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The History of the Legal Status of the Ukrainian Language: From Kyivan Rus' to Contemporary Ukraine

Abstract. The insecurity resulting from the Russian invasion on Ukraine signifies that the political future of the country is still being formed. Multiple aspects of the further functioning of the country are being decided now. This also concerns the Ukrainian language, which has a significant number of native speakers not to be considered even remotely endangered, yet, its future status as the main language of the state institutions is continuously under threat.

If one looks at the turbulent history of Ukraine, one can observe that this is not a new issue at all. Throughout the centuries, the Ukrainian lands have been controlled by many countries. They included the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Austro-Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union. All of them conducted various policies towards the Ukrainian people as well as their language. In

addition, these policies were constantly being altered. This article aims to present the evolution of the Ukrainian language, in particular its legal status in entities controlling the Ukrainian territories. Save the above-mentioned unions and empires, the language status is also explained, as it existed in the proto-states attempting to form independent Ukraine in the past, such as the Kyivan Rus', Zaporozhian Sich, the UPR, the WUPR, and the Ukrainian SSR.

A particular emphasis is put on the modern history, namely the development of the language laws in the Soviet Union and in independent Ukraine. Whether Ukraine will become a *de jure* and *de facto* monolingual European democracy is up to the aftermath of the currently ongoing events.

Keywords: history of Ukraine, Ukrainian language, language policy, Soviet policies, contemporary Ukrainian law, state-building, endangered language

Historia statusu prawnego języka ukraińskiego Od Rusi Kijowskiej do współczesnej Ukrainy

Streszczenie. Niepewność wynikająca z rosyjskiej inwazji na Ukrainę oznacza, że polityczna przyszłość kraju wciąż się kształtuje. Obecnie rozstrzygane są liczne aspekty dalszego funkcjonowania kraju. Dotyczy to również języka ukraińskiego, który ma znaczną liczbę rodzimych użytkowników, których nie można uznać za nawet zdalnie zagrożony, a mimo to jego przyszły status jako głównego języka instytucji państwowych jest stale zagrożony.

Jeśli przyjrzymy się burzliwej historii Ukrainy, możemy zauważyć, że nie jest to wcale nowy problem. Przez wieki ziemie ukraińskie były kontrolowane przez wiele krajów. Należały do nich Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów, Austro-Węgry, Czechosłowacja, Rumunia, Imperium Rosyjskie i Związek Radziecki. Wszystkie one prowadziły różną politykę wobec narodu ukraińskiego, jak również jego języka. Ponadto polityka ta była stale zmieniana. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przedstawienie ewolucji języka ukraińskiego, w szczególności jego statusu prawnego w podmiotach kontrolujących terytoria ukraińskie. Oprócz wyżej wymienionych unii i imperiów, wyjaśniono również status języka, jaki istniał w protopaństwowych próbach utworzenia niepodległej Ukrainy w przeszłości, takich jak Ruś Kijowska, Sicz Zaporoska, URL, ZURL i Ukraińska SRR.

Szczególny nacisk położono na historię współczesną, a mianowicie rozwój praw językowych w Związku Radzieckim i niepodległej Ukrainie. To, czy Ukraina stanie się *de jure* i *de facto* jednojęzyczną europejską demokracją, zależy od następstw aktualnie trwających wydarzeń.

Słowa kluczowe: historia Ukrainy, język ukraiński, polityka językowa, polityka radszecka, współczesne prawo ukraińskie, budowanie państwa, język zagrożony

Why is the topic of the Ukrainian language raised so often in the media? What is, in fact, its current legal and official status? How can it be compared with the general linguistic situation in Ukraine? The problems regarding the functionality of the national language, which undoubtedly exist in the country, have been subject to several political and social debates. The formation of the modern Ukrainian language was influenced by multiple historical factors. In this light, this article has two main objectives. First, it aims to present the languages and dialects spoken in the Ukrainian lands against the background of history, as well as to demonstrate the differences between the *status quo* and the legal solutions applied by different states that held governance over the territories of current Ukraine. The process of forming the Ukrainian language alongside other languages is also shown. Second, the article attempts to answer the question about whether the Ukrainian language can remain the sole universally-used language of contemporary Ukraine despite all historical challenges and the linguistic diversity in all Ukrainian territories.

Most of the existing elaborations focus either on the whole history of Ukraine (Serczyk, 1990) or its particular periods (Wilson, 2015), or they strictly describe the process of legal evolution quoting particular acts (Dyczok, 1994), or they simply deal with the issue of the languages in the country, as if the topic was taken out from any political or social frame (Dalewska-Gren, 2007; Vydaychuk, 2021). Here, the more holistic picture is provided. It is to be shown how the above-mentioned factors interrelate. The methodology principally bases on a qualitative historical context analysis as well as the content analysis of several key documents mentioned in the text.

According to Article 10 of the 1996 Ukrainian Constitution, Ukraine has one official language – Ukrainian. However, the complexity of the law on the issue as well as the turmoiling history of the country led to divergent language policies implemented through various periods of history, which frequently promoted languages different from those actually spoken in the Ukrainian lands. In modern times, the issue has been of a strong political nature. It has largely been connected with the policies defining the very essence of the *nationhood* of Ukraine.

