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LANGUAGE SHIFT AND ATTITUDINAL DYNAMICS AMONG UKRAINIAN FEMALE WAR REFUGEES IN LITHUANIA

Abstract. This article examines the change in language attitudes and practices among Ukrainian war refugees who arrived in Lithuania seeking for shelter. Russia's invasion into Ukraine forced thousands of civilians to seek asylum globally. Within the Baltic countries, Lithuania became an especially tempting locality for the refugees because of the language factor. Most Ukrainians are bilinguals, with Russian as part of their linguistic repertoire, which facilitated communication with Lithuanians due to their shared history of using Russian during the soviet era. The issue of language in Ukraine has deep historical roots. This study describes the way two main languages in Ukraine (Ukrainian and Russian) have coexisted during various stages of the nation's independent history. To understand the evolving language attitudes and preferences of Ukrainian war refugees, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Lithuania in the summer of 2023. It is noteworthy that all participants were women, reflecting the unique characteristic of the 2022–2023 Ukrainian refugee wave, which consisted predominantly of women and children. For the majority of the research participants—primarily from the eastern regions of Ukraine—Russian is their first language. The study results reveal that although many Ukrainian refugees initially rely on Russian to facilitate communication, the majority are gradually transitioning to Ukrainian. The data suggest that this shift cannot happen instantly, considering the diverse multinational and multilingual profiles of Ukrainians. However, the traumatic experiences of enemy's occupation, refuge, lost family members and homes have significantly impacted individuals' aspirations to undergo linguistic and identity transformations. Most of the participants stress an urgent need to preserve the Ukrainian language and culture, as the most powerful factors of their national identity.

Keywords: language attitude; language policy; language shift; Ukrainian; Russian; female war refugees.

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Introduction

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine destroyed cities, villages, homes, schools and the country's major infrastructure in 2022. As a result, citizens of Ukraine (eastern and southern parts predominantly) were forced to flee the country. According to the official data, more than 6 million refugees are recorded globally. In Lithuania around 86,000 refugees registered for temporary protection (UNHCR, n.d.), which constitutes 2.5% of the country's resident population.

Given the shared soviet history, Lithuania has become an attractive destination for Ukrainians. As an independent, democratic and economically developing member of the European Union, Schengen Area and NATO, Lithuania demonstrates strong solidarity and positive attitudes towards Ukrainian war refugees. In addition to a very strong state social support and public sympathy, language also plays a significant role: Russian is still widely comprehended in Lithuania, especially among the older generation, enabling easier communication. As many refugees hailed from Ukraine's Russian-speaking eastern regions, communication posed minimal challenges in their new environment.

Ukrainian war refugees are predominantly women, as men aged 18–60 are banned from leaving the country. According to the official data, 87% of those who fled Ukraine due to the war constitute women and children (UNHCR. Global Focus, 2022). The researchers (Andrews et al., 2023) claim that female migration is not the same as male migration, as it involves childcare, educational contexts, and full engagement in household responsibilities, thereby requiring a different set of resources and support systems to address the unique challenges faced by women. In case of Ukrainian female refugees, the decision to flee the country was made under the threat of atrocities of Russia's war. As a result, they are struggling to cope not only with social-economic challenges, but also with traumas, caused by the war experience, family separation, and the loss of their homes.

The language question is one of the crucial issues for Ukrainian war refugees today. Ukrainian has traditionally been an important element of national identity, but it has rarely been used in the public sphere and has

reflected a more ethnic than civic nature. The Soviet regime elevated the status of Russian, making it more prestigious. As a result, even in independent Ukraine inconsistent language policies prevented a radical shift toward Ukrainian, despite its recognition as a symbol of national identity. Comparing the post-soviet language situation in Ukraine and the Baltic states, where a lot of Ukrainian refugees found shelter after 2022, we can identify differences in language policies and their varying impacts on each country's future. For example, Lithuania, upon regaining independence in 1991, pursued a path toward linguistic homogeneity, excluding Russian from all spheres of life. The idea of using the state language for nation building was strongly supported (Dabašinskienė, 2022).

The language question for war refugees is nuanced and complex as a result of their traumatic experiences, integration attitudes or simple everyday communication needs. Some refugees express their strong intention to maintain the Ukrainian language as a symbol of national identity, others continue speaking Russian, and still another group of refugees feel the need to integrate by learning and communicating the host country language.

In order to understand the Ukrainian nation's balancing between Russian and Ukrainian, a short overview of the language policies is presented.

Language Policy Dynamics: Ukrainian, Russian or Both?

