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RETHINKING LANGUAGE SOVEREIGNTY: UKRAINE'S POSTCOLONIAL CHALLENGE

Abstract

Background. *Ukraine's post-Soviet language policy has often been interpreted through geopolitical or normative lenses. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the enduring impact of colonial and imperial structures on language hierarchies and societal attitudes. The Russian language, while often framed as a pragmatic tool or cultural bridge, retains a symbolic dominance rooted in historical asymmetries of power.*

Contribution to the research field. *The present study raises the possibility that Ukraine's current language policy cannot be fully understood without a postcolonial framework that interrogates both external pressures and internalized linguistic hierarchies. This combination of findings provides some support for the conceptual premise that language sovereignty is inseparable from broader struggles for epistemic and cultural decolonization.*

Purpose. *The article aims to critically reassess Ukraine's newest language policy reforms in light of its postcolonial condition, exploring how questions of language sovereignty intersect with identity, memory, and resistance.*

Methods. *This study applies a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, drawing on critical discourse analysis of legal texts and public debates, as well as theoretical perspectives from postcolonial studies and sociolinguistics, especially in the context of language policy.*

Results. *The findings show that the legal and symbolic prioritization of the Ukrainian language in Ukraine functions not only as a tool of nation-building but also as an act of symbolic decolonization. These measures primarily challenge the enduring effects of Russification.*

Discussion. *These findings raise intriguing questions regarding the nature and extent of postcoloniality in Ukraine, particularly in contexts where the colonial relationship was ideologically denied. The Ukrainian case suggests that efforts to reclaim language sovereignty may entail complex negotiations between past oppression, present pluralism and future aspirations.*

Keywords: linguistics, Ukrainian language, language policy, minorities, postcolonializm, neocolonization, decolonization.

1. Introduction

Postcolonial studies today are widely recognized as essential for analyzing, understanding, and properly interpreting the specific characteristics and trajectories of colonial policies, which vary significantly across countries and continents. Ukraine is no exception, and postcolonial studies – both within Ukraine and in Ukrainian studies abroad – bear their own distinctive features. These are shaped by a long history of multilingual and multicultural coexistence under the forced unity of the Soviet Union, the colonial policies of the Russian Empire that preceded it, and, after the USSR's collapse, the mismanagement of state-building in independent Ukraine. Political dependency and institutional instability, which hindered the development of a strong national identity and effective state structures, became hallmarks of Ukrainian governance during the thirty years of independence.

Another turning point came in 2022, with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. According to researchers, the war in Ukraine has triggered profound processes, with decolonization at their center. However, the decolonization of Russian politics, Russian imperialism, and Russian culture is not – once again – an abstract gesture detached from a broader context, but is becoming, before our very eyes, part of a broader shift aimed at restoring epistemic justice (Szerszeń, 2023, p. 4).

In the introduction, we will also define the terminological framework, which, according to S. Biedarieva, should be clarified, as "notions of the postcolonial and decolonial are not interchangeable in terms of the war and history between Ukraine and Russia; rather they reflect two different stages of libera-

tion from entanglement. While the former denotes the situation immediately following the colonial experience and anti-colonial struggle, taking on all the implications of colonialism with the intention of reinterpreting them, the latter speaks about the final process of dismantling the colonial narrative" (Biedarieva, 2022, p. 2). The researcher simultaneously explains the difficulties associated with the use of this terminology, as "in Ukraine's particular decolonial case, Russia is no longer present as a political or cultural agent of impact. Among Ukrainians, there is more than a general lack of interest in Russia and its territory; indeed, there is a conscious collective position of distancing to avoid entanglement. We are yet to invent a new framework for interpreting and describing the decolonial state in which we find ourselves, for it goes beyond any existing postcolonial or decolonial paradigm" (Biedarieva, 2022, p. 14). Ukrainian linguist N. Yasakova writes that "in the construction of national identity among colonized peoples, it is characteristic to establish their differences from the colonizers" (Yasakova, 2024, p. 35). At the same time, she notes the difficulties associated with self-understanding in a newly liberated world, since, in her words, "for a nation that has existed under colonial conditions, developing conceptions of its own past and forming and preserving historical memory is an extremely complex task" (Yasakova, 2024, p. 32).

