

## RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT: THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE AMIDST AN IDENTITY CRISIS IN UKRAINE

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**Abstract.** The Ukrainian-Russian relationship is examined in this paper amid Ukraine's identity crisis, focusing on the historical trajectory, promotion of the Ukrainian language, and implications of continuous use of the Russian language in Ukraine. A thorough but careful look at the linguistic contact history reveals crisis sources influenced by Ukraine's geography and politics. Russian dominance, especially in the Soviet era, eroded Ukrainian language and identity, sparking debates on linguistic, social, and political implications. The impact of Russian on Ukrainian identity raises concerns about cultural preservation. Recent efforts prioritise Ukrainian language promotion to revive identity, addressing tensions from linguistic differences. Language becomes a geopolitical tool, amplifying the identity crisis. The political and social consequences of language choice are creating divisions in Ukrainian society today. This article concludes by emphasising the need to address the identity crisis in Ukraine through fostering linguistic diversity, inclusivity, and respect for both Russian and Ukrainian languages.

**Keywords:** Russian-Ukrainian, language policy, diversity, identity, politics, culture, linguistic

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## 1. Introduction

Language has always played a significant role in shaping individual and collective identities. It serves as a vehicle for communication, a repository of cultural heritage, and a powerful tool for expressing one's thoughts, beliefs, and aspirations. Nowhere is this relationship between language and identity more apparent than in the complex socio-political landscape of Ukraine, where the status of the Russian language has become a source of contention and a reflection of a broader identity crisis. Ukraine is home to around 20 languages, with Ukrainian being the primary language for 67% of the population and Russian for 29%, according to the 2001 census.

Ukraine, a country with a rich history and diverse linguistic landscape, has been navigating its path towards self-determination since gaining independence in 1991. Throughout this journey, language has emerged as a key aspect of Ukraine's quest to solidify its national identity and establish its place within the global community. Central to this discourse is the delicate connections between Ukrainian and Russian, the two dominant languages in Ukraine.

The Russian language has deep historical roots in Ukraine, a result of centuries of cultural and political ties between the two nations. Even today, Russian remains widely spoken and has a significant presence in various regions, particularly in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine despite the ongoing war between the two nations. However, the prominence of the Russian language has become a subject of intense debate and contention in recent years, fuelled by complex historical, political, and cultural factors. The events surrounding Ukraine's Euromaidan protests in 2013–2014 marked a turning point in the language dynamics within the country. The protests, initially triggered by a desire for closer integration with the European Union, soon became a symbol of resistance against the perceived influence of Russia. As Ukraine sought to assert its national sovereignty, the Ukrainian language became a powerful emblem of independence and resistance. In 2014, following the protests and Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainian government passed a law that aimed to promote the use of Ukrainian as the official state language.

This legislation on language policy, while viewed by many as a necessary step towards consolidating Ukraine's national identity, also raised concerns among Russian-speaking Ukrainians who felt their linguistic and cultural rights were being marginalised. The language issue in Ukraine is not solely confined to the political realm. It has significant implications for education, media, public administration, and everyday interactions. The choices made regarding language policy have the potential to shape the linguistic landscape of the country and influence social cohesion among its diverse population. As Ukraine looks to the future, the status of the Russian language remains a central question. Striking a balance between preserving linguistic diversity and strengthening the national identity is a complex task. The challenge lies in finding ways to acknowledge the historical and cultural ties with Russia while nurturing a strong sense of Ukrainian identity.

Language and identity have always been interconnected, and Ukraine is no exception. Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has experienced an extended

identity crisis, with Russia occupying a prominent position in the country's political and social environment. The use of the Russian language has become particularly controversial in Ukraine, with the government pushing to promote Ukrainian instead of Russian. This paper, "**Retrospect and Prospect: The Russian Language amidst an Identity Crisis in Ukraine**", aims to examine the evolution of the Russian language in Ukraine, its current status, and the implications of its continuous use in Ukraine.

### *1.1. Background to the study*

For many years, the Russian language has held a prominent position as the second language of communication in Ukraine. A substantial portion of the Ukrainian population has identified as Russian-speaking, contributing to the country's linguistic diversity (Kulyk 2017: 2). However, this linguistic divide has had a profound impact on the national identity, causing significant tensions and conflicts between those who identify as pro-Russian and those who identify as pro-Ukrainian (Kulyk 2017: 2). These clashes, fuelled by differing linguistic and cultural affiliations, have intensified in recent times, especially following the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. As a consequence, the Ukrainian government has implemented a series of measures aimed at promoting the use of the Ukrainian language, including the introduction of legislation designating it as the official language of the state and imposing restrictions on the use of Russian within government institutions (Walker 2023).

