Compassionate Linguistics:
Learning Ukrainian as Resistance to Russia's War

LAIMA VINCĖ

I came up with the term compassionate linguistics after three hours of talking with a group of academics, teachers and students from Ukraine and Lithuania who joined me online for a roundtable discussion on language, soft power, culture, and the historical connection between Lithuania and Ukraine. I define compassionate linguistics as the desire to learn another's language out of a sense of empathy, support, and mutual respect.

The youngest participant in our discussion was Sofia Savystka (born 2004), an 18-year-old first-year Biology student and volunteer Ukrainian teacher from Khmelnytskyi, Ukraine, and the eldest, 45-year-old Loic Boizou (born 1977) from Switzerland, a researcher who has made Kaunas, Lithuania his home. The others were Lilia Denikevych (born 1990), a refugee from Kyiv now living in Kaunas; Oksana Makarova (born 1984), who lives in the Kyiv region with her husband and two young children;Tetiana Ponomarkenko (born 1989), who came to Kaunas, Lithuania, from her hometown of Kyiv seven years ago when she married her Lithuanian husband; Miglė Janušauskienė (born 1988), a Lithuanian primary school teacher and mother of two young children, and Teresė Ringalienė (born 1983), director of the Institute of Foreign Languages at Vytautas Magnus University, initiator and coordinator of the Ukrainian – Lithuanian language program.

Teresė explained how the idea to teach Ukrainian to Lithuanians and Lithuanian to Ukrainian came into being.

"When the war started, and the first refugees started coming to Lithuania," Teresė explained, "many of the refugees said that they would like to learn to read Lithuanian and how to say at least a few words and phrases to get by. To fulfill this need, I gathered a few volunteers to teach Lithuanian to Ukrainian refugees. Then, Lithuanians started asking if they could learn Ukrainian because knowing some Ukrainian would help them better serve Ukrainian refugees, but also because they felt learning Ukrainian would be a way of showing their moral support for Ukrainians in this time of war.

"We put out an announcement that the university would be offering free classes in Ukrainian. In just two and a half hours, 120 people had signed up and registered. Even after every seat was filled, people kept calling and writing and asking if they could somehow get into a Ukrainian language class. The calls came in nonstop. At some point, we had no seats left in the program and had to stop registering students. Then we wondered, what next?

Lithuanian postage stamp in honor of Ukraine's freedom fighters by Lithuanian artist Eglė Kirlytė

By Ukrainian artist Alyona Zhuk

"We needed more Ukrainian language teachers, so we gathered Ukrainian students and alumnus and asked them if they could help us by volunteering to teach Ukrainian. Many agreed. We formed seven groups of 20 students. Officially the classes are supposed to cap at 20, but we let in more than just 20 students into a class. All the teachers are volunteers who do not get paid. Some of the Lithuanian language classes are taught in person on campus, and some are taught online. All the Ukrainian language classes are taught online. Oksana teaches online from a village outside of Kyiv where she is staying with her family during the war."

"Do you have a curriculum?" I asked.

"We have a good Lithuanian language curriculum that is time tested, and we have plenty of books and materials to teach Lithuanian through English, but we had to develop the Ukrainian language curriculum. Some of the Ukrainian language classes are taught through English and others through Lithuanian. Oksana is creating our teaching materials for the Ukrainian class right now. Teachers are creating their own materials and sharing what they have. We are all coordinated and constantly in touch. It is all very grassroots right now."

My screen switched to Sofia, a young woman with brown eyes and brown hair neatly braided into a plait in the Ukrainian style. She is an ethnic Ukrainian who grew up speaking Ukrainian in her small city of Khmelnytskyi, with a population just shy of 300,000. Sofia arrived in Kaunas in September 2021 to study at Vytautas Magnus University. Although Sofia did not come to Lithuania as a refugee, she has now become one because of the war.

"What was it like for you when the war began, being so far from home?" I asked.

"I was in a complete state of shock. Those first days of the war I found it hard to focus on my lectures. But then when I saw Lithuanians coming together to protest the war, and when I saw people waving the Ukrainian flag, I began to feel better. So many people from the community here at the university reached out and offered to help me. I felt so much support from Lithuanians."