The current sovereign state of Ukraine in its internationally-recognised borders, i.e. including the areas under the temporary Russian occupation, does not correspond with territories that can be classified as all Ukrainian historical lands. Some ethnographers consider the latter much larger (Kubiyovych, 1935). However, for the transparency of this article, the areas of contemporary Ukraine will only be investigated. The others proved to be of lesser importance to the pan-Ukrainian language policies.

The understanding of ‘*the legal status of a language*’ within a state or a region is a key factor of this analysis. Hence, the term ‘*official status*’ has to be defined.

According to a definition by McArthur (1998), “An official language is a language enjoying certain rights in defined situations. These rights can be created in written form or by historic usage”. Less important functions may also be legally entrusted to other languages that do not have official status but may be used in other formal circumstances, e.g. in courts, in education, or on information signs. The precise role of an official language (including in Ukraine) varied in different epochs. For instance, Latin was an official language of many European medieval states, yet, it was not *a national tongue* of any of them. On the other hand, *a national language* is usually *a proper language of an ethnic group that considers itself a nation and inhabits a given territory*. In the more mono-ethnic countries, the national language also usually constitutes the official or the state language. In the more multi-cultural states, there can be more national languages, and some of them may be given an official status, while others may not.

In order to address the problem with the Ukrainian languages in proper frames, first we have to define the phenomenon of language endangerment. A language becomes extinct when there exist no more native speakers and, subsequently, no one is able to speak it anymore, even as a second language. When it is assessed that such a scenario is likely to happen to a tongue in the foreseeable future, we deal with an endangered language (Crystal, 2002: 10–26). Many languages in the world are considered endangered. The level of threat for a particular language may differ and several institutions dealing with the issue, such as UNESCO, recognise various degrees of danger (Mosley, 2011: 11–12). Most of them are regional tongues. However, fully national and official state languages are certainly not without risks, either. The primary examples are Belarusian, Irish, and Scottish Gaelic (Mosley, 2011: 32–42).¹ Belarusian is the national and one of official languages of the Republic of Belarus, i.e. the neighbouring country of Ukraine, sharing a common and analogous history. Unlike in Ukraine, the Russian language also holds an official status in the country. The latter predominates. According to the latest 2019 census, it is assessed that the Belarusian language is spoken by 26% of the Belarusian population only (National Statistics Committee Belarus, 2020: 36). In addition, it may be presumed that many Belarusian native speakers do not use their language publicly due to the huge number of citizens who are not able to speak it. Similarly to Irish and Scottish-Gaelic, Belarusian is also endangered. It is worth noticing that the policy of Russification implemented

¹ Some consider Scottish-Gaelic as a regional language only; however, even though Scotland is not an independent country, it is an officially recognised separate nation within the United Kingdom rather than a region, thus Scottish-Gaelic fulfils the criteria of being a full national language.

at first by the Russian tsars and then by the authorities of the Soviet Union played a huge role in the process of a gradual disappearance of the Belarusian language.

The very same or similar policies were also applied to Ukrainian in the respective times. Even though, the level of the endangerment of the Ukrainian language is still remote from that of Belarusian, a strong analogy exists. Both languages have been affected by the same historical mechanisms aiming to eradicate the singularity of their respective cultures. Thus, their current use is not as exclusive, as it is most often the case with national and state languages.

The population of Ukraine has always been bigger than that of Belarus. The history of a separate Ukrainian identity may have been older than that of a Belarusian one. The opposition against the tsarist and communist authorities in Ukraine has probably been stronger than in Belarus. Therefore, the Ukrainian language survived with stronger foundations. Nonetheless, the Russian language was widely spoken in Ukraine, equally as in Belarus.

Though the Ukrainian language may not be an endangered language as per the above definition, its role as the main national language in Ukraine has continuously been under threat.

Ukrainian has competed with Russian for the *de facto* official status in Ukraine for many years. After the adoption of the 1996 constitution, the problem has been challenged by multiple politicians proposing the equal status of both languages. If such decisions had been taken, the Ukrainian language would probably have faced the fate of the Belarusian language (even if the number of native speakers had been much higher than those of the Belarusian language). Similarly, it would also have become ‘*a second*’ language in the state politics.

Although Ukraine became an independent country only in 1991, there had been a few attempts to establish the sovereign Ukrainian state before. It is worth mentioning that the lack of continuous existence of Ukraine as a single sovereign country has been used as one of the pretexts by the Russian propaganda to justify the 2022 full Russian invasion (Putin, 2021).

The Kyivan Rus’ was a proto-state (as it did not fulfil the contemporary definition of a state) located in the current Ukrainian lands. It was formed in the 9th century. Its existence lasted until the 13th century when it fell to the Mongol Invasion. Following these events, most of the Ukrainian lands were incorporated by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, then by Poland, finally forming a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the aftermath of the Union of Lublin of 1596 (Serczyk, 1990: 64).

As argued by authors such as Krause and Slocum (2013) as well as Schenker (2015), the Old Ruthenian language probably originated from the common Old East Slavic language (the ancestor of all modern East Slavic languages) and subsequently evolved into the Ruthenian language (approximately in the 16th century). It

became at first the *de facto* and then also *de jure* official language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. At the time, the Lithuanian language had barely developed any official written forms (Frost, 2015: 18–35). The Ruthenian language is considered to be the common ancestor of three contemporary languages, namely: Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Rusyn. It is estimated that Russian had split from this group much earlier, i.e. approximately in the 13th century (Vakareliyska, Pugh, 1996: 414–415). One of the first written artefacts in the Ruthenian language is ‘*Francyysk Skaryna’s Bible*’. The work was published sometime between 1517 and 1519 (Skaryna, 1517–1519). Following the signature of the Union of Lublin, the official status of the Ruthenian language was revoked. It was *de jure* replaced by the Polish language.