The situation analyzed by S. Biedarieva and N. Yasakova, is similar to that in academia, which is likewise grappling with the challenge of moving away from long-established dependence on Russocentric scholarship. Both Ukrainian and international scholars have emphasized the need to liberate Ukrainian studies – including its linguistic dimension – from the lingering influence of Soviet and, subsequently, Russian ideological paradigms. In the context of education, this requires a re-evaluation of traditional approaches. Ukrainian studies should no longer remain subordinated to colonial paradigms based on Russian academic models. For decades, research agendas, curricula, and even terminology were shaped under Russian scholarly influence. Foreign terms entered Ukrainian via Russian, transliteration was mediated by Russian orthography, and Russian scientific achievements were often prioritized at the expense of broader global perspectives. These practices are remnants of colonial dependency and must be overcome. Ukrainian studies must undergo a process of decolonization – detaching from the singular "correct" model and instead aligning with wider European and global academic traditions.

In *Decolonizing Academic Curricula: Integrating Ukrainian Studies through a Thematic Approach* (Grebeniuk et al., 2025), the authors propose a

comprehensive theoretical framework along with practical tools for renewing Ukrainian studies in the context of war. They emphasize the need to rethink Ukrainian culture, literature, and language through a decolonial lens. It provides teaching materials, guidelines, and questions essential to transforming the field. A curated literature overview helps educators and students explore Ukrainian realities and sociocultural dynamics with critical awareness. With all of this in mind, we now turn to works that help us explore and answer key questions about Ukraine's language policy – ranging from general overviews to in-depth analyses of the present situation during wartime and within the broader context of the decolonization of knowledge.

2. Theoretical Literature Review

The language policy of Ukraine since gaining independence in 1991 has been marked by inconsistency and frequent shifts, largely dictated by the changing political climate, ideological orientations of successive presidents, and parliamentary majorities (Romaniuk, 2016, p. 21; 2015, pp. 208–222). M. Moser's analysis of language politics under President Yanukovych illustrates how legal instruments, international frameworks, and political actors were mobilized to advance Russian language rights at the expense of Ukrainian sovereignty. His work, alongside others, maps the struggle between competing language ideologies in post-Soviet space (Moser, 2013). These fluctuations have significantly impacted the legislative landscape surrounding language use and have reflected broader debates about national identity, cultural sovereignty, and geopolitical alignment. This complex and at times contradictory evolution underscores the need for thorough analysis and evaluation of language policy within the broader framework of post-Soviet transformation. Central to this analysis is the comparative study of the 2012 and 2019 language laws and their consequences for Ukrainian society, especially regarding the symbolic and functional roles of Ukrainian and Russian.

One of the key voices in this discourse, B. Azhniuk, has repeatedly addressed the role of language in Ukrainian nation-building and cultural consolidation. He argues that despite the constitutional primacy of Ukrainian, passed legislation, particularly the 2012 law, effectively privileged Russian and led to linguistic segregation, weakening the integrative function of the state language. B. Azhniuk highlights the necessity of a balanced yet assertive language policy, one that secures the rights of minority languages while reinforcing the unifying function of Ukrainian (Azhniuk, 2017–18; 2019). In a 2021

monograph, B. Azhniuk further elaborates on the critical importance of language policy in shaping societal ideals and securing cultural continuity (Azhniuk, 2021). He highlights the role of legislation and state institutions in either preserving or transforming language practices, and stresses the need to maintain the qualitative richness of the Ukrainian language – its stylistic variety, purity, and standardization – as essential for intergenerational transmission. He also critiques the inconsistent application of international documents such as the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, noting the risks of political manipulation when these frameworks are implemented without contextual sensitivity.

A broader set of studies builds on these concerns, with particular attention to the challenges of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism and language mixing. These works note the persistence of Russian in private and public life, including media and education, and analyze how this coexistence shapes Ukrainian identity. Despite a growing majority identifying Ukrainian as their native language (as revealed in the 2001 census), widespread bilingualism – often realized in the hybrid form of *surzhyk* – complicates notions of linguistic loyalty and national belonging (Besters-Dilger, 2007).