For a very long time, since independence in 1991, Ukrainian society has been influenced by the coexistence of two cultures (Kulyk 2017: 3). Historically, like every other nation, Ukraine has been a bilingual country, with many individuals proficient in both languages and engaging in everyday conversations, education, and media consumption in Russian (Walker 2023). This language duality, however, has not been without consequences. The language divide has often correlated with differing political and cultural perspectives, with Russian speakers tending to lean towards closer alignment with Russia and its cultural heritage, while Ukrainian speakers have emphasised their unique national identity and sought closer integration with Europe (Kulyk 2017: 5). In recent years, these divisions have become increasingly apparent and contentious, primarily due to the events surrounding the annexation of Crimea. The annexation sparked a surge of nationalist sentiment among Ukrainians, particularly among those who identify as pro-Ukrainian. The Russian language, seen by some as a symbol of Russian influence and aggression, has become a point of contention and a catalyst for identity conflicts within Ukraine as we speak.

To address these challenges, the Ukrainian government has taken proactive measures to strengthen the use of the Ukrainian language and promote national unity. On 25 April 2019, the Parliament of Ukraine adopted the law no. 2704-VIII "On ensuring the functioning of Ukrainian as the State language", aimed at strengthening the role of the official language (United Nations Human Rights 2019: 1). This legislation aimed to reinforce the role of the Ukrainian language in various aspects of public life, including education, media, and government administration (United Nations Human Rights 2019: 1). The law stipulated that state institutions and local

governments should conduct their activities primarily in Ukrainian while allowing for the use of other languages in specific circumstances. These language policies have been met with mixed reactions and have been the subject of debate. Supporters argue that the promotion of the Ukrainian language is necessary to preserve the country's cultural heritage and foster a stronger sense of national identity. They believe that embracing Ukrainian as the official language is crucial for Ukraine's independence and sovereignty, particularly in the face of ongoing geopolitical challenges. Critics, on the other hand, raise concerns about the potential marginalisation of Russian-speaking citizens and perceive these language policies as a threat to their linguistic rights and cultural heritage. They argue that such measures only deepen divisions and hinder efforts to achieve national unity and reconciliation.

To sum this up, the linguistic divide in Ukraine, particularly between Russian and Ukrainian speakers, has had a profound impact on the country's identity and has led to conflicts and tensions. The Ukrainian government has responded by implementing measures to promote the use of the Ukrainian language, including designating it as the official language and imposing restrictions on the use of Russian in government institutions. These language policies aim to strengthen national unity and preserve Ukraine's cultural heritage, but they have also generated debate and raised concerns about inclusivity and linguistic rights. The challenge lies in finding a balance that respects the linguistic diversity of Ukraine while fostering a sense of unity among its diverse population.

## **2. Research objectives**

The core objectives of this research are to:

- examine the role of the Russian language in the context of an identity crisis in Ukraine. The study aims to look into the historical trajectory of linguistic interactions between Ukrainian and Russian, particularly focusing on how the use of the Russian language has contributed to an identity crisis in Ukraine.
- understand the impact of the Russian language on Ukrainian identity. The study scrutinizes questions related to the preservation of Ukrainian culture and heritage, sparking debates on the linguistic, social, and political implications of language choice. The promotion of the Ukrainian language emerges as a crucial strategy in recent years to revitalize and reaffirm Ukrainian identity.
- position language as a tool in the broader geopolitical struggle between Russia and Ukraine, exacerbating the identity crisis. The study analyzes the political and social consequences of language choice, identifying divisions and challenges within Ukrainian society.

### *2.1. Research questions*

- To what extent has the dominance of the Russian language impacted the Ukrainian language and identity?
- What are the specific ways in which the Russian language has influenced Ukrainian culture and heritage?
- Why has the promotion of the Ukrainian language become a priority in recent years?
- How are tensions and conflicts in the Russian-Ukrainian relationship influenced by linguistic differences?
- What is the importance of fostering linguistic diversity, inclusivity, and respect for both Russian and Ukrainian languages in addressing the identity crisis?
- How does the continuous use of the Russian language in Ukraine impact cultural heritage, social cohesion, and national unity?

### *2.2. Research methodology*

The focal point of this research was prompted by the crisis that occurred in Ukraine subsequent to Russia's annexation of Crimea, which consequently gave rise to separatist movements within the Russian-speaking regions of the country. In the compilation of this work, a comprehensive range of carefully sourced primary and secondary materials was employed. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information presented, a diverse array of sources was utilised. These sources encompassed peer-reviewed papers, published books, news reports from reputable and trustworthy outlets, as well as articles published in esteemed journals. By adopting the Postcolonial Theory approach as the interpretive framework, this study sought to provide a detailed understanding of the dynamics surrounding the Russian language amidst the identity crisis in Ukraine.

