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Language as a symbol of national identity in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

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Abstract. The relevance of this study lies in the fact that in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, language has become a key factor in national identity. The transition of a large part of the population to the Ukrainian language highlights changes in public attitudes and helps to strengthen national identity. The purpose of this study was to analyse language as a determinant of national identity in Ukraine in wartime. For this, 28 studies were reviewed, which were pre-selected according to the search criteria. The study found that language is primarily an instrument of territorial boundaries separating the aggressor country from Ukraine. During the Russian-Ukrainian war, a considerable number of Ukraine's population became Ukrainian-speaking, which also affected the national identity of society. These changes are particularly relevant to those areas that were the primary target of the Russian invasion. This once again underlined the change in the population's views under the influence of hostilities. Therewith, the aggressor country has long been trying to impose the Russian language on the Ukrainian population to change national identity. However, as the results of the analysis showed, Ukrainian national identity and Russian national identity differ in all aspects, which had the opposite effect during the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, or rather, the change in the population's course towards Ukrainian national identity. However, the language conflict has not been fully resolved, and it affects the identity and self-awareness of Ukrainians, as there is still a part of the population that speaks Russian and Ukrainian–Russian pidgin. The study also found that not only the Ukrainian spoken language plays an essential role, but also the written language, especially during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Therefore, the findings of this study are of practical significance, as they can be used in practice by the Ukrainian government in developing measures for further language policy and resolving the internal language conflict of the population

Keywords: self-consciousness; struggle for independence; military and political conditions; cultural policy; everyday communication

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that as of 2024, the language issue is quite complex, considering the events in Ukraine. Not only since 2014 the language issue has been central, but throughout the entire period of Ukraine's independence. This issue was present in both politics and ideology, and the problem of the language issue was created artificially. However, it was after the invasion of the Luhansk

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and Donetsk regions of Ukraine, as well as the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (the AR Crimea), that the language issue became critical, as it was used by the aggressor country as one of the determinants of the ongoing conflict in Ukrainian society and the need to "liberate" the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. As of 2024, in the third year of the full-scale invasion, the language issue is still a difficult one for society, and therefore its resolution is vital in the context of stabilising Ukrainian society, and on the other hand, it is a tool for improving the national identity of the people.

National identity, as the affiliation of people to a particular nation and country, is essential for Ukraine, which in 2024 is undergoing a stage of development in the context of war. Ukraine, having been ruled by the government of the Russian Empire and the government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the USSR) for quite some time, has been trying to build a successful, developed, and independent country for 33 years. Since its independence, Ukraine has been defending its territorial integrity, which Russia has been trying to completely violate for a decade. In such circumstances, the issue of national identity is one of the principal determinants not only of the creation of the country, but also of the creation of security conditions for the Ukrainian population. National identity is determined by aspects such as culture, traditions, and language. Notably, there is such a thing as "multilingualism" of countries, which is present in many countries of the world. There are monolingual countries, but such cases are quite rare in practice, since as of 2024, there are about 200 countries and over 7,000 living languages in the world. That is, multilingualism within one country is present in almost every country. Conflicts between countries are constantly arising on this basis. Both Ukrainian and foreign researchers have investigated the issue of language in the context of the national identity of Ukrainians in the context of the military conflict that began in 2014, before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

Examining Russia's war against Ukraine through the lens of nationality, E. Knott (2022) concludes that Russia seeks to achieve hegemony over Ukraine. Therewith, all the actions of the Russian president are based on Russian ethnic nationalism, while Ukraine's resistance and struggle are based on social nationalism. Analysing the national identity of Ukrainians, F.I. Pratiwi (2019) concluded that the linguistic aspect influenced the development of national identity as much as the religious and ethnic aspects. Differences in national identity were common among Ukraine's presidential candidates and political leaders. The division of people's national identity into western and eastern Ukraine was artificially created, where language played a major role. In his study, the researcher highlights that it was during the presidential elections in Ukraine that the language issue escalated into a conflict that provoked further military actions in the country. Investigating the state language and identity in Ukraine, O. Boryslavska (2023) concluded that the Ukrainian language is primarily a part of the constitutional identity and, therefore, of the national identity. Focusing on the analysis of the crisis of identity and language in Ukraine, D.W. Abimbola *et al.* (2024) argue that the introduction of Russian in Ukraine during the Soviet era was the starting point for a linguistic crisis in the country's history. In the context of war, language aspects create a split in Ukrainian society. D.W. Abimbola *et al.* (2024) concluded that overcoming the language crisis in the country is possible only if society respects the diversity of languages. Namely, Ukrainians who lived in the territories where the population was most exposed to Russification, resulting in entire generations of Ukrainians whose main language was Russian, should be treated with respect. Analysing identity in times of war, T. Kuzio (2022) concluded that post-Soviet linguistic ambiguity and tolerance for blurred identities and multiple loyalties ended in Ukraine with the advent of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Analysing previous studies, it can be concluded that many researchers point to the neocolonial nature of the Ukrainian language as a component of the nation's identity and consciousness. The language issue is not only a means of preserving identity and preserving historical memory but is also a matter of national security for Ukraine, and therefore requires detailed analysis. The purpose of this study was to analyse the significance of language as a factor of national identity and its importance in state-building and simultaneously ensuring the protection of the country. To fulfil the purpose of this study, the following tasks were set:

- to analyse changes in the use of the Ukrainian language by the country's population;
- to determine how language affects the formation and maintenance of Ukrainian national identity in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Researchers' opinions differ on the place of the Ukrainian language in ensuring the country's defence in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Therefore, this study aimed to fill the gap that has emerged in the international scientific discourse. Furthermore, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, language is the "second battlefield" and requires a more detailed analysis of its use by the population, not only as a means of communication, but also as a means of struggle on the way to victory.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted in two stages. At the first stage, the scientific literature was selected for analysis and then examined for compliance with the inclusion criteria to find as many relevant studies as possible. At the second stage, all the selected literature was analysed to fulfil the purpose of the study. The literature search was conducted in April 2024. Articles were selected for analysis based on predefined search criteria. For the literature search, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined as follows: an article was included in the literature review if it was published and peer-reviewed. A non-peer-reviewed article or an article that did not provide full access to the research report was not included in the literature review. The research period for the selected articles covered 2019-2024. Articles published prior to 2019 were not included in the analysis and were considered only in Ukrainian and English. Articles that discussed language in the context of war in other countries were not included in the analysis.

Search terms were combined using the AND and OR operators. The search strategy was adapted and refined for each database. The following search terms were used to find relevant articles: ("national identity" OR "nation's self-awareness") AND ("language" OR "everyday communication") AND ("Russian-Ukrainian war" OR "military conflict" OR "war conditions"). The search strategy was designed to include literature published in Google Scholar, Springer Link, and EBSCO databases. The search in EBSCO, Springer Link, and Google Scholar databases (Fig. 1) yielded 210 results on the research questions. Namely, the search in the EBSCO database found 14 articles, in Springer Link – 81, in Google Scholar – 115.