The Ruthenian language had also become the *de facto* official language of the self-declared autonomy of the Cossack Zaporozhian Sich (in the southeast of the Commonwealth), with little control or influence from the central governance.

The subsequent political events shaped the new linguistic map of the area. In 1648, Bohdan Khmelnytsky sparked off his uprising against the Polish-Lithuanian dominance. As a result, he founded the Hetmanate (the Zaporozhian Host) by taking over the power from the Kish Otaman (chief elder of the governance) of the Sich. Khmelnytsky allied himself with the Crimean khan, and then the Russian tsar, against the Commonwealth. The Hetmanate (the left-bank of the Dnipro River) was incorporated into the Russian Tsardom as an autonomous entity. The division into factions caused several internal conflicts. Hetman Ivan Mazepa turned his back on Russia. Since then, autonomy was gradually being downgraded until the complete abolition of the Hetmanate. The Cossack state lasted until the late 18th century as a protectorate of the Russian Empire (Serczyk, 1990: 171–199). Serhii Plokyh claims that “the abolition of the Hetmanate and the gradual elimination of its institution and military structure ended the notion of partnership and equality between Great [*current Russia*] and Little Russia [Ukraine] imagined by generations of Ukrainian intellectuals” (Plokyh 2017, 59).

The whole period of the Russo-Polish War (1654–1667) also led to massive depopulation of the Ruthenian speakers. In the aftermath, the language of the latter completely lost its significance. The incorporation of the eastern part of Ukraine (including Kyiv) to Russia constituted the *de facto* cultural split into the left-bank and right-bank Ukraine. The division was also later reflected in the language. An ethnic group speaking the same language found itself in two different states. Eventually, the language underwent the process of deep dialectalisation. The Ukrainian language began to separate gradually from the Ruthenian language. Finally, the development of the standard literary language followed the publication of *Eneida* by Ivan Kotlyarevsky in 1798 (Andrusyshen, Kirkconnell, 1963).

The above-mentioned events were also of momentous social meaning. They signified the *de facto* birth of the Ukrainian (then still referred to as Ruthenian) identity, which was supposed to be separate from those of the neighbouring nations including: Polish, Lithuanian, Muscovite (Russian), and Ottoman (Turkish)

(Wilson, 2015: 40–57). This led to demands for the official recognition of the Zaporozhian Sich. The Cossacks hoped for the similar privileges as those enjoyed by the Polish and Lithuanian noble class. There came up with an idea for the Grand Principality of Ruthenia, then represented by Hetman Ivan Vyhovsky, to become an equal part of the Commonwealth together with the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Great Duchy of Lithuania. The Ruthenian language was to regain its official status. Its prominence as the state language of one of the three constituent parts of the Commonwealth was only expected to grow. Despite all the potential political advantages, the legally-binding duration of the Treaty of Hadiach was very short. It only lasted from 1658 to 1659. It was ultimately rejected by the Polish and Lithuanian nobles who *de facto* held the state power.

Following the partitions of the Commonwealth, most of the Ukrainian lands became a part of the Tsarist Empire. Eastern Galicia (Eastern Halychyna) was annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Neither held a separate autonomous status, though the whole of Galicia/Halychyna (including the native Polish lands) did in Austro-Hungary. Additionally, two more Ukrainian lands that had been beyond the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Tsardom joined Austro-Hungary, as well.

Transcarpathia (together with the rest of the Grand Principality of Transylvania) entered the Habsburgs' Empire in 1875. Along with a few others, the following languages were spoken in the region: Ukrainian, Hungarian, Romanian, German, Slovak, and Rusyn (Frank, 2000). Bukovina was annexed from the principality of Moldavia to Austro-Hungary only eight years later. Therein, the Romanian language prevailed (Pascu, 1992). Consequently, it can be observed that several minority languages (including non-Slavic ones) were already common in the Ukrainian territories.

Not until the 19th century was the Ukrainian language standardised. In the Russian empire, the full separate Ukrainian identity was beginning to rise amongst the intelligentsia of that century. Initially, the society was much divided.

The standardisation of any language often results from the development of literature at the time. Early Ukrainian authors, for instance Mykola Gogol² (1809–1852), wrote in Russian considering the Ukrainian language a regional dialect of people with little education. Despite having such views, Gogol tended to popularise the Ukrainian culture and folk in his stories. Such an opinion was shared by many intellectualists of the epoch (Wilson, 2015: 77–85).

The next generation of writers, though, brought a noticeable difference. One of the protagonists of the classical Ukrainian literature was, without a doubt, Taras

² Mykola Gogol is usually referred to as Nikolai Gogol as per the Russian transliteration of his name, yet this article copes with the Ukrainian problematics and the author was Ukrainian, hence the transliteration of his Ukrainian spelling seems more appropriate for the purpose of this article.