Furthermore, an exhaustive content analysis was conducted on a wide array of publications, which were directly relevant to the topics under investigation. The content analysis encompassed a broad range of subjects, including Russian language usage in Ukraine, language policy, historical and cultural ties between Russia and Ukraine, and the ongoing armed conflict. Through the integration of these methodological approaches and sources, this article aims to provide a well-rounded explanation of the complex relationship between the Russian language and the Ukrainian identity crisis.

## **3. Theoretical framework: the role of language in shaping identity**

The significance of language in colonial power relations is highlighted in postcolonial theory, which examines the long-lasting effects of colonialism on contemporary society. Indigenous languages and cultures were erased or marginalised throughout the colonial era as a result of colonisers usually imposing their own language on the conquered populace. For instance, the French and British colonial

legacies in the Horn of Africa-good or bad-have led to the dominance of the English and French in the continent today. An oppressor can seize control of the thoughts of the oppressed by using language. According to postcolonial theory, westerners' perceptions of non-western cultures are inaccurate and subjective. This makes it clear that the goal of postcolonial thought is equality. The concept that the world can only be understood in reference to the history of colonial control is another conviction that almost all postcolonial theorists hold (Gabunia 2023).

The promotion of the Ukrainian language over Russian in the case of Ukraine may be seen as a form of decolonization, allowing the country to restore its linguistic and cultural independence from earlier hegemonic forces from Russia. Ukraine is reclaiming its unique cultural and national identity by actively encouraging the use of the Ukrainian language. This project addresses the historical marginalisation the Ukraine has experienced and represents its effort to achieve freedom. In order to express sovereignty and fight the dominating effect of the Russian language that may have been imposed during communism or post-communism eras, the Ukrainian language serves as a symbol of tradition and resistance to Ukrainians. There is little question that Ukraine's efforts to forge a national identity are a contributing factor to the current conflict there. In one way or another, the core component of Ukrainian culture has been infiltrated by the Russian language, and this damage cannot be undone by force.

Promoting the Ukrainian language has important consequences that go beyond linguistic revival, as postcolonial theory demonstrates. It stands for a larger effort to take back control of cultural narratives, revive national pride, and strengthen a sense of community among Ukrainians. By adopting their native tongue, Ukrainians fortify their sense of cultural identity and solidify their status as a distinctive country free from the shackles of imperial servitude. The revival of the Ukrainian language also calls into question the linguistic and power imbalances that now exist. It emphasises the value of linguistic variety in a global setting and acts as a form of resistance against linguistic supremacy. This is our argument for using this theory: by defending the importance of the Ukrainian language, Ukraine defends its right to self-expression and self-determination, eradicating the longstanding practise of linguistic imperialism.

#### **4. The Russian language and its impact on Ukrainian identity**

Applying logical reasoning to the discussion of the Russian language's impact on Ukraine, it becomes apparent that the use of Russian in the country has been a contentious subject with multifaceted implications. Numerous authors have contributed to the discourse, shedding light on its effects, particularly within the political domain. Götz (2017), in a comprehensive study, asserts that the Russian language functions as a strategic tool for Russia, serving to wield influence and advance its political agenda in Ukraine. Götz (2017) contends that Russia strategically wields linguistic influence to cultivate a sense of identity and affiliation among

Russian-speaking Ukrainians, especially in regions such as Crimea and the Donbas. The consequences of this manipulation have manifested in heightened political tensions and, in extreme cases, the emergence of separatist movements.

The controversial referendum that exemplified the annexation of Crimea in 2014 provides a tangible illustration of the political ramifications linked to the use of the Russian language. According to Ivanova (2022), the issue of the Ukrainian language and who speaks it has become highly politicised during the war with Ukraine. President Putin has even used it as a cover to annex some occupied areas of Ukraine with large numbers of Russian speakers (Ivanova 2022). The Russian-speaking populations in Crimea played a pivotal role in supporting the actions of the Russian government, underscoring the influential role language can play in shaping political allegiances and perspectives. Based on the 2001 census, about 14.3 million Ukrainian people (29% of the population) speak Russian as a first language (see Table 1), although by some estimates it is higher. The reasons for this lie in the history of the spread of the Ukrainian language and the formation of the borders of modern Ukraine (Ivanova 2022).