The language question in Ukraine dates back centuries, persisting even after the proclamation of independence in 1991. Since that time, gradual changes in the perception of the Ukrainian identity and language preferences have emerged. However, efforts to promote the Ukrainian language in independent Ukraine have been relatively moderate and inconsistent. Though the language was increasingly recognized as a crucial component of Ukrainian identity, many Ukrainians did not view speaking Ukrainian as essential to being a legitimate citizen of the state or a valued member of the nation (Kulyk, 2023). A nationwide survey conducted by the Razumkov Center in 2005 reported that "only 41% of respondents listed the exclusive use of the Ukrainian language among essential features of a Ukrainian patriot, a much lower level than for civic characteristics such as

work for Ukraine's good (81%), the wish to cultivate love for Ukraine in their children (78%), and the respect for Ukrainian laws and power institutes (75%)" (Kulyk, 2023, p. 6). The widespread use of Russian, especially in the eastern and southern regions of the country, made rapid linguistic changes unlikely. However, in response to Russia's aggression in 2014, most Russian speakers, even in historically pro-Russian regions, chose to stand with their fellow Ukrainians rather than side with Russia.

As the analysis by Kulyk (2023) demonstrates, this choice stemmed from subtle shifts in ethno-national identity over the last years. Instead of forming a community defined by language, many individuals gradually transitioned from a Soviet identity to a Ukrainian one without significantly changing their language use. While many continued to speak primarily Russian, they no longer saw it as a defining feature of their identity. Another study, conducted in 2020/2021 on attitudes and opinions regarding language use, policies, and identities in the Black Sea region (Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kherson), found that the respondents who strongly identified with Ukraine and the Ukrainian language expressed skepticism towards the Russian state. However, they did not exhibit hostility towards the Russian language itself (Zeller, 2022).

Since 1991, these gradual changes in the perception of Ukrainian identity and language preferences have been profoundly shaped by the country's leadership, particularly the serving president during different periods and his closer or more distant connections with Russia. While all Ukrainian presidents acknowledged the importance of the Ukrainian language, their attitudes and policies regarding its promotion varied significantly. For many years, the main task was to balance the advancement of Ukrainian while managing the continued notable presence of Russian in the country. Presidents Kravchuk and Yushchenko strongly supported Ukrainian as pivotal to national identity, while Kuchma adopted a more pragmatic, bilingual approach. During his presidency, Russian remained widely used, especially in urban areas and regions with Russian-speaking majorities. Kuchma even attempted to grant Russian the status of an official language in Ukraine, stating in his inaugural speech: "In the near future, I intend to propose changes to the current legislation with the aim of giving the Russian language

official status while preserving the Ukrainian language as the state language.” (Lyzanchuk, 2008, p. 196). The most pro-Russian president Yanukovich also encouraged russification, while the most pro-Ukrainian president Poroshenko focused on unifying the nation through a shared Ukrainian identity and zealously promoted the Ukrainian language and culture.

Poroshenko’s presidency was marked by a strong focus on fostering a distinct Ukrainian national identity. A key development during his tenure was signing the Language Law in 2019. The primary goal of the Law is to eliminate the remnants of a discriminatory approach to the Ukrainian language, which is the legacy of both the Russian Empire and the soviet era. Importantly, the Law does not discriminate against minority or foreign languages in Ukraine (Explanation on the Law of Ukraine, 2019).

The transformation of language policy in Ukraine, particularly during the presidencies of Poroshenko and Zelenskyy, underscores the intricate relationship between language and national identity. Poroshenko’s pre-election presidential slogan “Army. Language. Religion” was highly criticized by Zelenskyy’s team. However, soon after the beginning of a full-scale war, Zelenskyy embraced these very principles.

In November 2022, Zelenskyy declared, “Ukrainian is the language of freedom and will, a powerful weapon of the Ukrainian people in the struggle for our independence and victory. I am sure that the preservation of our identity, the revival of historical memory, the establishment of the Ukrainian language is a matter of national security of the state” (Dorosh, 2023). This shift in the president’s stance aligns with the general nation’s attitude. “What Ukraine had been striving for over 30 years of independence changed within a few days after February 24,” noted Holovakha, director of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, relying on numerous sociological studies (Dorosh, 2023). Despite persistent Kremlin propaganda, many Ukrainians who had long shown loyalty to the Russian language began to distance themselves from it, refusing to use what they now saw as the language of the aggressor (Maxwell, 2023).

A nationwide survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in December 2022 revealed a significant increase in the use of Ukrainian. Moreover, a comparison of surveys conducted in 2012, 2014,

