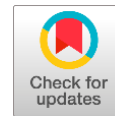


The language education and the language component as an element of countering hybrid threats in Ukraine



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Abstract This article examines the role of language education and the language component as an element in countering hybrid threats in Ukraine. Language is explored as a symbol of national identity and a unifying force among Ukrainians in the face of external threats. The literature review investigates language shift and transition from Russian to Ukrainian, particularly among Russian-speaking Ukrainians, as an act of resistance and assertion of Ukrainian identity. Survey data revealed that 90.5% of respondents consider the Ukrainian language important, and 88.5% believe it is necessary to exclusively communicate in Ukrainian within Ukraine. Notably, 41% of Russian-speaking Ukrainians have already transitioned fully or partially to Ukrainian since the invasion. The study also found a decrease in the proportion of Ukrainian residents speaking only Russian at home, from 37% to 13% between 2012 and 2022. Additionally, prior to the invasion, approximately half of Ukrainians frequently watched Russian films or listened to Russian music. Findings emphasize the importance of language education and promotion in countering hybrid threats and preserving linguistic diversity in Ukraine. This research contributes to the understanding of the language component in Ukraine's response to hybrid threats and provides insights for policymakers and educators in fostering language resilience and national identity. This research sheds light on the evolving language dynamics and underscores the importance of the language component in countering hybrid threats in Ukraine. It provides valuable insights into the language attitudes and behaviors of the Ukrainian population and highlights the role of language education and promotion in preserving national identity and resilience in the face of hybrid warfare.

Keywords: Language component, Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine, the Ukrainian language

1. Introduction

Language education plays a crucial role in promoting societal cohesion and safeguarding national security. In the context of Ukraine, a country grappling with hybrid threats, the language component emerges as a significant element in countering these multifaceted challenges. Hybrid threats encompass a wide range of tactics, including disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and cultural manipulation, which aim to exploit linguistic divisions and sow discord within a nation. Recognizing the importance of language education as a tool for resilience, Ukraine has been actively investing in initiatives that foster linguistic unity, enhance critical thinking, and promote media literacy among its population.

Ukraine has experienced a complex historical and linguistic landscape, with Ukrainian and Russian being the two predominant languages spoken within its borders. This linguistic diversity has not only enriched the country's cultural heritage but has also been exploited by external actors seeking to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Hybrid warfare strategies, often employed by Russia, have targeted linguistic fault lines to fuel internal divisions and destabilize the nation. To effectively counter these threats, Ukraine has recognized the need to prioritize language education as a means to strengthen national unity, enhance citizens' resilience, and fortify the societal fabric against external manipulations.

By emphasizing the importance of language education, Ukraine aims to empower its citizens with the necessary skills to critically evaluate information, identify disinformation, and actively participate in the country's democratic processes. Language education programs focus on fostering linguistic proficiency, promoting cultural understanding, and nurturing a sense of national identity that transcends linguistic divisions. By equipping individuals with strong language skills and a comprehensive understanding of their linguistic and cultural heritage, Ukraine aims to build a resilient society capable of withstanding hybrid threats and preserving its national security.

Furthermore, language education serves as a vital tool for countering hybrid threats in the digital realm. With the proliferation of social media and online platforms, information spreads rapidly and can easily be manipulated to exploit



linguistic fault lines. Therefore, Ukraine has also emphasized the need for media literacy education, enabling individuals to critically assess the information they encounter online and detect potential disinformation campaigns. By developing media literacy skills alongside language proficiency, Ukraine seeks to empower its population to be discerning consumers of information and active contributors to countering hybrid threats.

Language education plays a central role in countering hybrid threats in Ukraine. By investing in initiatives that foster linguistic unity, enhance critical thinking, and promote media literacy, Ukraine seeks to build a resilient society capable of withstanding external manipulations. By nurturing linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding, language education acts as a powerful defense against hybrid warfare, bolstering national security and ensuring the stability and resilience of Ukraine's future.

Therefore, the purpose of the study is to establish the role of language education and the language component as an element of countering hybrid threats in Ukraine.

Accordingly, the following research tasks were set:

- - determine the share of citizens for whom Ukrainian is their native language and the distribution of the population of Ukraine by native language;
- - to analyze the role of language education and the language component in countering hybrid threats in Ukraine, in particular in the context of protecting information security and national security.

2. Literature Review

The language education and the language component have become crucial factors in countering hybrid threats in Ukraine. As Ukraine faces ongoing challenges, including external aggression and attempts at cultural assimilation, understanding the role of language in countering these threats becomes imperative (Averianova and Voropayeva 2019). The Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union employed various strategies to suppress the Ukrainian language and promote Russian as the dominant language. Repression, genocide, and language policies aimed at assimilating Ukraine into the Russian world characterized this period. Studies of Averianova and Voropayeva (2021) shed light on the impact of these policies on language use and identity formation among Ukrainians.

Language plays a vital role in shaping national identity and cultural heritage. For Ukrainians, the Ukrainian language serves as a symbol of their distinct national identity and a tool to preserve their cultural values. The literature (Azhniuk 2018; Rehbein and Romaniuk 2014; Matviyishyn and Michalski 2017) explores how language serves as a unifying force among Ukrainians, strengthening their sense of belonging and resistance against external threats.

