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Russophone identity in Ukraine

in the context of the armed
conflict in the east of the country

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PREFACE

The essence of conflict – at any level within a society or even at the international level – is a dispute between principles and theories of how daily life should be run and organised. Thus, the use of words and language is to conflict what oxygen is to air – a vital and distinct ingredient. Perceptions of reality are shaped by the structure and emotional power of the words we use. Words do not merely describe conflict, they are themselves part of the conflict they describe. It can be argued that almost every choice of word, in most of the discourse that we engage in, is never a truly neutral act. The choice of words almost always has conflict-driving or conflict-mitigating potential and consequences.

The choice of which words and language to use is also double-edged – speech is an act of language, listening is also an act of language. The space for misunderstanding, or offence given or taken, all of which can trigger and sustain conflict, is huge, especially if different languages are being used and translation is needed. Even an apparently correct translation may contain very different connotations and nuances when compared with the original. The pen (language) may be mightier than the sword, but the power of the pen is much more complex, subtle and prone to misunderstanding than the power of the sword – or gun.

Language use – and especially the choice of which language to use – raises complex and ultimately mysterious questions. Questions of culture, identity and manipulative power are inseparable from linguistic structures. Language, in some contexts, sometimes seems definitive of identity; at other times it is almost irrelevant. One must beware of simplifying or generalising about language and its role in conflict and politics, yet always remain aware that language is not separate from these aspects.

The role of language in identity is complex. National identity is sometimes described as a threefold relationship between language, consciousness and territory. To possess a common language is to possess a common consciousness; add the perception of a shared territory and that shared consciousness becomes nationality. The reality of Ukrainian society is marked by deep regional contrasts, including linguistic ones. These strong regional differences, however, need not necessarily be a barrier to building a strong national identity. Problems arise only when these regional differences, including language use, become politicised.

Too often conflict is driven by the politicised and instrumental use of simplistic language that fails to differentiate complexity. The population is divided into polarised camps, nationalists or separatists, ‘with us’ or ‘against us’, loyalists or those that support the ‘Russian World’* – all these are divisions that fail to recognise the large number of people who perhaps do not see themselves sitting in any of these camps.

The research in this report is intended to begin to disentangle some of these complex issues at a particularly challenging period in the history of Ukraine. The research is by no means entirely conclusive. Like any useful research, it opens up other avenues that require further investigation. It does, however, provide us with the empirical evidence with which to hone our questioning further and with which to sharpen our analysis of the conflict. Different values, rather than different languages, are, for example, reported as key to self-identification and the reason behind the conflict. Yet, these values remain poorly defined and variously perceived. The conflict between ‘new’ and ‘old’ ideas is described in the research as having a more prominent place than linguistic differences, but what precisely is meant and understood by these ideas? What is the place of Russian language and culture in Ukraine, if any, and does it have a future there? How does this, and the conflict itself, impact on the process driving the consolidation of national identity?

* A term commonly used to broadly describe both Russians in Russia and Russian-speaking nationals living in other countries. Sometimes synonymous with the ‘former Soviet Union’.

The research presented here is therefore but one of the many jigsaw pieces required to build a fuller picture of the complexities of the multi-layered, multi-faceted conflict in Ukraine. The research was commissioned by International Alert, with funding from the European Union (EU) and commissioned from an independent Ukrainian research institute, the Ukrainian Center for Independent Political Research (UCIPR). Although issues and questions were elaborated on together with Alert, the UCIPR was given the freedom to explore the issues. This is in line with the general Alert approach of working closely with national partners, providing a platform for them to identify problems in society, but allowing them the autonomy to conduct investigations, explore and find ways of working on difficult issues, and achieve conflict solutions themselves through vigorous discussion and debate. The conclusions and recommendations of the report do not therefore necessarily reflect the views of Alert or the EU Commission.

More research on a range of issues is clearly needed. Nevertheless, the multi-faceted conflict in Ukraine is certainly one in which agreement over language use will be an important part of a comprehensive resolution process and which will prove key to the consolidation of a national identity and, ultimately, peace.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ATO	Anti-Terrorist Operation
EU	European Union
HCNM	High Commissioner on National Minorities
IDP	Internally displaced person
UCIPR	Ukrainian Center for Independent Political Research

MAP OF LANGUAGES IN UKRAINE



Source: Recreated with permission from Evan Centanni, Political Geography Now (www.PolGeoNow.com). Figures based on the Ukraine census 2001.

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians holds a special place in the social, cultural and political history of Ukraine. Ethnic Russians are the largest national minority group in the country. According to the data of the last national census conducted in 2001, 8.3 million citizens identified themselves as Russians (17.3% of Ukraine's population and 77.9% of the total number of other national minorities in Ukraine). Russian was the native language of 29.6% of the population in Ukraine, including 15% of Ukrainians, 96% of Russians and 31% of other ethnic communities. Minority languages were native for only 57% of the national minorities and ethnic groups other than ethnic Russians.

Most Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians lived in the southern and eastern regions. The number of Russians as a proportion of the population in the west of Ukraine was only 5%. In the centre, it was 10%, and in the east it ranged from 17.5% in the Dnipropetrovsk region to 24–26% in the Zaporizhzhya and Kharkiv regions to 38–39% in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In the south, this proportion varied from 14% in the Kherson and Mykolaiv regions to 21% in the Odessa region.

According to the most recent national census data, Ukrainian was the mother tongue of 58.5% of the urban population, including 78% of Ukrainians, 3.5% of Russians and 12.5% of other ethnic communities. In urban areas, 39.5% of city dwellers, including about 22% of Ukrainians, 96.5% of Russians and 44% of representatives of other ethnic groups, considered Russian to be their native language.

A May 2012 poll by the sociological group RATING revealed that 50% of respondents considered Ukrainian to be their native language, 29% considered it to be Russian, 20% considered both Ukrainian and Russian as their mother tongues and 1% considered a different language to be their native language.

Before the outbreak of the conflict in 2014, there was little mention of violations, or threat of violation, of the rights of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine in reports by international organisation missions, sociological surveys and official data on the satisfaction of needs for education, information and representation. Nevertheless, questions on language use were of high political sensitivity to the extent that fist fights broke out in parliament when language legislation was being decided upon in 2012.

The protection of the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers outside Russia has also often been the subject of Russian political discourse in the past decade. On 1 March 2014, the political leadership of the Russian Federation used the protection of Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine as a pretext for the annexation of Crimea. "Such measures are necessary due to the emergency situation in Ukraine and a threat to the lives of Russian citizens and Russian servicemen stationed in Crimea in accordance with an international agreement ... Our troops will stay in Ukraine until the socio-political situation in the country normalises."¹

Nevertheless, after her visit to Crimea on 6 March 2014, and just before the peninsula's annexation by Russia, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) Astrid Thors said that no violations of or threats to the rights of the Russian-speaking population were revealed. In April 2014, sociological data showed that 71.5% of those polled in eight regions of south and eastern Ukraine answered "no" to the following question: Do you agree with the statement that the rights of the Russian-speaking population are infringed upon in Ukraine? Most of

¹ The federation council gives Putin permission to send troops to Ukraine, Lenta.ru, 1 March 2014, <https://lenta.ru/news/2014/03/01/sovfed/>

those who gave an affirmative answer lived in Donetsk (39.9%), Luhansk (29.5%) and Kharkiv (24.8%);² a minority, but still a significant number in these regions. However, a recent survey by the think tank the Razumkov Centre indicated an absence of threats to the exercise of the comprehensive rights of the Russian-speaking population in the fields of education, the mass media and representation, as well as the need to develop and promote Ukrainian in the Russian-speaking regions.