Scholars such as V. Kulyk have contributed comparative analyses of language policy in other multilingual states, assessing how models from Europe and beyond might inform Ukraine's approach (Kulyk, 2014). He observes that the legal marginalization of Russian contrasts with its continued social presence, generating tensions between formal policy and lived practice. This dissonance not only fuels public controversy but also informs elite discourses on identity and nationhood.

The work of L. Bilaniuk brings an ethnographic perspective to these dynamics, particularly in the context of the Orange Revolution and its aftermath (Bilaniuk, 2005). Her research exposes the ideological underpinnings of linguistic categorization and explores how political upheaval reconfigures social perceptions of language. Similarly, L. Masenko investigates the colonial legacy embedded in Ukraine's linguistic situation, arguing that the dominance of Russian in many spheres of communication reflects the long-term effects of imperial and Soviet policies (Masenko, 2004, 2020). She emphasizes the need to evaluate not just speaker numbers, but also the functional reach of each language in public and private domains.

In fact, an important contribution to the postcolonial language debate was already made in 2000 by the political scientist S. Stewart with her publication

Sprachenpolitik als Sicherheitsproblem in der Ukraine, in which she points to the explicit dependence on the Russian language but also emphasizes the importance and, above all, the controversy of the "language question" (Stewart, 2000, p. 32).

Of course, issues of language policy, planning, and decolonization have also been addressed in other works, which are not examined here in detail due to the scope of this article. These include studies by sociolinguists such as H. Matsyuk, S. Sokolova, O. Danilevska, I. Renchka, N. Trach, H. Shumytska, H. Yavorska, among others, who in recent years have analyzed the challenges of the Ukrainian language situation, the trajectories of its development, and the necessary legislative reforms. It is also pertinent to acknowledge the sustained contributions of N. Kobchenko (e.g., 2023) and N. Yasakova (e.g., 2023) in the field of postcolonial studies, particularly their investigations into processes of identity formation and strategies for overcoming the enduring effects of totalitarian influence on scholarly discourse.

The broader theoretical literature emphasizes that Ukraine's language policy since independence has been shaped by political shifts, competing ideologies, and the enduring influence of Russian, resulting in fluctuating legislative frameworks and ongoing societal tensions between Ukrainian and Russian. Scholars consistently highlight the need for balanced and assertive policies that strengthen Ukrainian as a unifying state language, while also protecting minority rights, addressing bilingualism, and acknowledging the functional and symbolic roles of language in national identity and cultural continuity.

3. Data

In our article, the data show that Ukraine's language policy has evolved from the 1989 law, which recognized Ukrainian while preserving Russian privileges, to the 2019 law mandating the use of Ukrainian in administration, education, media, public services, and cultural events through staged implementation (2019–2024). The 2012 law granted Russian regional status in oblasts where over 10% of the population spoke Russian, but it was blocked following the Maidan, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in Donbas.

The data also include complementary legislation: the 2021 law on Indigenous Peoples and the 2023 law on National Minorities, which protect education, media, and public information in minority languages in accordance with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The Language Ombudsman, established in 2019, monitors compliance, enforces penalties,

conducts inspections, and promotes the use of Ukrainian. Quotas and transitional measures include 75–90 % Ukrainian in broadcasting, 60–100 % instruction in schools by Grade 12, and Ukrainian-language editions of newspapers and websites.

These data illustrate Ukraine's systematic decolonial strategy, consolidating Ukrainian as the state language while ensuring protections for minority communities. A more detailed analysis concerning these and broader issues will be presented in the next section of the article.