2017, and 2022 proves a gradual increase in the use of Ukrainian after the events of 2014 (Euromaidan and Russia's invasion in Eastern Ukraine). However, this steady growth fades in comparison to an "impressive upsurge" and a "drastic shift" from Russian to Ukrainian after the full-scale war in 2022 (Kulyk, 2023). The percentage of Ukrainians using Ukrainian rose by 8.7 percentage points, from 48.7% in 2017 to 57.4% in 2022, while the use of Russian declined by 11.0 percentage points, dropping from 25.8% to 14.8%. This decline was especially notable in the southeastern Ukraine, where reliance on Russian fell from 50.4% in 2017 to 27.2% after the invasion. Although some of these shifts may reflect aspirational reporting, qualitative research indicates multiple factors driving the increased use of Ukrainian (Kulyk, 2023, pp. 7–10). According to Arel (2017–2018), "a reconfiguration of the relationship between language and state loyalty ("state-building") has taken place". A full-scale invasion has led to an unprecedented revival of Ukrainian and a significant decline of Russian. As noted by Kudriavtseva, events like Euromaidan, followed by Russian aggression in the Crimea and the eastern parts of the country, and finally the outbreak of a full-scale war in February 2022 became a "turning point" that encouraged much more people to learn Ukrainian, or to switch more often to Ukrainian, if bilingual (Kudriavtseva, 2023, p. 12). Thus, the primary motivation was personal patriotism and contributing to nation building, linking language use with national identity. The belief that "real Ukrainians speak Ukrainian" became a key driver of this shift, making Ukrainian a symbol of national identification. Moreover, this shift underscores the idea that fluency in Ukrainian is a vital component of national identity and cohesion. People of various ethnic origins, eager to distance themselves from Russian identity, seek to disassociate from the connotations of being pro-Kremlin, which they find increasingly offensive due to geopolitical tensions and are motivated to learn Ukrainian.

The observed contexts have provided a basis to formulate the following research questions:

R.Q. 1: How do Ukrainian female refugees renegotiate their linguistic identity when transitioning from Russian to Ukrainian and what are their attitudes towards these languages?

R.Q. 2: In what ways do Ukrainian female refugees perceive the use of Ukrainian over Russian as a symbol of resistance or alignment with national identity?

Methodology

To explore the language dynamics among Ukrainian war refugees in Lithuania, the authors conducted a research initiative between July and August 2023 – 17 months after the commencement of an open-scale war. The study aimed to analyze refugees' language attitudes and usage, and to ascertain the emerging shifts in linguistic preferences.

Qualitative data for the research was collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews by the researchers in Lithuania's two biggest cities – Vilnius and Kaunas. The advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they offer flexibility, allowing new questions to be introduced during the interview. The questions were predominantly open-ended, encouraging interviewees to share their thoughts and attitudes freely, without being constrained by predefined options or influenced by researcher bias. The interviewers followed an interview guide – an informal collection of topics and questions prepared in advance. Such guides enable researchers to focus on the topic without a constraint to a particular format, thus the interviewer has the freedom to tailor the questions according to the specific context of each interview (Ruslin et al., 2022, p. 24). The issues explored in our interviews can be broadly categorized into three thematic blocks:

- 1) personal information block (age, sex, education and family status);
- 2) language block (respondents' native language; their language attitudes and language preferences when living in Lithuania);
- 3) national identity block (self-identification and perceptions of national belonging).

Individuals who agreed to participate in the research were provided with information about the research objectives and scheduled for

an interview. Each interview, lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed by the authors. The interviewees were given the option to choose their preferred language of communication: Ukrainian, Russian, English, or Lithuanian. Interestingly, the majority of the respondents (13 out of 15 people) opted for Ukrainian, including several whose first language is Russian. Only two chose to be interviewed in Russian. The participants' responses were translated into English by one of the authors, who holds an MA degree in English Philology. In cases of uncertainty, a second translator was consulted. The final version of the translation was reviewed and refined by a native English speaker.

The research participants were Ukrainian women currently residing in Lithuania, originating from various regions of Ukraine (see Table 1). This geographical diversity was essential for obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the language attitudes among Ukrainian war refugees. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 70 and had diverse educational backgrounds, including university students, college and university graduates¹, and holders of doctoral degrees. The majority of the interviewed women were married, all of them were either studying or working in Lithuania – mainly in the field of their specialization – or actively seeking employment (as in the case with the participant who had recently come to Lithuania). All the respondents were bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian, and most of them demonstrated their proficiency in one or more foreign languages: English, German, French, Lithuanian, Polish, Czech, Romanian, Spanish, and Yiddish.

Table 1

Demographic Data of the Research Participants

Code of participants	Age	Education	Language of communication (interview)	Region of Ukraine the interviewee came from
Participant 1	44	Doctoral degree	Ukrainian	Western
Participant 2	38	Doctoral degree	Ukrainian	Eastern
Participant 3	40	Doctoral degree	Russian	Eastern
Participant 4	27	Higher, medical	Ukrainian	Western

¹ In Ukraine a college graduate obtains a Junior Bachelor's degree with the main focus on vocational or technical training, while a university graduate is usually qualified for advanced academic studies and holds a Bachelor's or Master's degree.