Many participants of the focus groups and interviews that took place in the context of this study stated that ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine are getting involved in the process of forming a Ukrainian political nation, involving themselves in socio-political processes, the volunteer movement and the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO)*. In their view, it is not the language and identity question that is key to the conflict sparked in the Donbass, but a clash of values.

Respondents explained some language problems as being generated by the policy of forced Russification during some periods of the Soviet government. In turn, survey results demonstrate changes in the language preferences of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine, and in their attitude to the formation of a Ukrainian political identity.

Interestingly, there is a trend towards the strengthening of bilingualism in the upbringing and education of Russian-speaking children. The majority of Russian speakers and ethnic Russians in Ukraine advocate the official status of the Ukrainian language. In addition, Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians participate in the conflict on both sides. Distrust in Ukrainians who share a different worldview (pro-Russian) is growing, regardless of the language they speak.

The language issue in Ukraine has many facets. It could be used as a social consolidator or alternatively instrumentally used by political actors to sow division. The language issue could be used in future as a means of social mobilisation – whether for good or for bad.

* *A term used by the Ukrainian government to describe the military operations in the east of Ukraine.*

² A survey was carried out by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology between 10 and 15 April 2014. The sample included 3,232 respondents aged 18 and above from 160 localities of the Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhya and Donetsk regions in southeastern Ukraine. The sampling error was plus or minus 0.95 percentage points.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out to identify problems faced by ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine, as well as to determine the factors that shape their civil (political) identity (intercultural dialogue, language policy and values).

The study analysed how the conflict has affected the self-identification of Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians, Russian language and culture, as well as the language preferences of the population.

The methodology of the study included the following three methods:

- Fifteen interviews with experts, most of whom are Russian-speaking opinion leaders, and interviews with experts who promote Ukrainian in all spheres of public life were conducted.
- Six focus groups in different cities in areas controlled by the Ukrainian government (Lviv, Kyiv, Kramatorsk, Kharkiv, Vinnytsia and Kherson) were conducted in April–May 2016. This involved 62 ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians from different social groups (entrepreneurs, public servants, state employees, students and pensioners).
- An expert survey conducted with 30 opinion leaders from different spheres (journalists, public activists, businesspeople and academics), 85% of whom speak Russian in their public life.

The study methodology was determined and agreed upon with International Alert UK and the EU Commission.

This report is based on the analysis of information collected during the focus groups and interviews.

The study was conducted by the UCIPR with assistance from Alert and funding from the EU Commission, under the sub-project 'From conflict to peace: A path to understanding and reconciliation', which is part of a larger project entitled *Psychosocial Seeds for Peace*.

3. THE OFFICIAL STATUS OF THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE IN UKRAINE SINCE THE START OF THE CONFLICT

Although the question of Russian language in Ukraine was a factor in discussion during the Soviet period, voters were only mobilised around language issues at the dawn of Ukraine's independence. Today, these issues are neither prioritised by the government nor discussed much by the general public, which is more concerned about the socio-economic situation, day-to-day economic wellbeing and survival.

Issues of Ukraine's language policy are regulated by Law No. 5029-VI on the 'Principles of State Language Policy'. The law was adopted in 2012 and is still in force. Some have argued that the law was voted on in violation of the Ukrainian Constitution, the Regulations of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and the procedure for the consideration of bills by parliament. The law provided that regional or minority languages should be used "on par with Ukrainian" in education, the media and public administration in most Ukrainian regions. This ran counter to Article 10 of the Constitution which states that the state language of Ukraine is the Ukrainian language, and that the state ensures the comprehensive development and functioning of the Ukrainian language in all spheres of social life throughout the entire territory of Ukraine. Article 10 does, however, also guarantee the free development, use and protection of Russian and other languages of national minorities in Ukraine.

In the view of many parliamentarians and the public, the language law essentially narrowed down the possibilities for the use and development of Ukrainian as the official language. The document was severely criticised by the HCNM, not only for unclear mechanisms for the implementation of its provisions but also for its unconstitutionality.

The passage of this language law triggered mass protests in the Ukrainian regions, later called the 'Language Maidan'. In the summer of 2012, the language protests reached an unprecedented level. Under the law, in the regions where Russian speakers make up more than 10% of the population, Russian could be considered as the regional language. Thus in 2012, 13 out of 27 Ukrainian regions, including the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol, were granted Russian as their regional language. The regional status of Russian is currently retained in all regions controlled by the Ukrainian government, where it was introduced based on the decisions of local authorities.

On 23 February 2014, immediately following the Maidan events and the removal of President Viktor Yanukovich, the Ukrainian parliament voted in favour of a bill that abolished the 2012 language law. On 3 March 2014, the newly elected Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada (and Acting President) Oleksandr Turchynov refused to sign the bill to turn it into law. Nevertheless, the passage of the bill captured the headlines of the Russian, Ukrainian and foreign media, some of which criticised the new Ukrainian authorities for the persecution of Russian speakers.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, at present there are 1,256 secondary schools in Ukraine offering instruction in Russian. According to the data of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 351,948 school children studied in the Russian language in the 2015/2016 academic year. In addition, according to the data of the State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine, the circulation of Russian-language periodicals in 2014–2015 exceeded those in the Ukrainian language.³

³ Management of Publishing and Press, State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, Recommendations for media coverage of elections and protection of privacy, Publication of non-periodic and long-term periodicals in Ukraine in the Ukrainian and Russian languages, 2014 2015, 4 November 2015, http://comin.kmu.gov.ua/control/uk/publish/article?art_id=124783&cat_id=85717

Table 1: Languages of instruction of secondary school students at the beginning of the 2015/2016 academic year

	Including those taught in:			As percentage of the total, %		
	Total persons	Public secondary schools	Private secondary schools	Total	Public secondary schools	Private secondary schools
Number of students, including those taught in:	3,705,397	3,685,158	20,239	100.0	100.0	100.0
Ukrainian	3,316,459	3,305,690	10,769	89.6	89.7	53.2
Russian	351,948	343,300	8,648	9.5	9.3	42.7
Romanian	16,426	16,426	-	0.4	0.5	-
Hungarian	15,535	15,036	499	0.4	0.4	2.5
Crimean Tatar	-	-	-	-	-	-
Polish	1,698	1,698	-	0.0	0.0	-
English	323	-	323	0.0	-	1.6
Slovak	143	143	-	0.0	0.0	-
Bulgarian	68	68	-	0.0	0.0	-
Moldovan	2,797	2,797	-	0.1	0.1	-

After the outbreak of the 2014 conflict, the Ukrainian government did not introduce policies specifically to discriminate against the Russian language and Russian speakers in Ukrainian-controlled territories. However, it did place a ban on Russian TV channels to counter pro-Russian television programming and intensified efforts to protect the rights of Ukrainian speakers. This included advocating for, and adopting a law on, a 35% quota for Ukrainian music on the radio. This could have been used to blame discrimination on the government. However, the law provided for a soft transitional period and was agreed upon with multiple stakeholders.⁴ Its goal was to ensure a 50% share of Ukrainian audiovisual products in television and radio programmes. Under the law, the share of Ukrainian music products should be at least 35% of the total volume of songs broadcast between 7am and 2pm, and between 3pm and 10pm daily. The share of songs in Ukrainian and that in official EU languages in television and radio programmes should also be defined in the respective companies' broadcasting licenses.

