

Weaponizing Language Politics: Russian Foreign Policy Motives From 2014-Present

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ABSTRACT

The Russian Federation continues to search for political and historical continuity to establish its own legitimacy and to assert its influence and/or dominance towards other states. One of the tools it uses for this is the Russian language, as there are about 258 million Russian speakers around the world, many of whom live in Russia's geographic vicinity, or what it defines as the "near abroad."¹ The "near abroad" at times is even viewed as a domestic issue, and not as a foreign policy issue. Russia has paid particular attention to developments in language politics in the former Soviet Union over the last eight years since its invasion of Ukraine. There, it interpreted the establishment of a new Ukrainian government as threatening to the interests of the ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations, as well as to the Russian Federation overall. This capstone will explore Russia's reactions to issues surrounding language politics in the Baltic states (with a focus on Estonia), and Ukraine since 2014, and how they are representative of a shift in Russian foreign policy. The paper will compare language policies proposed and implemented in the Baltic states and Ukraine, the geopolitical environments surrounding them, and the Russian Federation's reactions to them.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent states had the opportunity to decide what sphere(s) of influence they wanted to shift towards, and this often depended on the ethnic composition of their populations, as well as the languages spoken. Today, the Russian Federation continues to utilize the Russian language to exert its influence by inciting dissatisfaction with their new, independent states by pointing out where ethnic Russian minorities or Russian speakers are looked down upon or outright repressed. In many former

¹ Steph Koyfman, "How Many People Speak Russian, And Where Is It Spoken?," Babel Magazine, February 18, 2021, <https://www.babel.com/en/magazine/how-many-people-speak-russian-and-where-spoken>.

Soviet republics, Russian is still taught in schools, or older adults once learned the language but younger generations are no longer learning it in school. As a result, although the level varies, the Russian language still has some sort of presence in those countries, leaving room for influence by the Russian Federation through means of soft power, or military intrusions most clearly seen in the example of Ukraine. When does the Russian Federation exploit issues of language politics as a foreign policy tool?

HYPOTHESIS ONE

The Russian Federation exploits the issue of language politics as a foreign policy tool when it interprets a country's legislative actions as Russophobic

The first hypothesis of this capstone suggests that Russia, through government and media proxies, reacts negatively when it interprets countries' proposals, bills, or laws as Russophobic. By Russophobic, this is when other countries try to reduce the status of the Russian language, or of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers as a minority group. These are visible towards actions taken by Estonia and Latvia in particular. Because the two states are NATO members, military intervention is highly unlikely. Additionally, pressure from the Russian Federation is not as likely to sway their domestic or foreign policy given the tense history between them and the former USSR, nor is it likely that either of these states will depart from NATO or the European Union. But, both countries still have significant Russian-speaking populations, including citizens of the Russian Federation and non-citizens who do not speak Estonian or Latvian. For them, the right to use the Russian language is critical in all spheres of life, and it is an especially contentious issue when it comes to primary and secondary education. Consequently, the Russian Federation calls out this issue as a way to undermine faith in local and European governance

among the Russian-speaking population.

Originally, one of the ways independence movements were bolstered in the Baltic states was by promoting their native tongues on the levels of national policy.² This begged the question of what to do with the Russian language, as there were significant amounts of monolingual Russian speakers.³ According to the 1989 Soviet census, just 52% of the population in the Latvian Soviet Republic consisted of ethnic Latvians. Furthermore, only 22% of non-Latvians spoke Latvian in the Latvian Soviet Republic, 15% of non-Estonians spoke Estonian in the Estonian Soviet Republic, and 35% of non-Lithuanians spoke Lithuanian in the Lithuanian Soviet Republic.⁴ These laws allowed for a period of general transition from Russian to the countries' native languages in public and private sectors, and then began to enforce them more strictly following the countries' declarations of independence from the Soviet Union. Additionally, during the liberalization period of *glasnost*, *samizdats* began to be released by internal dissidents and shared from diaspora communities abroad that retained their native languages.⁵ This further contributed to demands to implement native languages in education and government.

Thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, policies to promote state languages are continuing to be implemented in the Baltic states in an attempt to bolster a unified national

² Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³ Robert G. Moser, "Ethnicity, Elections, and Party Systems in Postcommunist States," in *Ethnic Politics after Communism*, ed. Zoltan Barany (Cornell University Press, 2005), 108–39, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv2n7m5h.8>.

⁴ Jānis Riekstiņš, *In Defense of the Latvian Language Against Russification* (Riga: Latvian Language Agency, 2012), https://valoda.lv/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Par-latviesu-val-Pret-rusif_145x210_ENG.pdf.

⁵ David D. Laitin, "Culture Shift in a Postcommunist State," in *Ethnic Politics after Communism*, ed. Zoltan Barany and Robert G. Moser (Cornell University Press, 2005), 46–77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv2n7m5h.6>.

identity. However, this becomes challenging given that approximately one-quarter of the populations of Estonia and Latvia consists of ethnic Russians, many of whom still do not speak the state language to this day or are not citizens. The Russian government, therefore, does not hesitate to call out language policies in these countries as Russophobic.