**Table1. The number of speakers for various native languages as per the 2001 Ukrainian Census**

Language	Speakers	Total percentage
Ukrainian	32,577,468	67.53%
Russian	14,273,670	29.59%
Other languages	1389764	2.88%
Total	48,240,902	100%

Source: <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/>

While numerous authors have assessed the impacts of the Russian language on Ukraine, a significant gap exists in the current discourse in terms of actively formulating a viable path forward amidst the identity crisis triggered by these linguistic dynamics. Thus, the academic community may benefit from further exploration of potential solutions and strategies to address the complexities arising from the intersection of language, politics, and identity in Ukraine. Another impact of Russian language use in Ukraine is observed in the domain of education. According to Volodymyr Kulyk (2016), the use of Russian in educational institutions can have negative consequences for the development of Ukrainian national identity. The study argues that a strong command of the Ukrainian language is crucial for the process of nation-building and fostering a sense of belonging among citizens. Consequently, Policies promoting the Ukrainian language in education, such as “The Law of Ukraine on Languages in Ukraine”, aim to strengthen the country’s identity and promote the Ukrainian language as the unifying language of Ukraine (Council of Europe 2011: 2). It has also been observed that the presence of the Russian language in Ukraine has economic implications. According to an analysis by M. Borodenko (2020), Russian-speaking regions in Ukraine tend to have closer economic ties with

Russia as they share linguistic, cultural, and historical links. As a result, these regions become vulnerable to economic shocks caused by changes in relations between Ukraine and Russia. This economic dependence can shape political sentiments and influence the geopolitical dynamics between the two countries, as we are presently witnessing in eastern and southern Ukraine.

In the media space for instance, the use of the Russian language can impact the media landscape in Ukraine. Andrii Ianitskyi (2023) discusses how the media sphere in Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine is dominated by Russian channels, which provide a different narrative and perspective compared to Ukrainian media. This linguistic divide in the media landscape can contribute to the formation of separate social and political identities among Russian-speaking communities, potentially reinforcing their distinct views and hampering national unity. In culture, the impact of Russian language use in Ukraine is visible in every aspect of Ukrainians lives.

In his investigation, Olszański (2012) argues that the Russian language has influenced the literary production and cultural expression of Ukrainian society. He postulated that the strong historical ties between Russian and Ukrainian literature have resulted in the development of a unique Ukrainian-Russian literary tradition. According to Kymlicka & Norman (2000), language policies can have a significant impact on the resolution of conflicts between linguistic and ethnic groups. They also postulated that policies can either promote social cohesion or exacerbate tensions and alienations between groups, just as it is happening between Russian speakers and other groups in Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states. Language policies that promote linguistic diversity and encourage the use of minority languages can reduce tensions and promote social cohesion (Kymlicka and Norman 2000: 70).

These policies can also enhance intercultural communication and promote understanding between different groups. For example, language policies that provide funding for minority language education, promote bilingualism, and recognise the right to use minority languages can help promote linguistic diversity and reduce tensions between groups. A study by Butters and Ronald (2004: 8) found that language can be a powerful symbol of identity and that conflicts are often linked to wider political and cultural issues. Similarly, Alcalde (2018), argued that language can be a tool for cultural dominance, with dominant languages being used to marginalise minority groups.

In the case of Ukraine, the use of Russian as one of the official languages has been seen by some as an attempt to marginalise and suppress the Ukrainian-speaking population in the western part of the country. The Russian language has provided a platform for Ukrainian writers to reach a broader audience and has facilitated cultural exchange between the two countries. The impacts of Russian language use in Ukraine are multifaceted, affecting politics, education, the economy, the media, and cultural spheres. The Russian language plays a significant role in shaping political sentiments, identities, and cultural expressions in Ukraine. The Ukrainian government and society need to navigate these impacts in a manner that respects linguistic diversity and promotes national unity while also addressing the challenges that arise from language divisions in various aspects of Ukrainian society.

### **5. Russian-Ukrainian relation: revisiting historical trajectory of linguistic contact**

Veritable academic debates have historically showcased the interconnectedness of Russia and Ukraine (Lewis 1981, Khmelko and Wilson 1998, Bever 2011). Significantly, Russian-Ukrainian relations have been a dealing of foundation, especially, right from the Kievan Rus era (Bacon 2014). With the formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922, following the success of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Ukrainian language was made to come so close to the Russian language, as Ukraine consequently became one of the historical integral parts of Russia's metamorphosis (Kuzio 2000, Omotade 2009, Omotade and Oluwafemi 2018). While taking the ethnic heterogeneity of the novel Soviet Russia into consideration, the leadership of the USSR espoused efforts at addressing linguistic disparities amidst the varying ethnic composition and distribution across the vast territory of the Soviet Russia.