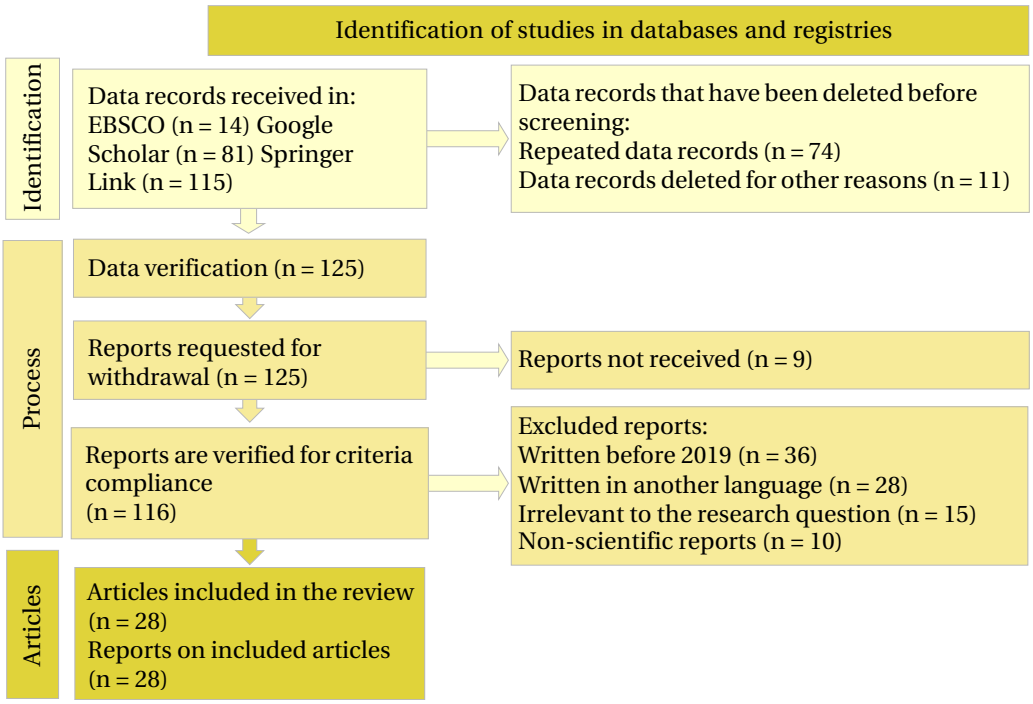


Figure 1. PRISMA research design
Source: compiled by the author of this study

The literature search found that some studies are duplicated. This could be explained by different data sources, indexing, or thematic overlap between studies. To ensure the accuracy and relevance of the study, duplicates were carefully removed to create a more reliable research base. After removing duplicates, 136 links remained. Out of the remaining 136 articles, 11 studies were excluded from further analysis of the literature, as the problematic analysed in this study was not the central issue, but a subordinate aspect in these studies. The datasets were then screened for their relevance to the narrower research profile and research topic, leaving 126 articles that were further analysed in detail according to the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Thus, analysing the data presented in Figure 1, out of 126 studies, 28 studies were selected directly for analysis, which met all the selection criteria, were relevant to the problem under study, and could contribute to the answer to the purpose of this study. The principal characteristics of the scientific articles selected for further analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Principal characteristics of the articles included in the analysis

Author	Year	Database	Research method	Countries
N. Averyanova & T. Voropaeva	2021	Google Scholar	Literary analysis	Ukraine
N. Gergało-Dąbek	2023	Google Scholar	Literary analysis	Poland
N. Bureiko & T.L. Moga	2019	Google Scholar	Survey	Scotland
T. Kuzio	2019	EBSCO	Literary analysis	USA
T. Lönngren *et al.*	2023	Google Scholar	Interview	Sweden
S. Akbaba	2022	Google Scholar	Literary analysis	Turkey
L. Eras	2023	Google Scholar	Quantitative analysis of the survey	Germany
O. Haran *et al.*	2019	Springer Link	Quantitative analysis of the survey	United Kingdom
A. Wilson	2024	Google Scholar	Literary analysis	United Kingdom
A. Maxwell	2022	Google Scholar	Literary analysis	New Zealand
G. Hentschel & O. Palinska	2022	Springer Link	Quantitative analysis of the survey	Germany
D.W. Abimbola *et al.*	2024	Springer Link	Literary analysis	Estonia
O. Boryslavska	2023	Google Scholar	Literary analysis	Ukraine
E. Fortuin	2022	Springer Link	Quantitative analysis of the survey	Netherlands
A. Glew	2023	Springer Link	Literary analysis	United Kingdom
E. Harris	2020	Springer Link	Literary analysis	United Kingdom
E. Knott	2023	Springer Link	Quantitative analysis of the survey	United Kingdom
T. Kuzio	2022	Google Scholar	Literary analysis	Ukraine
O. Onuch	2023	Springer Link	Literary analysis	United Kingdom
M.J. Page *et al.*	2021	Springer Link	Literary analysis	United Kingdom
L. Pidkuĭmukha	2022	Springer Link	Literary analysis	Germany
F.I. Pratiwi	2019	Springer Link	Quantitative analysis of the survey	Indonesia
D. Racek *et al.*	2024	Springer Link	Literary analysis	United Kingdom
S. Riedel	2022	Springer Link	Literary analysis	Germany
R. Sarkis-Onofre	2021	Springer Link	Literary analysis	United Kingdom
J.J. Van Bavel	2022	Springer Link	Literary analysis	Germany
H.M. Zalizniak	2023	Google Scholar	Literary analysis	Ukraine
J.P. Zeller	2022	Springer Link	Quantitative analysis of the survey	Netherlands

Source: compiled by the author of this study

Thus, analysing the data from Table 1, it can be argued that the results reflect the opinion of the international community.

RESULTS

Language as an indicator of territorial boundaries. National identity is characterised by a sense of community in a country (Van Bavel *et al.*, 2022). The issue of the relationship between language and national identity is one of the critical problems of all countries that used to be part of the USSR. Therewith, Ukraine is no exception. Whereas for Russians, national identity is associated with the country's leadership, as the identity of a Soviet person in modern conditions, the desire to unite all post-Soviet countries and restore the USSR. For Ukrainians, national identity lies in independence. Since the days of the Russian Empire, Ukraine has been an arena of conflict between the Russian and Ukrainian languages, as historical conditions have meant that the territories of Ukrainian lands have long been under Russian influence. These historical conditions include the ruthless subjugation of Ukraine by the Russian Empire, then the USSR, and more recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the form of an armed aggression and the genocide of the Ukrainian population (Akbaba, 2022). Since the current conflict in Ukraine is not an internal conflict, but an external conflict, this aspect forms a strong attachment of the population to the nation and the country (Haran *et al.*, 2019).