The ongoing conflict and hybrid threats in Ukraine have contributed to shifts in language usage among the population. Studies (Bilaniuk 2005; Kochergan 2008; Josías 2022) investigate the transition from Russian to Ukrainian, particularly among Russian-speaking Ukrainians, as an act of resistance and assertion of Ukrainian identity. The motivations, challenges, and consequences of this language shift are examined, shedding light on the societal and individual factors driving this linguistic transformation (Kulyk 2017; Matusza 2021).

The role of language education and promotion programs in countering hybrid threats is a critical aspect to consider. Researchers analyze the effectiveness of language education initiatives in strengthening the Ukrainian language and fostering linguistic pride. The literature explores various strategies, such as language courses, online platforms, and cultural programs, aimed at promoting Ukrainian language proficiency and preserving national identity (Moser 2013; Tkachuk and Tkachuk 2021).

The literature also examines language policies and legislation implemented in Ukraine to protect and promote the Ukrainian language. Scholars assess the impact of language laws on language use, education, media, and public discourse (Bilaniuk and Melnyk 2008; Hentschel and Taranenko 2021; Danylenko and Naienko 2019). The analysis delves into debates surrounding language policies, exploring their implications for countering hybrid threats and safeguarding Ukraine's linguistic and cultural diversity (Marcu 2021; Uffelmann 2019).

The literature review highlights the significance of language education and the language component in countering hybrid threats in Ukraine (Lewis et al. 2014; Hentschel and Taranenko 2015). It emphasizes the role of language in shaping national identity, resisting external aggression, and preserving cultural heritage (Hornberger et al 2018). The review (Norton and Toohey 2011; Brooks 2022) explores the historical context, language shift dynamics, language education initiatives, and language policies as integral elements in countering hybrid threats. Understanding these factors is crucial for policymakers, educators, and researchers to develop effective strategies to protect the Ukrainian language and promote linguistic diversity in Ukraine's diverse society.

3. Methods and Materials

The following methods are applied in the article:

1. Systematization of Statistical Data:

Statistical data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine was systematized to determine the state of the citizens' share for which Ukrainian was their native language, based on the census conducted in 2001. This data provided insights into the linguistic composition of the country.

2. Nationwide Survey and Analysis:

A nationwide survey conducted by the sociological group "Rating" was systematically and logically analyzed. The survey aimed to determine the level of Ukrainian language usage, the consumption of Russian films and music by Ukrainians, and the status of Ukrainian and Russian languages following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. The survey data were synthesized and analyzed to identify trends and patterns.

3. Analysis of Government and Reporting Office Data:

Statistical data published by the country's government and reporting offices were summarized to assess the distribution of the Ukrainian population by native language. This analysis provided an understanding of the linguistic landscape within the country.

4. Comparison Method:

A comparison method was employed to distinguish the level of language use by Ukrainians at home and to assess the transition of Russian-speaking Ukrainians to Ukrainian-speaking individuals. This method helped identify shifts in language preferences and understand the linguistic dynamics within Ukrainian society.

To determine the individual features of the Ukrainian language and the impact of the war on the process of transition from Russian-speaking to Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, a survey was conducted using descriptive statistics through MS Forms Pro. The online survey took place from June 30 to September 10 2022, and collected information from 25,630 respondents. The survey addressed research questions such as the importance of speaking only Ukrainian for the country and the significance of freely expressing one's opinion in Ukrainian, among others. The survey aimed to gain insights into the attitudes and preferences of the respondents regarding the Ukrainian language in the context of the ongoing war. It sought to assess the perceived importance of speaking Ukrainian as the national language and the degree to which individuals felt it was necessary for everyone in the country to freely express their opinions in Ukrainian.

4. Results

Following the conquest of a significant portion of Ukraine's territory in the 18th century, the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union pursued a policy of assimilating the Ukrainian people and integrating Ukraine into Russia through repressive measures and acts of genocide. However, one of Russia's purported triumphs, the extensive Russification of southeastern Ukraine during the 20th century, experienced a significant decline after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022. In the aftermath of the invasion, residents of regions where Russian had been predominantly spoken began undergoing a substantial shift towards the use of the Ukrainian language, even in areas where Ukrainian had lost its dominant position several decades earlier. According to the survey conducted by the sociological group "Rating," the results indicated a notable decline in the percentage of Ukrainians speaking only Russian at home from 37% in 2012 to 13% in 2022 (refer to Figure 1).

These findings suggest a significant linguistic transformation within Ukrainian society, reflecting a renewed embrace of the Ukrainian language and a shift away from exclusive Russian language usage. The Russian invasion of 2022 appears to have acted as a catalyst for this language shift, prompting residents in previously Russian-speaking regions to adopt Ukrainian as their primary means of communication. These survey results provide compelling evidence of the changing language landscape in Ukraine, illustrating a diminishing influence of the Russian language and a resurgence of the Ukrainian language. The implications of this linguistic transition extend beyond language preferences, reflecting a broader socio-cultural response to the events unfolding in the wake of the Russian invasion.