It is very interesting to establish that though the Soviet Union was ethnically diverse, each constituting republics also possessed their respective linguistic uniqueness. Of course, as a tradition of the Soviet Union, to guarantee fair play across the divergent groups, bilingual education was upheld. This allowed the various groups to be represented linguistically. In that case, the Russian language was signed at the state level, as the lingual franca of the USSR, while at the same time, titular languages were constitutionally recognised and accorded significance to co-function along side with the Russian language. This situation continued throughout the Soviet dispensation. It is important to note that the superior status allotted the Russian language, eventually manifested contestation as ethnicity became an opposing force to perceived Russification, where it was believed that the Soviet Russia intended to forge new Russians out of other non-ethnic Russian.

As it has been greatly debated, the introduction of perestroika and glasnost by Gorbachev upon assumption of the mantle of leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, there were varying degrees of agitations, since the populace began to question some perceived ills of the Soviet system, having become conscious of the operational direction of the communist's regime. These agitations culminated into the unanticipated collapse and uncontrollable eventual disintegration of the USSR in 1991. Very important is the epoch making that the unfortunate collapse of the USSR made of the fifteen (15) constituent republics, as each became fully fledged sovereign states. Significantly, the Russian instincts still permeate these new polities, possibly owing to the protracted historical belongings. The republics automatically inherited the Russian language, alongside the own ethnic languages, thereby making them to be confronted with the problem of addressing language issues upon their unanticipated separation.

Historically, it must be established that Ukraine is a multilingual polity upon its declaration of independence from the defunct USSR (Pavlenko 2008, 2009). Also, by virtue of implications, the Russian language became one of the main areas of focus among the newly found sovereignties of the collapsed USSR, Ukraine inclusive.

Hence, upon declaration of independence, Ukraine was confronted with which language to assume the state language status; Russian or Ukrainian? (Magosci 1998). Hence, there were two predominant and impactful languages namely: Ukrainian and Russian. The bottom line for actions on Ukrainian and Russian languages during the 1990s revolved around what Bever (2011) described as historical asymmetrical distribution between these two languages. Here, Ukrainian was the ethnic language of the vast majority of the Ukraine geopolitical coverage, while Russian was inherited as a result of its *de jure* and *de facto* implications in the USSR. Thus, while trailing where the problem lied, Bever (2011: 1) averred that:

“The linguistic and ideological conflict around language policy and language use in Ukraine is conditioned by the historical asymmetrical distribution of the languages: Ukrainian is dominant in the west while Russian is dominant in the east and south of Ukraine”.

From the foregoing, the prevailing problems in Russia-Ukraine war, Russia’s annexation of Ukraine in 2014, among other Russo-Ukraine longer heads have been aided by vast Russian minority speakers that are predominantly spread across the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, in the Donbas and Lugansk regions.

## **6. The use of Russian language in Ukraine**

To discuss the history of Russian language use in Ukraine, we must mention the Kyivan Rus that emerged in the 9th century and lasted until the Mongol invasion in the 13th century. The Kyivan Rus was a federation of East Slavic tribes, encompassing territories that are now part of modern-day Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. Prince Volodymyr the Great, a legendary figure, is closely associated with the establishment of this empire. He is believed to have united the tribes and adopted Christianity from Byzantium in 988 (Christianity Today 2022). The linguistic landscape of Kyivan Rus was characterised by Old East Slavic, which served as the common language spoken by the population (Danylenko 2004). Old East Slavic is considered the precursor to modern Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian languages (Danylenko 2004: 21). Although the language was not uniform across the region, it formed the basis for the development of the Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian languages (Danylenko 2004: 21). Despite the disintegration of the Kyivan Rus as a political entity, its cultural and linguistic heritage endured (Molchanov 1996). The influence of the Kyivan Rus can be observed in the literary traditions and linguistic developments of the successor states. Ukraine, in particular, regards the Kyivan Rus as an essential part of its historical legacy and considers it a crucial period in the formation of its national identity (Poppe 1997).