Code of participants	Age	Education	Language of communication (interview)	Region of Ukraine the interviewee came from
Participant 5	20	University student	Ukrainian	Eastern
Participant 6	28	Higher	Ukrainian	Eastern
Participant 7	25	College	Ukrainian	Southern – Eastern
Participant 8	47	Higher	Ukrainian	Northern
Participant 9	34	College	Ukrainian	Eastern
Participant 10	43	Higher	Ukrainian	Central
Participant 11	30	Higher	Ukrainian	Central
Participant 12	40	Higher	Ukrainian	Eastern
Participant 13	40	Higher	Ukrainian	Northern – Eastern
Participant 14	40	Higher	Ukrainian	Northern – Eastern
Participant 15	70	Higher	Russian	Central

In conducting our research, we employed thematic data analysis to examine in depth the interrelated concepts of language, identity and their broader implications. This methodology allows for a nuanced exploration of the participants' perspectives, as expressed through their comments, personal narratives, and the motivations underlying their linguistic attitudes. By analyzing personal information alongside language-related data, we aim to uncover the layers of meaning that the Ukrainian language holds in the current context of refuge. Through this approach, we seek to shed light on the roles Ukrainian, Russian and other languages play in the everyday lives of female refugees in Lithuania.

Research Findings and Discussion

Renegotiating Linguistic Identity (Ukrainian as “*ridna mova*”)

Although the research participants represent all the regions of Ukraine, the majority originate from the eastern part of the country, where Russian was commonly the first language. While fluent in Ukrainian, many of them used Russian in their family and social settings as well as in educational contexts-both at school and university in Ukraine. However, after the onset of the full-scale war, when they were forced to flee their country and found

refuge in Lithuania, many participants reported a change in their linguistic attitudes. Many Ukrainian refugees feel the need to renegotiate their linguistic identity and transition from Russian toward Ukrainian. This decision has been deeply influenced by the traumatic experience of the war.

For those who endured the horrors of occupation and violence, Russian has become associated with trauma. As a result, it is no longer perceived as a neutral means of communication but rather as a reminder of suffering and loss. The relationship between trauma and language is complex and multifaceted, as traumatic experiences can influence a person's linguistic choices, preferences, aspirations to use – or to reject – a certain language (Busch & McNamara, 2020, p. 327). Biographical or other texts and interviews reveal links between trauma and language experiences. For instance, Lerner (1997) recounts her own experience of being a German refugee during the Second World War, describing how she gave up speaking her first language along with the ideologies embedded in it. "The truth was, I no longer wanted to speak German; I was repelled by the sound of it; for me as for other Americans it had become the language of the enemy. ... I ceased speaking German altogether" (Lerner, 1997, p. 40). Traumatic events often evoke strong emotional responses, such as fear, distress, sadness, and anxiety or even anger; thus, it might lead to the desire to renounce the language. Researchers have noted that some bilinguals who have undergone negative or traumatic experiences in their first language may feel the urge to distance themselves from it. As Pavlenko (2002) states, such individuals "may experience detachment from it which, in some cases, leads to language loss" (p. 49; see also Lerner, 1997).

A similar example of emotional detachment emerged among the research participants – Ukrainian female war refugees. One participant, originally from a northern region of Ukraine, told a story of her 17-year-old daughter, who had witnessed Russian soldiers threatening her and her father in Russian before opening fire. Deeply traumatized by the event, the girl developed an aversion to the language of aggressors. "She has entirely renounced speaking Russian and has delved deeply into learning the Ukrainian history, literature, culture, and traditions" (Participant 8). The young female urges her whole family to stop speaking Russian at home.

Some participants expressed feelings of shame associated with the Russian language. A young female refugee, who endured all the horrors of Russia's occupation of the Lugansk region in Eastern Ukraine, shared: "I am a Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizen, but now, you know, I feel deeply ashamed of having spoken Russian all my life!" (Participant 9). During the interview, she reflected on the unresolved language issue in Ukraine, suggesting that it may have served as a pretext for the aggressor to start the war. She also criticized the government's weak position in addressing this problem and the inadequacies in legislative regulation. "Had Ukrainian been unequivocally established as the only state language after the collapse of the USSR," she argues, "I firmly believe the current war might have been averted!" (Participant 9).

For most participants the detachment from the Russian language led to a renewed embrace of Ukrainian, marking this shift in both attitudes and language preferences. As the findings will demonstrate, this transformation is closely related to the perception of language as a powerful symbol of resistance and national identity. Many participants – even those for whom Russian was the first language – identified Ukrainian as their native language during the interviews.