With the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the language aspect became one of the key factors for the Russian president that would allow him to re-create the once existing Russian empire. It is the language that Russia uses during the full-scale war against Ukraine as the main pretext for the occupation of Ukrainian territory. In his speeches to the Russian population, Russian President Vladimir Putin constantly emphasises the unity of the Ukrainian and Russian people, addressing the fact that "Russia ends where the Russian language ends". The Russian president has not mentioned any other factor in his speeches and motivation to "rebuild the nation" as often as he has mentioned language (Gergalo-Dąbek, 2023). Generally, it is impossible to apply

the term "nationalism" to Russia, as the country has constantly resorted to separatist movements and has always initiated them in the territories of post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine, to provoke an internal split. If Russian nationalism aims to create an independent state, it is a myth (Kuzio, 2019; Eras, 2023). P.E. Harris (2020), who investigated the role of nationalism and ethnicity in the Russian-Ukrainian war, reached an analogous conclusion. As a result of the analysis, the researcher concluded that the views of the two peoples on national identity are not simply different – they are incompatible. Investigating the national identity of Ukrainians, S. Riedel (2022) concluded that for modern Ukrainians, national identity refers not to their own experience of language use, but to the historical, social, and cultural conditions into which they were born. Analysing the national identity of Ukrainians during the full-scale invasion, O. Onuch (2022) concluded that the Russian invasion of Ukraine affected the civic aspect more than the ethnolinguistic one, as Ukrainians increased their pro-European and pro-democratic orientations.

The Ukrainian language is a unifying factor for Ukrainians, and therefore from Russia's point of view, it is the biggest threat to the aggressor country. N. Gergało-Dąbek (2023) points out that it is much easier to destroy an entire nation when it does not have its own language or has declined. Analysing the aspects of language and identity in building the Ukrainian nation throughout independent Ukraine, the researcher found that the Ukrainian language has been considered equal to the Russian language since the beginning of Ukraine's independence. However, later, Ukrainian became the only state language that had to be protected and developed, and it became the boundary of Ukrainian identity. As a result, language has arguably become the key issue in the Ukrainian process of nation-building. However, it is the ability of the country's population to make efforts to Ukrainise that can make this process successful.

Starting with the occupation of the Donetsk region in 2014, Russia gradually began to impose the need for the Russian language in Ukraine, i.e., it did everything possible to destroy the Ukrainian language for the population of Ukraine, conducted linguocide or, in other words, language murder, i.e., the deliberate destruction of the Ukrainian language as the principal feature of the nation (Gergalo-Dąbek, 2023). Long before the full-scale invasion began, there was a complex debate in Ukrainian society about granting Russian the status of a second state language. There were many reasons for this: the considerable number of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, especially in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, the limited right to use public services in Russian, and the practice of other countries such as Switzerland and Canada. On the other hand, it was clear that the Ukrainian language, as the only state language of Ukraine, was a factor in consolidating the country, and that propaganda among the population to speak Russian was nothing more than a neocolonial policy of Russia. After all, due to the massive Russification of Ukrainians over the decades, almost the entire population is bilingual and understands Russian as well as Ukrainian, which has not created problems in obtaining public services or interpersonal communication. Thus, a language conflict was brewing in society. Russia's leadership has always described Ukraine as an artificial, fragile country, constantly suffering from civil war and unable to function independently without Russian assistance (Page *et al.*, 2021; Fortuin, 2022).

In practice, language conflicts have repeatedly occurred and have been resolved in diverse ways. For instance, in Switzerland, such a conflict was resolved by holding a referendum. In Belgium, it was decided to divide the territories where the languages are used, and in Norway, several variants of language use were formed. However, the above activities were carried out in countries in peacetime. It can be concluded that none of these options can be implemented in Ukraine, as the country is at war with Russia, which is seeking to occupy Ukrainian territories. The situation in Ukraine with the language conflict is unique, where every citizen can choose the language in which they are more comfortable communicating, but in the national discourse it is vital that the only state language, Ukrainian, is functional as the principal means of mass communication (Averyanova & Voropaeva, 2021).

This situation has been observed throughout the entire period of Ukraine's development, where language is the main element of the nation. In Europe, under the influence of many factors, the situation has developed in such a way that the nation is identified with citizenship. The Ukrainian nation, which was constantly deprived of statehood in the historical context by various neighbouring states, began to identify the nation with the linguistic aspect, something that no one could take away (Bureiko & Moga, 2019). N. Gergało-Dąbek (2023) argues that every time Ukrainians have fought for the nation and their identity, the problem has been the language. T. Lönngren *et al.* (2023) reached an analogous conclusion. A comparable situation can be observed in the context of the Russian attack on the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in 2014 (Gergało-Dąbek, 2023). Even the invasion of Crimea and its subsequent occupation by Russia in 2014 was argued as a defence of the Russian-speaking population and their liberation from the oppression and harassment of the Ukrainian authorities. An analogous situation was observed in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022

