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Russian language in Ukraine: does it concern only Russians?

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This paper examines the problem of current status of the Russian language in Ukraine. Based on the data of a monitoring "Ukrainian society" conducted by the Institute of Sociology (Kyiv) on the yearly basis since 1994, I define the factors that influence people's attitudes toward the Russian language. The focus of the analysis is on the individual- and regional-level effects. The results show that there is a significant regional effect on the degree of support of the Russian language: the more Russian-speaking people live in the oblast (administrative unit), the more likely people from this oblast are to support the official status of the Russian language. In the meantime, no nationality effect was revealed suggesting that Ukrainians and Russians do not differ in the level of support of the official status for the Russian language in Ukraine.

Introduction

After Ukraine had become an independent state in 1991, the problem of the status of the Russian language remained unsettled and is still a stumbling block for many political and civil forces. The current Constitution of Ukraine proclaims Ukrainian to be the only state language on the territory of the country. However, the Ukrainian media, scientists and public figures keep discussing the possibility of adopting Russian as the second state language. This debate often turns around such issues as legitimacy of bilingualism, specific conditions of Ukraine as a multinational state and protection of cultural capital of different ethnic groups. According to the results of social surveys and official statistics a relatively large part of the Ukrainian population considers Russian their native language.

This paper presents an empirical analysis of public opinion in Ukraine concerning the status of the Russian language and attempts to reveal the factors that explain the differ-

ences in attitudes toward the Russian language. Multilevel analysis was used to assess the effects of individual socio-demographic characteristics on support for official bilingualism in Ukraine and at the same time to consider the regional effect. This approach helps not only to better address the range of the problems that identify the current sociolinguistic situation in Ukraine, but also to explain the process of opinion formation concerning the status of the Russian language.

Current studies of Ukrainian sociolinguistic situation

Practically every social scientist treating the language problem in Ukraine points out the potential for conflict, dissociation and antagonism of different social groups which result from the dispute over the status of the Russian language in Ukraine. O. Reznik expresses the opinion of many social scientists when he ar-

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gues that the aspiration to confirm the official status of Russian increases political tension, especially among those who speak only Ukrainian and perceive such aspirations as a threat to the revitalization and the spread of the Ukrainian language (Reznik 2003: 374). Other scientists stress that the establishment of the language of the titular ethnic group as the only state language provides additional privileges to this group and therefore could be considered anti-democratic (Horodjanenko 1996: 108; 2007: 7). Another position in these debates aims at reaching consensus between different opinions on the language problem by ascribing to Russian the status of the "official" or "regional" (but not *state*) language. It means that Russian could be used equally with Ukrainian in administrative and educational spheres in eastern and southern regions (Vyšnjak 2008). In general, scientists agree that in order to avoid social tension between different ethnic groups in a multinational society, a thorough language policy should underlie political decisions. Such a policy should be based on a deep understanding of the actual language situation in the country and account for freedoms and rights of all citizens.

Social studies of the language situation in Ukraine mostly concentrate on the sources of bilingualism and extensively describe the language usage by different age, ethnic and other groups in different parts of the country. Even though descriptive analysis of the changes of Ukrainian ethno-linguistic structure over the years of independence can be quite detailed, additional analysis is needed to explain the nature of causal relationships between people's individual characteristics and their attitudes toward the Russian language. Obviously such kind of research provides a possibility not only to observe the changes of linguistic situation in Ukraine but also to better predict consequences of different social and political decisions in this sphere.

In a series of contributions to the field of Ukrainian *ethno-linguistic* studies, difference in attitudes toward the Russian language is often mentioned together with regional division. Cultural and historical circumstances have facilitated the spread and prevalence of the Russian language in Southern and Eastern regions of Ukraine and this is reflected today in its current high popularity in these regions. The usage of Russian in Central and Western regions of the country is thus substantially less intensive. According to findings of social surveys people from different oblasts show an unequal degree of support for the idea of

adoption of Russian as the second state language in Ukraine (Žadan, Zor'ko 2006).