The increasing popularity of Ukrainian as a native language reflects a significant trend in Ukraine. In contemporary circumstances, Ukrainian is gradually assuming the role of a language associated with culture, prestige, and business, replacing Russian. Previously, Ukraine exhibited a strong regional divide. Ukrainian served as both the native language and the language of culture and intelligentsia in the western regions. In contrast, Russian held an informal status as the "language of cities" in the eastern parts of Ukraine, a remnant of its historical colonial dominance.

For instance, in the early 2000s, it was common to observe two TV presenters speaking different languages on the same broadcast, with one presenting in Ukrainian and the other in Russian. However, this practice has since disappeared, and now all TV presenters speak Ukrainian. Notably, the first Russian invasion in 2014 prompted a significant shift, with nearly all TV presenters transitioning to using the Ukrainian language.

Before the invasion in 2022, approximately half of Ukrainians frequently or occasionally watched Russian films or listened to Russian music. However, the ongoing war has had a considerable impact on these numbers. Currently, only 14% of respondents sometimes watch Russian movies, while 25% listen to Russian music. Moreover, 68% of respondents state that they have not watched any Russian films since the invasion, and 53% note that they have not listened to any Russian songs (refer to Figure 2).

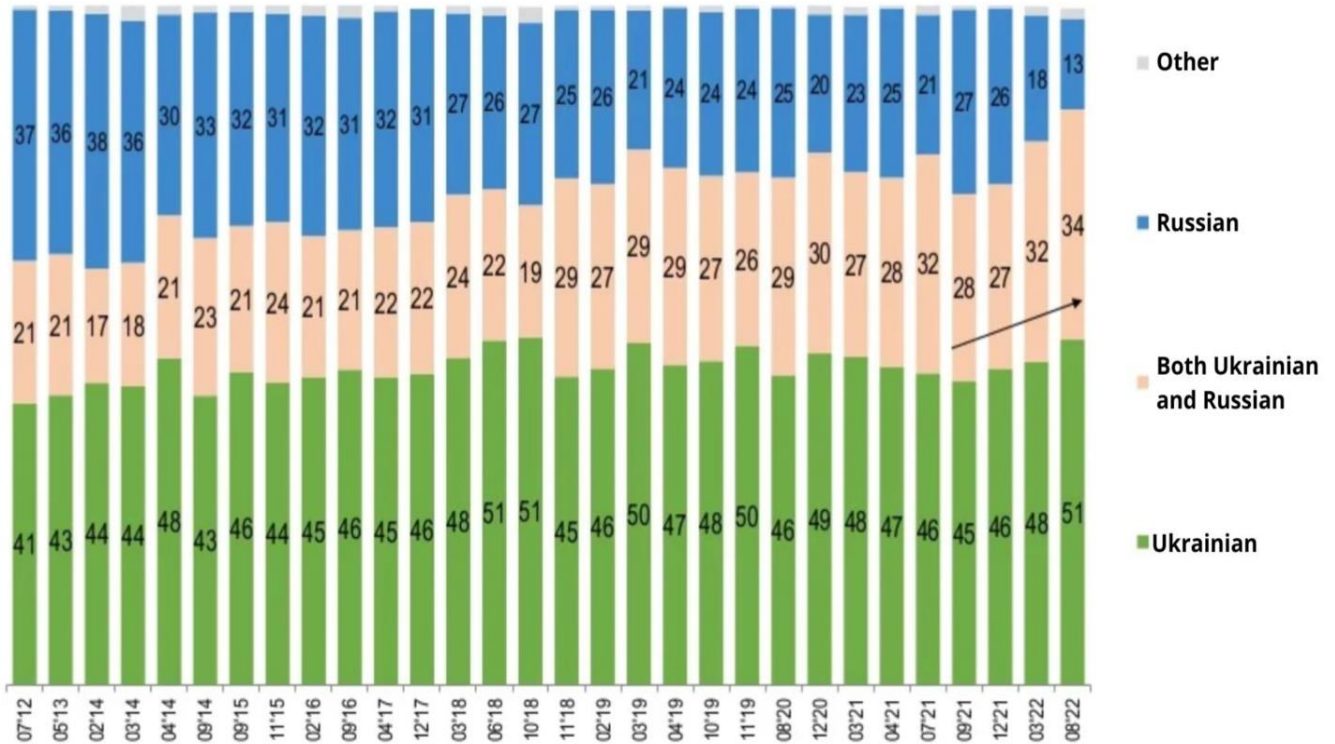


Figure 1 The languages Ukrainians use to communicate at home according to the sociological group “Rating”, from July 2012 to August 2022. *Source:* Compiled by the authors based on official data of (Sociological group “Rating” 2022).

How often did you watch Russian films?

How often did you listen to music of Russian singers?