The history of the Russian language in Ukraine is a complex and multifaceted topic that reflects the delicate relationship between language, politics, and cultural identity in Ukraine. Situated at the crossroads of Eastern Europe, Ukraine has undergone significant linguistic shifts over the centuries (Masters 2023). While Ukraine achieved independence from the Soviet Union just two decades ago, it has a

rich ethnic diversity within its population due to its historical integration with Russia (Masters, 2023). Alongside Ukrainians, there is a significant presence of Russians and individuals from various other nationalities of the former Soviet Union residing in Ukraine (Olszanski 2012). Furthermore, a notable portion of the population still identifies themselves as Soviets in terms of their nationality (Olszanski 2012: 5). Since gaining independence, Ukraine has maintained a bilingual state or society (Olszanski 2012: 7). Irrespective of their declared nationality, a significant portion of the population predominantly uses the Russian language for both spoken and written communication. However, despite this linguistic reality, the Ukrainian constitution of 1996 designates only one state and official language, primarily as a symbolic gesture rather than a practical necessity (Olszanski 2012). Without sentimentality, the Ukrainian government has shown a level of tolerance towards the widespread use of Russian in various aspects of public life, including within the parliament. According to Olszanski (2012: 6), linguistic leniency by the government is a result of the mutual intelligibility of the Russian and Ukrainian languages, enabling effective communication between speakers of both languages.

According to Dominique (2017), between 1989 and 2012, the language issue in Ukraine has been a source of ongoing political disputes. Initially, Ukrainian was declared the sole ‘state language,’ but in 2012, Russian was recognised as a ‘regional’ language. This language question has played a significant role in regionally divided electoral competitions during presidential and parliamentary elections from 1994 to 2012 (Dominique 2017). The controversy escalated in February 2014, when the Ukrainian parliament swiftly repealed the 2012 language law after removing Viktor Yanukovich from the presidency. This development coincided with the annexation of Crimea and the armed uprising followed by Russian military intervention in the Donbas region, which were presented as defensive actions aimed at protecting Russian speakers (Dominique 2017).

## **7. Russian and a language of power, research and Intelligence**

Russian, a language of power, research, and intelligence, holds a significant place in the linguistic landscape of Eurasia and Europe. It is among the most geographically widespread and widely spoken Slavic languages (Chevalier 2016). The dominance of Russian extends beyond its native speakers, as it is used in tandem with English to publish 60–70% of all information, making it an international language of science and information dissemination (Chevalier 2016). In terms of sheer numbers, Russian stands tall among the world’s most spoken languages, ranking in the top eight by the total number of speakers (Govind 2021). The digital age has only amplified its importance, with Russian taking the second spot as the most utilised language on the Internet after English (see Table 2; Govind 2021). This linguistic prowess translates into Russian playing a vital role in global media and communications, encompassing broadcast media, airwaves, and even space transmissions. Remarkably, it is one of the official languages employed aboard the International Space Station, further exemplifying its reach (Chevalier 2016).

**Table 2. Most commonly used languages in the Internet**

Rank	Language	% of top 10M websites	Share of speaking population
1	English	60.4%	16.2%
2	Russian	8.5%	3.3%
3	Spanish	4.0%	6.9%
4	Turkish	3.7%	1.1%
5	Persian	3.0%	0.7%
6	French	2.6%	3.5%
7	German	2.4%	1.7%
8	Japanese	2.1%	1.6%
9	Vietnamese	1.7%	1.0%
10	Simplified Chinese	1.4%	14.3%

Source: Bhutada, Govind

Geopolitically, the Russian language assumes a position of significance as one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Alongside Arabic, Chinese, English, French, and Spanish, Russian's presence on this list underscores its role in international diplomacy and cooperation (The United Nations 2022). Ensuring accurate interpretation and translation of speeches and texts in these official languages is of utmost importance in fostering effective multilateral diplomacy at the United Nations (The United Nations 2022). Within the borders of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, Russian holds the prestigious title of the official language. However, its influence stretches far beyond national boundaries.

As a lingua franca, Russian is widely used throughout Ukraine, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and, to some extent, the Baltic States. The language's historical ties with the Soviet Union have had a lasting impact, with Russian serving as the de facto language of the former superpower until its dissolution. Today, it continues to be an integral part of public life in varying degrees across the post-Soviet states (Chevalier 2006). Russian's extensive geographical reach, international recognition, and geopolitical importance solidify its status as a language of power, research, and intelligence. From scientific discoveries to diplomatic negotiations, Russia plays a key role in shaping the world's interconnectedness and communication across borders (Abimbola et al 2022).