Ju. Tyščenko and S. Horobčyšyna (see Hromadjans'ke suspil'stvo 2010) notice that the language preferences of the citizens do not necessarily correspond to their ethnic self-identification. This statement is consistent with the "Ukrainian society 2010" study conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences (IS NASU), according to which 23% of ethnic Ukrainians consider Russian their native language (76% consider Ukrainian) while 96% of ethnic Russians declare Russian is their native (3% declare Ukrainian). Altogether, in 2010 33% of the Ukrainian population considered Russian and 65% Ukrainian their mother tongue. One should take into account that according to the same study Ukrainians make up 85% and Russians 12% of the population. The analysis of the distributions of respondents by nationality and native language allows the conclusion that 59% of the citizens who consider Russian their native language are ethnic Ukrainians. This suggests that the status of the Russian language is a fairly complex issue and can not be treated exclusively as a problem of freedoms and rights of an ethnic minority.

It may seem controversial that the percentage of ethnic Russians decreased from 23% in 1994 to 12% in 2010 (figure 1) while the percentage of people considering the Russian language their native one remained practically unchanged (35% in 1994 and 33% in 2010). A logical explanation of this discrepancy was proposed by H. Bohdanovyč and S. Jefimov, who noted that the National Census of 2001 captured the growth of the share of ethnic Ukrainians in all regions (except for Crimea) as well as the fact of an absolute and relative decrease in number of ethnic Russians (which also characterized all regions of Ukraine). The authors found out that the reason for this was not migration but a changing ethnical self-identification especially of people who grew up in mixed Russo-Ukrainian families (Bohdanovyč, Jefimov 2006). This study confirmed that ethnic self-identification of the population does not necessarily interfere with language preferences. Moreover, there are individuals who consider both Russian and Ukrainian their native languages (about 12% of the population according to the data of Kiev International Institute of Sociology in 1999-2000) and sometimes identify themselves as representatives of both nationalities (Khmelko 2004).

Another controversy on the language issue concerns the balance between the Ukrainian

and Russian languages in the society. V. Horodjanenko (2007) claims, for example, that Russian is being excluded from the spheres of education and interpersonal communication. To confirm this statement the author points to the decreased number of Russian schools in Ukraine. On the other hand, another Ukrainian sociologist O. Vyšnjak (2008) suggests exactly the opposite: It is the Ukrainian language that is being excluded from all spheres of social life. An accurate analysis of the up to date survey data is needed to shed light on this question.

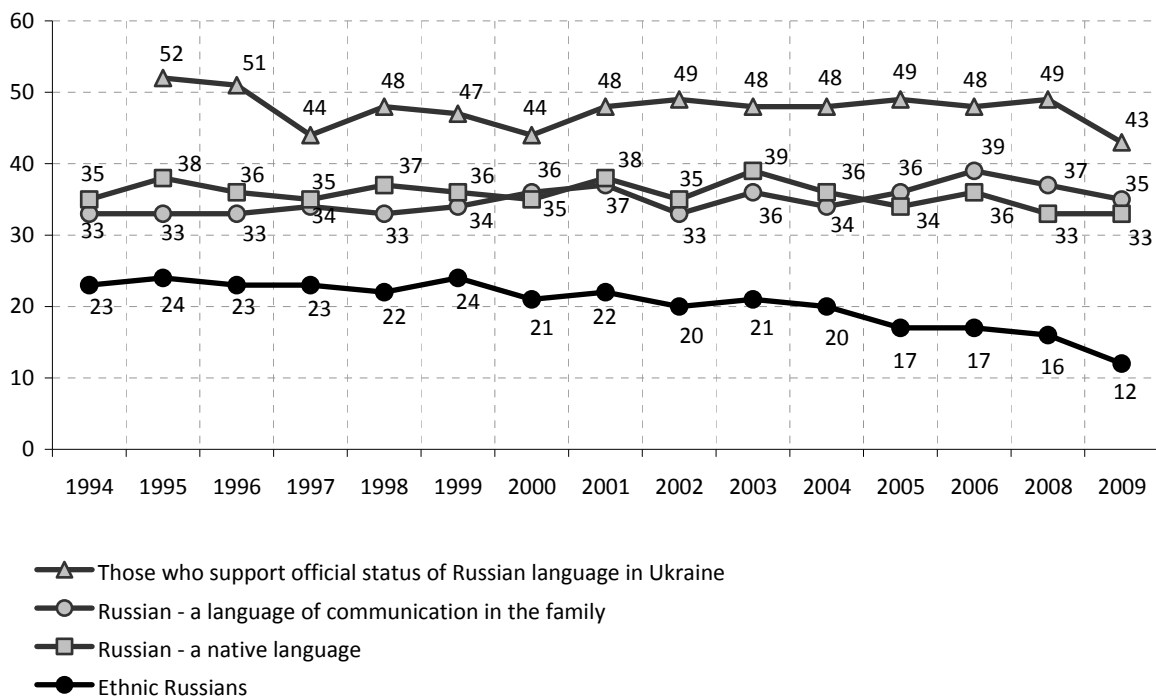
The analysis reported in this paper attempts to provide answers to the questions that have been greatly overlooked by the Ukrainian researchers: which factors affect the Ukrainian citizens' perception of the status of the Russian language? What is of decisive importance in the process of such perception formation, individual characteristics or social environment? Does the Russian speaking