Despite this legislation, the results of different sociological surveys included in the current research show that nothing prevented Russian-speaking Ukrainians from exercising their language and cultural rights, as well as the right to access information. No discrimination on the grounds of language and ethnicity was reported.

According to the expert survey⁵ conducted as part of this study, 80% of experts surveyed said that the language rights of Russian-speaking Ukrainians were satisfied, 13.3% stated that they were somewhat satisfied and 6.6% said they were not satisfied. Although an 80% satisfaction rate is commendable, it still leaves a significant minority less than fully satisfied on an issue of acute sensitivity – language use.

⁴ Law No. 1421-VIII on 10 Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine regarding Sharing of Music Products in the Ukrainian Language in the Programmes of Television and Radio Organisations

⁵ An expert survey was conducted by the UCIPR as part of the project, 'From conflict to peace: A path to understanding and reconciliation', with assistance from Alert, in May/June 2016. Thirty experts (journalists, public activists and businesspeople) from different Ukrainian regions were interviewed. It was revealed that 85% of respondents mainly use Russian in everyday life. Detailed survey data are presented in the infographic (see Appendices).

More broadly, during the research, 90% of respondents pointed out that the cultural needs of Russian speakers are satisfied, whereas 10% were not satisfied. Almost 90% of respondents said that the Russian-speaking population is not harassed or discriminated against. Of those polled, 70% deem that there was no real threat to Russian speakers before the start of the conflict, though this again leaves a significant minority who feel that there was some kind of threat, and 20% argued that the sense of threat was created by the Russian media. In total, 65% of those polled believe that the level of trust in the media is determined not by the language used by the media outlets, but rather by their values and compliance with journalistic standards. Similarly, 87% of experts noted that a Ukrainian political nation should be represented by Ukrainian citizens, regardless of their preferred language and ethnic identity.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 The identity and character of the conflict

The overwhelming majority of this study's participants stressed the importance of their self-identification as Russian-speaking Ukrainians and ethnic Russians in Ukraine. These elements of Russianness are key to self-identification. At the same time, however, many respondents made a clear distinction between Russian citizens of the Russian Federation and ethnic Russian Ukrainians, most of whom associate themselves with the Ukrainian political nation.

“We differ drastically in opinions on political events and social processes because we are different peoples, regardless of the language we speak. Russian-speaking Ukrainians and most Russians who live here and strongly condemn Russia’s methods of political struggle simply belong to another Ukrainian ethnos.” (A male focus group participant in Kherson)

Within the past few years, many Ukrainians have rejected the idea of fraternal Ukrainian and Russian peoples. The conflict is, however, not about peoples but a more fundamental conflict between the old and new ideas of how society should be organised.

“I would not say that we are completely different because there are Russians and Ukrainians who hold a proactive position. They formed the opinion of the majority ... and attempt to impose it on others. Though the attitude has changed in this respect. The old opinion that Russians and Ukrainians are fraternal peoples is in conflict with the new ideas shaped over the past two years.” (A female focus group participant in Kharkiv)

The great majority of Russian-speaking experts claimed that identity is not only determined by language or ethnic background, and that it has different components. Some components, such as the first language and ethnicity, are given by birth, whereas others are formed throughout life under the influence of circumstances and surroundings. Male and female ethnic Russians could feel that they are Ukrainians in accordance with their civil identification because this identification is, to some degree, a matter of choice.

“My acquaintances, with whom I studied at university, take part in the ATO. They are Russian-speaking. But the language they speak and the opinions they hold do not characterise their identity.” (A male focus group participant in Kharkiv)

“Identification and identity are voluntary categories. If a person wants to be a Ukrainian, nothing will prevent him or her from becoming a Ukrainian, especially a factor such as language. And nobody should say that this person cannot be a Ukrainian because he or she speaks Russian.” (An interview conducted in Vinnytsia with a female internally displaced person [IDP] from the Donbass)

“I would not say that Kharkiv is totally Russian. For example, I identify myself as a Russian-speaking Banderite. It is normal. The Russian language is not an indicator. You can love Ukraine, but speak Russian.” (A male focus group participant in Kharkiv)

The respondents believe that there is no direct connection between language/ethnicity and a side in the conflict. They said that all categories – whether Russians or Russian speakers, and Ukrainians or Ukrainian speakers – could find themselves on opposite sides of the barricades. To underscore the absence of a direct connection between language use and the conflict, a female participant mentioned a meeting with an elderly woman in Kherson who asked for help to register the organisation Russian-Speaking Banderites of the Kherson Region. The contentious figure of Stepan Bandera and

the Banderites are key figures in Russian radio and TV programmes that depict the current Ukrainian government as a neo-fascist regime seeking to destroy ethnic Russians in Ukraine.

“For me in general, not only now [because now it has become especially apparent], language identity alone is not a decisive factor. I knew and I know very many Ukrainian speakers who are indifferent to their Ukrainian identity.” (An interview with a female IDP from the Donbass)

“I communicate with the families of Ukrainian patriots and volunteers killed in the ATO ... I keep in touch with such families all over Ukraine and I must say that most of them are Russian speaking. They told me in Russian about the life of their husbands who enlisted in the army of their own free will. Russian happened to be native for them. They studied in Russian-language schools and universities, and were surrounded by Russian-speaking people.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

“There is a difference between Russians and Russian speakers. For instance, Russians fight our army in the Donbass, Russians are citizens of the Russian Federation. There are few Russian speakers there. And few Russian speakers participate in the war [on the side of Russia]. Representatives of many other ethnic groups are engaged in the war and, by the way, mostly on Ukraine’s side.” (A male focus group participant in Lviv)

The experts interviewed characterised the conflict in eastern Ukraine as a conflict of civilisations, which destroyed attitudes and perceptions prevailing in society before the conflict. Some focus group participants differentiated between the ‘Russian identity’ in Ukraine in terms of the ‘Russian World’ and the real needs of Ukrainian citizens. Others expressed the view that the Russian identity is hostile to Ukraine.

“The Russian identity poses a problem for Ukraine – the problem of the fifth column, the problem of Ukraine’s enemies. We need to discern between Ukraine’s enemies, the ethnic needs of Ukrainians of Russian origin, and the necessities of life. We need to differentiate these things in terms of a political nation.” (A male focus group participant in Kherson)

Some Russian-speaking respondents perceived ‘Russians in Ukraine’ as ‘residents’, who supported Russia’s interests in Ukraine and who were nostalgic for the Soviet past. Alternatively, many focus group participants deliberately rejected a positive perception of the Soviet legacy and identity. They said that they do not share the Soviet values. What these values are, however, was not fully elaborated upon.