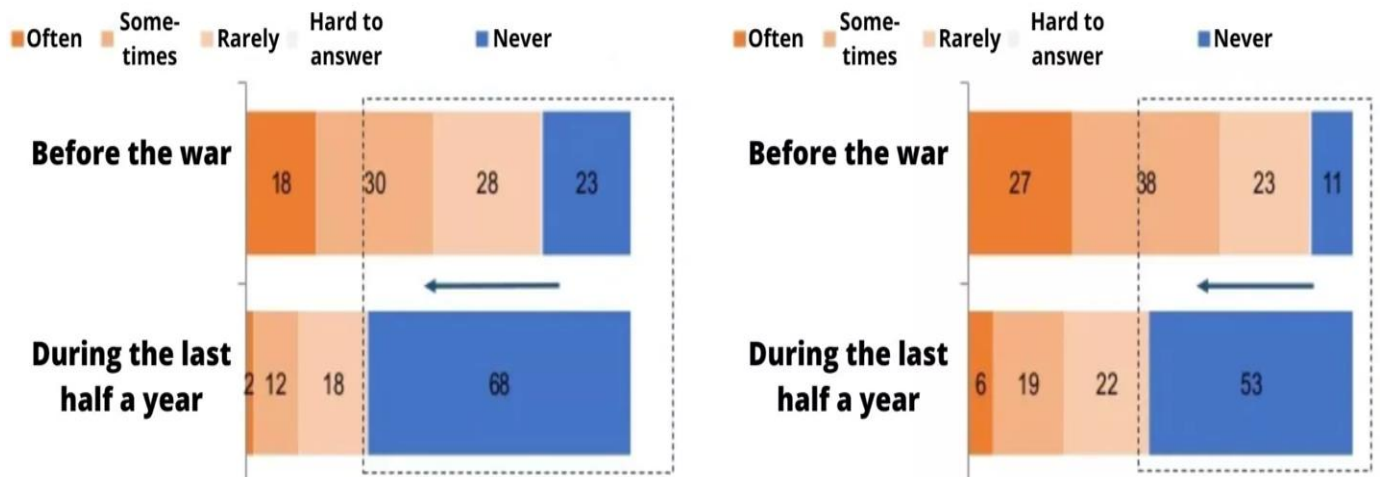


Figure 2 The share of Ukrainians watching Russian films or listening to Russian music after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. *Source:* Compiled by the authors based on official data of (Sociological group “Rating” 2022).

These findings indicate a substantial change in cultural preferences and media consumption patterns. The war has led to a significant decrease in the consumption of Russian films and music among Ukrainians, with a notable shift towards embracing Ukrainian cultural products. This shift represents a broader sociocultural response to the ongoing conflict and exemplifies the changing dynamics in language and cultural affiliations within Ukrainian society.

According to Figure 3, in the 2001 census data, only 44% of the population spoke exclusively Ukrainian at home, while 15% spoke both Ukrainian and Russian.

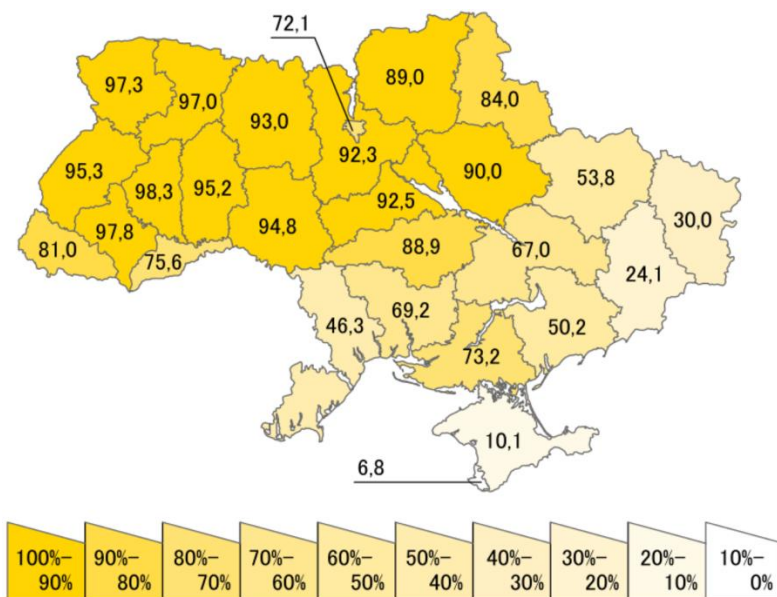


Figure 3 The share of citizens for whom Ukrainian is their native language, according to the census as of 2001. *Source:* Compiled by the authors based on official data of (the State Statistics Service of Ukraine 2022).

These statistics shed light on the complex linguistic landscape of Ukraine. While a significant percentage of the population identifies as Ukrainian by nationality, there is a notable variation in the language preferences and usage patterns. The fact that a relatively lower proportion of individuals speak exclusively Ukrainian at home indicates the influence of other languages, particularly Russian, in daily interactions.

This linguistic diversity and the discrepancy between national identity and native language usage can be attributed to historical factors, including the efforts of the Russian Empire and the USSR to promote Russian and suppress Ukrainian. These policies have left a lasting impact on the linguistic dynamics within Ukraine, resulting in a complex interplay between Ukrainian and Russian languages.

