

Redrawing the Language Map of Ukraine

Expert insights on significant changes in language use since the last census offer pointers for service providers

Summary: what you absolutely need to know

Organizations responding to the needs of the millions of people who have fled the war in Ukraine need to know which languages they prefer to use in order to support them effectively. Humanitarian responses are often not informed by language data, and as a result operate on assumptions which can leave the needs of marginalized language communities unmet. CLEAR Global reviewed the existing data with linguists, language policy experts and affected people to gain operational insights into language sensitivity and the potential for exclusion.

The 2001 All-Ukrainian Population Census is the most recent representative record of language use in Ukraine. But it is not an accurate reference for communication strategies in the humanitarian response to the war more than two decades later, for three main reasons. First, the census didn't accurately record language use among some ethnic minorities, especially the Roma, Crimean Tatar and Greek communities. Second, changes of language policy since 2001 have influenced language use and language identity. And third, events since 2014 have affected how Ukraine's linguistically diverse population relates to the country's most widely spoken languages: Ukrainian and Russian.

As a result, although we must wait for the next census for a full picture, it is clear that the language map of Ukraine is being redrawn. Ukrainian and Russian have long been languages of interethnic communication for Ukrainians, but with Ukraine and Russia at war many first- and second-language Russian speakers are switching to Ukrainian. For some this is a painful choice, for others a natural alignment of their language of communication with their language identity. Others need or prefer to continue using Russian to communicate. It is important for organizations supporting Ukrainians fleeing the war to recognize the sensitivities of language choice and act accordingly. They can do that by:

- **ensuring that at least basic communication happens in Ukrainian** - a greeting or signs directing people to services can send a positive signal acknowledging their national identity.
- **offering service users the option to communicate in the language they prefer** wherever possible, and promoting an environment where people feel comfortable to do so.
- **sharing information on the languages they cater for** so people know where they can go to access information and support in their preferred language, and other organizations can refer them appropriately.
- **collecting information on language preferences** as a basis for better language provision.

Findings

The language map of Ukraine is incomplete

The most complete statistical data on languages used in Ukraine is available from the [All-Ukrainian Census of 2001](#), visualized in CLEAR Global's [language map of Ukraine](#). The census recorded more than 130 nationalities and ethnic groups in the country at the time. Over two thirds of the population (67.5%) gave Ukrainian as their first language, 29.6% Russian, and 2.9% another language. But our research found that not only does this not accurately reflect the language situation in Ukraine today, but it was not accurate then either, for several reasons. Understanding the gaps in this data can help responders reduce the risk of exclusion for marginalized language speakers and plan service delivery in people's preferred languages.

Many minority language speakers weren't registered in 2001

The 2001 census contains incorrect information about certain national minorities and the number of people who communicate in se their first language. In 2001, the Roma population of Ukraine was several times greater than recorded in the census, so more people spoke Romani as their first language. Most Roma lived in the Zakarpattia and Odesa Oblasts, followed by Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv and central Ukraine. According to an expert informant, in the 2000s, 70,000 Roma lived in Zakarpattia alone, and 25,000 in Odesa.

The statistics given in this 2001 census tell us that 47,500 Roma officially lived in Ukraine. Even in 2001, there were already about 400,000 Roma in Ukraine. [...] So the number of people speaking Romani was also much higher than indicated in the census.

- Expert in public policy for Romani

For the Crimean Tatar population, an expert informant told us the situation changed in 2010, when it became easier for Crimean Tatars to settle in Crimea. As a result, from 2010 to 2014 significantly more Crimean Tatar speakers were living in Crimea than recorded in the 2001 census.

Where we are (in Sudak ... and Alushta)... in principle, they always speak Crimean Tatar with each other. When you arrive in one of those towns, you hear everyone speaking their native Crimean Tatar language on all sides.

- Professor of Crimean Tatar, formerly resident in Crimea

Key informants also observed that there were more than 140 different nationalities and ethnicities in the Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts alone in the early 2000s, not 130 as in the census. They suggested that these groups largely understood Ukrainian, but used Russian as the common language of communication.

More than 140 different nationalities were registered in Luhansk. Among them there was a huge diaspora of Armenians, Georgians, Jews, and a lot of Germans and Poles. Well, Russian probably just served (like English does all over the world nowadays) as a language of communication. There were large numbers of Azerbaijanis and Georgians migrating [to Ukraine]. So Russian was the language of communication, and I know for sure that families spoke Armenian and Georgian at home, and some other local languages.