(Averyanova & Voropaeva, 2021). Therefore, even as of 2024, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war that has been ongoing since 2014, the Ukrainian language is a symbol of the Ukrainian people's struggle for their freedom and independence (Gergało-Dąbek, 2023). It can be concluded that the change in the identity of the Ukrainian population is caused by both the historical background of the country's development and the two waves of war in 2014 and 2022, respectively. Such events accelerated both the civil and social construction of Ukrainian identity (Wilson, 2024). Therewith, language acts as a territorial boundary that the Russian Federation is trying so hard to violate. Thus, minimising the language conflict that still exists in Ukrainian society in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war is a crucial task for the Ukrainian leadership and is possible only through detailed consideration of the state language policy, improvement of legislation, etc.

Notably, it is not only spoken language that is important, but also written language. Language, as a manifestation of national identity, is found in Ukrainian society not only in spoken form, but also in written form, where symbols are important (Zaliźniak, 2023). When analysing the language, it is vital to pay attention to the Ukrainian alphabet. One of the symbols that embodies the struggle for independence, resistance to Russification and the development of Ukrainian identity is the letter "Ї" in the Ukrainian alphabet. This letter is unique because it is not found in any other alphabet based on the Cyrillic alphabet. The letter "Ї" appears in all words and expressions that identify Ukraine: "Україна" (Ukraine) – the name of the state, "Київ" (Kyiv) – the capital, "Слава Україні!" (Glory to Ukraine!) – the national slogan. This letter was also used by Ukrainians in the struggle against the Soviet regime in the last century, and its use as a symbol of resistance continues in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. There is a well-known community and organisation called Ukraïner that broadcasts Ukrainian identity all over the world. In Germany, there is the Ukraïne Hausin, a public space that promotes the integration of Ukrainian refugees into German society because of the war in Ukraine. It is quite common to find the Ukrainian letter "Ї" in the name of the country in English: household items, clothes, jewellery, inscriptions on the streets occupied by the Russian military – all this once again emphasises the self-identification of Ukrainians through the language aspect. The symbol of the Russian occupation on the territory of Ukraine is the letter "Z", which Russian military personnel put on equipment, occupied cities, and in places where "pseudo-referendums" on the accession of the occupied Ukrainian territories to Russia are held. As a sign of opposition, Ukrainians depict the letter "Ї" (Gergalo-Dąbek, 2023).

In changing the national identity of Ukrainians after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, not only the spoken Ukrainian language is crucial, but also its written form among the population. A. Glew (2023) also reached these conclusions, having analysed the commemorative language and its distribution among residents of Central Ukraine, namely in the Poltava region in 2014-2022. The researcher found that it was the military events that activated the commemorative activity of Poltava residents to ensure the presence of the memory of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the commemorative landscape, playing an important role in public meaning-making. Thus, using various types of visual language, Poltava residents convey to other Ukrainians the idea of the sacrifice of soldiers in the name of the nation, presenting Ukraine's response to Russian aggression as a righteous and noble struggle. Therewith, A. Glew (2023) found that Poltava residents linked this event to past events in the history of Ukraine, thus creating storylines of Ukraine's long struggle for sovereignty and self-determination. In this way, ordinary people contribute to the construction of narratives about the history and identity of the Ukrainian nation. Thus, in summary, the contribution of language to the national identity of the Ukrainian people cannot be overestimated, and in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Ukraine's simultaneous aspirations to join the European Union, the task for the country's leadership is to pay greater attention to the language problem in society.

Transformation in the perception of language by the Ukrainian population. On 16 January 2022, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted the Law of Ukraine "On Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language". The adoption of such a law was a small push for Ukrainian society to increase the use of the Ukrainian language in the provision of information services or the sale of goods (Lönngren *et al.*, 2023). Analysis of previous studies found that researchers assert that it was after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 that Ukrainians radically changed their attitude towards the use of the Ukrainian language in everyday communication and in business for the civilian population. The issue of establishing Russian as the second state language in Ukraine, which was raised in society before the war, has simultaneously disappeared (Gergalo-Dąbek, 2023).