“In particular, I disassociate myself from the Soviet identity, despite the fact that I was born in the USSR ... A country that does not take care of its citizens cannot exist.” (A male focus group participant in Kyiv)

Respondents nostalgic about the Soviet Union had a negative and sometimes hostile attitude to the Ukrainian language and culture. Some of them perceived the Soviet legacy as an adherence to the values and attitudes of the ‘Russian World’. In their opinion, the values of the ‘Russian World’ coincide in one way or another with those of modern Russia. They were mostly positive about this coincidence. Such a viewpoint was shared by some focus group participants from Kramatorsk, as per the examples below.

“I don’t even know what to say. There is neither Ukrainian nor Russian culture. These are artificial systems, which can be manipulated to cause problems for certain people. Earlier, there was the Soviet identity, the Soviet ideology. We all knew that people have to be honest, help the elderly, work and do other things for society’s development. Conversely, hearing the comparison of the Ukrainian and Russian languages [which one is better] reminds me of two rams butting heads.” (A male focus group participant in Kramatorsk)

“I know that Ukrainian girls are much worse than Russian ones. It is their mentality that makes them strange. I don’t understand them at all. Sometimes I look at them and think: what creatures! They are as strange as all Ukrainians. Russian girls are normal.” (A male focus group participant in Kramatorsk)

However, despite the blatantly xenophobic statements above, very few similar statements about Ukrainian culture and society were made during the research. The overwhelming majority of participants in the focus groups were positive about European values for Ukrainian society and negatively assessed Russia’s manipulation of Ukraine. The term ‘European values’ was, however, not clearly defined.

An elderly female respondent shared her fears and apprehensions regarding language use, such as the increase in the share of Ukrainian content on radio and TV, and pro-Ukrainian assessments of Russian actions. She did not mention, however, having any problems with using Russian language in everyday life.

It is possible to conclude therefore that language and ethnicity are not the key characteristics of the current conflict or of identity in Ukraine. What matters most are values – they are at the heart of self-identification. These values, however, remain poorly defined and are therefore perceived and understood in various ways.

4.2 The implications of the conflict for ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians

As noted above, there are different Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine. Some of the experts interviewed shared this opinion.

“Russian speakers are different. There are pro-Ukrainian Russian speakers, Russian-speaking Ukrainian nationalists, Russian-speaking Ukraine-phobes and fervent Russian-speaking separatists. What I mean is that there are many different Russian-speaking groups.” (An interview conducted in Odessa)

According to the experts interviewed, these differences are the reason for a wide range of reactions to the conflict among Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Some respondents said that the conflict did not affect them at all. Others pointed out the radicalisation of the Russian-speaking community, misunderstandings caused by different attitudes to the Ukrainian state, resentment and anger against Russia and its leader – who, in their view, used Russian-speaking Ukrainians to justify their actions – and painful rifts with friends and relatives in Russia.

The conflict did not affect the ethnic identification and self-identification of some respondents.

“I am not just a Russian speaker. I am an ethnic Russian and nothing changed in this regard over the past 40 years. I am not going to change my identity.”
(An interview conducted in Kyiv)

The Russian-speaking community has radicalised and become less tolerant of the Ukrainian language.

“By virtue of my civic position, I did not develop a good relationship with the Russian-speaking community in recent years. Like the Ukrainian-speaking community, it became radicalised amid the events in the country ... My Russian friends dislike that I speak Ukrainian sometimes and write poetry in Ukrainian.” (An interview conducted in Odessa)

The Russian language and the Russian state sparked strong emotions, such as rejection, hatred and anger. Nobody was proud of being a Russian speaker.

“When I change the language on my computer and accidentally see Russian in the languages icon, I feel hatred and anger growing inside me ... It is because my Russian compatriots came here to kill me, to kill my brothers.” (An interview conducted in Kherson)

“My attitude to the Russian language started to change because I strongly disliked things I heard in Russian ... I mean, I still speak Russian but at least I take no pride in it. That’s the point.” (An interview conducted in Odessa)

The conflict of values has resulted in misunderstandings and painful rifts with friends and relatives in Russia.

“I try to avoid politics so as not to lose my friends. My sister lives in Russia and I have many relatives there. That is why it was painful for me.” (An interview conducted in Kherson)

The actions of the Russian Federation and Vladimir Putin, as well as their justifications of these actions, triggered protests.

“When Putin said that he sent troops to Ukraine to defend Russian compatriots, I wrote a manifesto ... I explained that I am one of these Russian compatriots, I am a born and bred Russian but Putin lies ... Russia does not save me, a Russian compatriot in Ukraine, from Ukrainian nationalists, but Ukrainian nationalists save me from Russia. Russia is my homeland but Russians came here to bomb me, their compatriot, steal my land like they stole Crimea, and steal my Donbass because this is the territory of Ukraine and I am a Ukrainian citizen. And Ukrainian patriots defend and save me.” (An interview conducted in Kherson)

The idea of ‘fraternal peoples’ was rejected.

“Five years ago I, like everyone else, could say without a second thought that Ukrainians and Russians are fraternal peoples because it felt like that. Yet now, this idea is, of course, unacceptable to me.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Russian-speaking Ukrainians have started to search for their identity. People who never really thought about who they are began to think about their identity, many identifying themselves as Ukrainians. Consequently, many citizens loyal to Ukraine renounced their Russian identity, claiming to now have nothing in common with Russia. The number of people claiming Ukrainian identity increased, especially among youth.

The conflict has made people think about their identity and many believe it is important to identify themselves as Ukrainians.

“People who never thought about who they are started to think about their identity. More or less, they came to the conclusion that they are Ukrainians.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

“Many of my friends and colleagues like to repeat that they did not value what turned out to be very important – they mean their Ukrainian identity. What is interesting is that many people who are not Ukrainian by descent associate themselves with Ukraine.” (An interview conducted in Vinnytsia with a female IDP from the Donbass)

“I am a member of a Russian cultural centre named after Aleksandr Pushkin. Our activists were directly involved in the developments of the events in 2013, 2014, 2015, as well as today’s events ... During a conversation at a meeting, we found out that people of Russian descent born in Ukraine are in fact Ukrainians with Russian roots. Those who were born in Russia but live in Ukraine are ethnic Russians and citizens of Ukraine.” (A male focus group participant in Kherson)

Many Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians have renounced their Russian identity, either implicitly or explicitly.

“I have many friends and relatives among ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. Due to various factors, their decision to associate themselves with Ukraine or choose the Ukrainian identity is accompanied by the renunciation of their Russian identity.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Some Russian-speaking Ukrainians want to disassociate themselves with Russia in order not to bear responsibility for what is going on.

“Far fewer people will call themselves ethnic Russians. By calling themselves Russians, people think that they partly assume the responsibility for the war waged by Russia, the actions of Russia and the Russians.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

The number of people who are identifying as Ukrainian is increasing. According to some respondents, it has become ‘cool’ to be a Ukrainian.

