

Will Moscow Expand Assistance to Russian-Language Schools in Ukraine?

By [Paul Goble](#)

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Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

A Russian activist has written President Dmitry Medvedev asking that the Kremlin help Russian regions provide assistance to Russian-language schools in Ukraine, an effort that recalls Soviet-era projects, threatens Kiev's control of its schools and unintentionally calls attention to the absence of Ukrainian-language schools in the Russian Federation.

Anatoly Lisitsyn, who heads a charity foundation, wrote Medvedev to say that he had been asked by students at one Russian-language school in Ivano-Frankivsk to provide assistance, given [the difficulties that school has had in obtaining Russian-language instructional materials](#).

In his letter, which was reported today by Novosti and other Moscow news outlets, Lisitsyn said that the request which arrived by email on his foundation's website had convinced him that Russia's regions should take responsibility for providing such help to Russian-language schools in Ukraine more generally.

The students said in their message, Lisitsyn continued, that they "would like Russia to devote more attention" to their desire to study in Russian, especially since "the Poles are making massive efforts to introduce Polish language in [Ukrainian] schools," even to the point of paying for computerization and trips to Poland.

If Poland can do that, the students said and Lisitsyn agreed, then Russia should be able to do at least as much. Lisitsyn told journalists that he would like to see Medvedev back a program in which "all regions of Russia through various charitable foundations and organizations" would "support Russian-language schools in Ukraine."

According to Lisitsyn, he has already met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who supports the idea, as does the pro-government United Russia Party in the Duma, especially since many of Russia's regions have already "assumed responsibility for providing schools and other institutions in Ukraine with some aid."

Such aid, RUpor.ru noted, "frequently can assume a political character," and the news agency noted that last year, Russian special services had promoted the activities of Ruthenian separatists in the Transcarpathian districts of Ukraine "under the aegis of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate."

Ukrainian officials are clearly concerned that Lisitsyn's proposal represents another attempt by Moscow to increase Russian influence in Ukraine and undermine the authority of Kiev. Ukraine's education minister, Ivan Vakarchuk, for example, said that there currently are "no particular problems" with Russian-language schools in his country.

"Today more than 17 percent of Ukrainian pupils and the same percentage of university students study in Russian," he pointed out. And he noted that in Ukraine there are also schools "in the languages of other national minorities," including Hungarian, Polish, Moldovan, Crimean Tatar, and Romanian.

And Vakarchuk observed that while Russians and others have the opportunity to study in their native languages in Ukraine's educational system, "in Russia there is not a single Ukrainian school financed by municipal governments." As a result, "children of ethnic Ukrainians" in Russia — and there are several million Ukrainians there — have access only to "Sunday schools."

"I have raised this question at bilateral meetings" Vakarchuk added, "but the Russian side still has not been willing even to bring it up for discussion." He implied but did not say that once the economic crisis in Ukraine passes, perhaps Kiev will follow Moscow's example and offer to provide outside assistance to Ukrainian-language programs in the Russian Federation.

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