtsi regions (Western macro region);
- Vinnytsia, Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Kirovohrad, Poltava, Sumy, Khmelnytskyi, Cherkasy, Chernihiv regions and in Kyiv city (Central macro region);
- Mykolaiv, Kherson and Odesa regions (Southern macro region);
- Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv regions (Eastern macro region)

The survey was conducted using a stratified multi-stage sample. The structure of the sample reflects the demographic structure of the adult population on the territories where the survey was conducted, as of the beginning of 2022 (by age, gender, type of settlement).

2018 respondents of the age of 18 and older have been interviewed. The theoretical sampling error does not exceed 2.3%. However, additional systematic deviations of the sample can be caused by the consequences of Russian aggression, in particular, forced evacuation of millions of citizens.



WHAT CAN BE UNDERSTOOD FROM THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

1) PECULIARITIES OF THE CONSUMPTION OF RUSSIAN CULTURAL CONTENT: INFLUENCE OF THE WAR

According to the nationwide poll, **prior to the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, a significant proportion of Ukrainians actively engaged with Russian cultural content.** More than 40% of respondents engaged with this content often or very often. Almost 30% engaged with such content rarely.

It confirms the fact that **despite the war in Donbas and occupation of Crimea in 2014, Ukrainian society was heavily influenced by Russian cultural content. It was consumed not only by Russian-speaking Ukrainians (54%) but also by Ukrainian-speaking ones (35%).**

Part of the focus group participants have made a conscious effort to discontinue the consumption of Russian cultural content since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion. This group no longer finds Russian content acceptable and is unwilling to consume content made by the people or representatives of the state that wages the war against Ukraine. Often, when one discontinues consuming Russian content, one switches to Ukrainian content. **For some participants, the fact that monetization and profits of Russian content are directly or indirectly used to fund the war against Ukraine was the chief reason to forego Russian content.**

At the same time, **some participants limited or completely ceased the consumption of Russian cultural content right after 2014** (the year when Crimea was annexed and the war in Donbas began). Moreover, this refusal often concerned Russian content and not the content in the Russian language, and participants continued consuming translations of literary works to Russian or other cultural products adapted to the Russian language (cinema, video games, etc.).

However, **far from all respondents refused to consume Russian cultural content. Some participants who would like to completely forego Russian content find it too difficult to do at the moment**, especially if they used to consume it a lot. That is why, they forego it gradually and decrease the number of creators they follow little by little. Further, **some participants have foregone content by Russians** who support the war or have not voiced their opinion.

Overall, **the decision to forego Russian cultural content and switch to Ukrainian content is closely related to one's decision to switch to speaking Ukrainian**: at work, in personal life, etc. as well as a switch to reading Ukrainian media and speaking in Ukrainian in public places/places of leisure.



2) Why do Ukrainians continue to consume Russian cultural content?

According to the poll, **45% of respondents believe that the main reason** why Ukrainians continue to engage with Russian cultural content is **habit** (a.k.a. “they just are used to it”). **Another 21% of respondents believe that Ukrainians who continue to engage with the Russian content just like it. A similar proportion of respondents, 21%, believe that it is easier for some Ukrainians to engage with Russian content. 18.5% of respondents believe that Ukrainians who engage with the Russian content cannot find a Ukrainian alternative they enjoy.**

It is highly probable that all these factors have their own influence on different segments of the population. They were discussed in more details within the focus groups studies.

Those focus group participants willing to switch from Russian content to Ukrainian or foreign content have faced certain difficulties. **Their primary concern is the lack of niche Ukrainian cultural content.** Content for children is particularly scarce. Further, participants reported the lack of **Ukrainian content in the following spheres: video games, literary or virtual universes**, etc.

Further, there is a shortage of cultural products that are Ukrainian or in the Ukrainian language in spheres adjacent to culture, such as science (popular science and sci-fi content). At the same time, participants noted that the situation is improving.

On the other hand, there are some participants who believe that **the issue of shortage of Ukrainian content is made up, and there is actually enough of it**, and it is about making the effort to find it.

Some participants cannot forego Russian content because they are used to it or have positive associations with it. They find this content irreplaceable. It is typically associated with certain life events and bright memories, which is why it is difficult and hurtful to forego this content for such participants.

Some participants found it paradoxical that sometimes one can both volunteer for the Armed Forces of Ukraine and continue to consume Russian films, music, etc.