Shevchenko (1814–1861), who wrote mostly in Ukrainian. Many amongst the even further generation, e.g. Lesia Ukrainka, did not only write almost exclusively in Ukrainian, but also criticised the Russian governance as well as underscored the differentiation amid the Russians and Ukrainians. In Ukrainka's *Бояриня* (*Boyarynya* – *The Noblewoman*), the main character states that the Ukrainians are the *borderline*, the so-called *last nation* of Europe, while the Russians are a barbarian people from Asia (Ukrainka, 1914). Such a forcible form of the anti-Russian sentiment became fairly common in Ukraine at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. No matter how inaccurate it was from the point of view of ethnography, it did reflect the actual views of a significant part of the population. However, people were still very much divided, not to say polarised, on the issue (Kruhlova, 2003: 76–79). A large number of the inhabitants of the Ukrainian lands continuously shared the view of Gogol and considered Ukraine or *Malorossiya* as a region of the huge pan-Russian empire. Nonetheless, the tendency kept changing throughout the 19th century. The number of advocates of the latter concept was decreasing, while there was a notable rise amongst the supporters of the former one (Wilson, 2015: 95–99). Additionally, the issue of identity highly varied amidst different social groups.

The altering moods became a threat to the Tsarist Empire. Therefore, the decree of Tsar Alexander II of 1876 banned all printing publication in the Ukrainian language (Internet Encyclopaedia of Ukraine, 2001). The Belarusian language had already been banned by Tsar Nicholas I in 1840 (Arloŭ, Sahanovič, 1996). The Ukrainians (analogously to their fellow Belarusians) were given a choice to consider themselves as Poles or as Russians. Let us notice here that both languages had been heavily influenced by Polish, mostly in terms of vocabulary, which dated back to the Commonwealth times. The repressive policies were relaxed in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution. The Ukrainians were free to choose religion and leave the Russian Church if they wished so. The Ukrainian language was recognised as a separate language, and the newspapers in it could be printed once again. Whether these policies were fully respected remains dubious, yet they officially existed in law until the First World War broke out (Ploky, 2017: 163–167).

The Austro-Hungarian policies were much more liberal than those of Russia. The central government encouraged people to participate in the public life of the whole empire. Galicia/Halychyna, similarly to other regions inhabited by minorities, was autonomous. Although the Ukrainians wished for full autonomy for themselves (as East Galicia/East Halychyna), they shared the region together with the Poles, whose majority lived in the western part of the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria.³ Nonetheless, the Ukrainians living in the region enjoyed more rights

³ It is not to be confused with Western Ukraine in the contemporary meaning of the word. Regions such as Volhynia had been under the occupation of the Tsarist Russia, and the Russian laws applied there.

than their compatriots in the Tsarist Empire, especially in view of the implemented policies of Russification. For instance, the majority of Ukrainian writings were printed in Austro-Hungary, where it was legal (Wilson, 2015: 101).

Russia withdrew from World War One in early 1918 by the Brest-Litovsk Treaty (Lesaffer, *n.d.*), following the two revolutions and the outbreak of the civil war. The Central Powers were defeated by the Alliance, thereafter. In the aftermath, a significant number of independent countries emerged in Central and Eastern Europe on the territories of the former empires. Not all of the independent movements in the region turned out to be successful, though. In January 1918, most lands of contemporary Central and Eastern Ukraine declared independence as the Ukrainian People's Republic. It had already existed for six months as a self-declared autonomous entity within the borders of Russia. Then, the Western Ukrainian People's Republic was formed in the territory of Eastern Galicia (Eastern Halychyna) in November 1918. The two states merged later. These were the first attempts at creating independent Ukraine in the contemporary meaning of the word. The main policy of initially both states – and, after the unification, of the whole of the UPR – was to gain a fully recognised international independence.

At the same time, the Bolshevik forces continued the civil war with the White Movement in the former Russian Empire. The communists attempted to establish the Ukrainian Soviet Republic twice: in 1917 (as the Ukrainian Social Republic in Kharkiv) and in 1919 (as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in the same city). The latter attempt was successful. The communist entity, as a constituent republic which later joined the USSR, came into existence (Service, 2010a).

The Ukrainian language had already been standardised before the time of the creation of the UPR, the WUPR, and Communist Ukraine. The official use of any other language but Ukrainian was out of the question. The only exception was the brief period of the alliance of the UPR and Poland when the Polish language was also allowed. The 1920 Treaty of Warsaw stated that Poland recognised the Ukrainian People's Republic as an independent state, while the Ukrainians agreed to transfer most of the territories of the former Western Ukrainian People's Republic to Poland. Accordingly, both the Poles and the Ukrainians recognised each other as minorities with equal rights in their respective newly formed states. Nonetheless, the UPR only enjoyed a very short existence and was soon divided amidst the Second Republic of Poland and the above-mentioned Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic of the USSR.

Shortly after the October Revolution, Vladimir Lenin and the first generation of Bolsheviks claimed that the USSR should be a union of peoples. Therefore, the Ukrainian language was a *de facto* official language of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Nonetheless, the Russian language was also widely used. The choice of a language was almost always dependent on an individual holding the official post. These policies lasted until Joseph Stalin came to power.

The split of the factions between Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky led to a further disturbance of the language policies. Trotsky perceived the spread of the communist revolution as a challenge for the whole of humanity rather than an internal affair of one nation. On the other hand, Stalin was of a different mind and insisted on building a new system basing on the ‘socialism in one country’ principle. This led to sacking Trotsky and his collaborators from the party, the condemnation of their views, and the eventual assassination of Trotsky himself. Trotsky believed that the communist revolution should bring changes on a worldwide scale and considered the role of the nations, not to mention the languages spoken in their territories, as mostly irrelevant (Service, 2010c). Therefore, the issue whether the Ukrainian language or the Russian language was spoken in Ukraine was of little importance.

