

## UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN UKRAINE: HUMANITARIAN EXPERTISE

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### INTRODUCTION

Ukraine is often regarded as a post-Soviet country with internal political and social disunity, a lack of common consent among various groups of society concerning Ukraine's political orientation, historical events, personalities, use of language, and national identity. Since Ukraine's independence in 1991, these problems were used to demonstrate the existence of two conflicting identities – Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking – split mainly based on language arguments (Riabchuk, 2003)<sup>1</sup>, affecting speakers' worldview values. The Ukrainian-speaking population is pro-Western, and Russian-speaking people traditionally are more attached to Russia. However, some researchers challenge the idea of the fundamental role of language in shaping national identity in Ukraine (Bureiko & Moga, 2019<sup>2</sup>) based on data collected on the Ukrainian-Russian dual practice of speaking. These researchers provide as evidence of this argument the results of two surveys conducted in Ukraine in 2013 and 2015, which clearly show that language-based identities have often been manipulatively used by various political forces, especially during elections.

Polarized ethnolinguistic identities and their negative influence on Ukraine's social and political situation frequently appear in public debates and research about Ukraine (Sasse, 2022<sup>3</sup>). However, Western scholars justify the national identity of Ukrainians based on citizenship rather than ethnic identification.

Today, the unprecedented unity of society against the backdrop of the war had a dramatic impact on the attitude towards the status of the language: today, the absolute majority (83%) is in favor of Ukrainian being the only official language in Ukraine, and 78% regard the Ukrainian language as their native.

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<sup>1</sup> Рябчук М. Дві України: реальні межі, віртуальні війни. *Критика*. Київ, 2003. Рік VII, число 9 (71). С. 19–23.

<sup>2</sup> Bureiko N., Moga T. The Ukrainian-Russian Linguistic Dyad and its Impact on National Identity in Ukraine. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2019. Vol. 71. P. 137–155.

<sup>3</sup> Sasse G. Russia's War Against Ukraine: A Trio of Virtual Special Issues. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2022. Vol. 74. No. 8. P. 1–4.

Our essay enquires about what role the Ukrainian language plays in Ukrainian national identity. The essay's first section offers a theoretical basis for the relationship between language and national identity, defending the assumption that language is a necessary part of national identification. The second section looks at the language-based attachment to Ukraine and the self-identification of the Ukrainian population. The final section presents our conclusions and overall summary.

### **1. Debates on national identity and language: theoretical reflections**

The problem of "identity" is interdisciplinary. Scientists of various specialties study it: philosophers, sociologists, historians, and social psychologists, distinguishing its structural components, levels, forms, and typology.

National identity is complex, variable, elastic, and thus subject to manipulations notion (Maalouf, 2000<sup>4</sup>). Exact concepts and definitions are generally rare in the social and humanitarian sciences. Different views and approaches prevail in these sciences. The issue of national identity is also no exception. Certain signs are recognized by everyone – for example, that it is a feeling of belonging to a specific nation. This is the most general formulation. Some researchers attach great importance to the so-called objective factors of belonging – this is the territory in which people live, the language they use to communicate, and the religion to which they belong. Others prefer subjective factors such as self-identification. Such multifaceted nature of national identity makes it extremely difficult to conceptualize.

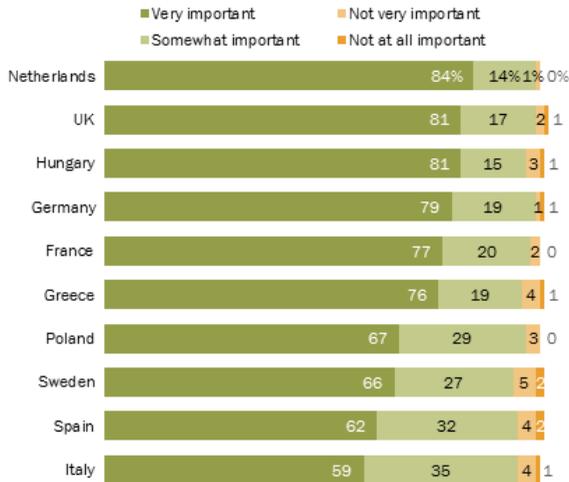
Nowadays, representatives of the humanities pay much attention to studying such an issue as national identity. Problems of consolidation, national identity, culture, language, trust, ideology, religion, and tolerance became and are becoming the causes of the emergence of different consequences and depth crises and conflicts in different parts of the planet. The importance of the issue of national identity for the security of modern states nobody can underestimate. National identity appears as one of the primary constituent concepts of "sovereignty," "national self-determination," and "national security." The future of the state itself and the nature of the development of relations in the country between different population groups largely depends on the nature and content of the existing national identity. The people of a particular country identify themselves, their own and group interests with the state, and whether the state is interpreted as an obstacle to the realization of their cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, political, and economic interests, the territorial integrity of the country, the state of relations between different population groups (ethnic, political, social,