population support the official bilingualism equally strong in all regions of the country?

Data

The data used in this report come from a monitoring „Ukrainian society“, which was conducted on the yearly basis during 1994-2010 (except for 2007 and 2009). The sample size ranges from 1799 to 1820 respondents for each year of the study. The data collection was realized using the self-administered questionnaires. A three-stage stratified sample with quota screening on the last stage is representative for the adult population of Ukraine (aged 18 and older). The quotas were computed on the basis of the known proportions for sex, age, education and type of settlement (oblast centre, city and village) distributions. The questionnaire includes a wide range of questions covering different issues of economic, political and cultural life.

Figure 1: Russian language and nationality in Ukraine, Monitoring “Ukrainian society”, %



The questionnaire included following questions concerning language and ethnicity: “Please indicate your native language”, “Which language do you mostly speak at home?”, “Do you think that Russian language should be-

come an official language in Ukraine?”, “Indicate please your nationality”, etc. According to the data the percentage of the population considering Russian their native language remained practically unchanged in the period of

1994-2010 (see figure 1); the same applies to the amount of people considering the Ukrainian language their mother tongue (in both cases the differences between percentages in 1994 and 2010 are statistically insignificant). The share of the population speaking mostly Russian at home has not changed in this period either. This fact evidences that the Russian language is not excluded from the interpersonal communication. However, there is a lack of information about the spread of the Russian language in official or business communication; it is therefore not possible to rule out conclusions concerning these specific fields of communication.

One of the empirical findings of this study suggests that there is a tendency of slow but significant reduction of the share of population supporting the official status of the Russian language in Ukraine. Moreover, the proportion of the population objecting to the idea of official status of the Russian language increased from 33% in 1995 to 40% in 2010 (difference is significant at the 5 percent level). However, nowadays there are still more adherents of the official bilingualism in Ukraine than its opponents.

Table 1: **List of the variables and their values**

Question in the questionnaire (<i>variable name</i>)	Variable values
<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
1. Do you think that the Russian language should become official in Ukraine? (<i>y</i>)	0 – no 1 – yes
<i>Independent variables:</i>	
2. Your native language (<i>lang</i>)	0 – Ukrainian 1 – Russian
3. Your nationality (<i>nation</i>)	0 – Ukrainian 1 – Russian
4. Your age (<i>age</i>)	Values from 18 to 94
5. Which language do you mostly speak at home (with your family)? (<i>home</i>)	0 – Ukrainian 1 – Russian
6. Which language, except of Ukrainian, do you think should be obligatory subject in the schools? Category “Russian language” marked (<i>school</i>)	0 – no 1 – yes
7. Where were you born? (<i>born</i>)	0 – in Ukraine 1 – in Russia
8. Regional context (<i>region</i>), computed as a constant value for every oblast. This variable equals the percentage of people who speak mostly Russian at home for a relevant oblast (see appendix 1)	
9. Cross-level interaction (interaction term) is a product of multiplying two variables: “language of communication at home” and “regional context”	