4. Ukrainian Language Policy
in the Post-Soviet Period – Brief Overview

As early as 1989, shortly before the Soviet Union's collapse, Ukraine enacted its first language law, *On Languages in the Ukrainian SSR* (Zakon, 1989), which elevated Ukrainian's status while preserving a privileged role for Russian. Following independence on 24 August 1991, Ukrainian became the sole state language – except in Crimea, where Ukrainian, Russian and Crimean Tatar shared official status – but the 1989 law remained unamended alongside the 1996 Constitution (Konstytutsiia, 1996). There, Article 10 upheld Ukrainian's primacy yet continued to grant Russian a special position, a reality confirmed by the 2001 census, which recorded nearly 30 percent of the population as native Russian speakers, especially in the south and east. In everyday life, Russian remained even more widespread, since "mother tongue" in Ukraine often denotes ethnic identity rather than actual language use.

In practice, Russian functioned as a post-colonial legacy: legally protected and institutionally entrenched, while increasingly juxtaposed against a resurgent Ukrainian, whose status was unstable and even threatened. Debates over a new language law began in 2010, reflecting a growing awareness that the inherited Soviet system would require deliberate decolonial measures. This early phase lays the groundwork for understanding why subsequent legislation adopted a staggered implementation, both to allow institutions time to adapt and to signal a gradual shift away from Russian-centric norms.

5. Ukrainian Language Policy
in 2012 – An Attempt at Neocolonization

In 2012, the new language law *On the Principles of State Language Policy* (Zakon, 2012), also known as the Kolesnychenko-Kivalov Law, was passed,

sparking a wave of criticism. One can undoubtedly speak of a case of official and internal neocolonization. Even the Venice Commission criticized the law for undermining minority-rights protections under the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (Khartiia, 1992), which Ukraine had ratified in 2005. Under its provisions, any language spoken by at least 10 percent of a region's population could be granted regional or minority status. Crucially, however, the Ukrainian text of the Charter had been translated from Russian rather than English, introducing a mistranslation of the term "minority" that skewed its application (Mierzwa, 2024, pp. 158–159).

These neocolonial measures significantly altered language practices: in around six oblasts, Russian functioned de facto as a second official language, extending into education, media, public services and administration.

Only the Maidan protests of late 2013, followed by Crimea's annexation in March 2014 and the outbreak of war in Donbas, triggered a renewed push for decolonization. Transitional president Oleksandr Turchynov formally blocked any further application of the 2012 law and called for drafting replacement legislation. As early as 2008, M. Riabchuk had argued that the language question can only be solved in a liberal society, not in a Soviet one, and the choice of which language to speak must belong to the citizen, not to officials or service providers (Riabchuk, 2008).

In the years that followed, a series of interim laws paved the way for a fully decolonial statute. In January 2016, the law *On Television and Radio Broadcasting* (Zakon, 2016) introduced quotas requiring at least 75 percent of public-service and 60 percent of private broadcasting to be in Ukrainian. In September 2017, the law *On Education* (Zakon, 2017) was enacted with a transitional timetable running to 2023 (later extended to 2024): by Grade 5, at least 20 percent of instruction must be delivered in Ukrainian; by Grade 12, this increases to a minimum of 60 percent, while schools may still offer one ECRML-protected minority language, English, or another EU language. Finally, in February 2018, the Constitutional Court declared the language law from 2012 unconstitutional, clearing the path for a new law.

In April 2019, Ukraine adopted the newest language law, which is widely regarded as the first fully decolonial language law. It immediately drew criticism from Russia, as well as Hungary and Romania, but represented a decisive break with the neocolonial legacy of its predecessor.

6. Ukrainian Language Policy
in 2019 – An Attempt at Decolonization

While the 2012 law exemplified neocolonial tendencies, the new law *On Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language* (Zakon, 2019) represents Ukraine's shift into a decolonial phase of language policy. Rather than a single sweeping decree, its provisions were introduced in four stages to allow institutions to adjust and to signal a deliberate break with Soviet-Russian linguistic norms.

The first stage took effect on 16 July 2019, when all state bodies and local administrations became required to conduct their written and oral communications exclusively in Ukrainian. This entrenched Ukrainian as the obligatory language of official documentation, legal proceedings, and public services.

In September 2020, the next stage extended the mandate to state secondary schools, which were now obliged to teach exclusively in Ukrainian.