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<sup>4</sup> Maalof A. On Identity. London : Vintage Publishing, 2000, 133 p.

religious), the degree of consolidation and certainty of society regarding their future directly depends on development within a particular state entity.

*Being able to speak our national language is \_\_\_ for being truly (survey country nationality)*



Source: Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey, Q85b.

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**Figure 1. The results of the Pew Research Center survey on the attachment of the ability to speak the national language and national identity**

As we mentioned, this essay aims to consider perceptions of national identity in Ukraine as these coalesce around the Ukrainian language. This scope limitation requires some explanation of how national identity is seen here. Smith singles out five fundamental features of national identity<sup>5</sup>: 1) homeland, 2) common myths and historical memories, 3) a common culture, 4) joint legal rights and duties for all members 5) a shared economy. Furthermore, scholars often categorize language as a marker of ethnic identity (Schmidt, 2008<sup>6</sup>) and even a constituent of national identification

<sup>5</sup> Smith A. National Identity: Ethnonationalism Comparative Perspective. Reno : University of Nevada Press, 1993. 204 p.

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt U. Language loss and the Ethnic Identity of Minorities. *ECMI Issue Brief*. November 2008. No. 18. URL: [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/96835/ECMI\\_brief\\_18\\_November\\_2008.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/96835/ECMI_brief_18_November_2008.pdf) (Last accessed: September 21, 2022).

(Oakes, 2001<sup>7</sup>). Most Europeans believe the ability to converse in their country's language is crucial to nationality<sup>8</sup> (see Figure 1).

Self-identification of Ukrainians is no exception. Of the national identity attributes, language far and away is seen as the most critical to national identity.

## **2. The analysis of attachment of language use and identity in Ukraine**

For a long time, Ukrainian society has undergone total and consistent denationalization, which has led to the deformation of the national consciousness of Ukrainians, which is the core of any nation and its powerful internal phenomenon. Russia, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, continued efforts to denationalize Ukraine, blurring the differences in cultural, historical, and linguistic spheres. Russian narratives are tools for spreading the ideas of the “Russian world”. They are characterized by the fact that they are appellative and are widely and often repeated by various channels of information to influence the public consciousness. The narrative of a “brotherly people,” which sometimes transforms into “the same people,” is one of the central narratives of Russian propaganda. It is built on the “commonality” of the experiences of Ukraine and Russia and sometimes questions the existence of Ukrainian statehood itself.

As the main sign of Ukrainian identity and an essential state-building factor of the Ukrainian nation, the Ukrainian language was always one of the first targets for destruction by the Russian imperialists, a key objective of the policy of linguicide.

Recently, the concept of a “Russian-speaking patriot” (of Ukraine) has become popular in the Ukrainian political community and mass media. Masenko<sup>9</sup> (2016), Polyanska<sup>10</sup> (2016), and Bureiko & Moga<sup>11</sup> (2019)

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<sup>7</sup> Oakes L. *Language and National Identity: Comparing France and Sweden*. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing, 2001. 305 p.