In the southeastern regions, Russia propagates the narrative that Russians living there are awaiting liberation by Russian troops. However, the reality is that these regions are populated by Ukrainians. Their ancestors endured the devastating Holodomor famine of the 1930s and subsequent mass repressions, resulting in a partial Russification over time. Figure 4 reveals that 78% of the population identified themselves as Ukrainians by nationality. However, when considering native language, only 67.5% considered Ukrainian as their primary language. Presently, these Ukrainian communities have a strong motivation to retaliate against the Russians and repel their unprovoked invasion.

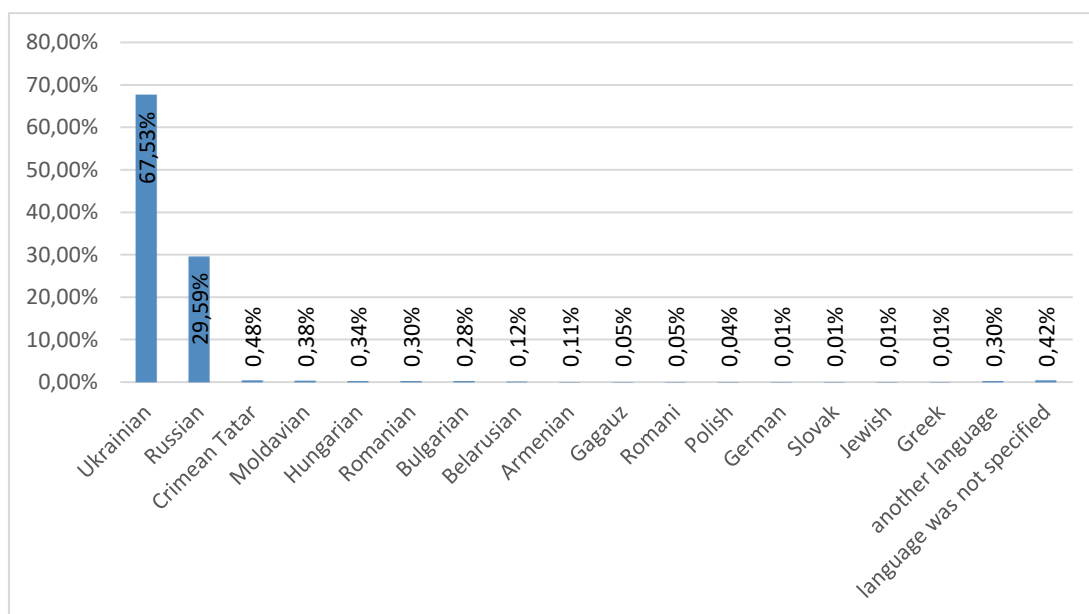


Figure 4 Distribution of the population of Ukraine by the native language 2001. *Source:* Compiled by the authors based on official data of (the State Statistics Service of Ukraine 2022).



It is worth noting that many Ukrainians in Ukraine possess knowledge of both Ukrainian and Russian languages, not due to linguistic similarity, but rather because of the historically strong presence of Russian alongside Ukrainian, which was heavily promoted, even in mass media, until recent years. Nonetheless, Ukrainian and Russian are distinct languages, with Ukrainian sharing the highest similarity to Belarusian (84%), followed by Polish (70%) and Slovak (68%), while Russian shows a similarity rate of 62%.

To evaluate the language component within Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine, a survey was conducted from June 30 to September 10 2022. The survey collected information from 25,630 internet-connected respondents. The study findings reveal that 90.5% of respondents acknowledge the importance of the Ukrainian language, while 88.5% believe it is necessary to exclusively use Ukrainian in Ukraine (refer to Table 1).

The language component of Russia's contemporary hybrid warfare against Ukraine has played a significant role, motivating Russian-speaking Ukrainians to transition to Ukrainian. This shift demonstrates the resilience and determination of the Ukrainian people to assert their national identity and preserve their language amidst external challenges.

Table 1 The results of the survey.

Questionnaire	%
In your opinion, how important is it for your country to speak only Ukrainian?	Ukrainian is important (7-10) 90,5
Think about your country today. What benefit will this measure bring?	Ukrainian citizens must speak Ukrainian (7-10) 88,5
The Ukrainian language is important, because the country should have its own national identity and uniqueness	Deficit of the Ukrainian language in society 45,4
Which of the following statements is closest to your standpoint? "I think that .."	Ukrainian is used to an insufficient extent 38,7
	Ukrainian is used to a sufficient extent 73,3
	Ukrainian is used more than necessary 5,4
How important is it for everyone in your country to be able to freely express one's opinion in Ukrainian?	Communication in Ukrainian is an important state-building process (Very important) 88,9
"Everyone can freely express his opinion in Ukrainian in my country"	Assessment of communication in Ukrainian (7-10) 86,5
	Russia's constant interference by assimilating the population of Ukraine into the Russian world 73,2
	Russia's information and cyber warfare 72,1
	Constant political pressure on the part of the Russian special services and the threat of arrest forced Ukrainians to leave the temporarily occupied territories 44,3
	Implementing the idea of linguistic dismemberment of Ukraine 58,5
Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? "The Ukrainian language in my country is under threat because of..."	Other reasons 54,3

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Despite the pretext of "protecting" Russian speakers, the full-scale military invasion led to a surprising outcome—many Russian-speaking citizens in Ukraine chose to abandon the Russian language in favor of Ukrainian. It is important to note that these individuals did not identify themselves as Russian; rather, they had only used the Russian language due to the language policies of the former Russian Empire.