As a matter of fact, the degree of support of official status for the Russian language among the ethnic Ukrainians who consider Russian their mother tongue is as high as among the ethnic Russians considering Russian their native language. 81.5% of the latter have supported the idea of official Russian language in

2010, among the Russian-speaking ethnic Ukrainians 76% were adherents of this idea (the difference between percentages is insignificant). Moreover, 9.5% from the Russian group rejected the idea of official bilingualism; and in the group of Ukrainians 10.4% were against this idea (the differences are also in-

significant). At the same time, the Russian-speaking Ukrainians differ in their views and perceptions of the status of the Russian language from the Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, 26.1% of which positively answered the question about the official status of the Russian language in Ukraine, and 54.3% were against this idea.

For further analysis I restrict the dataset to the cases from 2010. The questions relevant for this study's concern are: the native language of the respondents, their nationality, the language of communication at home, the support of the Russian language teaching at school, the country of birth, etc. The variables used in the model, which is described below, are listed in table 1.

Model estimation, technique and results

The dataset in consideration is characterized by complex patterns of variability: it has a nested structure that includes unexplained variability at two levels (individual and regional). The most appropriate methodology for the analysis of such data is multilevel analysis (see Snijders, Bosker 2004; Rabe-Hesketh, Skrondal 2005).

D. Luke (2004) distinguishes *three types of arguments* for the application of multilevel analysis: 1) empirical; 2) statistical; 3) theoretical.

Empirical arguments relate to the empirical findings of previous research. In the case of this study, such arguments are provided by the studies describing regional differences in support of official status for the Russian language in Ukraine. Such differences point out the highly probable supra-individual effect (a regional effect). Another empirical argument for the usage of multilevel analysis is a high degree of resemblance between micro-units (individuals) within the macro-unit (oblast). In order to assess this degree, the intraclass correlation coefficient is used. This coefficient is defined as a proportion of variance that is accounted for by the group level (Snijders, Bosker 2004). The magnitude of the intraclass correlation coefficient in this case is rather high (equals 0.44) and this supposes that the multilevel model appears to be more effective than a one-level model. Previous methodological studies argued that ignoring of clustered (or multilevel) structure in such cases results in underestimation of standard errors, especially

when the effects of macro-level independent variables are examined. *Statistical argument* is based on the structure of empirical data. As it was already mentioned, the respondents could be considered units clustered in the oblasts where they live. The analysis of a multilevel model seeks for explanation of variation between individuals as well as of variation between regions. The last, but certainly the most important argument in favor of multilevel model is a *theoretical* one, which is always determined by the purposes of the study. The main purpose of the current analysis is to test the hypotheses about causal relationships between individual characteristics of people and their attitudes toward the official status of the Russian language simultaneously allowing for the impact of environment.

In the following I assess *three specifications* using three blocks of independent variables. A multilevel logit model with random intercept is used to test the hypotheses about causal effects of independent variables listed above (see table 1). As a whole, the regression results obtained should be interpreted as follows: positive coefficients increase the probability of support for the official status of the Russian language; negative coefficients reduce such probability.

The *first specification* contains only one independent variable – the nationality of a respondent (see the first column in table 2). The probability that a respondent, depending on his/her nationality, would support the official status of the Russian language could be expressed by the following regression equation:

$$\log\left(\frac{\pi_{ij}}{1-\pi_{ij}}\right) = \beta_{0j} + \beta_1 nation_{ij} + r_{ij},$$

where β_{0j} is a group-dependent intercept, which can be split into an average intercept γ_{00} and the group-dependent deviation u_{0j} . β_1 is the regression coefficient, and r_{ij} is normal residual on the individual level. The first column in table 2 presents the results of the assessment of the first specification. The regression coefficient related to nationality of a respondent (1.233) is significant at the 1 percent level, what could have been interpreted as an approval for a statement about higher degree of willingness of ethnic Russians residing in Ukraine to adopt a second official language – Russian. However, this conclusion might be misleading. The analysis detailed below shows a clear evidence of it.