<sup>8</sup> The Pew Research Center survey results on the attachment of the ability to speak the national language and national identity. 2016. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/02/01/language-the-cornerstone-of-national-identity/> (Last accessed: September 21, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Масенко Л.Т. Якою мовою говорить патріотизм? URL: <https://language-policy.info/2016/11/yakoyu-movoyu-hovoryt-patriotyzm/> (Last accessed: September 21, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Полянська Я. Мовне питання: чи має патріот говорити українською? URL: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/27933326.html> (Last accessed: September 21, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Bureiko N., Moga T. The Ukrainian-Russian Linguistic Dyad and its Impact on National Identity in Ukraine. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2019. Vol. 71. P. 137–155.

actively debate over the thesis on whether it is possible to be a patriot of Ukraine but not to communicate in the Ukrainian language. Ivanna Tsar, in her research<sup>12</sup>, reveals the problem of the national identity of Russian-speaking youth. Many interviewees have not formed a national but a global or regional identity. At the same time, the majority connect their future with Ukraine. It should be noted that “native language”, “nationality”, and “patriotism” for many representatives of the Russian-speaking youth are somewhat symbolic concepts. The territorial principle connects them: “I am Ukrainian because I live in Ukraine”.

In such conditions, the development of national identity in Ukraine has not been an easy task. The linguistic diversity across the country has frequently been politicized and used against the national interests of Ukraine. As we can witness, in hybrid warfare, an adversary can easily exploit any boundaries, real or virtual.

Over the last decade, there has been a steady increase in those who consider Ukrainian their native language: from 57% in 2012 to 76% in 2022. Russian lost from 42 to 20% in 10 years. In this dynamic, attention should be paid to the following trends. First, noticeable language use changes occurred between 2012–2016, and 2022. One of the key reasons was: a) society’s reaction to the experiments of the then government in language policy; b) events of the Revolution of Dignity; and c) Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the temporary occupation of Crimea and certain territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia and Kherson regions. Second: positive dynamics in self-identification occurred due to a change in attitude toward the Ukrainian language in the central, southern, and eastern parts of the country.

The Russian language has remained part of everyday communication practices in Ukraine. However, “Ukraine has become more Ukrainian”<sup>13</sup> (Arel 2018, p. 186), and this process continues. Thus, according to a nationwide survey conducted on March 19, 2022, 83% of Ukrainians favor Ukrainian being the only state language in Ukraine<sup>14</sup>. This result is 18% higher than in 2021 before the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine. This opinion dominates in all regions, ages, and language groups.

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<sup>12</sup> Цар І. Поняття «патріотизм» у розумінні російськомовної молоді зі Сходу України та Криму. URL: <https://er.chdtu.edu.ua/bitstream/ChSTU/1507/1/10.pdf> (Last accessed: September 21, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Dominique Arel. How Ukraine has become more Ukrainian. *Post-Soviet Affairs*. 2018. Vol. 34: 2–3, P. 186–189.

<sup>14</sup> Шосте загальнонаціональне опитування «Мовне питання в Україні». 19 березня 2022. URL: [https://www.prostir.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/RG\\_UA\\_1000\\_032022\\_VI\\_Mova.pdf](https://www.prostir.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/RG_UA_1000_032022_VI_Mova.pdf). (Last accessed: September 20, 2022).

On the other hand, almost a quarter favored giving the Russian language official status before the war; today, this number decreased to only 7%. In peacetime, residents of the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine traditionally advocated for the status of the Russian language as a second official language in the country. However, even in these regions, there were only a third of the population, and today their number has almost halved.

## CONCLUSIONS

The level of self-identification of Ukrainians is connected to the Ukrainian language. The number of Ukrainians who speak the Ukrainian language in everyday life is steadily increasing. The war will only accelerate this process as a challenge for the whole society. The Ukrainian language, as one of the cornerstones of statehood, is only getting more potent today, and the lines of opposition in this matter are disappearing.

Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism, observed in various spheres and on television and radio broadcasting, is a vestige of colonialism due to the long-term Russification of Ukrainians.

The “language problem” and efforts to start discussions around this topic do not have the support of the majority of the population. The nature of this problem is purely political and partly local. Despite this, most citizens, regardless of the language of communication, realize that there is one common enemy – Russia, which is trying to destroy Ukrainian statehood. Thereby, it is expected that the changes in the self-identification of Ukrainians will continue, and the sphere of use of the Ukrainian language will expand.

## SUMMARY

Self-identification of Ukrainians is strongly connected to the Ukrainian language. Against the backdrop of Russian aggression against Ukraine, we can witness the new pulse of national self-determination of Ukrainians. Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism can only be considered as they can be considered only as a consequence of the policy of colonialism and not as a feature of the Ukrainian people. The above-mentioned is additional proof that language and national identity are the objects of political manipulation the adversary uses against the national security of Ukraine.

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