“I have a sense of pride, not in the Ukrainian government and politicians, but in Ukrainians who attempt to preserve this country against all odds.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

“Some people changed their identity for shits and giggles [to look cool] and many because it became cool to be Ukrainians.” (An interview with a female IDP from the Donbass)

4.3 The implications of the conflict for the process of forming a political nation

Most experts surveyed paid attention to the process of forming a political nation in Ukraine. They listed different dates for when it began, from the Soviet times to the Orange Revolution of 2004. They said that the conflict in the Donbass without a doubt accelerated the process of forming a Ukrainian political nation. However, at the same time, it has also polarised Ukrainian society.

“The process of the formation of a political nation is underway. Many Russians actually identify themselves as Ukrainians in political terms. They say that they are citizens of Ukraine and that the Russian Federation is alien to them. The conflict probably accelerated this process.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Respondents noted that minor noticeable changes occurred since the outbreak of the conflict. This was partly explained by the local nature of the conflict, whereby it did not affect many people in places outside the conflict areas.

“Since the conflict is localised in the Donbass and has not spread across Ukraine ... some people remained in a kind of shell or comfort zone, choosing not to make this choice because this choice is really a difficult one, especially in interethnic families.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

An example of the conflict’s implications for identity was the situation in Odessa. Here the self-identification of some citizens changed within a year after the events at Kulykove Pole on 2 May 2014, which saw 40 people get killed.

“We have been polled. Before 2 May, 20% of the residents of Odessa were pro-Ukrainian – that is to say those who were strongly convinced that Odessa is Ukraine. A year after the notorious events of 2 May 2014, and please bear in mind that all events in Odessa should be assessed in terms of the 2 May massacre, this percentage changed to 80%. People said: We need nothing, Odessa is Ukraine, hands off.” (An interview conducted in Odessa)

Russian-speaking participants in the focus groups underscored that they had recently started to speak Ukrainian more often than before. The reasons for this were not made clear. At the same time, some of them noted that they could only think of a few examples of Ukrainian-speaking people who had started to speak Russian.

“There are many examples of Russian speakers who started to speak Ukrainian. Everyone has such acquaintances. Yet, I have never heard of Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians who started to speak Russian. This indicates a trend and suggests that the conflict changed people’s language preferences.” (A male focus group participant in Kharkiv)

In addition, a large majority of Russian-speaking participants said that their children mainly identify as Ukrainians, even if they speak Russian at home, and have begun speaking Ukrainian more often.

“It seems to me that people became more tolerant and accepting of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. After all, many soldiers in the ATO zone speak Russian but defend Ukraine. Probably people are starting to understand that we are the same – citizens of Ukraine.” (A male focus group participant in Lviv)

Respondents pointed out that the Russian language issue faded after the Maidan events of 2013–2014. Russian language became an ‘element of Ukrainian space’, while trust in Russian-speaking Ukrainians increased because they appeared to be ready to resist the perceived threats of others.

“What I say is that after the Maidan, people became more tolerant towards the language ... the messages that Russians also die in the war and that half the soldiers of the Azov battalion are Russian-speaking served their role well.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

At the same time, respondents emphasised a difference in attitude towards the population of some regions (not only areas currently outside Ukrainian government control), determined by their political preferences, loyalty to Russia or desire to be separated in some way from Ukraine.

“This concerns not only political issues but some sacred things. Perhaps people are not disrespectful, but doubtful about Kharkiv residents. There is a negative attitude towards Donbass residents because they elected Viktor Yanukovych and because many of them believe Russia to be at least their second homeland. Crimean residents used to say that Ukraine is on the other side of Perekop. This was an illustrative example of communication with many residents of Crimea.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Some respondents said that, as a group, Russian-speaking Ukrainians played a negative role in the life of the country and some of its regions. This situation, however, was the result of political manipulation and the use of the language issue for the interests of politicians, for example, to mobilise voters.

“In my opinion, their role was not the best. This is partially their fault but at the same time the fault partially lies with policies, including cultural policies pursued by the Ukrainian government. It is no secret that for a quarter of a century, politicians manipulated the language issue to win votes.” (An interview conducted in Odessa)

It is possible to conclude that the conflict accelerated the acceptance and integration of Russian-speaking Ukrainians and thus has affected the formation of a political nation in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the role of some citizens in these processes was negative. Society has become more polarised, split into those ‘loyal to Ukraine’ and supporters of the ‘Russian World’.

4.4 The rights of Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians

The overwhelming majority of those who took part in the interviews and focus groups stressed the absence of a real threat to the Russian language and its speakers in Ukraine. They said that Russian prevails in the media and other spheres of life. Participants from the Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine (Kharkiv, Kherson and Kyiv) noted that they are not discriminated against on the grounds of language and therefore there is no need to preserve or protect the Russian language.

“I am a Russian woman. I teach Russian language and literature, mainly literature, at the university, and I teach in Russian. In 35 years of my work, I have never been discriminated against on the grounds of language.” (An interview conducted in Kherson)

“What I mean is that I cannot give an example of when my Russian posed a problem.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Respondents asserted that statements about discrimination against the Russian language in Ukraine are nothing but manipulations. They said that there are many Russian-language media outlets covering events in Ukraine. A sense of discrimination against Russian-speaking people could be explained by a steady increase in the number of Ukrainians who prefer to speak the official language.

“The Russian language is not discriminated against and does not need to be protected. The point is that the market dictates its requirements to the media and, consequently, language. However, these 30 Russian-language newspapers do not advocate a pro-Russian position. They are pro-Ukrainian outlets published in the language understandable to the majority of Kharkiv residents.” (A male focus group participant in Kharkiv)

Some Russian-speaking experts said that irrespective of ethnic identity, the prevalence of Russian is a result of the language policy of the Soviet Union, which focused on the Russification of the socio-cultural and humanitarian spheres. This was manifested in urbanisation trends, a deliberate education policy (which placed restrictions on the number of schools that provided instruction in Ukrainian), and prohibition of the Ukrainian language and culture by the Soviet government. The Ukrainian language and the Ukrainian ethnic identity were viewed as threats. Respondents gave examples of the tacit prohibition of Ukrainian in education, culture and business, which created preconditions for Russification and caused problems that are still not resolved.

“I speak Russian because I lived in Kyiv and studied at a school in the Lisovy district. There were five or six schools there, including one Ukrainian-language school. This is the answer to the question about identity and the Russian language. I studied at the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute in the Russian language because there was no other alternative. This does not mean that I do not speak Ukrainian. My mother was born in a village near Kyiv. She survived the famine there and told me stories about this tragedy. This is my identity. And I will never change this, because I feel one hundred percent Ukrainian.” (A male focus group participant in Kyiv)

“In the early 1960s, the Soviet government prohibited the Ukrainian language and culture. My classmates, if their parents held high-ranking positions, were not allowed to learn Ukrainian. I read books in Ukrainian at that time.” (A male focus group participant in Kherson)

Participants interviewed in Kharkiv, Kherson, Kramatorsk and Kyiv indicated a severe shortage in Ukrainian-language cultural products. Some of them said – based on their own experience or the experience of their acquaintances – that prior to the conflict, Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians faced difficulties and pressure on the part of the Russian-speaking majority.