- Language service provider for Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts, formerly resident in Luhansk

“My grandmother used to say, if you didn’t speak Russian you couldn’t get a job”

I, (50 years old, female, economist and clinical psychologist), was born and raised in Kazakhstan. In 2009 the family moved to Kyiv. In March 2022, the family left Ukraine under the evacuation program for citizens of Kazakhstan. They have now returned to Kyiv.

I and her whole family communicated and studied in Russian. Her native language is Russian but her linguistic identity is Kazakh.

My mother tongue is Russian, unfortunately. Well, maybe fortunately or unfortunately, I don’t know. It just happened that way. ... My grandmother strictly forbade us to speak Kazakh, because she was afraid no one would give us a job.

She speaks Russian, Ukrainian and Kazakh. Today she tries to communicate with her son in Kazakh more often. The children study at a school where the usual language of instruction is Russian, but for the last two years they have been taught in Ukrainian.

I works as a professor and runs a private psychotherapy practice. In private practice she uses Russian; in teaching, Ukrainian; in everyday life she communicates in Russian. She believes that non-verbal language is universal and everyone understands it.

I feels her knowledge of Russian allowed her to adapt faster to life in Kyiv.

I am very grateful to the Russian language, which has given me the ability to communicate. It is [part of] the family of Slavic languages. Imagine if I had come here only speaking Kazakh - I don’t know, I think it would have been much harder to adjust to life here.

The census did not reflect substantial differences between dialects

Key informants emphasized that there are a number of dialects in Ukraine that the census did not record. For example, the Greek used in Ukraine is the Rumeika dialect, which our key informant said is not understood in Greece. Rumeika speakers live mainly in the east (rural Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts) and south (Mariupol) and in the city of Lviv.

Language, as you know, is a living organism. It develops in the same way, it is born in the same way, it evolves in the same way, it changes in the same way, it is subject to different influences, and so is Greek. [Ukrainian] Greek is not understood [in Greece] by the locals.

- Greek language expert

Key informants described a similar situation with regard to the Russian language in Ukraine. Two informants emphasized that the Russian spoken in Ukraine is composed of several dialects, and different from that spoken in Russia.

What kind of Russian did we speak [in Luhansk]? ... Let's say it was a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian. I was 11 years old when we moved there from Russia, so I had nothing to compare it with. I clearly understood that it was not Russian, it was Ukrainian Russian.

- Language service provider for Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts, formerly resident in Luhansk

That is, everyone says: "Half of Ukraine speaks Russian". Sorry, I don't know who speaks Russian in Ukraine. In Ukraine, Russian is definitely spoken by Russian language teachers. That's for sure. The rest ... there are very few of them - those who really speak Russian ... Take those experts from Moscow and ask what kind of language it is. Is it your language or is it not your language? It is definitely not their Russian.

- Professor of Ukrainian and English

Population displacement has changed language distribution and use

There has been mass population movement over the past 20 years, both within Ukraine and across its borders. After Russia claimed Crimea and armed conflict started in the east of Ukraine, around 1.6 million people were internally displaced between 2014 and 2015. This had a significant impact on language use. Key informants told us that since then, Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian have been little used in Crimea and in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. Children in Luhansk have not had the option of studying in Ukrainian since 2013, and only a few schools in Crimea teach in Crimean Tatar.

About a year before all these events [...] in 2013, out of the blue, Ukrainian classes were all stopped in Luhansk. We were shocked [...] After 2014, of course, Ukrainian was stopped entirely. They brought in textbooks from Russia. Nominally, a very small number of hours were left in schools for Ukrainian language classes.

- Language service provider for Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts, formerly resident in Luhansk

Now in Crimea, of course, it is very difficult. They say that Crimean Tatar is not taught in schools at all. There are a few Crimean Tatar schools ... and in [Simferopol] there is a school [where] the Crimean Tatar language is still taught. It is very difficult to preserve the opportunity to teach children who live in Crimea their native language.