Initially, the multilingualism did not consider any burden for the first generation of Bolsheviks. On the contrary, it went along with their propaganda, as at the time, the hopes raised for the world revolution where each and every nation was ‘liberated’. Stalin did not pay too much attention to the use of proper languages himself (i.e. the first languages spoken in the given territories) of the lands belonging to the Soviet Union, either. The politics of Ukrainisation was even enhanced by the central Soviet government. Effectively, in the 1920s, the number of Ukrainian speakers began to grow, which was visible particularly in the regions bordering the Ukrainian and Russian republics. This nationalism (only in its very limited form) was not perceived to be a threat to the existing political system. The situation was about to change in the early 1930s.

The attitude of Stalin regarding one-state ‘socialism’ must have eventually made all the nationalist movements within at least partly hostile to the regime. The split with Trotsky made Stalin look at the issue more pragmatically. He was aware of the potential independence or self-governance movements across the Soviet Union, which could threaten the whole system, not to mention himself personally. The ‘socialism in one country’ principle directly indicated the existence of the very one country, i.e. the *Soviet Nation* (Service, 2010b). The hitherto ideologies that the communists of all the nations within the Soviet Union had stood for must have been thoroughly overhauled. In particular, they must have favoured the cult of personality. The leader had to fit in the whole system (Service, 2010b: 357).

Speaking in languages other than Russian became somewhat undesirable, but not officially prohibited. Therefore, in the 1930s, the Ukrainian language was taken out of the public sphere of life. Those who disagreed were forcibly silenced. The use of the tongue was *de facto* limited to private households (Service, 2010b: 356).

The ‘socialism in one country’ principle meant that the spread of revolutionist ideals behind the Soviet borders was only to result from the political convenience rather than the essence of any revolutionary ideology of the Bolsheviks. The achievement of the fully socialist world was no longer the primary objective. It can be assessed that such a change of orientation led to dissatisfaction among some high officials, including many members of the Central Committee. The policy contradicted the earlier assumptions of the communist party, particularly Trotsky’s way of thinking, not to mention the original ideas of communism (Engels, 1847). Subsequently, Stalin labelled his opponents (in particular, the members of the so-called ‘Opposition Left’, but not only) as Trotskyists, discrediting his former political rival even more. Then, he commenced his infamous purges in order to eliminate all his potential political foes. According to the new policies, the nationalists from the republics became the natural target (Service, 2010b: 323).

The shift of the pan-Soviet politics had an enormous impact on Ukraine. The national sentiment was at the time one of the highest in the Soviet Union. The ongoing process of Ukrainisation was completely retracted. The political and cultural elites of the republic were arrested. Some of them faced death penalty. Further repressions continued. They included the creation of *Holodomor* (‘Famine’). This Stalinist policy was conducted in Ukraine, but it also occurred in a few other parts of the Soviet Union. It aimed to restrain the grain production artificially in order to create famine, which was supposed to stop the population from any political activities. Although some researchers claim that the *Holodomor* resulted from multiple factors such as the failures of the industrialisation and agriculture collectivisation processes, most contemporary literature shows without doubts that the *Holodomor* was a man-made operation (Applebaum, 2018).

Following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the admission of Volhynia to Poland, parts of the Ukrainian lands remained in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. The Ukrainians living in the respective countries used their language on a daily basis, yet the Polish, Czechoslovak,⁴ and Romanian languages, respectively, were the official languages in Ukraine’s inhabited areas.

⁴ At the time, there was no differentiation between Czech and Slovak as two separate languages.

The borders were changed again in 1945 after the end of World War Two in Europe. The previously Polish lands of Eastern Galicia (Eastern Halychyna) and Volhynia, as well as Czechoslovak Zakarpattia and Romanian Bukovina (Chernivtsi land), were wholly incorporated into the Soviet Union (as a part of the Ukrainian SSR). The borders stayed this way until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

After Stalin's death, Mykola Khrushchov,⁵ born to Russian parents, a resident of Ukraine since his teenage years, introduced the political process of de-Stalinisation. The new Soviet leader denounced the policies of his predecessor, admitting that Stalin had been a dictator who had committed numerous crimes against the Soviet people, which had threatened the security and even existence of the Union. In particular, he criticised Stalin's cult of personality (*About the Cult of Personality...*, 1956). In Khrushchov's times, the Ukrainian language enjoyed its revival, especially after the nomination of Petro Shelest for the First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party in 1963. The republic leader made his fame by introducing many new policies that promoted Ukraine as a separate nation within the USSR. This included the expansion of the use of the language, also into the area of education. Shelest promoted Ukrainian writers and claimed the Cossack origin of the then-contemporary nation of Soviet Ukraine. He even proposed the introduction of the Ukrainian language as a mandatory language of higher education in the Ukrainian SSR. The last proposition ultimately failed (Bertelsen, 2022).

On the other hand, in the late 1950s, Khrushchov initiated some reforms in education, which, in some schools, included the replacement of a non-Russian medium of instruction with Russian. This mostly concerned small nationalities and the already bilingual communities (Bilinsky, 1962: 138–147). Thus, it did not affect the Ukrainian language.