"Are you learning Lithuanian?"

"Yes, I will be studying in Lithuania for four years and I need to know how to say basic words and phrases. Besides, learning Lithuanian is compulsory for foreign students. When I came in September, I felt the lack of language. Many of the other students from Ukraine who are studying here are from East Ukraine and speak Russian. I can speak Russian, but I speak it poorly, and I don't really want to speak Russian, so I felt isolated. I felt as though I couldn't speak with anyone, except in English. I never heard Ukrainian spoken while in Lithuania."

Sofia continues, "the Ukrainian language is an essential part of being Ukrainian. People must make their choice whether to speak Ukrainian or not. It is not required to speak perfectly."

"In Ireland, after years of English colonialism," I said, "only in small villages in Western Ireland people spoke Irish, the indigenous language. The Irish government has sought to bring back Irish by making it mandatory in schools and by sponsoring an Irish TV channel, Yet Irish has not flourished. Is the situation with Ukrainian similar?"

"No, it is different," Sophia said. "People still use Ukrainian in everyday life. During the years of the Soviet Union, they tried to change the Ukrainian language to make it grammatically similar to Russian. But they could not destroy Ukrainian. 2014 was a pivotal year because Ukrainian became the state language and high school students were required to take a Ukrainian state level language exam to graduate. Five years ago, Ukrainian television started."

"How is it teaching Ukrainian to Lithuanians?"

"They are great students. Ukrainian uses the Cyrillic alphabet and that is hard for people who speak a language like Lithuanian that uses the Latin alphabet, but they have adjusted and can now read well. They connect the sounds. They find many similar words between Lithuanian and Ukrainian. The declensions can be problematic though."

"Who are your students?" I asked.

"My students are teachers working in schools who want to be able to better help Ukrainian refugee children. They are volunteers in humanitarian aid organizations. Some work for the Red Cross. Some are just interested in languages."

"You must be so busy with your studies," I asked Sofia, "why have you taken on the extra work of volunteering to teach Ukrainian?"

"My language is important to me. There is a presumption that all people in Ukraine speak Russian, but that's not quite true," Sofia said. "Only in the industrial cities is Russian predominant. Also, the Russian language has been imposed on Ukrainians through persecution. A few years ago, all Ukrainian television was in Russian, all the cartoons, all the movies, the news. After 2014, I made the conscious choice to no longer speak Russian, not watch Russian media, not to listen to Russian pop music. I do not wish to be connected to Russian culture."

"Why?"

"Russia is the culture of murderers," Sofia said simply. "They are a people who have destroyed my nation."

Sofia's student, Miglė Janušauskienė, tuned in next. She explained that she teaches preschool and early elementary school in Kaunas and is raising two

This article is an excerpt from the forthcoming book, *Angel of Maidan: Ukrainian Women's Voices in War* by Laima Vincė.
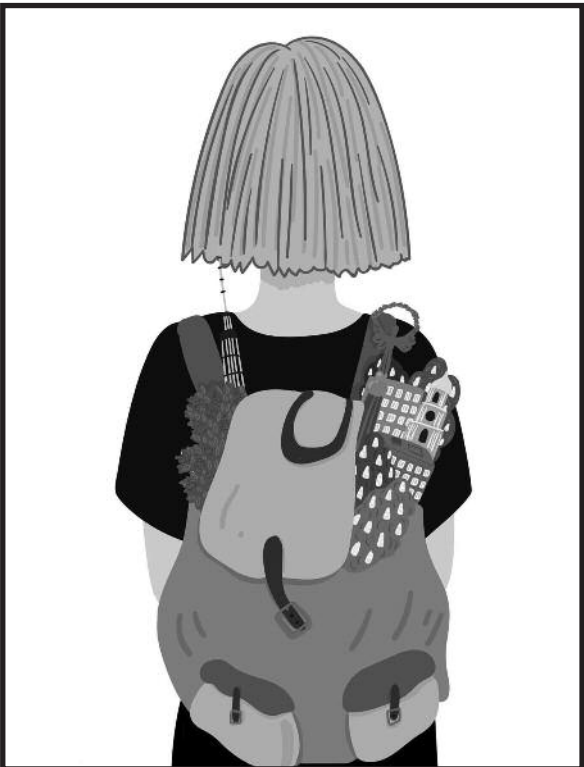
Alyona Zhuk, "Girl with backpack"

children.