In addition to the nationality effect, the *second specification* comprises another inde-

pendent dummy variable related to native language. The results of the analysis yield an insignificant effect of a nationality variable on the same dependent variable as in the previous model. It means that the examination of the nationality effect separately from the effect of native language may lead to loss of informa-

tion, and, consequently, to the ungrounded conclusions. More detailed analysis shows that the inconsistent effect of nationality occurs because of the already mentioned group of ethnic Ukrainians who consider Russian their native language.

Table 2: Results of the model assessments

Variables	Specification 1		Specification 2		Specification 3	
	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error
Constant	-0.543	0.380	-0.789*	0.332	-3.801**	0.545
Nationality – Russian	1.233*	0.265	0.232	0.307	0.074	0.379
Native language – Russian			1.520**	0.226	0.853*	0.333
Age					0.002	0.006
Language of communication at home – Russian					3.030**	0.576
Teaching Russian at schools					1.097**	0.235
Place of birth – Russia					0.278	0.273
Regional context					0.067**	0.011
Interaction term (<i>home*region</i>)					-0.050**	0.013
(2 level)						
Variance	3.454	1.098	2.590	0.850	0.974	0.379
Log likelihood	-654.656		-617.794		-386.134	
Number of Oblasts	26		26		26	
Number of Respondents	1442		1426		1136	

** $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.05$

The *third specification* of multilevel logistic regression includes all independent variables that were identified and described above. This

$$\log\left(\frac{\pi_{ij}}{1-\pi_{ij}}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 lang_{ij} + \beta_2 home_{ij} + \beta_3 school_{ij} + \beta_4 age_{ij} + \beta_5 nation_{ij} + \beta_6 born_{ij} + \beta_7 region_{ij} + \beta_8(home_{ij} * region_{ij}) + r_{ij}$$

The results show that the majority of explanatory variables appear to be relevant for the explanation of the support of official status for the Russian language. It depends significantly on the respondent's native language, the language used in communication at home, his/her support for Russian language teaching at school as well as on the regional context. The conducted analysis suggests that the age or the place of birth of a respondent does not significantly influence his/her attitude toward the Russian language. This finding shows that the hypothesis about the age differences in perception of the Russian language has found so far no empirical support. It contradicts the idea, according to which the younger the per-

son is the less inclination he/she has to support the official status of the Russian language.

model may be expressed by the following regression equation:
 Similar to the previous specification, those who indicate that Russian is their mother tongue are more likely to support the official status of the Russian language.

A hypothesis about causal relationship between language of communication within the family and an attitude toward the status of Russian language has found an empirical support, which reflects in a positive, highly significant effect of a "language of communication at home" variable (see table 2). This empirical observation leads to the conclusion that people who speak mostly Russian with their relatives show a higher degree of willingness to adopt a