HYPOTHESIS TWO

The Russian Federation exploits the issue of language politics as a foreign policy tool when a country's language legislation threatens Russia's regional power balance, security, and/or status quo.

The second hypothesis of this capstone suggests that Russia, through government and media proxies, reacts negatively when another country's proposals, bills, or laws threaten the Russian Federation's regional standing, balance of power, and general influence within that country. This is most evident with the case of Ukraine, where the Russian Federation has intervened militarily under the guise of protecting Russian speakers and ethnic Russians, but also to prevent the country from shifting towards the West (specifically, towards the European Union and especially NATO). The status of the Russian language in Ukraine is particularly important to the Russian Federation given the two countries' shared history, and Russian's continued use as a *lingua franca*. Of particular importance are Crimea and the Donbass, which are majority Russian-speaking. Additionally, Crimea hosts the Russian Navy and its Black Sea Fleet, giving the Russian Federation access to a warm-water port.

Movements like the Orange Revolution in 2004 and especially the Euromaidan in 2014 were of great concern to the Russian Federation, as its supporters called for shifts away from the Russian sphere of influence towards Europe. Although Ukraine was never given a member

accession plan, or MAP, to NATO, statements made in 2008 at the NATO summit in Bucharest, as well as Western support for pro-democracy movements in Ukraine were interpreted as an implication of future NATO accession, as well as meddling in Russia's near abroad.⁶ It was not only Russian-speakers who were affected by language legislation in Ukraine (Hungarian and Romanian speakers in Western Ukraine were also strongly affected, particularly with language policies regarding education). However, the Russian language was and continues to be used consistently throughout Ukraine, and is part of *russskiy mir*, or Russian world, according to Vladimir Putin. Although the Russian Federation did not support the Baltic states joining NATO and the European Union, Ukraine joining NATO would be perhaps the harshest blow to Russia's geopolitical insecurity. To prevent Ukraine from shifting away from its influence, the Russian Federation has consistently exploited issues surrounding language, presenting them as dangerous to Ukrainian citizens.

LANGUAGE POLITICS IN RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Since the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, the Russian Federation has prioritized promoting and protecting the Russian language abroad, most notably in former Soviet countries with significant Russian-speaking populations. Multiple remarks on the topic were made by figures such as Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, and other Ministry of Foreign Affairs representatives over the years. This is usually done by mentioning one or more of the following: Russian residents, Russian speakers, Russian-speaking diaspora, Russians, compatriots, and national

⁶ Andrew E. Kramer, "Putin Warns of a Russian 'Red Line' the West Will Regret Crossing," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/21/world/europe/russia-putin-ukraine-navalny.html>.

minorities. Although it is important to note that these terms do not necessarily equate with one another, they are often used interchangeably by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs so as to cover a larger population that is oppressed or needs protection by the Russian state.

Spokesperson Zakharova even stated in 2018 that “a topic that has become routine in our briefings is discrimination against the Russia-speaking population in the Baltic states. It is routine, because it is at the center of attention and constant control of our country’s leadership and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.”⁷

In June 2014, the Presidential Council on the Russian Language was formed, just a few months after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Although a Presidential Council on the Russian Language had existed under first Russian President Boris Yeltsin, its main priorities were “development and support” of the Russian language.⁸ However, in 2014, along with development support, the rhetoric also switched to “protection”; specifically “protection [of the Russian language] in the Russian Federation and abroad.”⁹ In 2019, Putin also signed a decree for the council’s interdepartmental commissions to be engaged in state policy in the field of protection and support of the Russian language and promote it abroad.¹⁰ During the council’s meeting in 2019, along with discussing the need for congruent Russian language instruction

⁷ “Брифинг Официального Представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой, Светлогорск, 15 Августа 2018 Года - ,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, August 15, 2018, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1574938/#18.

⁸ “Указ Президента Российской Федерации ‘О Совете по русскому языку при Президенте Российской Федерации,’” Pub. L. No. 1221 (1995), <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&prevDoc=102048224&backlink=1&&nd=102038575>.

⁹ “Указ Президента Российской Федерации ‘О Совете при Президенте Российской Федерации по русскому языку,’” Pub. L. No. 409 (2014), <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&prevDoc=102362466&backlink=1&nd=102353206&rdk=0>.