- Professor of Crimean Tatar, formerly resident in Crimea

Since February 2022, more than 7 million Ukrainians have sought refuge in other countries and over 6 million people have been displaced within Ukraine. This has again significantly affected language use in the country. In some regions of Ukraine, people have begun speaking Ukrainian more often. Elsewhere, Russian is heard more often, as people have fled from the largely Russian-speaking eastern regions of Ukraine to the largely Ukrainian-speaking west. An estimated 100,000 Roma left Ukraine, mainly for Poland and Germany, while more than 50,000 Ukrainians of ethnic Greek origin left for Greece.

"I got up one morning and started speaking Ukrainian"

K (19 years old, female, university student) was born in Kyiv and had never lived anywhere else before the war. In March 2022, she left Ukraine for the first time. For several months she lived with friends in different countries: Ukraine - Italy - Poland - Netherlands - Germany - Austria - Poland - Austria. Currently K is studying and living in Austria.

K's family always spoke Russian at home, but she completed her education in Ukrainian, from kindergarten to university. She speaks Ukrainian, Russian, English and basic German. Though her family spoke Russian, K has always considered Ukrainian her native language.

I always understood that this [Ukrainian] is the language of my country [...] So, it is also my language

In January 2022, K decided to switch to communicating in Ukrainian in all aspects of her life. She doesn't associate this with any specific events.

I grew up in a Russian-speaking family. And it was normal for me to speak Russian. [...] And one day I just thought about why. And whether I shouldn't switch to my native [Ukrainian] language, which I consider my mother tongue. And I just did. I got up in the morning and started speaking Ukrainian. And that's it... I just felt physically better and definitely mentally better when I switched completely to Ukrainian. I don't know how to explain this feeling, but it's about how you feel. It becomes easier. When you identify with something all your life, but at

the same time you do something completely different, use another language of communication - and then you decide to change back, to define yourself in the way you want. And it becomes easier on the soul.

K judges her level of Ukrainian as very good, and she only had to consciously think about word choice and speak a little slower for the first month after deciding to switch to Ukrainian. She now communicates in Ukrainian and English, as she is studying on the English-language program at university. In her family K. speaks Ukrainian, while her parents still speak Russian.

Evolving language policies have reflected shifting political dynamics

There have been significant changes in the language policy of Ukraine over the past 20 years. The 1996 [Constitution of Ukraine](#) recognizes Ukrainian as the official language and guarantees the free development, use and protection of Russian and other languages of national minorities. Our analysis found that from independence until 2014, Ukraine's lawmakers tried to settle the language question by enshrining in law the idea that Ukrainian citizens are largely bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian, while also protecting minority languages. Since 2014, the priority has become protecting the official status of Ukrainian, while retaining protections for language minorities. Understanding the impact of these shifts can help service providers adapt their language strategies for service delivery.

Minority languages have enjoyed increased protection

In 2003, Ukraine ratified the [European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages](#) protecting endangered languages. In Ukraine this protects Belarusian, Bulgarian, Gagauz, Greek, Hebrew, Crimean Tatar, Moldovan, German, Polish, Russian, Romanian, Slovak and Hungarian. Critics pointed out that several of these languages, including Russian, can't be considered endangered since they are official languages in other countries. But the move began a period of increased attention to the protection of minority languages. Key informants described how between 2003 and 2011, universities started offering language history courses in Crimean Tatar and Greek. Schools started offering classes in minority languages using textbooks published with government funding. And civil society organizations meanwhile continued offering extracurricular classes for children to study their native language and culture.

Children attend school. And children learn Greek not only at home, and not only spoken Greek. [...] Graduates of these schools go on to university. There are at least six universities in Ukraine that teach Greek.

- Greek language expert

Around 2010, I guess, such a sharp increase began, [...] even studying our native [Crimean Tatar] language. Courses started to be offered and people tried to learn it. [...] Textbooks became available in almost all subjects in Crimean Tatar - something that had once been only a dream.

- Professor of Crimean Tatar, formerly resident in Crimea

Legislation also protected Ukrainian as the official language. Universities were required to teach in Ukrainian - although two informants reported that some lecturers continued to teach in Russian. In order to protect the state language, all films in cinemas and on television now had to be dubbed into Ukrainian. Research participants suggested this has helped speakers of other languages to gain a better understanding of Ukrainian. Some described how switching between Ukrainian and Russian became part of a distinctively Ukrainian cultural life.

[At] the cinema, when we went when we were still living in Luhansk, [...] I didn't feel the difference between watching a film [...] in Ukrainian or in Russian.

