

# Ukrainian independence 1991: Initial situation of language planning

Juliane Besters-Dilger

(University of Freiburg, Germany)

Keywords: Ukrainian language, Russian language, language planning, domains, education system

*The historical factors* that have shaped the relationship between Ukrainian and Russian include the following: Russian and Ukrainian are genetically related languages and Russian was present in Ukraine for centuries (Moser 2022), which also led to the emergence of a mixed language, Surzhyk. Ukraine was fully integrated into the Russian Empire in several steps since 1667 and Ukrainian was regarded as Russian dialect. Until 1991, Ukraine as a whole had never been an independent state and was the object of Russian language planning in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and even the Russian Federation.

On the other hand, there was resistance in intellectual circles in the USSR to the propagation of Russian (Dziuba 1968; Krouglov 2021) and the language planning of Ukrainian could draw on preparatory work and supporters since the 19th century (Prosvita, Shevchenko Society, Writers' Union). In addition, western Ukraine, which only fell to the Soviet Union in 1944, maintained a centuries-long tradition of the Ukrainian language.

*The linguistic situation in 1991* was the following: The language law of October 1989, which declared Ukrainian the only state language, had already been passed, but the census of the same year showed a further decline in the number of native Ukrainian speakers. In fact, at least 50% of the population preferred to speak Russian. Most domains - except in western Ukraine - were Russian-speaking: business, science, media, education, administration, judiciary, military. Ukrainian was the language of the rural population and the language within family and friends. Even when schooling in Ukrainian was possible, as in western Ukraine, higher education and military service led to Russification. The prestige of Russian as an indispensable language for a career was much higher.

*The main measures* of the first President, Kravchuk, concerned two domains in whose language use he could intervene: administration, including the judiciary, and education. Kravchuk tried to impose Ukrainian as a school language in every region to the extent that citizens of this region had declared themselves native Ukrainian speakers in 1989. This led to significant resistance in eastern and southern Ukraine.

The balance between Ukrainization and the promotion of minority languages (including the self-proclaimed minority language Russian) is still a problem today.

The prestige of the Ukrainian language remained lower than that of Russian. Only the rigid language law of 2019 and, above all, the Russo-Ukrainian war led to a clear turn to the Ukrainian language.

## References

Dziuba, Ivan (1965), *Internatsionalizm chy russifikatsiia*. Miunxen 1968

Krouglov, Michail (2021), Language planning and policies in Russia through a historical perspective, *Current Issues in Language Planning* 23 (4), 412-434.

Moser, Michael (2022), Geschichte und Gegenwart des Russischen in der Ukraine – ein Überblick, *Die Welt der Slaven* 67, 393-423.