Beginning in January 2021, all service providers and labels on goods and services had to be available in Ukrainian (the use of another language remained possible only by mutual agreement). By July 2021, Ukrainian became compulsory for state-funded cultural, artistic, and entertainment events, covering announcements, posters, tickets (with the exception of sports), museum and exhibition signage, cinema (Ukrainian dubbing or, at most, 10 percent foreign-language showings with Ukrainian subtitles), tourist and excursion services, and at least 50 percent of book titles.

From January 2022, nationwide newspapers and magazines were required to offer Ukrainian-language editions (excluding publications in EU languages and Crimean Tatar); and by July 2022, company websites and user interfaces had to switch to Ukrainian, with fines for repeat violations coming into force.

Finally, in July 2024, the regional press had to publish Ukrainian-language versions, and broadcast quotas rose – national television and radio from 75 percent to 90 percent, local from 60 percent to 80 percent – while the External Independent Evaluation for school leavers will be conducted solely in Ukrainian (except for foreign-language exams) from January 2030.

Together, these staged measures function as a decolonial strategy, gradually displacing the institutional dominance of Russian and aiming to restore epistemic justice by reaffirming Ukrainian's central role. The law also imposes fines on individuals and organizations that fail to comply, underlining its enforceable character. Although criticized by various parties, such as Russia and

Hungary, supporters argue that the law is a necessary corrective to the post-Soviet legacy and a cornerstone of Ukraine's European integration (RFE/RL, 2019).

7. Additional Steps in the Attempt at Decolonization: The Position of the Language Ombudsman

With the adoption of the 2019 language law, Ukraine established the Commissioner for the Protection of the State Language, commonly referred to as the Language Ombudsman (Zakon, 2019). This independent office was created to ensure the protection and promotion of the Ukrainian state language across all spheres of public life. Enshrined in the law, the Ombudsman's mandate includes monitoring compliance with the legislation, safeguarding the linguistic rights of citizens in the public sphere, and addressing violations in areas such as public administration, education, healthcare, culture, media, and services. Individuals who experience infringements of their right to use Ukrainian in the public domain may file complaints, which the Ombudsman is authorized to investigate and, where appropriate, address through administrative mechanisms or refer to competent authorities.

Beyond its supervisory role, the Language Ombudsman conducts comprehensive public-awareness campaigns aimed at promoting the everyday use of Ukrainian and informing citizens about their linguistic rights. These efforts target both urban and rural populations and seek to explain not only the legal requirements but also the broader rationale for using Ukrainian as a cornerstone of national identity and social cohesion. The Ombudsman also facilitates dialogue with state institutions, civil society organizations, minority-language communities, and private-sector actors to identify challenges in implementing the law and to formulate practical solutions.

Additionally, the office initiates sociolinguistic research and cooperates with public authorities to support the development and refinement of language policy. In this regard, the office functions not only as a regulatory authority but also as a mediator and policy advisor, helping bridge the gap between legal mandates and real-life language practices. For example, he publicly exposes violations of the language law (Shurmakevych, 2024). The Commissioner is appointed and dismissed by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine and serves a five-year term. Although operating within the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers, the Office enjoys institutional independence, enabling impartial execution of its duties. The Commissioner is empowered to conduct inspec-

tions, request documentation from public and private entities, issue mandatory instructions to address violations, and initiate administrative proceedings. However, the office does not possess judicial authority and often collaborates with other competent bodies to enforce language legislation.

Despite objections from some minority groups, who fear that rigorous enforcement might marginalize non-Ukrainian speakers, the Language Ombudsman remains a cornerstone of Ukraine's decolonial language strategy. By actively dismantling the symbolic and institutional dominance of Russian, the Ombudsman reinforces Ukrainian's status as the sole state language and advances the broader project of post-Soviet "epistemic justice." This role is especially significant given the historical entanglement of language with power and identity in Ukraine.

8. Ukraine's Language Policy on Minorities

Alongside the 2019 language law and the continuing application of the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, Ukraine has enacted two additional statutes focused on minority affairs.

In 2021, the law *On the Indigenous Peoples of Ukraine* (Zakon, 2021) established special legal status and protections for three indigenous groups – Crimean Tatars, Karaites, and Krymchaks – creating consultative bodies and safeguarding their rights to culture, education, and language.