Before Russia's invasion of Donbas, Ukrainians identified themselves as Ukrainian not primarily by language, but primarily by aspects such as citizenship, long-time residence in Ukraine, Ukrainian descent, and birth in Ukraine (Eras, 2024). In other words, the language aspect was the least important in determining the national identity of the Ukrainian population. Prior to the war, Ukrainians'

national identity was more likely to be expressed as citizenship. Notably, prior to the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian was less commonly used in everyday speech among the population compared to Ukrainian-Russian pidgin or Russian (Bureiko & Moga, 2019). Already after the first hostilities in eastern and southern Ukraine in 2014, the population of Ukrainian nationality who spoke Russian considerably increased their use of their native language but did not completely abandon Russian (Hentschel & Palinska, 2022). Ukrainian-Russian pidgin, or Surzhyk, should be understood as a spoken language that contains elements of the Russian language and elements of the Ukrainian language that were formed by old rural dialects. As for people's identification of their ethnicity, prior to the full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian-speaking population identified themselves as Ukrainian, the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine identified themselves as Russian, and the population speaking Surzhyk identified themselves as Ukrainian (Lönngren *et al.*, 2023). This aspect is significant, as researchers analysing the role of the Ukrainian language in the Russian-Ukrainian war often pay attention only to the Russian language, relegating to the background such an essential concept as "Surzhyk". In a population survey, G. Hentschel & O. Palinska (2022) found that some respondents even stated that Surzhyk was their mother tongue. Considering the interconnectedness of language and nationality, it is vital to define what the term "mother tongue" means for Ukrainians. The researchers found that Ukrainians understand three components of their mother tongue, namely: the language of the country and nationality, the language of everyday communication, and the language that was learnt by the respondent in childhood. These findings are consistent with the results of the survey.

The trend in the use of the Ukrainian language was not equal in all parts of Ukraine. The highest use of the Ukrainian language before the full-scale invasion was recorded in the western Ukrainian regions, especially in Chernivtsi. In Central Ukraine, the region with the highest use of the state language in everyday communication was Kirovohrad. In the south of Ukraine, the use of Ukrainian in communication was considerably lower than in the centre and the west of Ukraine (Bureiko & Moga, 2019). After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it became clear that the Russian-speaking Ukrainians targeted by Russia's "liberation operation" were in fact Ukrainian patriots. Russia's perception of the Left Bank of Ukraine, which used to be part of the Russian Empire, and its desire to join Russia was a delusion. Ukraine functioned only with the support of the European Union and the United States, the Russian population on the territory of Ukraine wanted to become part of Russia, but they were prevented by the Ukrainian fascist leadership that came to power after the revolution – all these stereotypes and myths were nothing more than fictions and had nothing to do with reality (Kuzio, 2019). That is, Ukraine was the complete antithesis of Russia (Wilson, 2024). The situation with language has been simplified by the Russian side (Lönngren *et al.*, 2023).

Furthermore, the Russian leadership did not understand the full extent to which the occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions had permanently changed the attitude of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine towards the policies of the Russian leadership. Back in the days of the USSR and at the beginning of Ukraine's independence, Ukrainians believed in "brotherly nations", but after the first signs of the seizure of territories, these illusions disappeared among the population of Ukraine (Kuzio, 2019). Even after the outbreak of the military conflict in 2014, the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine, which identified itself with the Ukrainian national identity, preferred the country's development towards Europe rather than towards Asia and Russia. Before the armed conflict, Ukrainians who used Russian in everyday communication changed their minds about using the state language. Even in those regions of Ukraine that have long been considered "exclusively Russian-speaking", such as Odesa, Kherson, and Mykolaiv regions, Ukrainian is being used increasingly more and people say that Ukrainian is their mother tongue. According to the analysis of the survey, G. Hentschel & O. Palinska (2022) found that about 90% of the population of the southern regions of Ukraine shared this opinion. Considering all regions of Ukraine, it can be concluded that Ukrainian prevailed in the west and the centre of Ukraine, Russian in the east and the south of Ukraine, while Surzhyk – in the regions belonging to the north-east of Ukraine, i.e., Sumy, Poltava, Chernihiv, and Dnipro regions. The findings on the aspect of specific changes in the national identity of Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine contradict the study by J.P. Zeller (2022), who investigated the attitudes towards language and identity of Ukrainians living in the southern regions of Ukraine before the full-scale invasion. Having analysed a population survey conducted in 2020-2021 in Odesa, Kherson, and Mykolaiv regions, J.P. Zeller (2022) came to the following conclusions. The respondents' identification was entirely in favour of Ukraine and the Ukrainian language, with elements of scepticism towards Russia. As a result of the study, the researcher found that the actual situation on the ground was considerably different from what Russian propaganda had been broadcasting. This study concludes that national

identity and increased use of the Ukrainian language after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war was particularly noticeable in those regions that are ideologically and linguistically closer to Russia, which also includes the southern regions of Ukraine. However, this study disputes this view, as the population, although Russian-speaking before the war, identified themselves with the Ukrainian nation.