As of August 2022, a significant majority of 86% of Ukrainian citizens believe that Ukrainian should be the sole official language of the country. Only 3% of respondents expressed support for Russian to become the second state language. Additionally, 10% of respondents suggested that Russian should receive official status in specific regions alongside Ukrainian (refer to Figure 5).

These findings highlight a shift in language preferences and a strong desire among Ukrainians to uphold the status of the Ukrainian language. It signifies a broader sentiment of national identity and a rejection of external influence. Despite historical factors and the invasion's context, the Ukrainian language has emerged as a unifying force and an essential element of Ukraine's cultural and linguistic heritage.

It is noteworthy that the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in a significant increase in the number of Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, particularly in the southeastern regions that Russia targeted for seizure. Prior to 2022, these regions were predominantly inhabited by Russian-speaking citizens. However, according to a sociological survey conducted by the "Rating" agency, there has been a notable shift in language usage after Russia's full-scale invasion.

In the unoccupied regions of southern and eastern Ukraine, 31% and 34% of citizens respectively transitioned to speaking Ukrainian. In comparison, the figures for the central and western regions were approximately 16% and 3% respectively. It is important to note that the majority of people in these regions were already primarily speaking Ukrainian. As a result, a significant proportion of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, around 41%, has either fully or partially switched to using Ukrainian following the invasion (refer to Figure 6).



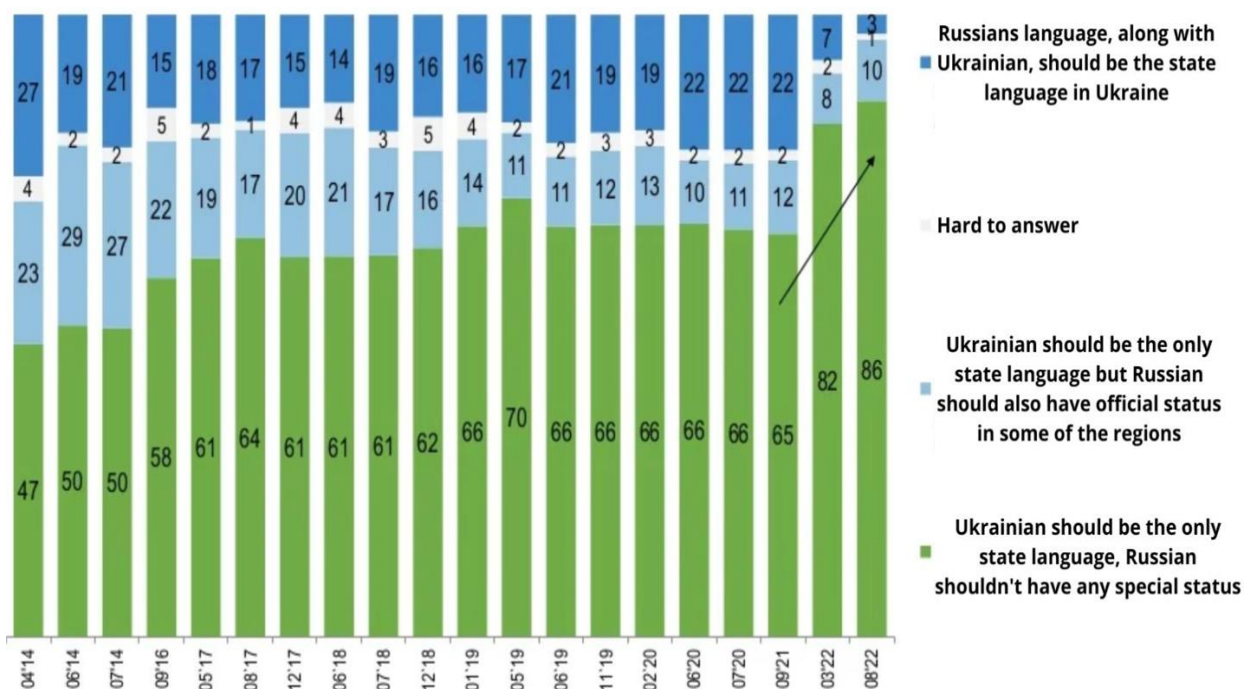


Figure 5 Predictions concerning the status of Ukrainian and Russian after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Source: Compiled by the authors by official data of (Sociological group “Rating” 2022).

