

Title: Ukrainian's declaration of a mother tongue. A contemporary debate rooted in colonization.

Bartłomiej Chromik, Tetyana Lewińska

(University of Warsaw, University of Warsaw)

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The Ukrainian language in Ukraine has traversed and continues to navigate a lengthy path of resistance (in the legal sense) and confrontation (in the practical sense), not only in its condition and a relatively recent trajectory as an independent state but also as the country victimized by aggression and an ongoing war.

In this presentation, we will share our perspective on the possibilities of applying the concept of a 'mother tongue' and a 'native language' within the linguistic diversity of Ukrainians in the context of the legacies of colonization. We particularly focus on the notion of a mother tongue in the context of colonial linguistic policies, the connection between the native language and ethnic and national identities as well as the contrast between self-identification and linguistic practices. Colonial practices of the Russian Empire and later of the Soviet Union were rooted in restricting the languages of republics or transitioning to Russian as the official language. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's colonization practices in language policy were disguised under the guise of advocating for multilingualism and the rights of ethnic minorities. In practice, in the territory of Ukraine this led to functional bilingualism, where Russian was used on par with Ukrainian in public spaces, with noticeable dominance in eastern and southern regions. Significant shifts in the relationship between linguistic self-identification and language practices occurred in 2014 when Russian forces entered the territory of Donbas, purportedly to protect the Russian-speaking population. It was during this period that linguistic self-identification, tied to national rather than to ethnic identity, began to be manifest among some Ukrainians through the declaration of Ukrainian as their native language. Still, a significant percentage of the population continued to declare Ukrainian as their native language while conversing in Russian.

These recent developments again brought the issue of a mother tongue to the center of a public debate in Ukraine. This debate reveals the discrepancy between meaning attached to basic sociolinguistic terms like, already mentioned mother tongue, native language, and bilingualism in Ukraine and Western Europe. The consciousness of these differences may not only help in better understanding but also complement the theoretical discourses. The presentation is based on the results of two projects: "Language as a cure: linguistic vitality as a tool for psychological well-being, health, and economic sustainability" and "Multilingual worlds – neglected histories. Uncovering their emergence, continuity and loss in past and present societies".