Therewith, the Russian leadership continued to prepare a second attack in 2022, with the aim of seizing the territory of Ukraine in three days (Kuzio, 2019). In other words, Russia is misrepresenting the national identity of Ukrainians. The public support for the uprisings planned by Putin never materialised because the Russian-speaking Ukrainians on whom such actions were aimed turned out to be patriots. As early as 2014, separatists were Ukrainians who advocated the unification of Ukraine and Russia, but their number never exceeded one-third of the population of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Moreover, support for separatists was even lower in other Ukrainian regions (Kuzio, 2019). In other words, Russia sought major support from the Ukrainian population in 2014 but received it only in a few small areas. In Donbas, direct military assistance was needed to create a conflict so that Russia could then resolve it. Even in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the so-called success of the return of the peninsula to Russia was fabricated by the Crimean population (Wilson, 2024).

The change in language use by the population over 2001-2022 is also evidenced by statistical data. In 2001, a population census was conducted, and the results showed that 67.5% of the population of Ukraine identified themselves as citizens with Ukrainian as their mother tongue, and 29.6% – with Russian. Subsequently, no census was conducted in Ukraine, but other organisations conducted analogous surveys, which in 2017 showed that 64% of the population of Ukraine identified themselves as citizens with Ukrainian as their mother tongue, 17.1% – with Russian, and 17.4% – with Russian and Ukrainian equally. In 2022, the number of Ukrainians who supported Ukrainian as the main language in everyday communication increased by another 20% compared to 2017. By the end of 2022, this figure was 82%. It can be concluded that Ukrainian citizens represent different ethnic minorities, different geographical origins and languages of communication, but it was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that created the basis for the linguistic shift in the country. The Ukrainian language has become a unifying determinant of society (Lönngren *et al.*, 2023). The findings of D. Racek *et al.* (2024) confirm these results. The researchers investigated the activity of Ukrainians on social media in 2020-2022 to determine whether the language of communication in the online environment has changed. Since social media nowadays takes up a considerable amount of time for communication, the language of communication in them is an essential element of everyday communication. As a result of the study, the researchers concluded that before the full-scale invasion, there were already noticeable changes in the language used by Ukrainians on such social networks as Twitter. After the start of the full-scale invasion, this process increased rapidly. The researchers interpret these results as a conscious choice of users towards a more Ukrainian identity and self-determination of Ukrainians.

After the outbreak of hostilities in Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014, many Russian-speaking people volunteered to provide humanitarian aid to Ukrainian soldiers on the front line. During the fighting in Donbas, over 60% of the Ukrainian military were Russian-speaking. As a result of the active hostilities in the east of the country, over 1.5 million Russian-speaking refugees moved to other regions of the country, which also played a major role in the establishment of the language as a symbol of the national identity of the Ukrainian people (Kuzio, 2019). After the full-scale invasion in 2022, the Ukrainian language became the tool for the military to distinguish their colleagues from Russians on the battlefield. Ukrainian military personnel are divided into Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking, but Russian servicemen do not speak Ukrainian and have a noticeable accent. Communication in the Ukrainian language ensured safety for Ukrainians and was incomprehensible to Russian soldiers, e.g., in the Kyiv region, where the occupiers launched an offensive, it was possible to instantly distinguish a Ukrainian from a Russian thanks to language tools. For instance, the Ukrainian word "паляниця" (Palianytsia, Ukrainian hearth-baked bread) can be classified as such a tool. It is in making the suspects pronounce this word that saboteurs can be easily detected (Gergalo-Dąbek, 2023).

Analysing the language issue from the perspective of combatants in 2014-2019 in Donbas, L. Pidkuĭmukha (2022) aimed to investigate the linguistic behaviour of Ukrainian military personnel and their view of the impact of language on national identity. As a result of the study, the researcher concluded that for Ukrainian-speaking military personnel, language is the basis of national identity and state unity. It is also a matter of security on the battlefield when Ukrainian soldiers use the Ukrainian language for everyday communication at the front. These results underscore analogous findings from this study. However, L. Pidkuĭmukha (2022) also found that, at the same time, for Russian-speaking military personnel in Ukraine, language is not a major component of the nation's self-awareness and identity.

For most Ukrainians, the Russian language after the outbreak of hostilities is synonymous with harshness, aggression, and violence, while Ukrainian is synonymous with goodness, humanity, peace, and unity (Gergało-Dąbek, 2023, Lönngren *et al.*, 2023). Ukrainians began to understand that language is not only a means of communication, but also a symbol of national identity. The language problem, which has existed in Ukrainian society for decades, has become one of the key challenges to be addressed (Lönngren *et al.*, 2023). That is, as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainian language has become a unifying factor that Ukrainians no longer separate from the country itself (Gergało-Dąbek, 2023). For Ukrainians, national identity is characterised by involvement in the Ukrainian nation, involvement in social activities in the country, Ukrainian citizenship, etc. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, national identity is gradually deviating from the ethnic identity of Ukrainians and is manifested in the significance of speaking Ukrainian.

