

Ukrainians Now (Say That They) Speak Predominantly Ukrainian

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poses. However, the Charter, such as the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, remains valid. Ukraine's accession to the EU will require

adoption of the complete *acquis communautaire*, which also includes regulations regarding minorities and their languages.

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ANALYSIS

Ukrainians Now (Say That They) Speak Predominantly Ukrainian

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Abstract

Contrary to Putin's expectations, most Ukrainians responded to Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine by a stronger attachment to their country and nation. One element of this attachment is an embrace of the national language at both the symbolic and communicative levels. Not only did Ukrainians come to love their language more than before, but they also started to speak it more often in their everyday lives. Or so they say.

Introduction

Language use has long been a controversial issue in Ukrainian politics and Ukraine's relations with Russia. (Arel 1995, Kulyk 2002, Besters-Dilger 2009) While champions of Ukrainian wanted to make it the main language of all social domains and called for the state to take active measures to achieve that goal, supporters of the Russian language sought to prevent its unrestricted use and for many years tried to have its legal status elevated to the level of Ukrainian. Moreover, the Russian government considered any expansion of the use of Ukrainian as a violation of the rights of Ukraine's Russian-speakers and pressured the Ukrainian authorities to refrain from any such moves. Although Russian continued to be widely used in virtually all domains and remained the predominant language of

the eastern and southern regions, the status of Ukrainian as the sole official language facilitated the gradual expansion of its use in institutional and everyday communication.

The introduction of Ukrainian in various domains became more resolute after 2014 when the victory of the Euromaidan revolution brought to power more nationally minded politicians, and Russian aggression urged many Ukrainian citizens to more strongly embrace the titular language as an important element of nationhood. This embrace became much more pronounced after Russia's full-blown invasion in February 2022 when millions of Ukrainians came to hate Russia and all things Russian, which for many of them included the language.

A nationwide survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in December 2022

presented a picture of a predominantly Ukrainian-speaking Ukraine, with language preferences in different parts of the country manifesting greater convergence than at any time since the advent of mass surveys in the early 1990s. (For analyses of survey data of the 2000s and 2010s, see Kulyk 2007 and 2018, Vyshniak 2009) The comparison of the results of KIIS surveys of the last decade demonstrates a slow growth of the use of Ukrainian in the years after Euromaidan and the Russian intervention in Crimea and the Donbas and then an impressive upsurge in the wake of the full-blown invasion of 2022.

The Surveys

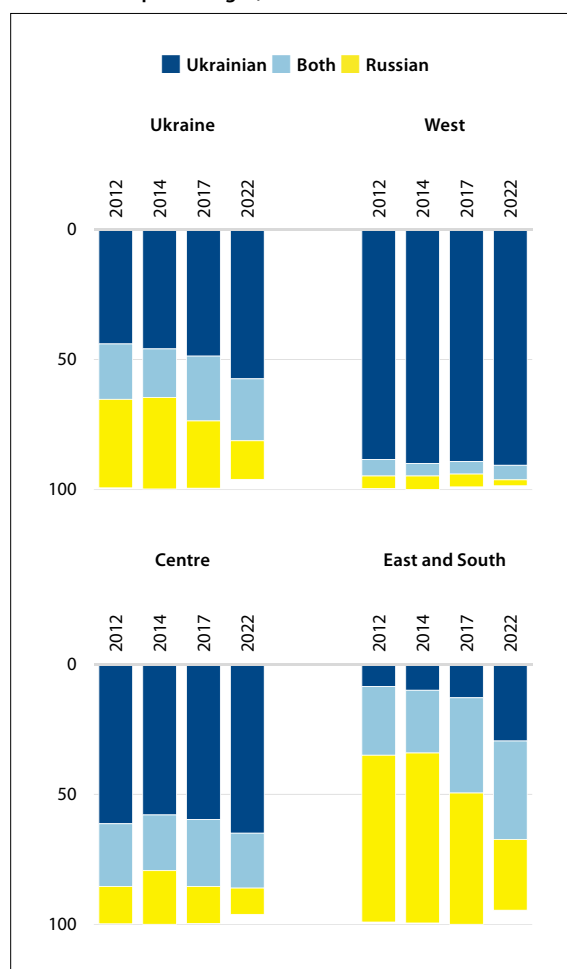
Before I begin to discuss the survey results, a few words about the design are in order. All surveys I rely on had a sample of approximately 2000 respondents. Those of 2012, 2014 and 2017 were conducted by means of face-to-face interviews, while the last one, conducted during the full-scale war of 2022, relied on computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI). As the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the subsequent occupation by its proxies of part of the Donbas made these territories inaccessible to Ukrainian sociologists, I also excluded the respondents from these territories in the earlier surveys to make the results comparable. Unfortunately, a similar procedure could not be applied to make the results of the first three surveys fully comparable with those of the 2022 survey, which aimed at the entire territory controlled by the Ukrainian government before Russia's full-blown invasion but managed to reach only a small portion of respondents in the newly occupied territories in the east and south and none of those who fled to other countries. However, the data of all surveys have been weighted to make the shares of different regions and different demographic categories correspond to the structure of Ukraine's entire population.¹