The analysis revealed a peculiar trend in how participants interpret the concept of "the native language, or *ridna mova*" (Ukrainian: рідна мова). It became evident that the participants' understanding of this concept is complex and multifaceted, shaped not only by linguistic experience but also by evolving personal and national identities. Although 11 out of 15 participants identified Ukrainian as their native language, follow-up questions revealed that Russian was actually the first language for the majority of them. This discrepancy is largely attributed to the fact that the majority of the interviewees came from the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, where Russian has historically held linguistic and cultural dominance. A noteworthy insight from the interviews was the divergence in how the participants understood the terms "the first language" and "native language". This ambiguity stems from the different interpretations of the term "native language" ("*ridna mova*"), which is not uniformly synonymous with "the first language." According to a 2011 survey,

34% Ukrainians perceive the term "native" as the language enabling free thought and communication; 32% associate it with the language of their nationality; 24% link it to their parents' language, while 9% consider it the language they use most frequently (Olszański, 2012). The term "native language" might align with "the first language" or "mother tongue", but the concepts are slightly different. According to Pavlenko "the first language" denotes the initial language(s) learned, regardless of the current proficiency or dominance, while "second language" refers to languages acquired later in life, regardless of chronological order" (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 7). In Ukrainian, though, there is a nuanced difference: "native" (*рідна* – "*ridna*") can also figuratively denote closeness in spirit, habits, and views, or someone to whom one has grown accustomed to" (Busel, 2005, p. 1225). As a result, when asked about their native language, Ukrainians may at times combine emotional and cultural attachment with linguistic origin, identifying the language that is dear to them as "native" or "*ridna*" – even if it was not the first language they acquired. Thus, the majority of participants whose first language was Russian still identified Ukrainian as their native language.

For many Ukrainians from the eastern regions, Russian is the first language. They used to speak it in family, social and professional/educational contexts in Ukraine. A similar experience was shared by a young female refugee from Eastern Ukraine, who endured the impact of Russian aggression twice – first, in 2014, when the bombing of her native city, Donetsk, forced her to move to Mariupol, and then again in 2022, when Russia began a full-scale war and occupied Mariupol, compelling her to flee once more, this time to Lithuania. She recalled that the language shift began in 2014, when many of her colleagues and university staff started transitioning to Ukrainian. Although she had grown up bilingual, speaking both Russian and Ukrainian within the family since her birth, she reflected, "My native language is Ukrainian, but it seems to me I only firmly recognized it when all these events unfolded, sparking discussions about the national language in our regions" (Participant 2). Another Russian-speaking participant, who had communicated in Russian since birth, also referred to Ukrainian as her native language, explaining her reasoning this way: "Because I'm Ukrainian by nationality" (Participant 3).

A participant from the north-eastern Ukraine, whose school language of instruction and daily communication used to be Russian, described a sense of dissonance when identifying as Ukrainian while singing Ukrainian national songs. Over time, however, she came to embrace Ukrainian as her native language – not because it was her first language, but out of personal conviction. "It's by conviction, I feel it deep within me," she said (Participant 13). She underlined the importance of the role of language in shaping national identity: "Depriving someone of their language strips away their identity, their sense of belonging and personal territory" (Participant 13).

Another Ukrainian war refugee in Lithuania, who came from a southern region of Ukraine, spoke Russian as her first language but now identifies Ukrainian as her native language. She feels compelled to emphasize that Russian was imposed upon Ukrainians; in her small town, locals spoke in "*surzhyk*" – a blend of Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian. She reflected, "It even became embarrassing to speak Russian" (Participant 8). She continued: "We used to live our lives without much pride for our land. It was just a nice place with nice people. But after all the events in 2022, the Ukrainian language became my own. It awakened the feelings I had never experienced before, a newfound perspective on my own culture and language. And you come to realize that no one can destroy it now! They (the Russians) tried to eradicate it (the Ukrainian language), but the opposite happened: people began to cherish what they had once took for granted!" (Participant 8).

Thus, although Russian was the first language for many of the research participants, they now identify Ukrainian as their native language ("*ridna mova*"), due to recently rediscovered cultural and emotional ties. Initially, only four participants acknowledged Russian as their first language, however, further clarification revealed that, in fact, this number is higher – nine participants' mother tongue is Russian. The war has played a pivotal role in reshaping linguistic identities and many refugees report a shift towards Ukrainian in response to the Russian aggression.

The Ukrainian Language as a Symbol of Resistance

Languages play a crucial role in symbolizing individual and collective identities. They often serve as markers by which people are categorized by other individuals (Byram, 2006, p. 5). Edwards (1994) emphasizes that ethnicity is deeply rooted in shared bonds, such as language, race, religion (p. 125). For Ukrainian refugees, preserving their linguistic heritage has become an essential aspect of maintaining their identity in the face of displacement. Most of the participants interviewed admitted that the language of their motherland is their "true treasure", although some only realized it when Russian troops invaded their homes. One war refugee in Lithuania, originally from the central Ukraine, stressed the crucial role of language in the nation's identity development, referring to it as "the code of the nation". Although Ukrainian is her first language, upon moving to Kyiv in 2005, she quickly adapted to the dominant Russian-speaking environment and transitioned to Russian. However, Russia's aggression in 2014 marked a radical turning point in her attitude towards the language choice. She and her entire family underwent a profound transformation, adopting Ukrainian in all spheres of their lives – personal, professional, and social.