Having forced Khrushchov to give away power, Leonid Brezhnev, a true Ukrainian by birth (Schattenberg, 2019: 32–33), became the new General Secretary of the Soviet Union (i.e. the *de facto* Soviet leader). Nonetheless, Brezhnev's vision of the Soviet Union was different than that of his predecessor. He aimed to restore a few of the former Stalin's policies. Although some new repressions were imposed, they were not as severe as those implemented by the former dictator. Brezhnev insisted on centralising power in the USSR. He also inclined towards the collective leadership to a more notable extent than Khrushchov did. The main

⁵ Similarly to the previous cases, the most common transliteration of the Soviet Leader's name in the English language comes from Russian (Nikolai Khrushchev), yet, even though he was Russian by birth, he spent his youth in Ukraine, and later, as a political leader, he strongly advocated Ukraine. Following the assumptions of this article, which copes with the Ukrainian matters, the text uses the transliteration of his name written in Ukrainian, which has always been common in the Ukrainian SSR.

figures of the communist party fully participated in the central decision-making process. This signified no more autonomy for the culture of the republics. The Ukrainian language was once again threatened, as Russian was supposed to be the only pan-Union language (Schattenberg, 2019: 242). Brezhnev's politics also impacted the raise of corruption throughout the whole of the USSR in the contemporary meaning of the word (Plokhly, 2016: 307). This also led to gradual nationwide economic stagnation (O'Sullivan, 2008).

Effectively, the new central Soviet government sacked Shelest (Kuzio, 2010). The leader of the Ukrainian SSR was replaced by Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, who significantly contributed to the Russification of Ukraine. Shcherbytsky was a close ally of Brezhnev. The change in language policy was notable. The Ukrainian language could no longer be used officially even in local matters. It remained in the public life unofficially, yet the authorities did not look at it favourably. For example, during Shcherbytsky's tenure, all the signs in the Kyiv Metro were temporarily changed from Ukrainian to Russian (Ermak, 2012: 22).

The subsequent leaders of the USSR, Yuri Andropov and Konstantyn Chernenko, stayed in power for a relatively short time. No major legislative changes concerning the Ukrainian language took place when they held the position of the General Secretary (Kenez, 2017: 214).

In the second half of the 1980s, the Soviet economy was performing very poorly. It brought the very existence of the Soviet Union into risk. The disaster of the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant in Prypyat, the Ukrainian SSR, in 1986 brought further complications to the pan-Union authorities. Though never officially stated, the issue of the potential Ukrainian independence became a threat to the already weak USSR (Judah, 2016: 31–35). Additionally, the continuous unsuccessful war efforts in Afghanistan were not helping. The fate of the USSR had already been sealed. Only four years after the biggest nuclear disaster in history, the Nakhchivan ASSR, as the first part of the Union, declared independence (Bolukbasi, 2014: 138–139). It was the first blow to the unity of the perceived 'invincible state' (14 months before the even more famous declaration of Lithuanian independence).

However, in order to save the Soviet state, its new leader Mikhail Gorbachev set in motion a number of reforms, the so-called *perebudova* and *glasnost* (*perestroika* and *glasnost* in Russian, i.e. *reconstructing* and *transparency* in English), aiming to democratise the Soviet Union to a certain extent so as to make it more capable to compete in international business relations. The introduction of the new laws gave the Ukrainian language more manoeuvres. However, Russian still remained the preferable tongue in Ukraine. Shcherbytsky was still number one in Ukraine. He did not desire Ukraine to separate too much from Russia. Therefore, he maintained some Russification policies from the Brezhnev era. Let us notice that at the time, the central government became less influential in Ukraine than in the past.

It is worth adding that despite various recommendations from the central authorities regarding linguistic policies, and the treatment of regional languages (the republic level as well as more local level) in different periods of its history, the USSR had no language with an official status until 1990. It was only then that Russian became officially acknowledged as a state language, as a language for interethnic communication (though the latter status had already been denoted in written statements), while the national languages of the republics were given an official status within their jurisdiction (Law of the USSR, 1990).

The rivalry at the highest level of power was one of the most significant drivers leading to the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union. Ukraine became an independent state. It was decided that Ukrainian ought to be the only state language, even though Russian was widely spoken (Ukrainian Census, 2001). The latter was predominant in the east and southeast of the country. Even though most inhabitants of the central and northeast parts declared Ukrainian as their primary language (undoubtedly, they were fluent in it), Russian and Surzhyk (the dialect continuum between Ukrainian and Russian) remained their main media of everyday communication. Surzhyk was also widely used in the Ukrainian central west and in principally Russian-speaking areas. The dialect continuum was also present in big cities which had internal migrant populations, such as Lviv (though in the case of this city, Ukrainian was predominant). Rural areas as well as smaller cities and towns in the west used almost exclusively the Ukrainian language (though the population was still fluent in Russian, which had been a *de facto* and then *de jure* state language of the former Union). The east and south, as well as autonomous Crimea (the autonomous status of the peninsula was returned after the Ukrainian independence) used mostly the Russian language (Schmid, Myshlovska, 2019: 188–192). Nonetheless, some Russian speakers from the east of the country had a notable Ukrainian influence on their accent, e.g. due to the characteristic use of a voiced glottal fricative sound, i.e. replacing the sound [g] with [ɦ], which is typical of Ukrainian speakers. The sound [g] appearing in Russian words is usually replaced by [ɦ] in the Ukrainian words of the same etymology (Divanovskiy, 2019; Dalewska-Gren, 2007: 100–103). The phenomenon was uncommon amongst the majority of the Russian-speaking Ukrainians from the south, as well as the Crimeans.