Language Use As Reported

One question repeated in several KIIS surveys of 2012–2022 asked the respondents in what language they “primarily communicate in everyday life”, without prioritizing any particular practice of communication. Figure 1 and Table 1 present the results for different years, distinguishing between those respondents who reported predominantly speaking Ukrainian or Russian and those supposedly speaking the two languages equally (The small percentage of respondents who indicated other languages are not shown). In view of well-known differences between language use in different parts of Ukraine, I present the results not only for the country as a whole but also for its three distinct macroregions (I treat the

east and the south as one region, not least because sociologists disagree on where to draw the line between them). It should be kept in mind that the breakdown by region that is analysed in this article pertains to respondents' place of residence before the full-blown invasion; that is, people who have fled more dangerous regions to safer parts of the country are related to their regions of permanent residence, which makes the comparison of the regional breakdowns from different surveys more meaningful. The figures in the table demonstrate that while the Rus-

Figure 1: Responses to the question “In what language do you communicate in everyday life”, for Ukraine as a whole and for particular macroregions (KIIS surveys of February 2012, September 2014, May 2017 and December 2022; in percentages)



The figures on which the chart is based can be found in Table 1 on p. 11.

sian intervention of 2014 did not change the nationwide distribution by everyday language, the full-scale

¹ For a more detailed description of the methodology of the 2022 survey, see: <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&cid=1173&page=1>. For a detailed discussion about the challenges and pitfalls of public opinion surveys in wartime Ukraine, see Kit Rickard, Gerard Toal, Kristin M. Bakke and John O'Loughlin, “How Reliable are Polls in Wartime Ukraine,” *PONARS Eurasia Memo No. 830*, February 15, 2023. <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/how-reliable-are-polls-in-wartime-ukraine/>.

war of 2022 drastically shifted the balance in favour of Ukrainian. There was some shift away from Russian between 2014 and 2017, but this led to an increase in the share of respondents reporting the equal use of the two languages, while the percentage of those speaking primarily Ukrainian changed insignificantly. In contrast, the change between 2017 and 2022 is a direct and drastic shift from Russian to Ukrainian, which is obviously related to the war that had affected virtually all Ukrainian citizens, albeit to a very different extent.

The regional breakdown reveals different dynamics in different parts of the country. While westerners were overwhelmingly Ukrainian-speaking before 2014 and did not significantly change their usage afterwards, in the east and south, there was a gradual shift from Russian to Ukrainian, with an intermediate stage of reportedly using the two languages equally. The change in this macroregion was particularly impressive between 2017 and 2022, thus affecting the distribution for Ukraine as a whole. Remarkably, residents of the centre responded to Euromaidan and the Russian intervention of 2014 by reporting the increased rather than decreased usage of Russian, but later they reverted to the pre-Maidan figures and in 2022, demonstrated a small but significant shift towards Ukrainian.