- Civil society representative for the Russian-speaking community in Kyiv, formerly resident in Luhansk

When you [...] turn on the TV in Ukraine, and you even have some Russian talk show and the Ukrainian adverts come on, then you feel that you are at home.

- Civil society representative, formerly resident in Kharkiv

"I simply had no interaction with the Ukrainian language"

D (35 years old, male, economist and language historian) was born in Kharkiv. He moved to Kyiv in April 2022. All his life he has spoken Russian at home, at work, in his social network. He studied at school in Russian, and at university the teaching was theoretically in Ukrainian, but actually in Russian.

All our teachers, professors, what did they do? To comply with the law, they gave the topic of the lesson - or the topic of the lecture - in Ukrainian. And then they would ask: "Dear students, would you prefer to have the lecture in Ukrainian or in Russian?" Well, naturally, everyone said "in Russian", and then the teachers switched to Russian.

His native language is Russian, and he also speaks English. He understands Ukrainian, but there are words he is unfamiliar with.

Minority languages including Russian gained special status at local level in 2012

The adoption of the [Law on the Principles of State Language Policy](#) in 2012 strengthened national policy protections for minority languages. The law maintained Ukrainian's status as the official language, but also created a special status for 18 regional languages¹ in areas where they are spoken by at least 10% of the population. In some cases, the local authorities can also grant regional language status to a language spoken by a smaller proportion of the population. When the law was applied, Russian was granted the status of regional language in 13 administrative areas in Dnipropetrovska, Donetsk, Luhansk, Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv and Kherson Oblasts and in the city of Sevastopol. Moldovan was recognized as a regional language in the village of Tarasivtsi, Novoselytsia Raion, in Chernivtsi; Romanian in the village of Bila Tserkva, Zakarpattia; and Hungarian in the city of Berehove, Zakarpattia. In 2018, however, the Constitutional Court overturned the law, declaring it unconstitutional on procedural grounds.

Key informants' opinions on this law differed. Some feel it protected regional languages. Others emphasize that it privileged Russian rather than protecting endangered languages. However, all agreed that the adoption and repeal of this law had political implications.

[Under President] Kuchma they could not adopt [the law]; under Yushchenko they couldn't agree Under Yanukovich they agreed and adopted it. And now, you see, I don't see what is wrong with it. It says there: 10% is a regional language. That is a very high percentage and we should take into account the rights of these 10% of people who speak another language.

- Expert in public policy for Russian, Professor of Russian

Greater attention to protecting Ukrainian after 2014 has made a marked difference to public language use

From 2014 onwards, Ukraine's language policy was mainly directed towards protecting the state language. The state budget began to allocate more funds for publishing Ukrainian authors and Ukrainian translations of foreign literature. For other minority languages, key informants also described positive changes, with books being published for example in Crimean Tatar and Greek.

We see [...] this peak of Ukrainian book publishing, especially translated literature after 2014, when Russia was recognized as the aggressor for the first time [...] And suddenly we were reading in Ukrainian what was published in the West, when it came out. A book wins a prize, and within a few months it is published in Ukraine, and it sells out.

- Professor of Ukrainian and English

Some research participants welcomed the resulting rapid translation of international bestsellers into the state language and their introduction into the Ukrainian cultural space. Others voiced fears that there will soon be no books in Russian in Ukraine.

¹ Russian, Belarusian, Bulgarian, Armenian, Gagauz, Yiddish, Crimean Tatar, Moldovan, German, Modern Greek, Polish, Romani, Romanian, Slovak, Hungarian, Rusyn, Karaim and Krymchak.

... During the war and after it, well, who will bring books from Russian publishing houses to Ukraine, in Russian? ... We are not officially banning the Russian language. But at the same time we are doing everything at the state level so that time will pass and books will cease to be available in Russian.

- Civil society representative, formerly resident in Kharkiv

In 2019 the [Law on Ensuring the Functioning of Ukrainian as the State Language](#) brought together all previous protections for Ukrainian as the official language of Ukraine. This makes it a requirement to use Ukrainian in almost every aspect of public life, from labor relations to broadcasting, publishing to transport, and websites to customer services. All research participants said that they definitely felt these changes. For example, they are more often addressed in Ukrainian in public places, the main subjects are taught in Ukrainian in schools, websites have Ukrainian-language pages, and more Ukrainian-language content appears on social media.