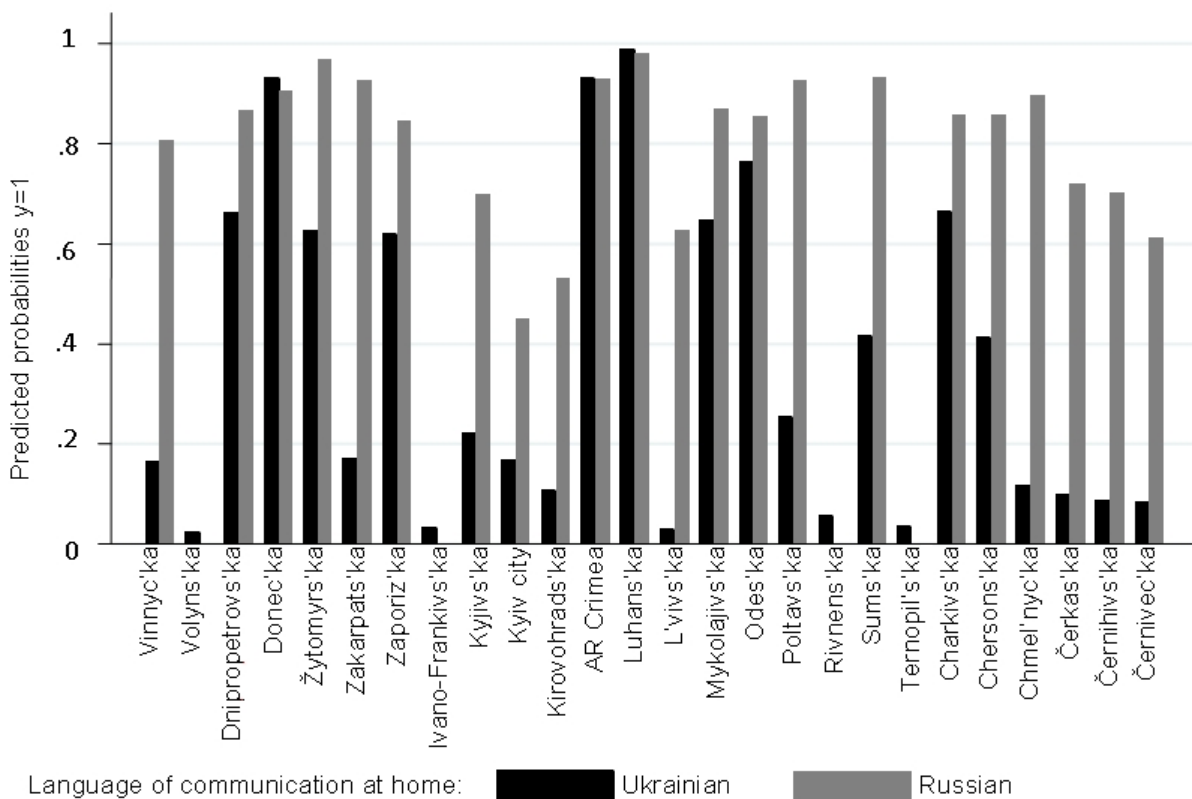
second official language – the one that makes communication outside the family more comfortable and easy for them. It is widely acknowledged that the language of interpersonal communication (that is communication at home, with relatives and close friends) is perceived ingenuously and determines the emotional acceptance of the language.

Respondents who think that the Russian language should be an obligatory subject at

school are also more likely to favor the idea of official bilingualism in Ukraine.

There is also a remarkable effect of the regional context of oblast on the Russian language perceptions. The positive regression coefficient suggests that the more Russian-speaking people live in the oblast, the more likely people in this oblast are to support the official status of the Russian language.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities for the support of official status for the Russian language by oblast and language of communication at home, 2010



Contextual effects may be expressed by different mechanisms, including the interpersonal influences (the insights into the contextual analysis may be found in Stipak, Hensler 1982). That is, interaction with other people evokes changes in behavior and attitudes of an individual. Without empirical findings the effect of the environment is unclear. One could expect that the Russian-speaking citizens, who live in western oblasts, feel their belonging to the language minority and they perceive the need to legalize the official status of the language of their interpersonal communication more acutely. One would therefore conjecture that these people are more likely to support the official status of the Russian language than the

people who live in the Russian-speaking environment. But the empirical analysis shows the reverse. The negative coefficient of the interaction term illustrates that the people living in Russian-speaking regions (where the majority of people speak Russian at home) generally support the official status for the Russian language more actively, than the Russian-speaking citizens who reside in the oblasts with lower percentage of Russian-speaking population. Moreover, the Ukrainian-speaking people from “Russian-speaking” oblasts are more likely to support the idea of the official status for the Russian language than the Ukrainian-speaking citizens who live in oblasts with low percentage of Russian speaking peo-

ple. The predicted probabilities for an affirmative answer to the question about the official status of the Russian language in different oblasts of Ukraine are presented in figure 2.

The strongest support for adoption of the Russian language as an official language in Ukraine among both Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking respondents was detected in Lugans'ka and Donec'ka oblasts and the Autonomous Republic Crimea. At the same time there is practically no support of the official bilingualism in Volyns'ka, Ivano-Frankivs'ka, Rivnens'ka and Ternopil's'ka oblasts.