Then, in 2023, the law *On National Minorities (Communities) of Ukraine* (Zakon, 2023) extended protections to all other recognized minority communities, guaranteeing rights to schooling, media, and public information in their native languages. Due to the realities of the ongoing war and occupation, neither statute currently applies to the Russian-speaking population.

Much like the 2019 language law, these minority-rights laws drew sharp criticism from Hungary, who argued that their ethnic communities in Ukraine would face undue restrictions, and even threatened to block Ukraine's EU accession. The Venice Commission echoed some of these concerns in its opinion, leading Ukrainian legislators to amend clauses on educational quotas and local administrative use of minority languages. A compromise text was adopted in late 2023 that preserved core protections for minority groups while addressing partner-state objections (Hall, 2023).

In 2024, lawmakers proposed an amendment to the educational law requiring students to use Ukrainian not only during lessons but also during breaks (Mamchenko, 2024). Following strong protests from Hungarian and Roma-

nian minority representatives, a softened amendment was drafted in 2025 to allow optional use of minority languages in non-instructional settings. This ongoing negotiation between majority-language consolidation and minority-language accommodation continues to shape Ukraine's decolonial trajectory.

So today, Ukraine's language policy is shaped by not just the 2019 law but also by its commitments under the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* and two separate minority-rights laws. N. Trach (2015) rightly pointed out that in post-Soviet area, the laws are more declarations than real mechanisms of social interactions (Trach, 2015, p. 219). This new constellation of legal instruments – three major laws plus the Charter – creates a highly complex framework that both advances Ukrainian as the state language and embeds protections for minority groups. Managing these overlapping provisions, alongside ongoing wartime realities, presents a significant administrative and political challenge. Yet the very breadth of this legal architecture also testifies to the depth of Ukraine's commitment to linguistic decolonization: in times of crisis and war, the country continues to refine and expand its safeguards, underscoring that language remains central to its national and European aspirations.

9. Results and Discussion

On both professional and societal levels, the recognition of language as a key identity marker intensified in Ukraine after 2022. Numerous educational initiatives emerged – language courses for internally displaced persons, refugees, and foreigners in cities such as Lviv, Ternopil, Lutsk and others. Language choice became a conscious act of civic expression: in social media, users began posting more frequently in Ukrainian, often adding statements such as "From now on, I will write only in Ukrainian." This kind of linguistic self-identification has become a defining characteristic of wartime life since February 24, 2022.

It is important to note that, in the face of the threat of renewed colonial subjugation, the imperative for clear self-identification among Ukrainians has intensified. This is exemplified by the increasing centrality of language in public life, which has, in turn, elevated the role of the Language Ombudsman. The establishment of this institution constitutes a significant structural response to the growing need for oversight and enforcement of national language legislation. A symbolic linguistic division has taken shape: Russian is increasingly employed in reference to "the enemy," particularly Russian nationals, whereas

Ukrainian functions as a marker of in-group identity, showing solidarity, closeness, and national cohesion. This dichotomy establishes a pronounced linguistic boundary between "us" and "them." In this context, the articulation of linguistic and national identity becomes crucial not only for individual self-definition but also for maintaining the coherence and sovereignty of state institutions.

The broader sociopolitical context, particularly the full-scale war initiated by Russia in 2022, has intensified the urgency of language-related debates. Scholars increasingly recognize the centrality of language in wartime discourse, hate speech, and national resilience. The weaponization of language in both domestic and international communication underscores its role not only as a cultural asset but also as a tool of propaganda, resistance, and identity defence. Language conflicts have become not merely symbolic, but existential. In this light, academic attention has turned to political and parliamentary discourse, exploring how language is employed in legislative debates, policy framing, and media narratives.

Theoretical and empirical investigations also extend to multilingual settings beyond Ukraine, with comparative studies examining language conflict, policy, and coexistence in countries such as Belarus and Russia. These works offer valuable methodological insights for linguistic conflict research and contribute to the development of a more inclusive and context-sensitive model for language governance in Ukraine (cf. Müller & Wingender, 2001).