I felt it simply as a consumer. In any shop or cafe or restaurant, staff began speaking Ukrainian.

- Language service provider, Kyiv

The law does not directly address the use of minority languages in public life, but provides for that to be governed by other existing legislation for the protection of minorities. This was controversial for some language minorities, particularly the absence of a guaranteed right for children to receive pre-school and primary education in their first language alongside Ukrainian. This was especially controversial for ethnic Russian and Hungarian communities, who had previously had monolingual Russian- and Hungarian-language schools in some areas.

The Hungarian speaking population in most of Zakarpattia say that the teaching of certain subjects in Ukrainian already violates their language rights or limits their opportunities.

- Public policy expert for minority languages

For other language minorities the law was not seen as problematic, according to most of our key informants. For example, in parallel with the adoption of this law, Ukraine submitted a request to the Council of Europe to codify the Romani language.

[In 2019], the Ministry of Education officially asked the Council of Europe to codify the Romani language. This is a very big step. It is very important for the Roma of Ukraine because it is also recognition, political recognition of the Roma people. [...]
I see this as a very big step for Ukraine in Romani language policy. There were also attempts by the Ministry of Education to hold competitions for the development of courses and textbooks on the Romani language.

- Expert in public policy for Romani

Language identity has gained new importance for many since 2014

The 2001 census recorded which language people considered their first language. But a person's first language is often linked to their ethnicity and for many residents of Ukraine it is not always the language of communication.

"Until 24 February 2022, I considered Russian my mother tongue"

O (44 years old, female, lawyer) was born and raised in Luhansk. In May 2014, she moved to Crimea with her children when Russian troops entered Luhansk Oblast. However, after a few months they moved again, this time to Kyiv, when residents of Crimea were required to adopt Russian passports.

O and her family always spoke Russian. She studied exclusively in Russian and only started taking Ukrainian lessons in high school. At university she only took one Ukrainian class, "Business Ukrainian".

All the teaching was in Russian. I personally didn't study Ukrainian at all - it was optional. Whoever wanted to, studied Ukrainian. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, the Ukrainian language became compulsory, and I studied Ukrainian in 10th and 11th grade. At university, too, the language of instruction was Russian.

She speaks Russian, Ukrainian and basic English. Until February 2022, she considered Russian her native language, but now she finds it difficult to talk about it.

I used to consider Russian my mother tongue, but now it is [...] It's complicated. [...] I would like Ukrainian to be our native language, for us to be able to speak Ukrainian freely, but [...] this is the feeling after 24 February 2022. Before February I didn't feel this way.

At work, O writes in Ukrainian and speaks both Ukrainian and Russian. At home she speaks Russian; her children attended a school in Kyiv where they were taught in Russian. Until February 2022, she never thought about changing the language she used to communicate, but now she is starting to use Ukrainian more and more. Through tears, she told us:

I don't want to speak the language spoken by the people who brought the war here, who bring a lot of grief to our country and people. [...] This language has stopped being comfortable for me. It is no longer associated with Pushkin and Dostoevsky. [...] The Russian language is now associated with great suffering.

She assesses her knowledge of written Ukrainian as very good, but speaking it is still difficult.

I can speak Ukrainian, but I don't have enough vocabulary to speak it comfortably. I still translate it in my head like a foreign language [...] like [I do] in English. [...] I translate. It is much easier for me to write in Ukrainian than in Russian. Speaking is still easier for me in Russian.

Language identity and language use are two different things in Ukraine

In Ukraine, multiple language identities coexist but Ukrainian and Russian have long been the main languages of communication. For this study we spoke to several Ukrainians whose language identity is different from their language of communication. For many, events since 2014, and particularly the escalation of 2022, have heightened the sense of a national identity tied to the Ukrainian language.

I finished [studying] in my native language [Crimean Tatar], but I still speak Ukrainian at work.

- Professor of Crimean Tatar, formerly resident in Crimea

I am an ethnic Hungarian living in Ukraine, but right now my native language here in Ukraine is Ukrainian.

- Civil society representative, Zakarpattia Oblast

"If I want to communicate with a person, I will always find a way"

O (32 years old, female, lawyer) was born and raised in a small town in western Ukraine. She studied in Kyiv and Kharkiv. She moved to Kyiv for work, and lives there currently. In March 2022, she went to Italy with her son, but they returned in August.