Being a war refugee in Lithuania since 2022, the woman firmly believes that it is the language that helps preserve national identity. As she explains, "The Ukrainian language is like a root, a foundation. Your native language, *"ridna mova"*, is the code of your nation. No matter where you are, speaking your mother tongue, preserving it, communicating in it with your children and grandchildren – that's fundamental. To me it's not even a question of whether to do it or not – it's a must!" (Participant 10).

Admiring Lithuania's efforts to integrate its state language into all spheres of public life, the participant admits, "It's so sweet to see how Lithuanians cherish their language. I hope Ukrainians will do the same. It disappoints me to hear Ukrainian children speaking Russian here in Lithuania" (Participant 10). The woman is convinced that language choice remains a person's decision, but asserts that the state should encourage the use of the state language by increasing its prestige. This, she suggests, can be

achieved by promoting the Ukrainian culture and providing greater support for Ukrainian singers and artists.

While living abroad, many participants observe the attitudes of local citizens towards their national languages and express admiration for how the people of the Baltic States, though fluent in many languages, cherish and actively preserve their linguistic heritage. Recently a 30-year-old woman from Kyiv found her refuge in Lithuania. A lifelong bilingual, this research participant, has a passion for learning new languages and is fluent in English, German, Polish and Spanish. Reflecting on her past experiences, she recalls a visit to Estonia long before the war in Ukraine began. She vividly describes an incident in Tallinn where she was refused a purchase of a souvenir after addressing a shop assistant in Russian. Regarding the Ukrainian language, the interviewee firmly supports maintaining a clear distinction between the state language – which she considers obligatory for all residents – and the family language, which she believes should remain a matter of personal choice. "Being born in Ukraine and raised in a Russian-speaking family, I have never encountered any pressure or discomfort in the society because of it. But I know Ukrainian, the state language, very well. So, in all official moments, in all state institutions I speak only Ukrainian" (Participant 11).

Though Ukrainian is the only official state language in Ukraine, there have been instances where Russian was perceived as more dominant in certain contexts. Thus, a research participant from western Ukraine shares her experience of being denied a call center job in Kyiv due to her insufficient fluency in Russian. "I think that if people live in Ukraine, they must speak Ukrainian. Otherwise, it's not just the language at risk but also our culture and perhaps something more," Participant 4 contends. However, she advocates for a gradual approach rather than imposing state-enforced language policies: "Language should be esteemed through enhanced educational opportunities, improved life prospects, high-quality film dubbing, and good translations of the best books and textbooks into Ukrainian" (Participant 4).

Research participants see a very strong link between language and national identity. Thus, a 44-year-old female refugee originating from Ukraine's western region, whose mother tongue is Ukrainian, stresses its

significance: "Ukrainian holds a profound importance for me; it's intertwined with my identity. I cherish it deeply. It is an integral part of who I am, connecting it to my mother, grandmother, and my ancestral heritage. It is as the cornerstone of my ethnicity and identity" (Participant 1). She confesses that hearing Ukrainian immigrants speak Russian while residing in Lithuania disappoints her. This observation reflects her acute awareness of the language's pivotal role in preserving a nation. "In my opinion language is a very powerful tool that can either unite the nation or, as we are witnessing now, become a pretext of initiating a war" (Participant 1).

The same idea is supported by participant 14, a 40-year-old female from the southeastern region bordering Russia. Brought up in a Ukrainian-speaking family, the participant expresses deep love for her mother tongue and hopes her two children will preserve it even in exile. "I was born into a Ukrainian-speaking family. There is no other language so dear to me. It resonates deeply within me, connecting me to my Ukrainian identity with every fiber of my being!" (Participant 14). Her feelings about the Ukrainian language, both within Ukraine and abroad, are deeply emotional. She says that many of her relatives and acquaintances stopped speaking Russian after 2022, perceiving it as the aggressor's language. She staunchly asserts, "Every nation has its own language and history, which should be preserved and respected" (Participant 14).

Donbas – the eastern region of Ukraine currently occupied by Russia – is often considered Russian-speaking. Nevertheless, a 40-year-old research participant, who left the Donetsk region with her family in 2014, states that Ukrainian is her first language. She attributes this to the prevalence of Ukrainian among the rural population of Donbas, in contrast to the dominance of Russian in larger cities. The participant holds a deep appreciation for the Ukrainian language and culture. She compares the language to a traditional Ukrainian costume: "It (speaking Ukrainian) is like wearing a national costume: you need to put it on to truly feel it, to immerse yourself in it. Speaking the language is the essence of the culture. You can't convey culture through a different language" (Participant 12).