“Ukrainian-speaking residents of Odessa always experienced more problems than others. They frequently heard derogatory remarks about the Ukrainian language and faced snobbery, which was typical for Odessa and which I hated ... Say, if a person spoke Ukrainian, she or he was immediately asked, ‘In which village do you live?’ I even heard some people saying, ‘You, hayseed, go back to your village!’” (An interview conducted in Odessa)

“Before the war came to Donetsk, it seemed to me that it is the Ukrainian culture and language that should be protected in some Ukrainian regions.” (An interview with a female IDP from the Donbass)

Experts emphasised that people will gradually transit to Ukrainian and that this transition should be voluntary and not painful. Russian-speaking participants, who speak Ukrainian fluently, were positive about the opportunity to increase the use of Ukrainian. However, some of them paid attention to a phenomenon of conformism – the transition to the language of the majority, in most cases Russian. They said that in some Russian-speaking regions, for example in the Kharkiv region, it is impossible to use Ukrainian.

“It was painful for Odessa because there were many Russian-language schools there. Nevertheless, children started to study Ukrainian ... Residents of Odessa vehemently protested against Ukrainian-language movies in the cinemas. I remember petitions. I remember statements. I remember pickets.” (An interview conducted in Odessa)

“It is much easier to do this when the right conditions are created. In this case, it would take people less time to learn and speak Ukrainian. Their attitude to learning would be more harmonious. Though there is a simpler way: you must start to learn and speak Ukrainian tomorrow, otherwise you will not be able to graduate from university, sign papers and so on – from simple official things to more complicated matters.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Respondents pointed out that in the opinion of some Russian-speaking Ukrainians, especially in the Russian-speaking regions, the learning of Ukrainian and the need to use it as the official language could be perceived negatively because of resistance to change, difficulties of adaptation and rejection of the Ukrainian language.

“The old Russian-speaking elite failed to adjust. The Komsomol, the Communist Party and trade union members were removed from the system of public administration by the new elite that set new rules: to speak Ukrainian and to be taught in Ukrainian. These old guard people were indignant and said, ‘What the hell, these Banderites are harassing us!’ Though the new rules are absolutely normal: As Ukrainian is the official language, children should be taught in Ukrainian and newspapers should cover events in Ukrainian. Cultured people understood and accepted this. But some people resented this. Teachers at higher educational institutions clamoured about the requirement to teach in Ukrainian. I guess this is a problem for those few who rejected the Ukrainian language but had to adjust to it.” (A male focus group participant in Kherson)

A group of Russian-speaking respondents in different cities indicated the importance of preserving the opportunity to learn and speak Russian, while simultaneously learning Ukrainian and developing a relevant infrastructure for this.

“We speak Russian at home and I teach my children to speak Russian. This does not mean that we don’t speak Ukrainian. My children study at school in Ukrainian. It is out of the question. Whatever is said about Ukrainian, there should be one, and only one, official language. No good will come out of the separation. However, it is a matter of personal choice what language you speak at home.” (A female focus group participant in Vinnytsia)

“There are no problems with the Russian language in today’s Ukraine. Specifically, the Ukrainian language poses a great problem for residents of Kherson. If you can speak a little Ukrainian, don’t hesitate to speak and don’t bully others. If we revive Ukrainian, we will not stop speaking Russian. We will definitely read Pushkin, but Ukrainian will prevail as the official language. I hope that will happen in my lifetime.” (A male focus group participant in Kherson)

4.5 Russian/Russian-language culture in Ukraine

Respondents had different opinions about Russian-language culture and attitudes to it in Ukraine. Those who believed that the Russian-language culture exists mostly listed the names of literary works, publications and writers who write in Russian about Ukraine. At the same time, interview and focus group participants were sceptical about the existence of an independent Russian/Russian-language culture in Ukraine that is not closely related to Russia. They also claimed that the mainstream or pop culture in Russia could be propagandistic in nature, controlled by the Federal Security Service and detrimental to the Ukrainian community.

Some experts said that it is very difficult to separate Russian-language culture in Ukraine from Russian culture, and that those who do this follow a certain fashion. In their opinion, Russian-language culture in Ukraine is in crisis because it has lost ties with Russian culture, of which it was once part and parcel.

“I understand it is fashionable today, but it is very difficult for me to differentiate between Ukrainian and Russian writers ... It is a kind of mimicry – writers confine themselves strictly to the Ukrainian identity, either territorial or ethnic or other.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

“First of all, some creators of the Russian culture in Russia became unacceptable to the Ukrainian audience because of their stance. Conversely, active pro-Ukrainian Russian-language cultural figures are unacceptable in Russia. These cultural communities are getting separated. It has become typical and important for the Russian-speaking Ukrainian community to consume Ukrainian/Ukrainian-language culture.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

The self-perception of most Russian-language Ukrainian writers and poets has changed. A participant in the interviews illustrated this point by citing as an example a change in the name of an anthology written by Russian-language authors.

“A new anthology written by Russian-language authors was recently published. After much debate, its name was changed from ‘Russian Poetry in Ukraine’ to ‘Ukrainian Poetry in Russian’.” (An interview conducted in Odessa)

Respondents concluded that potential opportunities are created today to form a specific Russian/Russian-language culture with Ukrainian content, reflecting distinctions between Russian-speaking Ukrainians and Russians. They stressed their disappointment that Russian mainstream culture manifested as a negative attitude to Russian content in cultural products of the Russian Federation. They could not cite examples of the historic Russian-language Ukrainian culture and therefore gave examples of modern pop music and show business. Those directly engaged in literary activities mentioned Russian-language Ukrainian authors, whereas other focus group participants could not provide any examples.

“I would like to say a few words about modern Russian culture. It should be completely excluded because it will be transformed – one way or another – into a Russian-language Ukrainian culture. Modern Russian culture is alien to Ukraine. It is fully controlled by the Federal Security Service and those who stand behind it. Therefore, we perceive modern Russian culture as Ukraine’s enemy.” (A male focus group participant in Kherson)

“Sometimes, I want to cry. I loved all TV series with Russian actors. But when I learned what they had said about Ukraine, all those calls to wipe Ukraine off the map, it felt like my blood brother had stabbed me in the back.” (A female focus group participant in Lviv)

Some interviewees highlighted the existence of Russian culture in Ukraine. They said that those who study and teach it are Russian culture-bearers. Ukrainian big cities are centres of Russian culture, while Russian literature faculties, literary societies and studios are Russian culture units.

“As a rule, any Ukrainian big city is a centre of Russian culture.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

“In my view, the bearers of Russian culture are scientists, philologists, literary scholars and art experts, who examine Russian culture and view it as a culture.” (An interview conducted in Kherson)

Respondents said that Ukrainian children are taught creative writing in both languages. Festivals and competitions for literary works written in Ukrainian and Russian are also held and are often attended by guests from the Russian Federation.

Some respondents also pointed out a difference between Russian and Soviet cultures, and the endurance of the Soviet legacy in society. Both Ukrainians and Russians could be bearers of this Soviet culture.

“Definitely there are the bearers of the Russian culture. There are also many bearers of the Soviet culture among Ukrainians and Russians. They outnumber the bearers of the Russian culture by far.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

The Ukrainian citizens who consider themselves to be the bearers of Russian culture differ from the bearers of Russian culture who live in Russia. The same holds true for Russian speakers in Russia and in Ukraine.

“Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine seamlessly adopt Ukrainian culture. Yet, they may continue to identify themselves as ethnic Russians, although they are not ethnic Russians.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

“Today, I read a book written by a female researcher who studies reading problems in schools. I understood that I have not heard half of these words and I do not use these constructions, despite the fact that I speak more or less literary Russian. It is because I use other, simpler language.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Other respondents believed that Russian-language Ukrainian authors should not be classed as a separate group. They are creators of Ukrainian culture. In general, all Ukrainian cultural products are parts of Ukrainian culture.

“I do not know whether they should be classed as a separate group. I mean, Russian-speaking Ukrainians. It just so happened that they grew up surrounded by Russian-speaking people or both their parents spoke Russian or they were brought up in Ukrainian-Russian families and had to abandon Ukrainian. But they think in Ukrainian. I am sure it is a type of culture. It is simply the Russian-language Ukrainian culture.” (An interview conducted in Kherson)

“I have every confidence that the culture created in Ukraine is mostly the Ukrainian culture.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Some Ukrainian cultural figures who were traditionally oriented to the Russian market refused to be represented in it and reoriented towards the Ukrainian and European markets.

“Let’s take, for example, Boris Khersonsky. He is a psychiatrist who became a popular Russian poet. Now he has fallen from grace in Russia, but he is still popular in Europe. He lives in his own paradigm. Although Khersonsky is a Russian-language poet and a Jew, he holds pro-Ukrainian views. His recent poems are written in Ukrainian.” (An interview conducted in Odessa)

Some cultural phenomena typical for Russia, such as social rock (protest songs), started to emerge in Ukraine. Rock songs are performed by both Russian and Ukrainian-language bands because the centre of social protest shifted to Ukraine.

The overwhelming majority of experts interviewed advocated for the development of Russian-language culture in Ukraine. They said that it enriches Ukrainian culture and that culture is viewed as a barrier only by those who lack it. They added that the task of Ukrainian society is to create a multilingual cultural product.

“I always believed bilingualism to be an advantage rather than a disadvantage of Ukraine’s new culture. And the problem is to shape, in the post-Soviet period, a common platform for a Ukrainian cultural and spiritual product that could be a multilingual one.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

4.6 The future of the Russian language and Russian-speaking Ukrainians in Ukraine

According to many respondents, the language problem has lost its topicality in Ukraine due to the conflict in the east of the country. Even political forces, which had traditionally raised the issue of the protection of Russian-speaking Ukrainians to win votes, have removed it from their agendas.

At the same time, however, all experts emphasised the importance of, and controversy over, the role of the Russian language in Ukraine and the status of Ukrainian as the official language. On the one hand, the overwhelming majority of participants indicated the artificial nature of the language issue. On the other, most of their discussions were dedicated to language aspects. They analysed the reasons behind the “unsatisfactory situation with regards to Ukrainian” as the official language and the use of the language issue by political parties to split Ukrainian society and win votes.

The majority of respondents agree that Ukrainian should be the only official language in the country. Many believe that Ukraine should become a state centred on the civil concept of providing conditions for the life and development of all ethnic groups. Some participants noted that attempts to build a Ukrainian state on the ethnic Ukrainian nation will result in the loss of territories.

“I guess that the civil society concept is good as it allows us to unite around shared values and a vision of the future for our state – what Ukraine will be like. When it comes to language, in my view, it is a matter of personal choice and adoption of the rules.” (An interview with a female IDP from Crimea in Kyiv)

Russian-speaking respondents stressed the importance of their children preserving their Russian identity. The majority of them said that if their children have a command of their native language, which they have developed at home, this is enough. They would, however, also like their children to learn Russian in school if they want to.

“My daughter speaks Ukrainian fluently and so do my grandchildren. But they use Russian in everyday life. There is no reason for them to stop speaking their mother tongue.” (An interview conducted in Odessa)

“I think I could do without the state in this respect, though I would like my children to be able to take up additional classes in Russian grammar or other subjects, if they want to.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Respondents held differing views on bilingualism and its role in the future. Some advocated for bilingualism. Others stated that bearing in mind the dominance of Russian in the public space, bilingualism was a threat to the Ukrainian language and they believe that the presence of Russian-speaking Ukrainians should disappear in time. According to them, Ukrainian society is very unhealthy if 15% of it is made up of Russian-speaking ethnic Ukrainians.

“The only reason for Ukrainian speakers to feel uncomfortable and unhappy is the dominance of Russian in different spheres of life, which means the marginalisation of Ukrainian.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

“For some reason, we fear Russian. We fear that it will replace Ukrainian.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

“There are such people [Russian-speaking ethnic Ukrainians]. According to national census data, they constitute 15% of the Ukrainian population, which means that our society is unhealthy. Yet in fact, there is nothing tragic about this.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

“The status of Russian is not a problem at all because, as you know, it prevails in all spheres of life in Ukraine ... There is no other country in Europe, save for Belarus, where Russian or other language speakers have so many rights. Nevertheless, Russian-language speakers want Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians to be thin on the ground. They want the Ukrainian language to be disregarded and ignored.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

“Ukraine is not a bilingual country. This is a grave consequence of the imperial policy. If it is not removed, we will face serious problems.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

In the opinion of Russian-speaking and bilingual Ukrainians, bilingualism is a positive phenomenon. Its rejection, or the unwillingness to learn a second language (Russian or Ukrainian), is either a result of ignorance or a short stay in Ukraine. Unlike some Ukrainian-speaking citizens of Ukraine, Russian-speaking Ukrainians believe that Russian is treated as a threat only in an unhealthy society.

“Of course, I believe that Ukrainian should be the official language because we live in Ukraine. Yet, it is simply absurd to kill, destroy or reproach those who speak Russian. It is good to be bilingual.” (An interview conducted in Kherson)

Interview participants underscored various fears and negative expectations. In particular, they were concerned about the future role of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, an inconsistent language policy, and an inappropriate attitude to the Russian-speaking population and the Russian language.

Fears of dominance of ethnic nationalism in Ukraine

“For me, it is the same risk as building Ukraine as a nation state, not as a corporate state.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Rejection of the idea that Russians are the second nation in Ukraine and that the Russian language should be the second or even the first official language

“Although Russians are believed to be the second nation in Ukraine, the experience of recent years showed that this is not Ukraine’s way.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

“I clearly see that any efforts, including my own, to explain the role of Russians as the second basis of the Ukrainian state, the second pillar and the second nation, and the importance of Russian, irrespective of whether it is the first or the second official language, are very often rejected. I am told that there is the Russian Federation where people speak Russian and where I can go and live if I don’t like something.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Inconsistent journalistic education because journalists are trained to write in Ukrainian, but the overwhelming majority of media outlets in the country are Russian-language, which results in the non-competitiveness of the Ukrainian media industry compared to the Russian one

“I don’t think that we currently have a healthy journalistic or media space because Russian-language periodicals and television programmes prevail. But at the same time, there are market realities and there are millions of Ukrainians for whom Russian is the one and only language. Nevertheless, our journalists study in Ukrainian ... For four or five years, we train journalists to write in Ukrainian, although we know perfectly well that half or more will write in Russian. We teach them to write in Ukrainian for four or five years and then send these 24 semi-finished journalists to work for Russian-language media and TV channels. By doing so, we undermine the competitiveness of Ukrainian Russian-language media outlets compared to Russian ones.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