O grew up in a Ukrainian-speaking family, studied at school and university in Ukrainian, and has always spoken Ukrainian as her native language. She also speaks Russian, English and basic Italian. She has never changed her main language of communication.

When O started working as a lawyer in a state institution in Kyiv, she had to communicate in Russian.

I was just starting my career and everyone around me spoke only Russian, and it was difficult for them to speak anything else - well, either it really was difficult for them, or they tried to make it that way. So to facilitate communication, to be part of the team, I used Russian.

O feels that in Kyiv more people have now started speaking Ukrainian.

Many more people have started to speak Ukrainian. When I came to study in Kyiv in 2007, there was no Ukrainian language to be heard anywhere. It just wasn't there at all. Today, there are probably only a few people who still speak Russian. Most people try to speak Ukrainian - if not fully, then at least try to switch to it. [...] Many people want to give up everything associated with [Russia]

But O has never seen communication problems in Kyiv due to people speaking different languages.

All this is because they are amplifying this difference in the use of language. Well, Ukrainian and Russian especially. I don't remember our having any problems with other languages in Kyiv. But this problem, in my opinion, is absolutely false. There are many people around me, even people close to me, who speak Russian at home. Some of them switch to Ukrainian with me, some speak Russian and I speak Ukrainian. There is absolutely no problem with that. The problem is that it is being exaggerated at some other level, at the political level especially. It is exaggerated to highlight a difference between people based on language. [...] Well, if I want to communicate with a person, I will always find a way.

Speakers of minority languages other than Russian have always had to speak a second language in public life, either Ukrainian or Russian. This doesn't change their sense of their language identity, which remains that of their ethnic group, according to research participants. Members of the Roma and Crimean Tatar communities, for instance, view the language of their ethnic community as their native language and mostly speak it at home. But respondents told us they also need to know and be able to communicate in Ukrainian in public to be able to access education and employment opportunities.

As citizens of Ukraine, we [Roma] have to learn Ukrainian because it gives us more opportunities and a better future for our children...

- Expert in public policy for Romani

For many ethnic Russians the situation is different. Those educated during the Soviet era and living in predominantly Russian-speaking parts of the country have lived their whole lives in Russian. Some struggle to engage with state institutions in Ukrainian, while for younger Russian speakers who were educated mainly in Ukrainian, the transition is easier.

For example, in Donetsk Oblast there are 20 raions [districts]. In 16 raions 92% of the population are [ethnic] Ukrainians. And there are 4 raions where 92% are [ethnic] Russians [...] and Russian is their native language.

- Professor of Ukrainian and English

The war between Ukraine and Russia heightens sensitivities about the choice to speak Ukrainian or Russian. For many these are entirely new tensions. For some the choice to switch from Russian to Ukrainian is painful, for others liberating. For others, particularly older people from a range of language communities, that switch may be hard, uncomfortable, or even impossible.

There were many people who identified themselves with Ukraine and Ukrainians, despite the fact that they used Russian in everyday life.

- Language service provider for Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts, formerly resident in Luhansk

Since February 2022, growing numbers of Russian speakers have begun speaking Ukrainian. Respondents stressed that most Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine have a good understanding of Ukrainian, and can read and write it well. But still they find it a little more difficult to speak it at first for lack of practice.

Many of my friends who have spoken Russian all their lives [...] are switching to Ukrainian. Of course, it sounds quite funny in some cases. At the same time, it is just incredibly wonderful because people are consciously rejecting the language of the aggressor.

- Language service provider, Kyiv

Sensitivity to both language ability and language identity are needed

A history of multilingualism, especially in the big cities, makes it possible for many in Ukraine to switch to Ukrainian. But it is unclear what impact the growing tension between language identity and national identity will have over time on the pre-war culture of mutual tolerance and respect between language communities which many research participants have described. And in the short term, it is unclear how those who are unable or unwilling to make the switch will manage.

“We treat every language and every nationality with tolerance”

M (65 years old, male, engineer) is an ethnic Hungarian and has lived in Zakarpattia Oblast all his life. His family mainly communicate in Ukrainian. He studied in Ukrainian and Russian, and speaks Hungarian. He considers Ukrainian his native language.

M feels that after 2022, Ukrainian has been used more and more in Zakarpattia and Russian is heard less and less often. He has started to speak Ukrainian more himself.