Language Use As Demonstrated

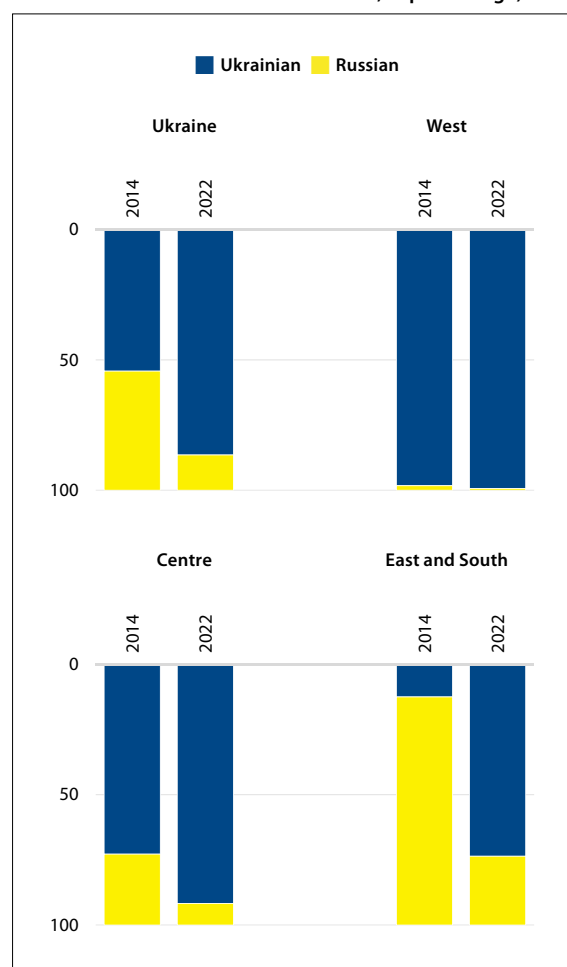
The finding that the share of Ukrainian in the east and south is now no smaller than that of Russian obviously contradicts the observable sociolinguistic reality in those regions where Russian has long dominated and can hardly be expected to retreat in a matter of months. This leads us to assume that the reported language preferences do not reflect the actual language use as much as that which respondents consider appropriate. Scholars have long argued that survey responses can be affected by the social desirability bias, that is, the tendency of respondents to answer the questions in a manner that will, they presume, be viewed favourably by others. There are reasons to believe that during the war and its concomitant mobilization, such a bias becomes stronger than in calmer times (Toal 2023). Scholars have developed some experimental techniques to account for this bias, but these techniques were not used in the surveys I rely on, which only included simple closed questions. However, KIIS has its own ways of eliciting respondents' language preferences rather than directly asking about them.

The first of these techniques is intended to determine which of Ukraine's two main languages, Ukrainian or Russian, the respondent prefers for interaction with a bilingual and accommodating interviewer. Of course, the language the respondents say (or otherwise signal) that they are more comfortable communicating in is not necessarily one they actually speak better or more often; here too, the respondents are influenced by social desir-

ability considerations that lead them to choose the language they believe is the most appropriate for this type of interaction. However, the respondents cannot plausibly choose the language they are not proficient in. In addition, they must make a clear choice between the two languages during the survey, in contrast to their reports about their everyday use, where they can resort to the ambiguous option "Ukrainian and Russian equally". The distribution of preferences in the sample as a whole and in particular groups thus reflects both the proficiencies in the two languages and their perceived appropriateness for semipublic communication, which gives an indication of the relative powers of the two languages among different populations.

Figure 2 and Table 2 present the data on the chosen language of survey interviews in 2014 and 2022, which provide another way of comparing the language situation in Ukraine in the wake of the two military interventions. We see an even more drastic change than for

Figure 2: Language chosen by respondents for survey interviews, for Ukraine as a whole and for particular macroregions (KIIS surveys of September 2014 and December 2022; in percentage)



The figures on which the chart is based can be found in Table 2 on p. 11.

the reported language of everyday use, particularly in the east and south, which switched from the predominant preference for Russian to the predominant preference for Ukrainian, thus becoming rather similar to the two other macroregions in this respect.