¹⁰ “Путин утвердил состав Совета при президенте по русскому языку,” РИА Новости, August 12, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190812/1557424417.html>.

around the Russian Federation, Putin asserted that “[the council’s] goal is to formulate active and wholesome language governance, which will provide the preservation and development of the Russian language and literature in Russia and the world,” including through organizations such as Russkiy Mir, and through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs directly.¹¹ Hand in hand with promoting a positive image of the Russian Federation, Putin suggested that interest in the Russian language will increase if the Russian economy develops further, and that interest is decreasing because other states are “still afraid of [Russia].”¹² At the same time, he asserted that “It is not just cave-dwelling Russophobes waging war against the Russian language,” speaking in a militaristic manner while calling on the need to protect the language abroad, as opposed to just contributing to its development. It was at this same meeting that Putin suggested replacing Wikipedia with a digitized Russian encyclopedia.¹³

Appeals to organizations outside of the Russian Federation were further promoted at the seventh World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad. One of the recommendations agreed upon was to ask Russian members of parliament to bring up the “violations of compatriots in education in their native language in Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and other countries” at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and other international organizations.¹⁴ Similar to the Language Council, although the World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad

¹¹ “Заседание Совета по русскому языку,” Президент России, November 5, 2019, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61986>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Светлана Бочарова, “Куда Владимир Путин предложил вывести русский язык,” Ведомости, November 5, 2019, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2019/11/05/815484-vladimir-putin-ukazal>.

¹⁴ “Итоги VII Всемирного конгресса соотечественников, проживающих за рубежом,” Константин Затулин - официальный сайт, October 25, 2019, <https://zatulyn.ru/itogi-vii-vsemirnogo-kongressa-sootechestvennikov-prozhivayushhix-za-rubezhom/>.

has existed since 2001 and meets once every three years, a shift in rhetoric is clearly visible post-2014, where extra attention is devoted to protecting the Russian language outside of Russia, particularly in Russia's near abroad.¹⁵ Overall, the establishment and promotion of institutions on a state level to not only develop, but protect the Russian language, reflects the Russian government's prioritization of the issue as a tool of foreign policy.

CASE ONE: ESTONIA

Background

On November 16th, 1988, Estonia became the first Soviet republic to declare state sovereignty from Moscow. On January 18th, 1989, the Estonian SSR Supreme Soviet passed the Estonian Language Law, making Estonian the only state language.¹⁶ In 1992, following the dissolution of the USSR, the 1938 Citizenship Act was re-adopted. This granted citizenship to people who lived in Estonia before the Soviet takeover in 1940, and their descendants. About one-third of Estonia's population at the time - mostly Russian-speakers - became stateless. For those who settled in Estonia after 1940 to become citizens, they had to become naturalized, which included taking an Estonian language test.¹⁷ This remains an issue thirty years after the dissolution of the USSR. Today, 24.3% of Estonia's population, or 322,700 out of 1.328 million, identifies as ethnically Russian.¹⁸ In 2020, there were approximately 70,000 noncitizens, mostly

¹⁵ “Резолюция четвертого Всемирного конгресса соотечественников, проживающих за рубежом,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, October 28, 2012, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/compatriots/vsemirnyy_kongress_sootechestvennikov/id/1744138/.

¹⁶ Toivo U. Raun, “The Estonian SSR Language Law (1989): Background and Implementation,” *Nationalities Papers* 23, no. 3 (September 1995): 515–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905999508408400>.

¹⁷ Priit Järve and Vadim Poleshchuk, “Report on Citizenship Law : Estonia,” Technical Report (European University Institute, 2019), <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/65466>.

¹⁸ “Population,” Statistics Estonia, 2021, <https://www.stat.ee/en/find-statistics/statistics-theme/population>.

consisting of Russian-speakers. Although noncitizens have visa-free access to Russia and freedom of movement in the European Union, they cannot vote in national elections, run for office, or work in the public sector.

In regions where the Russian population is particularly high, like the city of Narva and in the capital city of Tallinn, one can get by in those cities without having to use Estonian in the public or private sector. However, this linguistic separation leads to discrimination in the form of wage and opportunity gaps in the labor market, as observed by the Estonian Human Rights Institute.¹⁹ Therefore, linguistic integration on a universal level is prioritized by the Estonian government both to bolster Estonia's own national identity, as well as to create more equal outcomes for all residents. Over the years, the number of Russian-language schools has decreased as Estonian was promoted and prioritized on a national level. In 2010, the Estonian Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act of 2010 was implemented, which required schools to conduct at least 60% of their education in Estonian.²⁰ Exemptions where an entire school can be taught in a minority language are allowed on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of the Estonian government. Additionally, as public-sector employees, teachers can be fined by the National Language Inspection (*Keeleinspeksioon*) if they speak Estonian poorly.

Finally, the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research also released The Education Strategy 2021–2035, which sets out key educational goals for the coming years. Some of the challenges listed include teachers' poor knowledge of Estonian, and that there is no

¹⁹ Mart Rannut, "The Legal and Actual Status of the Estonian Language in the Labour Market," *Estonian Cooperation Assembly Foundation*, Estonia 2016-2017 Human Development Report: Estonia at the Age of Migration (2017), <http://inimareng.ee/en/migration-identity-and-language-change/the-legal-and-actual-status-of-the-estonian-language-in-the-labour-market/>.