In other words, Ukrainian society is increasingly taking the initiative to expand the range of areas where the Ukrainian language can be used and is showing increased interest in using the state language. Considering the findings of this study, although the situation in Ukraine has changed towards greater use of the Ukrainian language since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the identification of the population with the Ukrainian nation, the issues of the use of Russian and Surzhyk still adversely affect the self-identification of the population, reducing the threshold of national identity. To resolve this issue, Ukraine's leadership should pay more attention to the language aspect in the country and take prompt action to resolve the language conflict, which is present even in times of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

CONCLUSIONS

In the current conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the principal goal of Ukrainians is to preserve their territorial integrity, return the occupied territories and the right to their own unique language. The study found that it language that underlies the national identity of Ukrainians, it acts as a source of defiance, resistance to occupation, and faith in the future victory over the Russian invaders. During the Russian-Ukrainian war, language is the basis of Ukrainian national identity. The analysis showed that language is primarily an indicator of the territorial boundaries between Ukraine and Russia. It was found that with the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the national identity and perception of the Ukrainian language by Ukrainians have changed significantly, shifting the vector of development. Furthermore, the findings suggest that when considering language as a symbol of the national identity of the Ukrainian people, it is vital to consider not only spoken language as a way of communication, but also written language as a symbol of Ukrainian invincibility and resistance to the aggressor country. The analysis found that it was the Russian-Ukrainian war that became the key motivating factor for the population of Ukraine to speak Ukrainian more in everyday life. The analysis found that the population of western Ukrainian regions spoke Ukrainian the most compared to other regions of Ukraine, and therefore there were no major changes after 2014 and after 2022 in these regions. However, the study found that the central and northern regions of Ukraine mostly spoke Ukrainian-Russian pidgin (Surzhyk). However, many researchers do not consider this aspect, even though people who speak Surzhyk in Ukraine identify themselves as Ukrainians. Analysing that language is a symbol of national identity, the study found that the views of the Russian population and the Ukrainian population on the concept of national identity are quite different.

Since the language issue in Ukraine is a pressing one, the study requires further analysis. The inability to identify all reasons for the use of Russian or Surzhyk rather than Ukrainian by the population in the context of the war, and therefore the inability to propose measures to fully address the problem, is a significant limitation of this study. Therefore, it is of interest to conduct a broad survey of the population with a focus on different regions of the country in future studies to find out all the reasons for the use or non-use of the Ukrainian language. Such answers can form the basis for developing more effective strategies to address the problem.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this study declare no conflict of interest.

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Мова як символ національної ідентичності в умовах російсько-українського конфлікту

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Анотація. Актуальність дослідження полягає в тому, що в умовах російсько-української війни мова стала ключовим фактором національної ідентичності. Перехід значної частини населення на українську мову підкреслює зміни в суспільних поглядах та сприяє зміцненню національної самосвідомості. Метою дослідження був аналіз мови, як детермінанту визначення національної ідентичності в Україні в воєнних умовах. Для цього було проаналізовано 28 досліджень, які були попередньо відібрані за критеріями пошуку. В результаті дослідження встановлено, що мова перш за все є інструментом територіальних меж, що відділяє країну-агресора від України. В ході російсько-української війни значна кількість населення України стала україномовною, що також вплинуло на національну ідентичність суспільства. Особливо такі зміни стосуються тих областей, які були головною ціллю російського вторгнення. Це ще раз підкреслило зміну поглядів населення під впливом воєнних дій. При цьому країна-агресор довготривалий час намагалась нав'язати російську мову українському населенню із метою зміни національно ідентичності. Проте, як показали результати аналізу, українська національна ідентичність та російська національна ідентичність відрізняються у всіх аспектах, що й дало зворотний ефект при повномасштабному вторгненні 24 лютого 2022 року, а точніше зміна курсу населення до української національної самосвідомості. Проте мовний конфлікт повністю не вирішено, це впливає на ідентичність та самосвідомість українців, оскільки все ще є частина населення яка розмовляє російською мовою та суржиком. Також в результаті дослідження визначено, що важливу роль відіграє не лише українська усна мова, але й письмова, особливо під час російсько-українського конфлікту. Отже, результати даного дослідження мають практичне значення, оскільки та можуть використовуватися в практичній діяльності керівництвом України в процесі розроблення заходів подальшої мовної політики країни та вирішення мовного внутрішнього конфлікту населення

Ключові слова: самосвідомість; боротьба за незалежність; військово-політичні умови; культурна політика; повсякденне спілкування