The Ukrainisation process reinitialised. The most important steps were to enhance the use of the Ukrainian language in education as well as in the media. The Russian-language media were still very popular, though, including those broadcasting from Russia, especially in the east. Likewise, more motion pictures were translated into Russian than into Ukrainian. However, the use of the Ukrainian language in business was encouraged by the government. Ukrainian was

also supposed to become the new language of interethnic communication. Despite these policies, the spread of the Ukrainian language had limited successes.

Though Ukrainian was the sole official language of the whole country, some documents were allowed to be issued in Russian and Crimean Tatar in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, as per Article 4, section 2 of the 1998 Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Russian had been the unquestionable majority language in the peninsula for at least 200 years (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).

The Orange revolution of 2004 was a series of protests in Ukraine that led to the invalidation of the presidential election won by a widely considered to be pro-Russian candidate – Viktor Yanukovich. Whether he was pro-Russian indeed can be questionable. He was born in Donetsk. Being a native Russian speaker, he managed to learn some Ukrainian (Parafianowicz, Potocki, 2015, 45–55). He was presented in Oliver Stone's documentary titled *Ukraine on Fire* (Stone, 2016). The film undoubtedly took a hard pro-Russian stance; however, it also demonstrated that Putin blackmailed Yanukovich, trying to achieve his own political goals. This was confirmed by numerous scholars, including Dragneva and Wolczuk (2015) as well as Parafianowicz and Potocki (2015: 172–179). It seems quite plausible that Yanukovich aimed to build his own influence in Ukraine (e.g. via building the clientelistic networks), only using Moscow as a backup at times when it caused a real burden for the implementation of his policies. Nonetheless, the Russian speakers were frequently associated with pro-Russian political views, while the Ukrainian speakers were linked to pro-Europeanism and pro-Westernism. The truth is that such a simplification happens to be a huge mistake. Of course, this does not exempt President Yanukovich from any responsibility or criminal charges brought against him in the aftermath of the further events. It only demonstrates that many actions of his were not dictated by the pro-Russian stance. Moreover, the fact of him being a Russian-speaker probably had little impact on his actual policies (save the pure linguistic ones).

The repeated election took place in late winter 2004 and pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko was declared the winner. The change of the orientation of the Ukrainian politics towards the West had little influence on the language policies yet. Ukraine signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1996, and, subsequently, it ratified it in 2005, indicating 18 regional tongues (including the previously mentioned Crimean Tatar, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, Rusyn, Slovak, and several more) (European Charter, 1996).

The language politics continued without farther changes until Viktor Yanukovich won the following presidential election and took the office in 2010. Shortly after this, his Party of Regions won the parliamentary election and Mykola Azarov became the Prime Minister. The perception of the use of a language has always been controversial. It was never rid of a political context.

Yanukovych's presidency as well as the government of his own party made the discussion over the language policy alive again. In 2012, the new Law of Ukraine 'On the Principles of State Language Policy' was signed and entered into force (Law of Ukraine, 2012). The then-Ukrainian opposition considered the law controversial. Although it reaffirmed the Ukrainian language as the sole official tongue of the country, it allowed the other languages spoken in regions by at least 10% of the population to be used in some official purposes, e.g. as a medium of instruction in schools. Even though it would probably be perceived as a step towards the growth of democracy in the majority of free countries, the specificity of the Ukrainian realities and history contributed to the rise of anger amongst the opposition. It constitutes an analogous situation to the artificially-slowed-down process of the decentralisation of Ukraine (Slukhaili, 2015). The particular problem was the fact that the Russian language had already been widely spoken in many areas of Ukraine. The members of the opposition parties feared that the law would allow Russia to enlarge its influence on the internal affairs of the state (Guardian, 2012). The legislation also aimed to enhance the locals to use the regional languages, which the opposition labelled as *de facto* promoting the 're-Russification'. Additionally, it was suggested that the law contained numerous substantive and legal errors (Draft Law of Ukraine, 2012). The proposal was accused of not corresponding with the principles of linguistics concerning the function of a native language (Davies, 2003: 237). The idea of eventual granting Russian the status of the second state language in Ukraine was also supported by some members of the Party of Regions (Moser, 2015: 188–189).

In 2013, Ukraine faced the biggest pro-democratic and pro-Western protests in history (significantly larger than the Orange Revolution) (Marple, 2017) that ultimately led to the outbreak of the Revolution of Dignity. In February 2014, Yanukovych was ousted and escaped to Russia. A new pro-Western government was to be formed and a new presidential election was to be held. This happened, respectively, later in February and in May of the same year. The changes were also reflected in language policies. The previous law 'On the Principles of State Language Policy' became the subject of a major debate (Reznik, 2018: 169). The court declared it unconstitutional in 2018. The works on a draft of the new law also brought about many controversies. Even some pro-Western politicians, including the members of the presidential Petro Poroshenko bloc, showed some restraints, as the law could be considered repressive, since it *de facto* forced the Russian speakers of the south and east to adapt quickly to the life in a solely Ukrainian-speaking state (Moskvichova et al., 2018). In practice, the law forbade any official use of Russian. Those employees who served customers were obliged to commence each conversation in Ukrainian. The television was to be broadcast exclusively in Ukrainian. The limit was set for a number of non-Ukrainian songs played in the radio as well as non-Ukrainian language books sold in bookshops (BBC News, 2016). The European Commission for

Democracy through Law (the so-called Venice Commission) also criticised the project (Denber, 2022).