"Every Monday and Friday I come to Sofia's class to learn Ukrainian," Miglė said. "She is so calm and patient. She creates an entirely different world in her classroom. She is dignified. I've never heard her complain or say an angry word about the war. I decided to learn Ukrainian because I saw it as my own form of resistance. I have small children at home, so I can't take the time to volunteer anywhere, and we don't have the space at home to take in any refugees to live with our family, so I thought I could show my support by learning Ukrainian. I'm also learning Ukrainian out of a sense of respect and solidarity with Ukrainians, and to set a good example for my children. I feel that the foundation of a nation is its language and therefore it is necessary to learn the language if you want to know the nation. I wanted to learn more about Ukraine's history. This nation is not foreign to us Lithuanians. When I studied our shared history, I realized that Lithuania and Ukraine are like one nation together."

Miglė continued, "When you see the brutality and genocide of this war, it is impossible to remain neutral. Ukraine is so close to us. A country like France, which is geographically far from Ukraine, can remain indifferent to the plight of the Ukrainians, but we cannot. Learning Ukrainian makes me proud. I share what I am doing with my colleagues at the school where I work. I have colleagues who are afraid to speak about the war in Ukraine. It's as though they are superstitious. They fear that if they talk about the war, the war will come here to us. My generation had no idea what war is. Now we know. I have this fear of this war never ending. I read the news in Ukrainian now."

"If you speak Russian, isn't it easier to learn Ukrainian?"

"I know Russian well but emotionally I block Russian out of my consciousness," Miglė admitted. "Empathy comes through language. You see the suffering of the Ukrainian people on the news, and you wish to learn their language to better help them."

"How old are your children? Do they understand about the war?" I asked.

"My daughter is in the 6th grade. My children never let me forget what war means. Whenever we have any money left beyond our basic needs, whether its 10 euro or a 100 euro, we buy food for Ukrainians and donate. It's a shame that it has taken this brutal war for us to finally realize what is most important. All our lives we were still influenced by Russian propaganda. I always thought of the German nation as fascists and could not shake this perception. Now, this is how I think of the Russian nation."

"I'd like to say a few words about Russia," Terese interjected. "I was born in the Soviet Union. All the cartoons and movies were in Russian. As a kid, I could understand everything in Russian. My grand-

father had been deported to Siberia for ten years and my grandmother escaped, so she remained in Lithuania. My mother only met her father when she was 10 years old, when he returned from Siberia. I heard stories about Siberia, the war, the postwar period from my grandfather. I heard about how cruel the Russians were towards Lithuanians and it created an unconscious mental block in my mind against the Russian language. Logically, I know that Russian is just a language, but I had heard all the stories and subconsciously I began to associate the language with the terrors and horrors Russia inflicted on others."

"I have an interesting story to tell about the Russian and Ukrainian languages," Lilia said. Her face was framed by long wavy dark blonde hair cascading down her shoulders. She tells me that she is a refugee from Kyiv since March. She left Ukraine when her husband explained to her that he would be free to fight and defend his nation if he knew that Lilia was somewhere safe where he did not need to worry about her.

"My mother is from a village near Lviv," Lilia explained, "she is a native Ukrainian speaker. My father is from Luhansk, a Russian-speaking region, and he is a Russian speaker. In fact, whenever we spoke Ukrainian at home, my father would yell, 'Speak in a human language!'

"I was born in Luhansk, but when I was small, my grandmother took me to live with her in Lviv for four years. So, my mother tongue is Ukrainian. That is the only language I spoke and understood as a small child. When I was four, I returned to Luhansk to live with my parents. I didn't know Russian at all. When I was six years old, I was hospitalized. I still could not speak Russian and had a hard time in the hospital. We were often subjected to unkind remarks and bad words from Russian speakers in Luhansk whenever we went out because we spoke

Ukrainian. Many times, when we were out on the street, speaking Ukrainian as a family, Russian-speaking passers-by would shout at us: 'Fascists! Bandits! Banderovskys' (followers of World War II era Ukrainian ultranationalist Stepan Bandera).