3) Is it necessary to study Russian cultural content at schools?

The opinion of respondents on the matter of schools covering literature by Russian authors is split. 38% of respondents believe that this literature should not be covered by schools. More than 27% of respondents believe that only the literature by Russian authors considered classic should be covered by schools. Almost 11% of respondents believe that schools should only cover the literature by those authors who are in one way or the other related to Ukraine. Another 10% of respondents believe that the literature by Russian authors should only be covered by schools if these authors did not hold anti-Ukrainian beliefs. 7% of respondents believe that literature by Russian authors should continue to be studied the way it has been.



The distribution of responses varied strongly depending on the region of respondents. Indeed, in the West of Ukraine, 60% of respondents believe schools should not cover any kind of literature by Russian authors, while in the South of Ukraine, only 10% of respondents did.

It is probable that **this issue will remain quite sensitive. Therefore, the government should take it into account while planning changes in school program.**

Some participants are **generally supportive of the review process concerning the foreign literature studied at schools, but they believe that this should be a slow, non-radical, process.** This carefulness often concerns authors who are related to Ukraine: Gogol (Hohol), Bulgakov, etc.

However, the contrary opinion is also somewhat popular. Thus, **some participants believe that the Ukrainian state should claim the heritage of artists who come from Ukraine that Russia believes to be its own.** Mostly, Soviet authors or authors who emigrated to Russia in times of the Russian Empire are concerned. This group believes that this would allow for a proactive cultural policy that precludes Russia from “invading” and distorting history.

4) Attitudes to Ukrainian cultural content in Russian language

There is no uniform opinion on the matter of assessment of Ukrainian cultural creators who continue to produce content in Russian. 29% of respondents believe that after Russia’s full-scale invasion broke out it is not appropriate to create such content. 23% of respondents believe that cultural creators who produce content in Russian should no longer be considered Ukrainian. The rest of the respondents are more reserved. 10% believe that culture and politics must be discussed separately, which justifies cultural creators producing content in Russian. A similar proportion of respondents (circa 10%) believe that the content in Russian is justified if there is popular demand for it. There are those respondents who cite freedom of creation (circa 8%) and considerations for those who consider Russian their native language (8%) as reasons that justify the content in Russian.

At the same time, **almost 60% of respondents oppose support for Ukrainian cultural creators who produce cultural content in Russian.** 37% of respondents believe that the support is not appropriate after the Russian full-scale invasion broke out, and 22.5% of respondents are against the support because it is not conducive to the development of the Ukrainian language and culture.

These results show that the state should not limit creation of Ukrainian cultural content in Russian language. At the same time, the state should not promote it either.

Participants of the focus groups understand that many Ukrainian authors wrote in Russian and target the larger Russian and post-Soviet markets that are larger than the Ukrainian



one. **Access to these larger markets used to help creators to find their audience and be more well-off financially.**

Many participants question the notions of Ukrainian culture in the Russian language or Russian-speaking Ukrainian artists. They believe that these are artificial categories that does not square with the development of modern Ukrainian culture.

However, this opinion is not dominant. **Other participants believe that the freedom of creativity applies to Russian-speaking Ukrainian artists.** Still, very few participants believe that the state should support or promote such content. Rather, the authors of such content or their teams must promote it on their own.

To sum it up, most participants believe that **the state should not ban Ukrainian content in the Russian language, but it must create incentives to make the creation of content in Ukrainian more advantageous.** These incentives could include fiscal methods.

5) The attitude of Ukrainians toward the state regulation of Russian cultural content

Respondents tend to support the ban on the activities of Russian artists and cinematic products in Ukraine. They prioritize the security of the state over freedom of speech and expression when it comes to these measures. More specifically, over 63% of respondents believe that such measures are necessary for state security; only 14% of respondents believe that this is wrongdoing that limits the rights of citizens. Prior to the full-scale invasion, only 44% of respondents supported such measures, and 37% of respondents believed that it was a wrongdoing.

Based on the focus group discussions, **Ukrainians believe that Russian cultural content should be regulated but do not believe that it should be banned altogether.** Still, respondents support banning tours by Russian music artists, cinematic content, and, most crucially, the content on the Internet.

The regulation of cultural content in the Russian language in Ukraine should be coupled with programs that support the Ukrainian cultural content that covers prioritized spheres (e.g. content for children).