Recognizing that language is a powerful symbol of the national identity, a 20-year-old female refugee from Mariupol strives to embrace

Ukrainian, despite Russian being her first language. She and her family were fortunate enough to escape the Russian occupation of their native city. In an effort to identify herself as a “non-Russian” citizen, she speaks Ukrainian whenever possible. “Language demonstrates your political stance”, Participant 5 asserts. She is convinced that Ukrainians should transition to speaking Ukrainian, and feels a personal responsibility to set an example, “As someone from a heavily russified region, I must demonstrate: don't be afraid, if I can transition to Ukrainian, you can do it too!” (Participant 5). The same idea is supported by another female refugee from the southeastern part of Ukraine, now residing in Vilnius: “It is even inappropriate to speak Russian in Ukraine now. And speaking Russian abroad isn't good either, because it blurs the distinction between Ukrainian identity and that of other nationalities!” (Participant 7).

The attitude of a representative from an older generation, a 70-year-old female refugee originating from Kyiv, who prefers speaking Russian as it is her mother tongue, differs from the majority. Her mother was Russian, and the participant explains that she did not speak Ukrainian, because she “hadn't absorbed this language with mother's milk” (Participant 15). While the woman is fluent in Ukrainian, she preferred to be interviewed in Russian. Although her Ukrainian friends have tried to communicate with her in Ukrainian since the full-scale war began, she continues to respond in Russian, as she says, “This language (Russian) is dear to me. It's because of my origin, my roots” (Participant 15).

Nevertheless, most of the participants express their intention to distance from Russian, transitioning to Ukrainian. They heatedly emphasize the importance of preserving their heritage language and culture, recognizing it as essential for the nation: “Language is a nation's identity. Without a language, a nation cannot truly exist. Language upholds traditions; through it, we become part of a culture” (Participant 5). The importance of preserving Ukrainian while in exile is further confirmed by a research participant originally from the East of Ukraine. Being a volunteer at the Ukrainian Center in Vilnius, she teaches Ukrainian to children. Initially, her aim was to preserve her own children's heritage language. Gradually, more refugees began showing interest and bringing their children to the Ukrainian Centre for

language and cultural education. "The majority of war refugees hail from the East. They speak Russian at home, yet they bring their children here for Ukrainian instruction. They lack the strength to switch to Ukrainian themselves, but they want their children to embrace it" (Participant 12). Although children mainly encounter Ukrainian at the Centre and continue speaking Russian at home, the parents' efforts to recognize the importance of Ukrainian and encourage their children to learn their nation's state language demonstrate a conscious family decision regarding languages.

The results of our research indicate that the majority of Ukrainian female refugees in Lithuania regard the Ukrainian language as a key means of maintaining their national identity and fostering a sense of belonging within their community. Beyond the communicative function, Ukrainian also serves as a vital instrument in the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. Speaking the Ukrainian language became an assertion of identity, a deliberate act of resilience and resistance for many participants.

Conclusions

In our research, we explored the language dynamics among Ukrainian female war refugees who found shelter in Lithuania after the full-scale war in Ukraine was launched. The Ukrainian case today provides valuable insights into the role of language in shaping national identity and loyalty to the state. The analysis of the sources relevant to our research revealed that the development of the Ukrainian language and identity has been profoundly influenced by the country's historical struggles for independence and recent geopolitical events. Ukraine's post-independence language policy has been shaped by a complex interplay of national identity, political leadership, and regional loyalties. Initially characterized by an ethnic revival, the policy did not aggressively advance the transformation needed to establish Ukrainian as the dominant state language. It was only with the onset of the full-scale war in 2022, which forced millions of Ukrainian citizens to flee the country, that the role of language in the formation of the national identity and state building was reconsidered.

Lithuania welcomed thousands of Ukrainian war refugees, with language emerging as one of the decisive factors, as Russian often serves as the *lingua franca*. The majority of these refugees are women, who are not only struggling to overcome the trauma of war but also reassessing their cultural and linguistic preferences. In these changed contexts, some Ukrainians feel an urgent need to preserve their language identity and express their solidarity with their state and nation, while others continue to use Russian out of habit or for personal reasons. Still another group of refugees opt for learning the host country's language (Lithuanian), recognizing it as one of the key factors of social integration in a new context.

Emotional experiences have had a significant impact on language preferences, with many research participants experiencing a sense of detachment from Russian due to the trauma of the war. Many believe that the Ukrainian language is crucial for preserving national identity, calling it "the code of the nation". Moreover, they view Ukrainian as a unifying force, important for the nation's solidarity. However, they also identify the need for a thoughtful, voluntary transition from Russian to Ukrainian, particularly given the deep historical and emotional contexts that influence language choice. Although the shift to Ukrainian as the language of state-building, solidarity, and the cultural identity was noticeable in our study, we observed that this tendency differs from the patterns within Ukraine itself. This can be explained by the presence of an environment that favors Russian, including its use in schools and daily communication, which has helped sustain its prevalence. Although the female refugees try to teach and maintain Ukrainian for their children, success is not always guaranteed, as the majority are accustomed to speaking Russian at home.