²⁰ "Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act," RT I 2010, 41, 240 § (2010), State Assembly of Estonia, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/530102013042/consolide>.

comprehensive plan for the development of Estonian-language education, starting from the preschool level.²¹ In order to address these issues, the report states that it is necessary to make teaching the Estonian language and culture a national priority; increase the capacity to provide high-quality instruction in Estonian in preschool; ensure that non-native Estonian students have a sufficient level of linguistic competence for continuing their education and succeeding in the labor market; and ensure that additional Estonian language training is provided after basic school (which is through 9th grade), so that as many graduates from basic school as possible achieve the B2 level. All of this is “to ensure the vitality and functioning of Estonian as the first language in all areas of life, to guarantee the right of everyone to use Estonian in Estonia, to preserve and strengthen the status and reputation of the Estonian language and the Estonian-speaking cultural space, and to value proficiency in other languages.” Commenting on this report, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas commented that Russian-language schools will no longer receive state funding by 2035.²²

Russian Government Reactions to Estonian and Latvian Language Legislation

The Russian Federation has repeatedly expressed concern over Estonia and Latvia’s language policies, as well as their treatment of noncitizens, accusing them of being Russophobic. It has concentrated most on language restrictions in education and media. This is visible through statements on official government platforms, responses to questions posed at briefings and

²¹ “Education Strategy 2021–2035” (Ministry of Education and Research, Republic of Estonia 2020), https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/haridusvaldkonna_arengukava_2035_kinnitaud_vv_eng_0.pdf.

²² “Каллас: после 2035 года государство прекратит финансировать школьное обучение на русском языке,” ERR, June 15, 2021, <https://rus.err.ee/1608247059/kallas-posle-2035-goda-gosudarstvo-prekratit-finansirovat-shkolnoe-obuchenie-na-russkom-jazyke>.

interviews, as well as through complaints to interstate organizations such as the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe, and the United Nations. While statements are sometimes made separately about the two countries, they are often grouped together as “the Baltics” or “the Baltic states.”

In September 2015, following a decision by Estonian courts for two Russian-language upper secondary schools to switch their primary language of instruction to Estonian, Zakharova called out “we have repeatedly expressed our concern towards the discriminatory language politics of the Estonian government in regards to our compatriots,” stating that the decision “was contradictory to recommendations by international human rights organizations for providing national minorities the right to saving and developing their languages, which once again confirms the actuality of these remarks.”²³

Soon after this court ruling, the “Russian School Abroad” and “Government Support and Promotion of the Russian Language Abroad” projects were approved by President Vladimir Putin on November 3rd and 4th 2015 respectively. These projects emphasize that the Russian language is an official language of organizations like the UN, UNESCO, CSTO, SCO, OSCE, IAEA, WHO, and the EAEU, but that interest in the language is going down or is being suppressed in countries where there are significant native speakers.²⁴ Additionally, they state that promoting the Russian language goes hand in hand with promoting a positive image of the Russian Federation and its key foreign policy interests. Actions include “support of the Russian

²³ “МИД РФ выразил озабоченность отказом правительства Эстонии ряду гимназий в праве преподавания на русском языке,” ERR, September 18, 2015, <https://rus.err.ee/217304/mid-rf-vyrazil-ozabochennost-otkazom-pravitelstva-jestonii-rjadu-gimnazij-v-prave-prepodavaniya-na-russkom-jazyke>.

²⁴ “Концепция государственной поддержки и продвижения русского языка за рубежом,” Pub. L. No. Пр-2283 (2015), <https://legalacts.ru/doc/kontseptsija-gosudarstvennoi-podderzhki-i-prodvizhenija-russkogo-jazyka/>.

language as an international and intranational language” and “maintaining the Russian language in countries historically tied to Russia” by creating a centralized system of Russian language instruction and financially supporting Russian language instructor training and Russian textbook distribution abroad.

In an interview to the Izvestiya newspaper in October 2016, the Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Grigory Karasin talked about diminished opportunities to learn the Russian language for compatriots in the Baltic states, and promoted the “Russian School Abroad” and the “Government Support and Promotion of the Russian Language Abroad” projects as necessary for children from compatriot families to maintain their native Russian language. He stressed that “the Russian language is not opposed to the state language and does not diminish it. On the contrary, it creates additional opportunities for children, and opens new horizons. In any case, you cannot take away peoples’ systemic roots.”²⁵ He additionally states that “no less than 30 million Russian compatriots who speak the Russian language reside outside of Russia. They need reliable information, and free access to objective, unbiased social media in their native language.”

In December 2020, on the thirtieth anniversary of the signing of the Resolution on National Equality by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the Russian Embassy in Estonia published a press release, stating that “not a trace remains from this good intention.”²⁶ It also points out criticism from the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the UNHCR regarding Estonia’s treatment

²⁵ “Интервью статс-секретаря – заместителя Министра иностранных дел России Г.Б.Карасина газете «Известия», опубликованное 27 октября 2016 года,” GruzInform, October 27, 2016, <http://ru.saqinform.ge/news/29591/interviU-stats-sekretarA-zamestitelA-ministra-inostranniK-del-rossii-g-b-karasina-gazete-izvestiA-opublikovannoe-27-oktAbrA-2016-goda.html>.