"When I was growing up in Luhansk, in school I had Russian language and literature class four to five hours a week and only two hours of Ukrainian class. In 2007, I left Luhansk to study in Kyiv, and I stayed there, marrying my husband. Now, I live in Kaunas. But I plan to return to Kyiv after the war. When I went to Kyiv, I left Luhansk behind. I disassociated myself. My mom's relatives are all in Lviv. I have, however, kept up with my friends from school in Luhansk. When I call them in the Russian-occupied territory and try to speak with them they tell me they could care less if they belong to Russia or Ukraine. Many people in that region feel that way. All they care about is which government can give them more money and a higher standard of living. They are materialistic people. They chose to be a part of Russia because Russia gives them money."

"Do you miss your childhood home in Luhansk?"

"The only thing that I miss in the Luhansk region is the nature. I would like to show the nature of Eastern Ukraine to my husband. There are fields, mines, mountains. It is a vast space."

"And the people?" I asked.

"The people in Luhansk are mainly Russians, but they are Soviet-minded Russians. I grew up in a small city on the border with Russia, but I think it would be bad for Ukraine to let Luhansk go. Luhansk belongs to Ukraine. We are now developing a Ukrainian consciousness. If those people dislike Ukraine, they are free to move elsewhere.

"Eastern Ukraine is the region where millions of Ukrainian peasant farmers died in the 1930s during the Holodomor and Russian colonists were brought in to repopulate the region," I said. "During the Holodomor trainloads of grain were taken to Moscow as the people starved."

"When we learned about the Holodomor in school in Luhansk," Lilia said, "we were taught that everyone in Eastern Ukraine loved and respected the Soviet army so much that they voluntarily sent all their food to Russia."

"Has it been difficult to watch what is happening in Eastern Ukraine?" I asked.

"It's not difficult for me because of the loss of territory, but because of the people of Donetsk and Luhansk and how they have behaved. There is so much Russian propaganda in Luhansk and Donetsk. There is the pro-Russian party, called Prorosia. This is not a new story in these regions. This has been going on for the last 20 years. All my life I've lived with this conflict between Russians undermining Ukrainian statehood in Donetsk and Luhansk."

"Why have you decided to study Lithuanian?" I asked.

"I respect Lithuania because Lithuanians have done so much to help us Ukrainians. They are a different country and culture, and yet they help us. Here in Kaunas, I am studying Lithuanian and making camouflage nets for the army."

Oksana is a Ukrainian from Kyiv. Her husband has not yet been drafted into the army but is on the reserves list. They have two children.

"Why haven't you left Ukraine?"

"My mom refuses to leave Kyiv. The missile strike that happened yesterday took place not far from where my mom lives. She is very stoic."

"How is life for you there in Ukraine?"

"Everything has been calm so far. There are air raids, but where I live in the village there is nowhere to hide, so we just stay home."

"How are your children doing?"

"My daughter is 13 and will soon be 14 and my son is 10 and will soon be 11. We spent the two first weeks of the war in Kyiv. We often had to spend nights huddled in the corridor because of the shelling. Finally, we left to a small village outside of Kyiv. My children became calmer. In my daughter's class, all her classmates have left Ukraine. She chats with them online. But she is missing out on her teenage years, on doing the normal things a teenager does. They continue to ask me: Why do we have this war? When will it finish? What if it doesn't end, what will happen to us then? My husband is working online and if one day he is called up, he will need to go and join the fight. Every man in Ukraine is obliged to protect the country."

"How did you get involved teaching Ukrainian to Lithuanians?" I asked.

"Teaching Ukrainian for me is a form of cultural diplomacy. Besides, I'm not a fighter. I have two children to protect. I'm not a doctor. I work to support the economy of my country. My students are teachers, people who work in charities, people who help with gathering the news. And then there were those who were just curious to discover a new language. The first lessons were hard, but then we eased into the rhythm of the class. The group is tolerant and supportive. There is a core group who never miss a class. The students are motivated."