Thus, this research allowed us to explore the language attitude of Ukrainian war refugees and observe shifts in their linguistic preferences. Although the majority of Ukrainian war refugees are Russian-speaking, their attitudes towards Ukrainian and Russian have changed greatly since the full-scale war began in 2022. The participants express their willingness to distance themselves from Russian, as it has become associated with negative emotions and many find it inappropriate to speak the language of the aggressor. Even though Russian was their first language, Ukrainian war

refugees in Lithuania now consider Ukrainian their native language. Since the onset of the war and the relocation to Lithuania, there has been a noticeable shift, with many now embracing Ukrainian as their "*ridna mova*" (native language). This change reflects a deeper cultural and emotional connection and a desire to maintain their rediscovered linguistic identity.

The analysis of the perceptions concerning language use revealed that the shift toward Ukrainian among Ukrainian war refugees is driven by personal, cultural, and political factors. Ukrainian has emerged as a key marker of solidarity with the nation and a rejection of Russian dominance. Ukrainian has become a powerful symbol of national identity, reinforcing ties to national roots and resilience in the face of aggression. Ukrainian female refugees emphasize the importance of preserving their heritage language for future generations, describing the Ukrainian language as their "genetic code" and linking it to the traditional Ukrainian national costume. The war has played a significant role in reshaping linguistic identities, with many refugees reporting a shift towards Ukrainian as a response to the Russian aggression. Our findings highlight the dynamic nature of linguistic identities among female refugees, shaped by individual and collective agency, external factors and the symbolic power of language as both a tool for resistance and an expression of national identity.

Limitations

The presented study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 Ukrainian female refugees in Lithuania. While these data provide valuable insights into the topic, a larger participant pool would enhance the accuracy and depth of the findings. Expanding the scope of future research to include a broader and more diverse group of participants, particularly in terms of their numbers and educational backgrounds, would allow for a deeper understanding of attitudinal and language shift processes among Ukrainian refugees. Additionally, it would be important to investigate refugees' attitude towards the host language, as well as practices related to its learning and use. Given the significance of the topic, such studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of refugee experiences

and their integration into host societies, such as Lithuania and other countries.

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KALBŲ KAITA IR NUOSTATŲ DINAMIKA TARP UKRAINOS KARO PABĖGĖLIŲ MOTERŲ LIETUVOJE

Anotacija. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama Ukrainos karo pabėgėlių, radusių prieglobstį Lietuvoje, kalbinių nuostatų ir kalbos pasirinkimo dinamika. Prasidėjęs plataus masto Rusijos karas prieš Ukrainą privertė tūkstančius civilių gyventojų ieškoti prieglobsčio visame pasaulyje. Lietuva šiems pabėgėliams tapo ypač patrauklia šalimi, o lemiamas veiksnys buvo kalba. Nemažai ukrainiečių yra dvikalbiai, gerai mokantys rusų kalbą, ir tai palengvino jų bendravimą su lietuviais, sovietmečiu išgyvenusiais panašią rusų kalbos vartojimo istoriją. Kalbos klausimas Ukrainoje turi galias istorines šaknis. Šiame tyrime aprašoma, kaip dvi pagrindinės Ukrainos kalbos (ukrainiečių ir rusų) koegzistavo įvairiais tautos istorijos etapais. Siekiant suprasti besikeičiančias ukrainiečių karo pabėgėlių kalbines nuostatas ir kalbos pasirinkimą, 2023 m. vasarą Lietuvoje buvo atlikti pusiau struktūruoti interviu. Pažymėtina, kad tyrime dalyvavo tik moterys, ir tai atspindi unikalią Ukrainos pabėgėlių bangos (2022–2023 m.) ypatybę – ją daugiausia sudaro moterys ir vaikai. Dauguma respondenčių, ypač iš su Rusija besiribojančių rytinių regionų, yra dvikalbės, o jų gimtoji kalba – rusų. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė: daugelis ukrainiečių pabėgėlių Lietuvoje remiasi rusų kalba ir vartoja ją bendravimui palengvinti; bet noras pereiti prie ukrainiečių kalbos bendraujant privačioje aplinkoje ar socialiniuose tinkluose yra neaiškus. Kaip rodo duomenys, šis perėjimas negali būti itin greitas, atsižvelgiant į įvairialypį daugiatautį ir daugiakalbį ukrainiečių profilį. Tačiau trauminė patirtis, susijusi su okupacija, pabėgimu iš gimtosios šalies, šeimos ir namų praradimu, padarė didelę įtaką siekiui pereiti prie kalbos ir tapatybės transformacijos. Dauguma tyrimo dalyvių pabrėžia, kad būtina skubiai išsaugoti ukrainiečių kalbą ir kultūrą, kaip galingiausius jų tautinio tapatumo veiksnys.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: kalbinė nuostata; kalbų politika; kalbos kaita; ukrainiečių kalba; rusų kalba; karo pabėgėlės.