In 2019, the Verkhovna Rada (the Ukrainian parliament) passed a new law ‘On Protecting the functioning of the Ukrainian language as the State language’, which aimed to replace the old legislation. Accordingly, two new institutions were created. The first one was the post of a State Language Protection Commissioner and the other one was the National Commission on State Language Standards. The latter is an executive body deciding about the standards of the language, while the Commissioner’s role is to monitor whether the laws are followed properly. The law defined the areas of public life where the Ukrainian language should be used. This *de facto* indicated all areas of the social sphere leaving the liberty of using any language in private communication. Some Ukrainian politicians, even those with pro-Western stance, continued to oppose the law, accusing it of the discrimination of minorities (Language Policy Portal, 2019).

In 2019, a pro-EU and pro-Western candidate, Volodymyr Zelensky, won the presidential election. The Venice Commission withdrew its earlier concerns regarding a new language law after several modifications had been applied to the original draft. In particular, they brought more flexibility regarding the use of minority languages as well as those of the European Union. The changes were also visible in the sphere of education. Even though Ukrainian was still supposed to be the sole medium of instruction in primary education, any language of the European Union and/or Ukrainian could optionally be used in secondary and higher education (European Commission, 2024). The instruction of the humanities has also been influenced by the changes. The Ukrainian curriculum shifted away from teaching the Russian culture and literature, now focusing primarily on the matters native to Ukraine. More emphasis was also put on the world history and literature rather than on the Russian ones (Sklokin, 2016: 250–261).

The survey conducted during the Revolution of Dignity indicated that the Russian language still dominated in the south (e.g. 43% in Odesa and 42% in Mykolaiv). Similar results came from the east (e.g. 42% in Kharkiv, but only 27% in Dnipro). Many of the inhabitants of both regions claimed to be bilingual. The highest rate of the Russian speakers was in the oblasts, which were occupied by Russia later on (48% in Donetsk and 55% in Luhansk). In Crimea, the numbers reached almost 90%. In the north, most citizens declared Ukrainian to be their first language (e.g. 70% in Poltava). In the City of Kyiv, the numbers were around 67% of Ukrainian speakers, and in the oblast they reached 84%. The traditionally Ukrainian-speaking west confirmed the expectations (from 90% in Zakarpattia, where there are additionally many Hungarian speakers, to 96% in Lviv and more than 99% in Ivano-Frankivsk) (Schmid, Myshlovska, 2019: 188–192). Alas, this data cannot be considered thoroughly accurate, because many Ukrainians are, in fact, bilingual. They very often declare a given language to be their first or native

language solely according to their political views. In real life, they may speak the other language or Surzhyk, too.

The Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022 convoluted the situation even more. Many citizens migrated to other parts of the country. The war definitely enhanced the anti-Russian and pro-Western sentiment. Speaking Ukrainian rather than Russian became symbolic. Hence, many citizens whose first language was not Ukrainian began to speak it as a form of demonstration of their identity. Many 'former Russian native speakers' commenced to consider themselves Ukrainian speakers. Therefore, conducting a new objective statistical research regarding the issue even when the war is over will be extremely difficult.

Some authors, including Petro Tolochko, claimed that the Kyivan Rus' was an ancestor of all modern Eastern Slavic states (Tolochko, 1987: 246). Others, such as Mykhailo Hrushevsky, researched the history of Ukraine focusing on the continuous culture of the Ukrainian nationhood, even at times when it was not an independent state (Hrushevsky, 1911). The latter author believed that the Kyivan Rus' was the direct ancestor of proper Ukraine only. No matter which framework one considers, the existence of the Ukrainian statehood has never had continuity.

The Zaporozhian Sich was a self-declared autonomous proto-state whose appearance on the map led to the formation of the Ukrainian identity (separate from other Eastern Slavic, as well as Polish and Lithuanian). The most significant development of the latter took place in the 19th century among the intelligentsia.

Not until 1917 were there any realistic attempts at establishing a functional independent Ukrainian state in the contemporary meaning of the word. Then, Ukraine became one of the republics of the Soviet Union. Finally, it won independence in 1991. During the turbulent history, the language policy was at times dictated, and at times heavily influenced by Poland, Russia, Austro-Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. The legal solutions were diverse. The Ukrainian language had to compete for its place with other languages. Even though it is not endangered at the moment, its future as the main national language is still not certain. Although it received a sole official status after the regaining of Ukrainian independence, it was continuously undermined by the Russian language, which was spoken by a huge part of the population (including native Ukrainian speakers) on a daily basis. Perhaps, the new policies which aim to reduce the use of Russian as well as the large-scale social changes caused by Putin's invasion on Ukraine will transform the country into a monolingual society in the nearest future (Petrova, 2023). Also, the unwillingness of speaking Russian may redirect people's attention towards learning foreign western

languages, including English, French, and German. This will definitely constitute a big step in social transformation. On the other hand, if Russia is successful on the battlefield, the pro-Ukrainian policies might reverse. Without a doubt, the turbulent history of Ukraine has not ended yet, as is the case with the formulation of its long-term language policy. Unfortunately, there are still many issues to be resolved before this kind of stability is reached.

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