"Are you trained as a language teacher?"

"I studied French and English and planned to teach, but I ended up not working in a school.

"Baltic and Ukrainian women" – a sketch circulated online

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This opportunity to teach Ukrainian to Lithuanians is a revival of my 'inner teacher,'" Oksana said and laughed. "These classes satisfy my inner need to teach."

Tetiana Ponomarkenko has lived in Lithuania for seven years and speaks Lithuanian fluently. She teaches Ukrainian to Lithuanians, and unlike Oksana's and Sofia's classes, which teach Ukrainian through English, she teaches through Lithuanian. Tetiana has earned a master's degree in Management of Education and is working on her Ph.D. at VMU while she teaches at a primary school.

"My husband was my reason to move to Lithuania, but unfortunately, we spoke Russian at home, as this language was mutual for both of us. Now I am trying to switch to Ukrainian and Lithuanian in our routine talks. In the beginning, the biggest motivation to learn Lithuanian for me was to prove to myself that I could learn the language and show my respect to the country. Later I had more pragmatic aims, like finding a job and my Ph.D. studies, which are in Lithuanian."

"Are there similarities between Ukrainian and Lithuanian?" I asked.

"The languages are very similar in grammar and spirit," Tetiana said. "I just needed to replace Ukrainian words with Lithuanian words, and 80 percent of the grammar is the same.

The great Lithuanian founder of linguistics, Jablonskis, borrowed his grammar from Polish, and Ukrainian and Polish are similar. Speaking Lithuanian all day does not make me tired, but speaking English does."

"How has the war affected you as a Ukrainian?" I asked.

"It was a shock. I needed to pull out my family, my sister and her two children and my mother. Immediately, when the war began, my sister took them all to hide near the Kyiv airport. I knew that was a very bad idea because it would be the first target to be bombed by the Russians. I had to convince them to come to Lithuania. They resisted, but finally agreed. They lived through the bombings in Kyiv. Then, they made a very difficult journey by train from Kyiv to Lviv. The train took 11 hours, and they could not sit down the entire time. My mother has a disability, so it was very hard for her. In Lviv there were 10,000 people in the railway station. It was zero degrees outside. They had to spend the night outdoors and wait for the train to Poland. They stood outside, overnight, for 12 hours in the freezing cold, waiting for the train to Poland. Then, a train ride that normally takes two hours took 12 hours. There was nowhere to sit. They waited for hours at the Polish Migration. But Polish volunteers made it easier for them, distributing water, tea, food. My husband and I drove 11 hours across Poland to meet my sister, mother, and the children. We brought them back to Kaunas with us and now they are safe. My sister has found a job as a teacher at a private school organized for Ukrainian children. The Lithuanian state, along with regular people, parents, small business owners are financing this school. She also teaches Ukrainian to Lithuanian students in a primary school. A kind Lithuanian principal started this program. At the same time, she teaches English to Ukrainian children."

"You were born in 1989. You are a baby of the revolution," I mused.

"Your revolution in Lithuania started in 1989, but in Ukraine, we were not taught that the Soviet Union was an oppressor. Only when I came to Lithuania as an adult did I learn that the Soviet Union was an oppressor. I remember when I naively said to my husband, 'Why don't the Lithuanians celebrate May 9th" and he explained the history to me. Lithuania had 20 years of independence from Russia between the two world wars, and that made a huge difference. In Ukraine, we were independent for only one year after World War I. There was constant in-fighting, and then we were occupied by the Soviet Union. People were raised with a Soviet consciousness. They were all communists. My Ukrainian grandma, to this day, will swear that she loves Lenin and Stalin."

"Did you speak Ukrainian at home growing up?"

"When I was growing up, we spoke a type of sloppy mixture of Ukrainian and Russian that is called Surzhyk. Except for the western regions, few Ukrainians speak pure literary Ukrainian anymore. Surzhyk is my native language. It is my home language. It is the language I speak with my mom and grandma. When I was growing up in the Kyiv region, people felt ashamed to speak pure Ukrainian. We would always switch to Russian, and especially when we were in the city center in Kyiv. I did not know correct Ukrainian."