Conclusions

The analysis presented in this paper contributes to the field of research, which addresses the socio-linguistic situation in Ukraine, and provides some essential findings on the current position of the Russian language in modern Ukrainian society.

Over the last decades the status of the Russian language in Ukraine has been constantly discussed in media, political and public circles. Because of the controversial views on this problem the discussion concerning the current socio-linguistic situation in Ukraine acquired a meaning of the factor of social disintegration and confrontation of different political and civil forces. In spite of it, the Russian language remains the language of international and interpersonal communication for a large part of the Ukrainian society.

During the period from 1994 to 2010 the percentage of people considering Russian their native language, as well as the percentage of those who speak mostly Russian at home, remained practically unchanged. There is, however, a slow trend toward decreasing share of ethnic Russians in Ukraine. A similar trend may be discerned in respect to the share of people who give an affirmative answer to the question: do you think that Russian language should become official language in Ukraine? The nationality of citizens does not reflect the language preferences in Ukraine: national self-identification is not necessarily associated with the mother tongue. Nearly a quarter of ethnic Ukrainians (23%) specified the Russian language as their native in 2010. The degree of support of the official status of the Russian language among these people is as high as it is among the representatives of Russian nationality (considering Russian their native language).

This analysis allowed drawing some conclusions concerning the factors that influence people's perceptions of the Russian language. The positive associations of language of communication at home, native language and the support for the Russian language teaching at schools with the attitudes of people toward the status of the Russian language were observed as it was expected. On the other hand, no nationality or age effect on the attitudes of people toward the status of the Russian language was uncovered. The strongest support for the adoption of the Russian language as an official language in Ukraine was found in Lugans'ka and Donec'ka oblasts and the Autonomous Republic Crimea. Meanwhile, there are practically no adherents of the official bilingualism in Volyns'ka, Ivano-Frankivs'ka, Rivnens'ka and Ternopil's'ka oblasts.

Consistent with the previous studies, the regional effect on attitudes of people toward the Russian language has been revealed: the more Russian-speaking people live in the oblast, the more likely people are to support the official status of the Russian language. In addition, the results indicate that the people living in Russian-speaking regions (where the majority of people speaks Russian in their families) in general show a greater support of the official status for the Russian language, than the Russian-speaking citizens who reside in the oblasts with lower percentage of Russian-speaking population. The same tendency concerns also the Ukrainian-speaking citizens: they object the idea of an official Russian language less if the environment in which they live speaks mostly Russian.

Appendix 1

Percentages of the population who specified the Russian language as a mother tongue and as a language of communication at home, 2010

Oblast	Percentage of the respondents who indicated:		Number of respondents
	Mother tongue – Russian (%)	Language of communication at home - Russian (%)	
1. Vinnyc'ka	0	1,9	54
2. Volyns'ka	0	0	44
3. Dnipropetrovs'ka	44,4	49,2	124
4. Donec'ka	75,3	80,2	167
5. Žytomyrs'ka	11,1	15,6	45
6. Zakarpats'ka	3,2	3,2	31
7. Zaporiz'ka	39,5	45,3	86
8. Ivano-Frankivs'ka	0	0	51
9. Kyivs'ka	17,2	25,9	58
10. Kyiv city	33,0	43,3	97
11. Kirovohradska	4,8	6,3	63
12. AR Crimea	72,5	73,6	91
13. Luhans'ka	75,7	75,7	115
14. L'vivs'ka	4,8	3,6	84
15. Mykolajivs'ka	42,3	42,3	52
16. Odes'ka	64,7	61,8	68
17. Poltav's'ka	9,4	9,4	53
18. Rivnens'ka	0	0	42
19. Sums'ka	9,1	9,3	44
20. Ternopil's'ka	1,9	0	52
21. Charkivs'ka	45,7	44,8	116
22. Chersons'ka	30,5	35,6	60
23. Chmel'nyc'ka	4,7	4,7	43
24. Čerkas'ka	11,5	7,7	52
25. Černihivs'ka	8,1	15,0	62
26. Černivec'ka	4,4	11,1	45

Source: monitoring study "Ukrainian society", IS NASU

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