Furthermore, recent interdisciplinary collections have situated the Ukrainian case within broader postcolonial and geopolitical frameworks. These studies highlight the need for a decolonized understanding of Ukrainian language, literature, and culture – not as derivatives of Russian counterparts, but as entities with their own ways shaped by diverse European and global influences. Scholars have begun to reframe Ukrainian cultural production, from folklore and visual arts to children's literature and film, as repositories of national memory and identity, rather than as appendages to a Russian-centric canon.

We have previously emphasized the importance of integrating contemporary Ukrainian realities into the curricula of Ukrainian studies abroad. This involves not only teaching the language practically but also introducing students to critical discourses on language policy, minority language rights, and the sociopolitical status of Ukrainian (Romaniuk, 2023, 2025). We also note a growing body of research responding to the challenges facing Ukrainian studies. Scholars have called for the decolonization of a field that has long operated within the framework of Russian – dominated Slavic studies, shaped by Soviet

approaches to language, culture, and history across the post-Soviet space. Today, there is an active rethinking of how Ukraine is represented in international academic settings – how it is written about, taught, and interpreted.

Drawing on our own experience in academic and didactic work within Ukrainian studies abroad, we advocate for a revision of how Ukrainian is taught as a foreign language. This includes not only the linguistic component but also the ideological dimension: understanding Ukrainian as a marker of identity, its contested status, and its historical and political implications. Students must understand the historical and modern complexity of the "language question" in Ukraine, and place it within the broader context of colonial and postcolonial policy – from the Russian Empire to today's Russian Federation (Romaniuk, 2025), they must be equipped to contextualize Ukraine's language situation along a historical timeline and interpret it through the prism of colonial and decolonial shifts.

In the field of language policy, Ukraine's decolonial efforts have led to a complex but increasingly coherent legal framework. Since 2019, several key laws have been adopted that reposition the Ukrainian language as a marker of sovereignty, including the comprehensive law on the state language and additional legislation on indigenous and minority communities. These efforts reflect a clear institutional will to dismantle postcolonial linguistic hierarchies. At the same time, the multiplicity of legal instruments underscores the challenges of ensuring consistent implementation. These challenges are further illustrated by the recent change in the office of the Language Ombudsman, held by Taras Kremin from 2020 to 2025 and, since July 15, 2025, by Olena Ivanovska, appointed by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. This ambivalence reflects a broader postcolonial reality: while structural decolonization is advancing, its practical consolidation remains fragile and contested.

10. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is essential to strengthen the efforts of educational institutions both in Ukraine and abroad to dismantle persistent stereotypes and to build a modern educational process grounded in truthful, undistorted information. For too long, Ukraine has been portrayed exclusively through the lens of its Soviet past – as merely a former Soviet republic – resulting in a skewed understanding shaped by Soviet and, later, Russian ideological influence.

Correcting this narrative will foster a clearer recognition of the distinctiveness of the Ukrainian language, dispelling myths that portray it as merely a

variant of Russian or as artificially separated from it. It will also clarify the uniqueness of Ukrainian literature, which does not evolve under the influence of Russian canons and traditions but instead follows its own path – rooted in the diverse experiences of its authors and drawing inspiration from both European and global cultural contexts. When viewed through a decolonized lens, Ukrainian culture will be acknowledged as one that preserves and transmits memory and knowledge about the Ukrainian people.

This process of cultural and language rethinking is mirrored in Ukraine's recent language policy reforms, which can be seen as part of a broader postcolonial shift. The legislation adopted since 2019 does not simply promote Ukrainian as the state language – it actively challenges the lingering effects of imperial linguistic hierarchies. By gradually reducing the dominance of Russian in public institutions, media, and education, Ukraine is asserting not only full sovereignty but also epistemic agency. In this sense, the new language law becomes a real tool of decolonization: it reorients the linguistic landscape toward a self-defined cultural identity and creates legal mechanisms to protect that identity against external pressures. These developments underscore that the Ukrainian language is not a relic of resistance but a living medium of cultural self-determination.

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