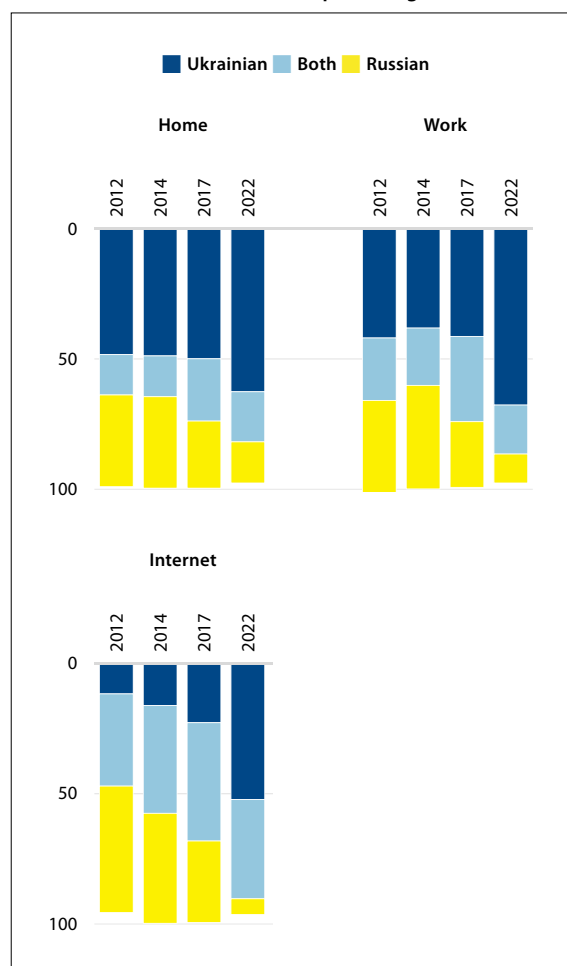
Moreover, the preference for Ukrainian was not just signalled by respondents at the beginning of their interaction with the interviewers; in most cases, it was indeed practised in the course of the interview. Another technique KIIS employs to reveal the respondents' language preferences is registering the actual language the respondent used during the interview, thus also allowing us to catch the inability or unwillingness to adhere to the language initially preferred. In this case, the interviewers register not only the more or less consistent use of a certain language but also the heavy mixing of the two. In 2014, 47.7% of all respondents reportedly adhered to Ukrainian, 49.8% to Russian, and 11.5% used elements of both languages, with the share of mixers being the highest in the centre (15.1%). In 2022, the share of consistent Ukrainian speech rose to 73.7%, while that of Russian speech dropped to 12.7% and became roughly the same as the share of mixed speech, 13.7%. In this survey, the mixing of the two languages was particularly widespread in the east and south (22.0%), presumably because many people who used to speak mostly Russian now struggled with the “politically correct” Ukrainian.

Language Use in Particular Practices

Apart from everyday use in general, all surveys included questions about particular practices of everyday communication. As the 2022 survey inquired about only three such practices, it is only for them that the comparison with the earlier years is possible. Figure 3 and Table 3 presents the reported language use at home, at work and in the reading of materials on the internet, using the same tripartite structure (Ukrainian—both—Russian) as for everyday use in general. For the sake of comparability, I excluded those respondents who reported not participating in the certain practices (e.g., not working).

The figures in the table demonstrate that the dynamics of language use in each of the three practices has been similar to that of everyday use in general: little change in 2014, a considerable shift from Russian to the supposedly equal use of the two languages by 2017, and a drastic shift from Russian and bilingualism to Ukrainian in 2022. At the same time, the data for each year reveal considerable differences between the three practices, which are all more noteworthy because we can assume that the social desirability bias is roughly the same for similar questions in a given survey. Perhaps most importantly, before 2022, there was less Ukrainian at work than at home, meaning that contrary to widespread allegations of forced Ukrainianization, Ukrain-

Figure 3: Responses to the questions “In what language do you usually communicate at home with your family/at work (in educational establishment)/ read materials on the internet” (KIIS surveys of February 2012, September 2014, May 2017 and December 2022; in percentages)



The figures on which the chart is based can be found in Table 3 on p. 11.

ian speakers had to switch to Russian in the workplace more frequently than Russian speakers to Ukrainian. In contrast, in 2022, Ukrainian has become even more prevalent at work than in families, not least due to the adoption of a new language law in 2019, which made the use of Ukrainian mandatory in all social domains and thus urged the regular use of it by many people who work not only in state establishments but also in private businesses. In turn, the new role of Ukrainian as the main language of the public domain later facilitated its performance of another role, that of the language of resistance to full-scale Russian aggression: many people who wanted to speak Ukrainian in defiance of the aggressor found a suitable environment for doing so. (Kulyk 2022)