²⁶ Посольство России в Эстонии / Russian Embassy in Estonia, “Press Release,” Facebook, December 1, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2797719500498211&id=1551599625110211.

of its minorities, particularly those who are Russian-speaking. The Russian Federation has also maintained its position towards Russian speakers in informal settings. In January 2021, at a UNSC Arria-formula meeting on media freedom in Belarus, First Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations called out the Estonian delegation over Estonia's treatment of Russian speakers and its alleged violations of media freedoms. He states that "the Russian-speaking community of Estonia is about thirty percent of the population... it cannot even be considered as a minority in conventional sense, but rather a state-constituent nation, bearing in mind the size of the community and its historical role in nation building."²⁷ He also mentions that non-citizens, "69,000 people, which is about six percent of the population, the vast majority of whom are Russians and their descendants, are deprived of basic rights in this country," like with the closing of Russian state news channels such as Sputnik-Estonia.

In December 2021, reacting to Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas's comment on transitioning to fully Estonian schools by 2035, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Maria Zakharova commented in her weekly briefing that "what is going on in the Estonian education system cannot be called anything but forced assimilation of Russian-speaking children and depriving them of the right to receive an education in their native language."²⁸ She also calls on the UN, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe to give an objective evaluation of Tallinn's international human rights obligations in education, calling the Estonian endeavor a plan to

²⁷ "Statement by First Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy at Informal Arria-Formula VTC of UNSC Members on Media Freedom in Belarus," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, January 22, 2021, https://russiaun.ru/en/news/arria_220121.

²⁸ "Захарова: в Эстонии готовятся к насильственной ассимиляции русскоязычных детей," Sputnik Латвия, December 16, 2021, <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20211216/zakharova-v-estonii-gotovyatsya-k-nasilstvennoy-assimilyatsii-russkoyazychnykh-detey-19647974.html>.

“derussify” schools by 2035.

In summary, the Russian government’s reactions towards language policies in Estonia and Latvia are grounded on these policies being allegedly Russophobic. To further back up its claims, the Russian government seeks validation from interstate organizations, and describes these policies as undemocratic or violating human rights of Russian-speakers and the ethnic Russian minority.

CASE TWO: UKRAINE

Background

Along with a significant portion of Ukraine’s population identifying as native Russian speakers, the Russian Federation also claims to share history with modern-day Ukraine. Shared periods include Kyivan Rus and its baptism into Orthodox Christianity by Prince Vladimir the Great, the Russian Empire and the Cossack Hetmanate’s allegiance to the empire through the Treaty of Pereyaslav, then the Soviet Union, and then its breakup into independent states. This is further asserted by Putin’s claims that Ukraine was an artificial state created by Vladimir Lenin upon the creation of the Soviet Union, and was created without the consent of Russians living in the region.²⁹

Although being a Russian speaker does not always equal being an ethnic Russian given Ukraine’s wide use of Russian as a *lingua franca*, the status of the Russian language there remains important to Russia. But, the Russian Federation equates the two at times for its purposes of exploiting language politics. Ukraine has not conducted a census since 2001, as the

²⁹ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

census was delayed following the annexation of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, and once again due to COVID-19 in 2020. While one was planned for 2023, it is unclear if or how it will be conducted given the ongoing war and its consequences. Additionally, any surveys conducted post-2014 usually do not include data from Crimea, and little to no data from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. This makes it difficult to get an accurate and up-to-date picture of linguistic preferences on the ground.

In 2001, 77.8% identified as ethnically Ukrainian, and 17.3% as ethnically Russian.³⁰ However, 67.5% of the population identified its native language as Ukrainian, and 29.6% of the population identified its native language as Russian.³¹ Additionally, 85.2% of ethnic Ukrainians responded that their native language was their language of nationality, while 95.9% of ethnic Russians responded that their native language was their language of nationality.

Language Legislation in Ukraine

In October 1989, the Law on Languages was signed in the Ukrainian SSR, which recognized Ukrainian as the sole official state language, but guaranteed “the free use of Russian [and other minority languages] as a language of interethnic discourse.”³² Ukraine declared its independence on August 25th, 1991, and in October 1991, the Law on Citizenship was signed, granting citizenship to all permanent residents at the time of signing. In June 1996, upon Ukraine’s adoption of a new constitution, Ukrainian was once again designated the official state

³⁰ “General Results of the Census | National Composition of Population,” All-Ukrainian Population Census 2001 | English version, 2004, <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/>.

³¹ “General Results of the Census | Linguistic Composition of the Population,” All-Ukrainian Population Census 2001 | English version, 2004, <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/language/>.

³² Anna Batta, *The Russian Minorities in the Former Soviet Republics: Secession, Integration, and Homeland* (Routledge, 2021).

language, but the development of other ethnic languages used by Ukrainian citizens was permitted. Even in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, which was majority Russian-speaking, Russian was not designated as a state language, but rather as an official language.