Many participants believe that the Ukrainian authorities should strictly limit the circulation of Russian content in Ukraine. They find it inappropriate to let it proliferate given that Russia uses this content as a soft power tool to justify its imperial ambitions and aggression.

Not all participants agree, especially when it comes to cultural heritage that was produced during the Soviet period or earlier. They believe that **a lot of these cultural products were created by Ukrainians and this cultural heritage is a part of Ukrainian history that should not be discarded for the sole reason of its affiliation with Russia.**



As far as the regulation of literature goes, **participants largely support the limitation on imports of Russian literature to Ukraine. Participants**, both the consumers of content and activists that advocate for Ukrainian content, **understand that it is difficult to regulate the circulation of Russian content.** Any bans can be bypassed, and restrictions can only be partial. Still, they believe the regulation is needed to form trends and outline the path forward.

Moreover, cultural activists largely believe that **the Ukrainian state, its representatives in regulatory bodies and local authorities, regulated Russian content highly ineffectively prior to the full-scale invasion.** They believe that the state was not been effective in countering the Russian influence and promoting Ukrainian informational and cultural resources.

Some participants believe that **bans are not sufficient to regulate the sphere** because some people are going to ignore restrictions on principle. On the other hand, some participants believe that one's development should be all-rounded and bans would preclude that.

When discussing the role of the state, participants argued that **the state does not do enough to support Ukrainian content.** They believe that grant support as well as systematic support for content producers is needed. They argue that such measures would support the Ukrainian culture, especially its elements that are difficult to commercialize.



RECOMMENDATIONS

After Russia initiated the full-scale invasion, Ukrainians have decreased the consumption of cultural content in Russian. At the same time, there are many Ukrainians who do continue to consume it, which is why regulating this sphere and tracking the potential destructive Russian influence remains important.

Even though the priority of the Ukrainian state remains defense, **the present moment is the best time to regulate the spread of cultural content in the Russian language in Ukraine to form an independent information sphere as well as safeguard and strengthen the Ukrainian national identity.**

Our team believes that the state policy regulating cultural content should be guided by these three key principles:

- 1) The preservation of freedom of speech and expression as well as the right to participate in cultural life;
- 2) The focus on state security, the banishment of harmful or dangerous cultural content in the Russian language that justifies modern Russian chauvinistic ideology;
- 3) The support of the development of Ukrainian cultural content (in the Ukrainian language) and its popularization.

With these principles in mind, our recommendations are as follows:

- 1) **The state should not seek to ban all cultural content in the Russian language but rather seek a more targeted response. The society supports restrictions on Russian movies and tours by Russian music artists, but despite Russia's ongoing war of aggression some Ukrainians still consume various Russian cultural content.** Many Ukrainians want to forego the consumption of Russian cultural content, which is why there is a need to promote existing Ukrainian cultural alternatives or support the creation of new alternatives to Russian cultural content.
- 2) **The state should provide grants and economic privileges to support the creators of Ukrainian cultural content, especially when it comes to content for children.** Respondents often noted that there is a shortage of Ukrainian cultural content for children, and Russian cultural content is often the only available alternative. The development of Ukrainian cultural content for children should be a priority. As far as other types of content are concerned, there is a need to create niche content in the Ukrainian language, such as that related to video games, virtual universes, popular culture, etc.
- 3) **The state should not ban the creation of cultural content in the Russian language in Ukraine** because that goes against the freedom of speech and expression and is not supported by public opinion. On the other hand, the state should not finance cultural projects in the Russian language, a notion that most Ukrainians agree with – **most Ukrainians have a negative perception of financing of cultural projects in the Russian language during the war with Russia.** Ukraine should support Ukrainian content by means of financial stimuli, such as lower taxation for the creators of Ukrainian content.
- 4) **The state should formulate clear criteria defining the works by Russian authors that should not be studied at schools or other educational establishments.** Respondents don't believe that many such works should be studied but believe that



works that are considered world classics or works by authors with Ukrainian background can be studied.

- 5) **The state should reconsider its information policy.** Many respondents do not believe that the state should finance information sources in the Russian language. Instead, they believe that the state should support Ukrainian cultural projects targeting the Ukrainian diaspora and those Ukrainians who relocated abroad as a result of Russia's aggression.