## **8. The promotion of the Ukrainian language**

Russia and Ukraine were engaged in a linguistic power war long before any guns were fired (Carter 2022). Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, has previously said that Ukrainian government measures encouraging the use of the Ukrainian language are proof of the ethnic Russian genocide in the Ukrainian-speaking east, which serves as justification for the “Special Military Operation.” There had been a power struggle over language, especially whether or not Ukrainian is a language, in the Russian-speaking areas before the war in Ukraine started (Carter 2022). According to Carter (2022), Ukrainian is likely approximately as different from Russian as Spanish is from Portuguese, and neither linguists nor Ukrainians have any trouble conceiving of it as a distinct language. However, Russian nationalists have long argued that it belongs in the category of Russian dialects. The languages of the so-called titular nations of the former Soviet republics received official recognition as state languages in their separate independent states following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although the status is a crucial tool for safeguarding the community’s language rights, its effects on actual language usage and future development prospects entirely depend on how effectively the government implements legal requirements with the help of NGOs (Azniuk 2017: 5). The government of Ukraine has recently placed a high priority on the promotion of the Ukrainian language. The language debate in Ukraine has caused recurrent bouts of political conflict between 1989, when Ukrainian was declared the only ‘state language’, and 2012, when Russian was declared a ‘regional’ language (Dominique 2017: 1).

The standing of the Ukrainian language has been improved, and initiatives have been taken to guarantee that it is widely used in all facets of life. The Law of Ukraine “on ensuring the functioning of the Ukrainian language as the state language” is one of the most important pieces of legislation aimed at promoting the Ukrainian language. The goal of this law, which took effect on July 16, 2019, is to make Ukrainian the only official language in the nation. In many spheres of public life, including government offices, educational institutions, the media, and workplaces, it is required that Ukrainian be used. A fragile political consensus existed prior to 2012 that was based on the symbolic primacy of Ukrainian (Ukrainian being the only ‘state’ language), state incentives to use Ukrainian (strong in schools but weak elsewhere, including in the media and book publishing), and acceptance of the informal oral dominance of Russian in cities outside of western Ukraine, including in state institutions.

A significant milestone in reaffirming Ukrainian’s status as the state language is the establishment of the Law on the Ukrainian Language. A legal basis for the promotion and defence of the Ukrainian language in all spheres of public life is provided by this legislation. The Ukrainian government has developed a number of projects and efforts to promote the Ukrainian language in addition to legal measures. Dedicated Language Promotion Institutions to monitor language policy and create plans for language development, many organisations have been formed, including the Ukrainian Language Institute and the National Commission on the State Language.

The creation of these specialised institutes demonstrates the Ukrainian government's dedication to preserving and advancing the Ukrainian language. The issue of language has sparked intense controversy during the presidential and legislative election campaigns, particularly when it comes to the dispute over Russian and Ukrainian becoming co-official languages. Giving the Russian language any kind of formal status now requires a constitutional majority in the Parliament and the approval of a national referendum, both of which were challenging to achieve (Azhniuk 2017: 2). The constitutional status of Ukrainian as the only state language further complicated the task of the pro-Russian political forces in doing so (Azhniuk 2017: 2).

### **9. The implications of the Russian language's continuous use in Ukraine**

Ukraine, a linguistically diverse country, has long grappled with the implications of the continued use of the Russian language within its borders, especially against the backdrop of tensions with Russia. The political implications of the Russian language in Ukraine are significant. Language has been a contentious issue, with debates revolving around the recognition and status of Russian as an official language. The continued use of Russian will continue to exacerbate political tensions between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian factions, as Ukrainian nationalists often perceive the use of Russian as a sign of pro-Russian sentiment or as a threat to Ukrainian national identity. Ukraine's linguistic diversity is an essential aspect of its cultural fabric. Ukrainian and Russian are the most widely spoken languages in Ukraine; however, the continued use of Russian acknowledges linguistic diversity and accommodates the substantial number of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. But the dominance of Russian in some regions in the east can hinder the promotion and preservation of the Ukrainian language, which is crucial for Ukrainian culture and national identity.

The Russian language has exerted a significant influence on Ukrainian culture. Russian media, literature, and entertainment have played a central role in shaping cultural norms and preferences in Ukraine. While this influence can be seen as a cultural bridge to Russia, concerns exist about the potential erosion of Ukrainian cultural distinctiveness. The Russian language's continued use will perpetuate cultural ties with Russia and influence societal attitudes and behaviours (Kulyk 2014). The use of the Russian language in Ukraine has geopolitical implications (Kulyk 2014). Russia employs language as a tool to maintain cultural and linguistic affinity with Russian-speaking Ukrainians, creating a basis for political leverage and potential claims of protection over Russian-speaking communities in Ukraine.

In 2004, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology conducted a public opinion poll, revealing that a notable percentage of individuals in Ukraine used the Russian language in their households. Interestingly, this surpassed the number of individuals who officially identified Russian as their native language in the census. The survey revealed that 43–46% of the country's population used Russian at home, a proportion comparable to the use of Ukrainian. Moreover, the majority of residents in the eastern

and southern regions of Ukraine were Russophones, according to the poll results (Table 3). The presence of Russian language use will continue to facilitate Russia's attempts to exert influence in Ukraine's domestic affairs (Kulyk 2014).