During the 2010 presidential elections, then-candidate Viktor Yanukovich and his Party of Regions ran on a platform which proposed establishing Russian as a state language. This did not happen when he became president. However, in 2012, the law “On the Principles of State Language Policy,” also known as the Kivalov-Kolesnychenko Law, was signed. With it, languages spoken by at least ten percent of an oblast's population were designated as regional languages.³³ In total, eleven oblasts, as well as the cities of Kyiv and Sevastopol had more than ten percent of their population identify as Russian-speakers, and thus had Russian as a regional language.

Following the Euromaidan protests and Yanukovich’s flight from Ukraine, the provisional government moved to repeal the 2012 law, declaring it unconstitutional, and proposing to restore previous language protection as guaranteed by the 1996 Ukrainian constitution. Still, this was interpreted by some in Ukraine and in Russia as an attempt to completely ban the Russian language. This was a particularly sensitive issue in Crimea and the Donbass, whose residents especially benefited from the recent upgrade of the Russian language’s status. Although the law was not repealed then, this move by the provisional government further fed anti-Maidan sentiments in those regions, as well as fears of being targeted for being a Russian speaker, ethnically Russian, or for not supporting the Euromaidan movement as a

³³ István Csernicskó and Csilla Fedinec, “Four Language Laws of Ukraine,” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 23, no. 4 (2016): 560–82.

whole.³⁴ Within days, unmarked soldiers appeared in Crimea, paving the way for the referendum and annexation by Russia in March 2014, and declarations of independence in the Donbass in April 2014.³⁵

In July 2016, President Petro Poroshenko signed the law “On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine (Concerning the Share of Songs in the State Language in Music Radio Programs and Radio Broadcasts)”. The law required that at least twenty-five percent of songs on a radio station's daily playlist be in Ukrainian, rising to thirty percent over a year and then up to thirty-five percent the following year. Additionally, sixty percent of TV and radio programs had to be in Ukrainian.³⁶ In September 2017, the law “On Education” was signed, which required school instruction to be fully in Ukrainian from the fifth grade onward. Similar to motivations in Estonia, the law was also promoted to ensure equal socioeconomic outcomes for ethnic minorities.³⁷ In June 2019, the Law “On Ensuring the Functioning of Ukrainian as the State Language” came into force, officially repealing the 2012 law. While the law does not regulate the use of Ukrainian or other languages in private matters and religious affairs, it originally proposed language inspectors to monitor its use.³⁸ Finally, in January 2022, the law "On Printed Mass Media (Press) in Ukraine" came into force. This law required that any

³⁴ Anastasia Kukunova, “How Russian Language Is At The Center Of Russia-Ukraine War,” *Student Blog, Russia and Eurasia Program, The Fletcher School* (blog), February 27, 2022, <https://sites.tufts.edu/fletcherrussia/how-russian-language-is-at-the-center-of-russia-ukraine-war/>.

³⁵ “Timeline: The Events Leading up to Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” *Reuters*, March 1, 2022, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/events-leading-up-russias-invasion-ukraine-2022-02-28/>.

³⁶ “Ukraine Imposes Language Quotas for Radio Playlists,” *BBC News*, November 8, 2016, sec. News from Elsewhere, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-37908828>.

³⁷ Gwendolyn Sasse, “Ukraine’s Poorly Timed Education Law,” *Carnegie Europe*, October 2, 2017, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/73272>.

³⁸ Roman Huba, “Why Ukraine’s New Language Law Will Have Long-Term Consequences,” *openDemocracy*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-language-law-en/>.

publications in a minority language, such as Russian, also have a Ukrainian-language edition. Regional media must transition to this requirement by 2024.³⁹

Overall, in order to establish a more unified national identity, especially following 2014, Ukraine has prioritized the Ukrainian language on a state level, particularly in media and in education. However, this has proven to be problematic at times given the Russian language's large presence and the importance of Ukraine as a barrier state to the Russian Federation.

Russian Government Reactions to Language Legislation in Ukraine

The Russian government reacts to language legislation in Ukraine when it interprets language policies as Russophobic, and when Ukraine's attempted shifts towards the West, including through decreasing the status of the Russian language, appear to pose an existential threat to the Russian Federation. The Russian Federation has used military means in the name of defending the Russian language and Russian speakers, which it cannot do in reaction to the Baltic states. But, it has also called out Ukraine in organizations such as the OSCE and the United Nations, consistent with how it responds to language legislation in the Baltic states.

Although the Russian Federation did not support the Euromaidan movement and its leaders, it changed its rhetoric towards the protests following the proposal to revoke the 2012 language law on February 23rd, 2014. At first, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called for cooperation between all sides and generally condemned violence that occurred. But, after February 23rd, representatives of the Russian Federation began to describe the movement as

³⁹ "Since January 16, 2022, Print Media to Be Published in Ukrainian," Institute of Mass Information, December 10, 2021, <https://imi.org.ua/en/monitorings/since-january-16-2022-print-media-to-be-published-in-ukrainian-i42807>.

fascist, terrorist, and dictatorial. On February 24th, 2014, in its statement on events in Ukraine, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that

“Citing ‘revolutionary expediency,’ [the Ukrainian interim government] are stamping ‘decisions’ and ‘laws,’ including those aimed at deprivation of human rights of Russians and other national minorities living in Ukraine.