Also remarkable is the much less active use of Ukrainian on the internet, where the norm was the reliance on either Russian or both languages since there was much more

material in Russian than in Ukrainian in this transnational network. (Kulyk 2017) Now the predominance of Russian is gone, and the prevailing use of Ukrainian appears to be more widespread than the equal use of both languages, which has partly to do with the switch from Russian to Ukrainian (or to bilingual versions) on many popular websites as required by the 2019 language law. Nevertheless, it is not clear how much the reported reliance on Ukrainian is exaggerated because of social desirability. Notably, apart from the country's two main languages, Ukrainians increasingly use other languages—presumably, first and foremost English—for the consumption of internet materials, the share of those languages being particularly high among most highly educated and well-to-do people.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the language practice of the Ukrainian population is undergoing profound change. Ukrainian is becoming the main language of most public domains and most people's everyday lives. Even in the traditionally Russian-speaking east and south of the country, many

people responded to Russia's full-blown invasion of 2022 by switching to Ukrainian in private and/or public communication, and many more started using it more often while still predominantly relying on Russian. These regions are thus becoming more similar to the centre and the west, which contributes to greater unity and the resilience of the Ukrainian nation. However, the question remains how large-scale the language shift really is, which is related to the question of how truthful the responses to the survey questions are. There are reasons to believe that some people inadvertently report what they wish to be true rather than what truly is, and some intentionally falsify their preferences for a language that has become "politically incorrect" in the context of war. What consequences their current declarations will have for their actual language usage will depend on the Ukrainian state's policies, Ukrainian speakers' sensitivity towards the difficulties and pains of a radical change in the language practice of their (previously) Russian-speaking compatriots, and the duration and outcome of the current Russian–Ukrainian war.

About the Author

Volodymyr Kulyk is a head research fellow at the Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. He is the author of four books and numerous articles and book chapters in Ukrainian, English, German and other languages dealing with the topics of language politics and ethnonational identity in Ukraine.

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Table 1: Responses to the question “In what language do you communicate in everyday life”, for Ukraine as a whole and for particular macroregions (KIIS surveys of February 2012, September 2014, May 2017 and December 2022; in percentages)

Year	Ukraine			West			Centre			East and South		
	Ukrainian	Both	Russian	Ukrainian	Both	Russian	Ukrainian	Both	Russian	Ukrainian	Both	Russian
2012	44.0	21.3	34.0	88.4	6.3	4.8	61.3	24.1	14.3	8.6	26.4	64.0
2014	45.9	18.7	35.1	89.9	4.8	5.2	57.9	21.4	20.6	10.0	24.1	65.3
2017	48.7	24.9	25.8	89.2	4.8	4.9	59.7	25.7	14.2	12.9	36.6	50.4
2022	57.4	23.8	14.8	90.6	5.6	2.3	64.9	21.1	10.1	29.5	37.8	27.2

Table 2: Language chosen by respondents for survey interviews, for Ukraine as a whole and for particular macroregions (KIIS surveys of September 2014 and December 2022; in percentage)

Year	Ukraine		West		Centre		East + South	
	Ukrainian	Russian	Ukrainian	Russian	Ukrainian	Russian	Ukrainian	Russian
2014	54.3	45.7	98.3	1.7	72.8	27.2	12.4	87.6
2022	86.5	13.5	99.4	0.6	91.7	8.3	73.6	26.4

Table 3: Responses to the questions “In what language do you usually communicate at home with your family/ at work (in educational establishment)/read materials on the internet” (KIIS surveys of February 2012, September 2014, May 2017 and December 2022; in percentages)

Survey	Home			Work			Internet		
	Ukrainian	Both	Russian	Ukrainian	Both	Russian	Ukrainian	Both	Russian
2012	48.3	15.5	35.2	41.9	24.0	37.5	11.6	35.4	48.6
2014	48.8	15.7	35.1	38.1	22.0	39.8	16.1	41.4	42.2
2017	49.9	23.9	25.8	41.3	32.8	25.2	22.7	45.4	31.3
2022	62.6	19.2	15.8	67.7	18.8	11.1	52.2	38.1	6.0

Ukrainian macroregions as defined for the above surveys

Map created by the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen; data sources: OSM contributors and, for the areas controlled by Russia on 18 December 2022, liveuamap (<https://liveuamap.com/>); data from liveuamap are available from <https://github.com/conflict-investigations>. Neue Zürcher Zeitung uses the data to create an interactive map which is updated on a daily basis (<https://www.nzz.ch/english/ukraine-war-interactive-map-of-the-current-front-line-id.1688087>).