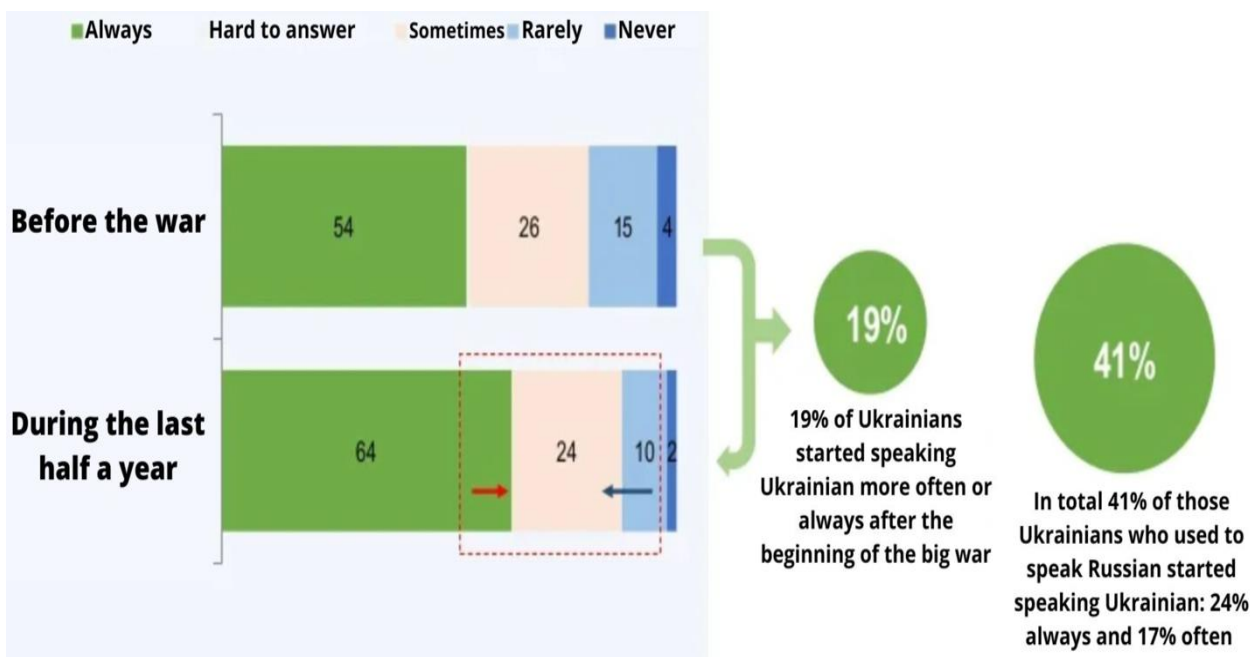


Figure 6 Percent of Ukrainians who have completely or partially switched to the Ukrainian language in Ukraine. Source: Compiled by the authors based on official data of (Sociological group “Rating” 2022).

This data highlights the impact of the conflict on language dynamics, with Russian-speaking Ukrainians embracing Ukrainian in greater numbers, particularly in the regions directly affected by the invasion. The shift in language usage reflects a strengthening of national identity and a response to the external aggression, as Ukrainians assert their linguistic heritage and reinforce their connection to the Ukrainian language.

It was established that 86% of Ukrainian citizens believe that Ukrainian should be the only state language. 3% of respondents believe that Russian should become the second state language. Along with this, 10% believe that Russian should receive an official status in some regions, in parallel with Ukrainian. As a result, 41% of Russian-speaking Ukrainians have already fully or partially switched to Ukrainian after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Already in 2019, 8% of Ukrainians believed that studying the Russian language in schools does not make sense, and now this number has increased to 52%. Although 42% of the population supports preserving the study of the Russian language in schools to a certain extent, there have been internal changes to reduce the amount of time devoted to studying this language.

Thus, in 1998, 46% of the population believed that the volume of studying the Russian language should be equal to the volume of studying the Ukrainian language. In 2019, this number was 30%, and now it is only 3%. In addition, the number of people who believe that the Russian language should be studied to a lesser extent than Ukrainian, but more than other foreign languages, decreased from 32% to 6%. In fact, of the 42% of the population that supports learning Russian, the vast majority - 33% (or almost 80% of this category of citizens) - would like to see the Russian language given as much or less time than other foreign languages. The war fundamentally changed the views of the Ukrainian population on the study of the Russian language in secondary school (Figure 7).