**Table 3. Percentage of Russian speakers in the eastern and southern Ukrainian regions**

Regions	Percentage of Russian speakers
Autonomous Crimea republic	77%
Dnipropetrovsk region	32%
Donetsk region	74.9%
Lugansk	68.8%
Zaporizhzhia region	48.2%
Odesa region	41.9%
Kharkiv region	44.3%
Mykolaiv region	29.3%

Language plays a crucial role in social cohesion and integration. The continued use of Russian in Ukraine can create linguistic and cultural divisions, particularly in regions with a significant Russian-speaking population. This can hinder efforts to foster national unity and inclusivity as language becomes a source of social and political polarisation. Promoting a balance between linguistic diversity and national cohesion becomes a challenge in such a context. The Russian language has a substantial presence in Ukrainian media and information sources. Russian-language news channels and online platforms offer alternative narratives and viewpoints that may differ from the Ukrainian government's official position. This presence contributes to the spread of disinformation and the shaping of public sentiment, further fuelling tensions between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian groups. The media landscape exacerbates information asymmetry and challenges efforts to establish a unified national narrative.

The Russian language's use in Ukraine can have economic implications. In some regions, Russian may dominate commerce, trade, tourism, and service industries. However, the preference for Russian over Ukrainian in economic activities can limit opportunities for Ukrainian speakers and potentially hinder their integration into national and international markets. This linguistic disparity may affect economic development and lead to unequal access to economic opportunities. The implications of the continued use of the Russian language in Ukraine, particularly in the context of tensions with Russia, are multidimensional and complex. Political tensions, linguistic diversity, cultural influences, geopolitical considerations, social cohesion, the media landscape, and economic factors all shape the implications surrounding language use in Ukraine.

‘Ukrainianization’ policies have been criticised by Ukrainian scholars for being poorly implemented and weakly enforced (Goodman 2010: 3). Goodman (2010) noted that, despite the current prevalence of Russian and the limited impact of Ukrainian-language policies, the future of Russian in Ukraine is more uncertain from the point of view of Russian scholars due to language-in-education practises. He espoused that the number of Russian-speaking people in the former Soviet Union will decrease by 50 percent in ten years while at the same time explaining that the “particularly fast reduction of those who speak Russian is noticed among the young of the former Soviet republics” and explains the situation by the diminution of Russian language at schools (Goodman 2010: 3).

## **10. Recommendations**

There should be recognition of the value of both Russian and Ukrainian languages and encouragement of bilingualism as a means to bridge the linguistic divide. Promote initiatives that support the learning and use of both languages in educational institutions, public spaces, and government offices. Invest in the development and implementation of comprehensive Ukrainian language education programs. Provide resources, training, and support for teachers to ensure high-quality instruction. Foster Encourage cultural exchange programmes between the Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking communities. Facilitate dialogue, interactions, and collaborations that promote understanding and appreciation of each other’s cultures, traditions, and histories. Promote the production and dissemination of Ukrainian-language media, literature, and other cultural works. Provide funding and incentives for the creation of Ukrainian content across various media platforms. Encourage the Ukrainian entertainment industry to create engaging and high-quality content in Ukrainian. Raise awareness about language biases and stereotypes that may exist within Ukrainian society. Encourage inclusive language practices that respect both Russian and Ukrainian speakers. Promote positive attitudes towards linguistic diversity and discourage discrimination based on language use.

## **11. Conclusion**

The Ukrainian-Russian relationship has been marked by a troubled history, with language serving as a significant factor in shaping identity. The dominance of the Russian language in Ukraine, particularly during the Soviet era, has contributed to an erosion of Ukrainian language and identity. The continuous use of Russian in the country has raised concerns about the preservation of Ukrainian culture and heritage. The tensions and conflicts arising from linguistic differences have amplified the identity crisis and further divided Ukrainian society. However, addressing this crisis requires fostering linguistic diversity, inclusivity, and respect for both Russian and Ukrainian languages. Promoting bilingualism, strengthening Ukrainian language education, and supporting cultural exchange can help bridge the linguistic divide.

Promoting the production of Ukrainian-language media, literature, and cultural works, as well as addressing language biases and stereotypes, are also essential steps. By embracing linguistic diversity and promoting inclusive language practices, Ukraine can work towards social cohesion, cultural preservation, and national unity. It is through these efforts that Ukraine can navigate its identity crisis and forge a path forward that respects and values the linguistic and cultural heritage of all its citizens, home and abroad.

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