Surzhyk is a Ukrainian word that refers to any mix of languages, not necessarily including Ukrainian or Russian.

"Growing up in independent Ukraine, our teachers in Kyiv were required to teach all our lessons in Ukrainian. But they spoke a stiff, formal, antiquated Ukrainian. Then, during the breaks, the teachers would switch to Russian and suddenly they appeared cool, fun, hip to us kids. We grew up learning to hate Ukrainian as something boring and formal imposed on us and loving Russian as a natural and fun language. All our cartoons and movies were in Russian. All the pop music was in Russian. We were saturated with Russian culture. Now I know it was all Russian propaganda, soft power."

"There is an ongoing debate between Russians and Ukrainians. Some argue that culture is neutral, and language does not matter, while others say that Russian culture must be boycotted. What do you think?"

"I side with the camp that says language and culture has been used by Russia as soft power and that we should now oppose it. In Ukraine, before 2014, Ukraine was the stiff formal state language, and everyone hated it. Meanwhile, Russian was the language of cool, hip, culture. After 2014, all of that changed. That was when I decided that Ukrainian was not shameful. My consciousness changed. I blame my teachers for the years I lost when I resisted speaking Ukrainian. Culture is soft power and acts the same as military power because it changes and shapes our minds. Teachers in Ukraine are now banned from speaking Russian during breaks and I support this policy."

Tetiana continues: "In the 1990s, when Ukraine first became independent, people had the opportunity to choose between becoming Ukrainians or Russians. Many chose Russia because they perceived Russia as giving them access to power, money, and opportunity. When I first came to Lithuania, I felt that being able to speak to people in Russian somehow gave me an advantage, but now I am ashamed that I ever thought that way. I feel that Russian is dirt in my mouth."

Strengthening ties

Algis Jaugelis, President of the LCBC, welcomed the participants, after which Nina Krieger, the Executive Director of the VHEC, made opening remarks. The Ambassador of Lithuania to Canada, Darius Skusevičius, kindly provided a recorded welcome to the event, followed by a written statement from Christopher Juras, the Honorary Consul of Lithuania in Vancouver.

LCBC member and historian Gene Homel then presented an overview of Jewish life in Lithuania from the 1300s to the present day. Rachel Mines, an LCBC Director whose father, a Holocaust survivor, was born and raised in a Lithuanian shtetl, gave an illustrated presentation on the Jewish community in her ancestral town, using photos and information found in her research.

Helen Mintz, a Yiddish translator, read a selection from one of her translations of Abraham Karpinowitz's short stories. Karpinowitz, the son of a theatrical family in Vilnius, survived the Holocaust and later wrote several volumes of stories memorializing prewar Jewish life in Vilnius.

The ceremony ended with the singing of the Partisans' Song, "Zog Nit Keynmol," written by Hirsh Glick in the Vilnius Ghetto, followed by a recording of Glick's words read in Lithuanian by Giedrius Galvanauskas of Atžalynas Gymnasium under the auspices of Eli Rabinowitz and his "We

Rachel Mines characterizes the lives of the Jewish residents of Skuodas, Lithuania.

Are Here!" international educational project.

Lithuanian and non-Lithuanian participants found the remembrance ceremony both educational and emotional, and all emphasized the importance of reconciliation. According to Algis Jaugelis, "it was … an important and moving event, an opening of doors and minds, with great potential for future intercultural and bridge-building events." Andrea Berneckas, another LCBC Director, wrote, "It was such a privilege to be part of this solemn, yet beautiful and hopeful event. I look forward to being part of the Lithuanian community's strengthening of ties by the sharing of stories and experiences." Nina Krieger commented, "I look forward to more opportunities to bring the communities together." Celia Brauer, a local Yiddishist, summed up the general feeling: "We are far away from the original homeland, but yet this event brought people closer together – which is incredibly important."

The National Memorial Day for the Genocide of Lithuanian Jews event is now on LCBC's yearly calendar of events, and the next memorial is planned for September 2023.

More information about the Lithuanian Community of British Columbia can be found at http://www.lithuaniansofbc.com.

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