The requirement to communicate with authorities and government institutions in Ukrainian, even if both parties speak Russian

“Why do I have to fill in an application form in Ukrainian in a housing maintenance office? Especially when its employees are Russian-speaking. It is absolutely irrational.” (An interview conducted in Kyiv)

Problems of employment and creativity in the field of theatrical and dramatic art

“When I started to write plays, I saw that only Ukrainian-language plays are in demand with the Ukrainian population. However, my Ukrainian is not as good as my Russian. I am a native Russian speaker and therefore I could not write good plays in Ukrainian ... I could not fulfil myself.” (An interview conducted in Kherson)

It is possible to conclude that the future of the Russian language and its speakers in Ukraine is unclear. The Russian language is currently not on the agenda due to the conflict in the east. However, taking into account the adverse opinions and assessments of Russian and Ukrainian speakers, this issue will most likely resurface and be returned to at a later stage.

5. CONCLUSIONS

- Prior to the conflict, there were no threats to, violations of or infringements on the rights of Russians and Russian-speaking citizens in Ukraine, nor was there a deliberate government policy of discrimination against Russian-speaking Ukrainians on the grounds of language. In addition, once the conflict started, threats did not emerge on territory controlled by the Ukrainian authorities. Any perception of a threat, where it may have occurred, could have been fuelled by subjective and unprofessional media coverage or political manipulation, but not by a tangible threat itself.
- Although ethnic and language identity is of high importance for Russian-speaking and ethnic Russian Ukrainians, it is not decisive in their attitude towards Russian government policies with regards to Ukraine or the conflict in the east. The study's participants either directly or indirectly characterised the Donbass conflict as a conflict of values or civilisations, not language. The nature of these values was, however, vaguely defined. In their words, it is the conflict between those who share the values of the 'Russian World' and are nostalgic for the Soviet Union, and those who consider themselves to be citizens of Ukraine, regardless of the language they speak.
- The majority of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians demonstrated resentment towards, and misunderstanding and condemnation of Russian governmental policies towards Ukraine. They said that today's events will affect the long-term relationship of the young generation of Ukrainians with the Russian Federation. Many Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians were very sensitive to the breach, or chill, in relations with their relatives in Russia. Some denied their Russian identity in favour of a Ukrainian one, spurred by an unwillingness to be tacitly or indirectly associated with the policies of the Russian government towards Ukraine.
- The conflict has intensified the formation of a political nation in Ukraine, but has also led to a social polarisation contingent upon attitudes towards the perceived role of Russia in the conflict. The majority of Russian and Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine support the official status of the Ukrainian language and did not stress the need to change the status of Russian. Ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians who associate themselves with Ukraine moved towards bilingualism by introducing Ukrainian into their everyday life and/or sending their children to schools that provide instruction in Ukrainian. In addition, perhaps counter-intuitively, the trust of Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians has been enhanced because they are both on the same side in the violent conflict in the east. Concurrently, there has been a rise in distrust of Ukrainians who share a 'Russian worldview'.
- Respondents in the Russian-speaking southern and eastern regions emphasised the need to protect and develop the Ukrainian language and overcome the consequences of the Russification policy pursued by the former USSR. They gave examples of discrimination against Ukrainian speakers in these regions over the period since Ukrainian independence. It is difficult to gain knowledge and proficiency in Ukrainian in these regions. However, it was predicted that over time most Russian-speaking Ukrainians will positively perceive, and pursue, gradual Ukrainisation. Nevertheless, blunt, insensitive government policies of forced Ukrainisation would most likely trigger protest and resistance.
- Before the conflict began, the Russian-language culture in Ukraine was closely linked to, and integrated into, the Russian context. Russian-language creative writing festivals were held with the active participation of Russian authors. The conflict did not break these ties completely. However, the formation of a specifically Ukrainian Russian-language culture has intensified in Ukraine. This trend is especially noticeable in people directly involved in the literary and cultural spheres.

- Despite the fact that the violent conflict in the east has put language questions on the back-burner, the question of the future of the Russian language and its speakers in Ukraine remains extremely sensitive, open to political manipulation and with the potential to fuel future tensions. Many Russian-speaking and bilingual respondents would like to see their children have the opportunity to learn and speak Russian, whereas some supporters of Ukrainisation view the Russian language as a threat to the Ukrainian identity and believe that Russian should incrementally disappear from Ukraine altogether.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

As this study indicates, the armed conflict in the east of Ukraine is not fuelled by violations of the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians. The Ukrainian state continues to offer its Russian-speaking citizens opportunities to learn, communicate and share information in their native language. Nevertheless, respondents held widely differing views on the future of the Russian language, Russian-language culture and Russian-speaking citizens in Ukraine. Language issues therefore remain a highly sensitive issue and prone to political manipulation.

In view of the above, the Ukrainian government is recommended to:

- maintain and publicise a strategic national policy to reduce the politically-driven escalation of existing language-based tension in Ukraine;
- base its language policy on support for Ukrainian as the official language, promote its development in various spheres of social and public life, and at the same time guarantee the free development of Russian and other minority languages, as well as the learning of EU languages;
- monitor closely the fair implementation of language legislation by the mass media and national authorities (protection of the language rights of both Russian and Ukrainian speakers will foster a growth in trust between the two groups and help to eliminate linguistic tensions in regions where the language and cultural needs of Ukrainian-speaking citizens are currently not being met);
- use and develop the Ukrainian language in public administration, public service and provision of public services;
- place an emphasis on the development of a comprehensive set of government policies (information, education and cultural) that seeks to maintain and develop the full integration of Ukraine's ethnic Russian citizens;
- combat hate speech targeted at minority groups irrespective of the languages used, irrespective of the level within society at which it is generated, and within a wider process of implementing and improving an information standards policy;
- offer the opportunity to speak minority languages in places where national minorities live in discrete groups, and simultaneously encourage and develop the use of the official language;
- develop a system of education for national minorities based on the implementation of multilingual education methods, provide national minorities the opportunity to learn Ukrainian as a second language in minority schools, and promote the study of English and other European languages in multilingual education;
- expand opportunities for studying and using Ukrainian in public and social life in the Russian-speaking regions to balance the consequences of the policy of Russification carried out by the former Soviet government in the fields of education, media development and culture;
- conduct awareness-raising campaigns on human rights in general, language rights in particular, together with minority rights;
- offer Russian-speaking Ukrainians opportunities to receive information from Ukrainian Russian-language sources by promoting the development of Ukrainian content in Russian-language media and cultural products produced in Ukraine; and

- pass new language laws taking into account the official status of Ukrainian, the EU recommendations for safeguarding endangered and minority languages, and clear mechanisms for the exercise of language rights at various social levels; hold consultations with a wide range of civil society organisations about mechanisms for the implementation of these language policies, together with the development of clear rules of the co-existence of languages on the basis of respect for human rights and fair enforcement of language legislation. This will help to avoid any politically-driven escalation of any existing language-based tensions in Ukraine.

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