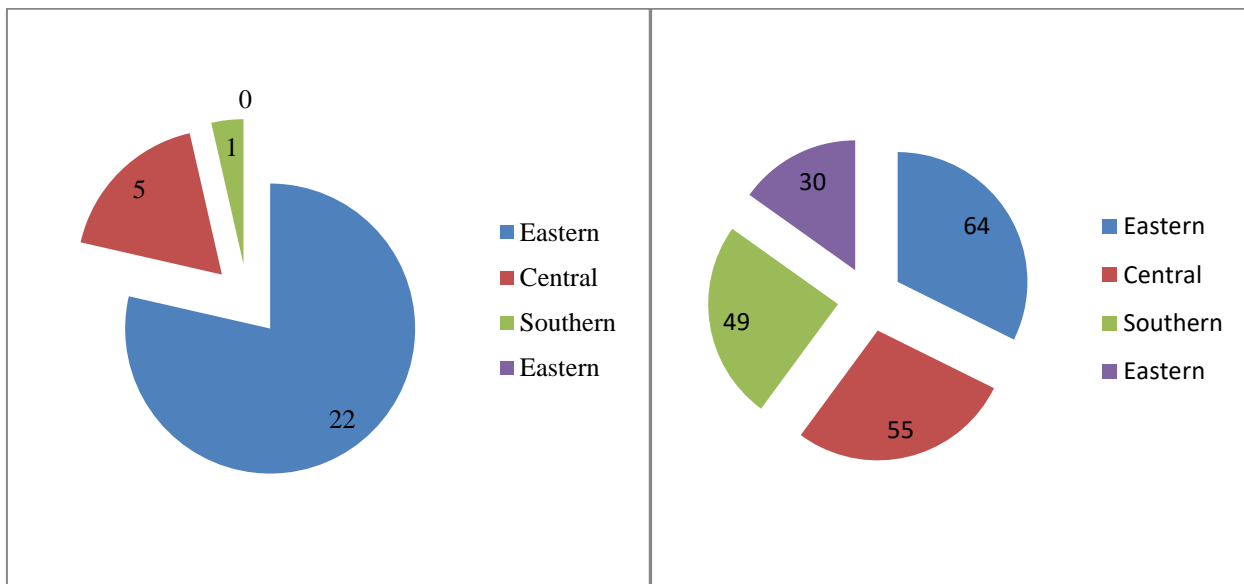


Figure 7 Priority of refusal to study the Russian language in Ukrainian schools in different regions of Ukraine in 2019 and 2023. *Source:* Compiled by the authors based on (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2023).

Undoubtedly, due to the Russian attack on Ukraine, the vast majority of Ukrainians prioritize the study of the Ukrainian language in the school curriculum. Therefore, the linguistic component of contemporary Russia’s hybrid warfare against Ukraine will face new problems in the process of popularizing the Ukrainian language in Ukraine. Along with this, its in-depth studying will cause increased attention to improving the language policy development process with the aim of complete Ukrainization of modern Ukrainian society.

5. Discussion

In the military dimension, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is localized, covering part of the territory of Ukraine; however, the discourse of this hybrid warfare has acquired a global character. The interpretive component of contemporary Russia’s hybrid warfare against Ukraine or the cognitive dimension of this war is implemented through discursive verbal-semiotic means (Tkachuk and Tkachuk 2021).

Attitudes towards languages at the level of state policy change along with power shifts. The influence of Soviet policy is still present due to implementing the dominant position of Russian in Ukraine. After Ukraine had gained independence, Ukrainian got the opportunity to be the state language. However, it was distributed unevenly territorially, which is manifested in pronounced bilingualism and linguistic bipolarity. These circumstances were one of the endogenous factors in developing the armed conflict in the east of Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by the Russian Federation in 2014 (Matviyishyn and Michalski 2017).

The growing popularity and expanding opportunities of Ukrainian helped to overcome political differences between the south-east and north-west of Ukraine, especially in the language issue. Until 2014, the language issue was often debatable by internal political forces due to the fact that about half of Ukrainians supported Ukrainian as the only state language for all regions, while the other half favored Russian as a second state or official language, for some regions, in parallel with Ukrainian. The second group of Ukrainians decreased significantly after the Russian aggression in Crimea and Donbas in 2014 and practically decreased to almost zero during the Russian invasion in 2022 (Sociological group “Rating” 2022).

In order to prevent similar negative processes in other regions of Ukraine, it is necessary to take measures that would combine both the creation of conditions for strengthening Ukrainian as the state language and promoting the development of minority languages (due to the lack of financial resources, it remains mainly in the declarative sphere) (Matviyishyn, Michalski 2017).

6. Conclusions



The language component has emerged as a significant element in countering hybrid threats in Ukraine. The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union employed various measures to suppress the Ukrainian language and assimilate Ukraine into the Russian world. However, the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the subsequent full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 have triggered a remarkable shift in language dynamics.

The Ukrainian language has experienced resurgence and has gained prominence as the language of culture, prestige, and business, gradually replacing Russian. This shift is evident in the increased number of Ukrainians speaking Ukrainian at home and the decline in the use of Russian in various domains, such as media and entertainment. The war has had a profound impact on language preferences, leading to a significant number of Russian-speaking Ukrainians embracing Ukrainian. The desire to assert national identity and resist external aggression has motivated Ukrainians to strengthen their linguistic ties and preserve their language. Ukrainian language courses have become increasingly popular, facilitating the transition from Russian to Ukrainian.

Survey data highlights the importance of the Ukrainian language to the majority of Ukrainian citizens. The overwhelming majority believe that Ukrainian should be the only state language, reflecting a strong nationalistic sentiment. This demonstrates the resilience of the Ukrainian people and their determination to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage. The language shift observed in southeastern regions, previously dominated by Russian-speaking citizens, is particularly significant. The invasion has led to a remarkable increase in the number of Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians in these areas. This trend signifies the rejection of external influence and the assertion of Ukrainian identity, even in regions targeted by Russia.

In summary, the language education and the language component have played a crucial role in countering hybrid threats in Ukraine. The transition from Russian to Ukrainian, the growing popularity of Ukrainian language courses, and the strong belief in the importance of Ukrainian as the state language all indicate the resilience and determination of the Ukrainian people to protect their language and national identity in the face of external challenges.

Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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