

BALTIC RIM ECONOMIES
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**ELINA
VALTONEN**
Ukraine has the
right to determine
its own future



**MARGUS
TSAHKNA**
The world has the
power to help
Ukraine win the war



**KRIŠJĀNIS
KARIŅŠ**
Ukraine forging
its future towards
the EU



TOMI TAIPALE
The role of the
Finnish SME sector in
the reconstruction
of Ukraine



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BALTIC RIM ECONOMIES

**The Centrum Balticum Foundation publishes
the Baltic Rim Economies (BRE) review
which deals with the development of
the Baltic Sea region.**

**In the BRE review, public and corporate
decision makers, representatives of Aca-
demia, as well as several other experts con-
tribute to the discussion.**

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SOLOMIJA BUK & OKSANA BABELYUK

Linguistic myths in Russian-Ukrainian war: Changes and challenges

Expert article • 3584

In the course of world history, different ethnic groups could often justify their right to constitute an independent nation by proving their national identity, cultural nationhood, speaking their own unique language. Sometimes, political ideology, rather than linguistic facts, can shape public opinion about how similar or different particular languages are. It is common wisdom that languages and how people use them represent personal national identities, as well as political and cultural histories of a definite country.

The impact of Russian-Ukrainian war on culture, communication and Ukrainian language is crucial. Full scale Russian invasion in Ukraine opened multiple questions not only in geopolitical and economical spheres, but in linguistic as well. Among them: language situation in Ukraine before and during the war, modelling post-war language situation; redistribution of language functions in a bilingual society; war migration and language; language problems of education in the conditions of war and post-war times; language of war, propaganda with linguistic myth for manipulation and the ways of their neutralization. This is not a complete list of the problems Ukraine is facing now.

Here is a brief overview of how similarities between Ukrainian and Russian languages are used by Russian propaganda to create certain linguistic myths for political manipulation.

The first myth is that the Ukrainian language cannot be regarded as a separate language as it is similar to Russian. The truth is that Ukrainian as a Slavic (Slavonic) language is related to other Slavic languages, such as Belorussian, Bulgarian, Czech, Polish, Slovak, Russian, etc. and shares some common features with them. Though for the Ukrainian language a version of the Cyrillic alphabet is basic, the Ukrainian also has a few unique letters to represent sounds specific to the Ukrainian language (r, r', ε, i, i'). Hence, Russian and Ukrainian are separate languages with some sort of complete and clear division between them.

It is also worth mentioning that over time, under some historical conditions, forced political influence quite definite divergences appeared between these two languages. Ukraine became the eastern part of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, absorbing significant amount of Polish words into its language. Moscow united the cities of the north and east into an independent state, eventually called Russia. So its language was shaped by contacts and immigrations from areas to the east and the borrowing of foreign technical and cultural terms from western European countries like France, Germany and the Netherlands. As a result great shifts had emerged both in the languages' vocabularies, as well as in the sounds and grammar. One frequently cited figure is that Ukrainian and Russian share about 62% of their vocabulary. This is about the same amount of shared vocabulary that English has with Dutch, according to the same calculations. It means that a Russian with no knowledge of Ukrainian (or vice versa) would understand roughly five in eight words. To understand this, have a friend cross out three out of every eight words in a newspaper and see how much of the text you can follow.

Another linguistic myth is that the Ukrainian language is a dialect of the Russian language. The truth is that over a thousand years ago, there was a language spoken in central Europe that we now call proto-Slavic, an ancestor to all the Slavic languages spoken today. Speakers of proto-Slavic migrated across Europe, spread out, and settled down, and taught their children to speak their languages which were at the very beginning in the form of dialects. However, because they were so spread out into multiple communities, each community started doing things a little differently — and then, as time went on, things got more and more different, until eventually members of these communities that once spoke the same mother tongue became unable to understand one another. This divergence of dialects over time and distance is how many languages evolve. However this evolution of Ukrainian is often used as a serious argument that Ukrainian is not a separate language, it's a dialect of Russian.

One more rather common linguistic myth is the Ukrainian cannot be regarded as a separate language because most Ukrainians in Ukraine speak Russian, but Russians never speak Ukrainian. The fact that most Russians don't know or understand Ukrainian as it's a different language, and most Ukrainians know and understand Russian are not because of linguistic peculiarities of the languages, but as a result of forced russification and bitter history of Ukraine. As the Russian-speaking Soviet Union occupied Ukraine for almost 70 years, Russian was the only official language of Ukraine. Government, schools, and business were all required to only use Russian, so even though most families continued using Ukrainian at home, especially at the countryside, much of their urban public lives required Russian. Hence another myth, the persuasion that Ukrainian is the language that is spoken only in villages, at the countryside and it's a shame to show one's country roots. As a result, older generation of Ukrainians grew up around Russian.

Covering itself with a screen of protection of Russian language, Moscow's the so called "special operation" made the opposite effect on the sociolinguistic situation in Ukraine: Russian-Ukrainian war discredited the perception of Russian language and culture in eyes of Ukrainians, moreover, even in its Eastern regions. De iure Ukraine has one official state language (Ukrainian), and de facto because of the long period of Russian colonization of Ukraine, Russian became very widespread in the Central and Eastern parts of Ukraine as a lingua franca needed to make career and to be seen as loyal to the ruling government. So, even here instead of strengthening the foundations of the "Russian world/peace", the full scale invasion activated the self-identification, nation-building, and unifying function of the Ukrainian, not the Russian, language. While Russian became to be seen as the language of the enemy, invaders, and occupants. Such the geopolitical and sociolinguistic situation in Ukraine had a huge impact on the perception of Ukrainian in eyes of many foreign citizens, in particular in eyes of people learning Ukrainian. ■



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