There are calls to prohibit the Russian language almost completely, lustration, liquidation of parties and organizations, closing of undesirable mass media, removal of restrictions for propaganda of Neo-Nazi ideology.

The goal is to suppress those who do not agree with this in different Ukrainian regions by dictatorial and even terrorist methods.”⁴⁰

Among the demands that were given by the Russian Federation on March 17th, 2014 to Ukraine were to “protect human rights and minority rights... and other principles, which support the political structure of Ukraine as a democratic federal state with sovereignty and neutral military-political status,” and that “the Russian language, along with Ukrainian, will be given the status of a second state language, and the rest of the languages - the status in accordance with the European Convention on Regional and Minority Languages.”⁴¹ Demands for Ukraine’s neutrality continue to go hand-in-hand with demands for respecting the rights of Russian-speakers from the beginning of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the present, especially when regime change is at stake.

Since the Euromaidan and Viktor Yanukovich’s flight from Ukraine, the Russian Federation has accused the United States and its partners of propping up the new Ukrainian

⁴⁰ “Заявление МИД России по событиям на Украине,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, February 24, 2014, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1670994/.

⁴¹ “Заявление МИД России о Группе Поддержки Для Украины - Министерство Иностранных Дел Российской Федерации,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, March 17, 2014, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1700559/.

government and pressuring it to take on reforms. For example, in a previously mentioned interview given to the Izvestiya newspaper in October 2016 by the Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Grigory Karasin, he also alleged that the West used Ukraine as a tool for Russophobic politics. This included “the prohibition of the Russian language, culture, journalism, and exclusion of Russians from the indigenous nations of Ukraine,” with the new Ukrainian government’s “first ‘instincts’ being canceling the status of the Russian language which was established in Ukrainian regions, and expelling Russians from Crimea.”⁴² Similarly, in a speech given on Russia’s Perviy Kanal talk show “The Great Game” in September 2018, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov mentioned that “Donetsk and Luhansk need to be given special status, where the right to speak Russian will be guaranteed... but Kurt Volker said that they will just take and occupy this part, and then, as the occupying administration, will decide it all themselves.”⁴³ This further demonstrates the Russian government’s stance that the West is effectively occupying Ukraine and is right at the Russian border, which poses an existential threat to the Russian Federation.

Reacting to the 2017 education law, the Russian representative to the OSCE Alexander Lukashevich spoke at the OSCE Permanent Council’s meeting in Vienna in September 2017. He mentioned that agreements that were violated by Ukraine’s adoption of said law included the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the European

⁴² “Интервью статс-секретаря – заместителя Министра иностранных дел России Г.Б.Карасина газете «Известия», опубликованное 27 октября 2016 года,” GruzInform, October 27, 2016, <http://ru.saqinform.ge/news/29591/interviU-stats-sekretarA-zamestitelA-ministra-inostranniK-del-rossii-g-b-karasina-gazete-izvestiA-opublikovannoe-27-oktAbrA-2016-goda.html>.

⁴³ “Выступление Министра Иностранных Дел С.В.Лаврова На Ток-Шоу «Большая Игра» На «Первом Канале», Москва, 4 Сентября 2018 Года,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, September 5, 2018, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1575413/.

Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education, the CSCE Concluding Document of the 1986 Vienna Meeting, the Document of the 1990 Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, and the 1991 Report of the CSCE Meeting of Experts on National Minorities, among others.⁴⁴ He stated that the law's main goals were "to infringe on the interests of millions of Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine as much as possible, and to enforce a monoethnic language regime in a multinational state." However, he also mentioned that European Union countries like Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Poland, Greece and Bulgaria expressed concern over the legislation. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Press Office similarly expressed concern over the law and referred to leaders of other European countries, although they acknowledge that the Russian language is not explicitly mentioned.⁴⁵ By referring to international institutions, including those often spearheaded by Western countries, the Russian Federation seeks to sow doubts in how democratic or progressive Ukraine really is, both in the global arena and among Ukraine's citizens given its poor treatment of Russian-speakers and ethnic Russians.

The Russian Federation brought up the repeal of the 2012 language law and the enforcement of the new 2019 language law at the UN Security Council and the Council of Europe. While the Council of Europe has been addressed multiple times over issues pertaining to language, the addition of the UN Security Council may be because the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also criticized the law for violating the Minsk Agreements. Additionally, it

⁴⁴ "Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCE Alexander Lukashovich's Remarks on Ukraine's Education Law Delivered at a Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, Vienna, September 28, 2017," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, September 29, 2017, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1554019/?lang=en.

⁴⁵ "Комментарий Департамента Информации и Печати МИД России в Связи с Принятием На Украине «Закона Об Образовании» - Министерство Иностранных Дел Российской Федерации," Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, accessed May 3, 2022, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1552177/.

asserted that the law demonstrates preferential treatment for European Union languages and Crimean Tatar over the Russian language, “which testifies to the double discrimination of the Russian language and only escalates contradictions and strengthens the potential for conflict within the country.”⁴⁶ Bringing up the issue to the United Nations Security Council signifies the Russian Federation’s dedication to protecting the rights of Russian speakers; in Ukraine’s case specifically, this signals the Russian Federation’s priorities for establishing a peace settlement in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

In summary, the Russian Federation focuses on issues of language politics in Ukraine for two reasons: when it interprets Ukraine’s promotion of a national identity as Russophobic, and when it interprets shifts away from the Russian sphere of influence through collaboration with the West as threatening to the Russian Federation’s existence.

CONCLUSION

War in Ukraine and Language Going Forward

On February 24th, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the beginning of a special military operation in Ukraine and launched a conventional full-scale war. Its goals included demilitarization of Ukraine, to ensure Ukraine’s neutrality, to recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR/LNR), and “denazify” Ukraine.⁴⁷ In the days leading up to the start of the war and throughout it, the Russian

⁴⁶ “Комментарий Департамента Информации и Печати МИД России в Связи с Принятием На Украине «Закона Об Образовании» - Министерство Иностранных Дел Российской Федерации,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, May 21, 2019, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1552177/.

⁴⁷ Natia Gamkrelidze and Tinatin Japaridze, “How Can Putin Save Face in Russia?,” Middle East Institute, May 3, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-can-putin-save-face-russia>.

government repeated rhetoric of Ukraine being an artificial state, violating the human rights of Russian and Russian speakers, and threatening the safety of the Russian Federation.

Additionally, although the official stance of the Russian government is that there is no war, rhetoric seems to suggest that there is a simultaneous war going on against the West. According to Maria Zakharova, “Ukraine fully under Washington’s control and seized by Russophobia is what the collective West needs as a geopolitical pawn against Russia.”⁴⁸ As of early May 2022, there is no clear end to what was supposed to be a short campaign.

On April 22nd, 2022, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced phase two of the special military operation, although it is debated whether various “phases” were as meticulously planned as the Russian Ministry of Defense states. The goals include establishing full control over the Donbass and Southern Ukraine in order to establish control over a land corridor to Crimea and to Transnistria.⁴⁹ According to Deputy Commander of the Central Military District Major General Rustam Minnekaev, in Transnistria “facts of oppression of the Russian-speaking population are noted... we are currently fighting with the world, like during the Great Patriotic War, all of Europe, the entire world was against us. And right now it is the same, they never loved Russia.”⁵⁰ This has prompted fears of further Russian troop buildup in Transnistria and a possible incursion into mainland Moldova. Moldova, like Ukraine, has only one state language (Romanian), but Russian is treated as a *lingua franca* and spoken widely throughout the country.

⁴⁸ “Захарова: заседание Евросовета подтвердило антироссийский курс Запада и Украины,” ТАСС, March 28, 2022, <https://news.rambler.ru/conflicts/48380549-zaharova-zasedanie-evrosoveta-podtverdilo-antirossiyskiy-kurs-zapada-i-ukrainy/>.

⁴⁹ “В Минобороны Назвали Задачи Второго Этапа Спецоперации На Украине,” ТАСС, April 22, 2022, https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/14446141?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Like Ukraine, part of Moldova's territory declared independence over alleged threats to linguistic rights, and has a self-declared government financially and militarily supported by the Russian Federation. Finally, like Ukraine, Moldova has pursued European Union and NATO membership.

Going forward in any peace negotiations, accessions over the Russian language will likely play a critical role, in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as in Ukraine as a whole. Although the entire country has been targeted, it has been majority Russian-speaking cities like Kharkiv and Mariupol that have been hit especially brutally. The war has also incited the largest refugee crisis in Europe to date, and displaced millions within Ukraine's borders. Consequently, ethnic and linguistic composition will likely be altered around Ukraine. But, it will continue to be difficult to get accurate statistics that will cover the entire country as long as the war wages on and Ukraine does not have full territorial sovereignty. Additionally, depending on political leanings that may have been altered as a result of the war, it is possible that people may choose to respond with a different preferred language or ethnic identity. For any sort of peace process, whether it be with Vladimir Putin or not, coming to terms with with, and separation of, ethnic and linguistic identity from the state will be critical for reconciliation. Furthermore, despite heavy losses to the Russian military throughout the military campaign, statements made about protecting ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers may be interpreted as legitimate threats to countries in the Russian Federation's near abroad, especially if they are not NATO members. Former Soviet states' attempts to revive previously suppressed identities, including linguistic identities, are interpreted as threatening by the Russian Federation, both to its interests and to its security.

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