Since the start of the war, Russian is less [used]: it is already what you might call a pariah language in Ukraine. [...] Before I would sometimes switch immediately to Russian with Russians, realizing that it would be easier for them. But now I never do. I communicate with Russians only in Ukrainian. Let them learn Ukrainian.

M says he has sometimes had to speak Hungarian with colleagues because they did not understand Ukrainian well.

We spoke to them in Ukrainian, but they did not understand me well. They were Hungarians from the villages. So I had to explain some things in Hungarian.

People of different ethnic backgrounds live in Zakarpattia, but M has never had difficulty communicating.

The borders are 50 km away: Slovakia, Hungary 50 km and Romania a little further. So, it's all close to us. We have villages where they speak Romanian. [...] And they got Romanian passports. So, it's like that. We have a multinational here. [...] The attitude towards each other is very tolerant. Regardless of what language a person speaks, no one infringes on anyone, so to speak. No one exalts themselves. [...] We treat every language and every nationality with tolerance.

Our largely urban, university-educated research participants stressed how many residents of Ukraine speak both Ukrainian and Russian, including members of national minorities who speak Ukrainian or Russian as a second language. There are families in Ukraine whose members speak different languages to each other without creating communication problems.

I was married for 13 years to a Russian-speaking man. And in 13 years I never spoke Russian with him. I understood him when he spoke Russian, and he understood me when I spoke Ukrainian.

- Language service provider, Kyiv

"I used to treat language as something functional, and always spoke to people in the language they started the conversation in"

S (27 years old, male, applied linguist), was born in Kharkiv. In 2020, he moved to Kyiv with his wife in search of new opportunities.

In his family S spoke Russian, and he studied at school and university in Ukrainian. He considers Ukrainian his native language. He speaks Ukrainian, Russian and English.

Why do I consider Ukrainian a special language, when I have spoken Russian all my life? Simply because the Ukrainian language is always around you: it is translated in cinemas, it is the language of advertising, of some announcements. [...] When the war began, I began to realize a little more how this soft cultural propaganda was taking place. I mean, as a person, I noticed that I watch a lot of Russian-language TV shows [...] and this Russian narrative is everywhere, more or less subtly or directly, that if you speak Russian, you are already Russian.

S used to speak Russian with Russian speakers and Ukrainian with Ukrainian speakers. Then in 2022, he completely changed the language he used with his family, in daily life, in his social circle and in formal and informal communication, from Russian to Ukrainian.

I thought that it is not a problem for me to speak Russian or Ukrainian, and in principle I have always felt that Ukrainian is my native language.

S does not feel that he experiences any communication barriers. His wife still speaks Russian and is slowly switching to Ukrainian. S believes that people politicize language, but they will speak more Ukrainian.

In the next five years, the absolute majority will switch to Ukrainian. That's how I see it. [...] We will definitely speak Ukrainian at home with my child.

Levels of proficiency in Ukrainian vary, but informants suggested that almost everyone in Ukraine understands Ukrainian. And if there are difficulties, for example if older Russian speakers struggle to fill out forms in Ukrainian, they have always been able to count on help to do so.

But [in] the passport office or any institution where, let's say, they had to fill out forms, there was always an employee who helped them fill out the documents in Ukrainian. They would switch to Russian if the person did not understand something. Oh, it was all explained in Russian.

- Language service provider for Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts, formerly resident in Luhansk

Yet as the example above also illustrates, older native Russian speakers especially will continue to need access to information and services in their own language. Many members of other minority communities who have used Russian as their main language outside the home may also struggle to switch to Ukrainian. [As noted elsewhere](#), older Romani-speaking women may be less able to read or speak Ukrainian, and some Roma may not be able to use it for complex or sensitive discussions.

Research participants recognize that the choice of language is now politicized. They observe that many who have had no difficulty switching to Ukrainian are now demanding a similarly quick transition from others. This creates pressure and insecurity for anyone who doesn't want, or doesn't feel able, to make that change.

Such sensitivities present humanitarian organizations and host communities and authorities with a challenge to know how best to communicate with people fleeing the war in Ukraine. CLEAR Global's research suggests that they can learn from Ukrainian language policy, which states that the first exchange in any public setting such as a store should be in Ukrainian, after which the speakers can use the language they are most comfortable with. In the current context, that "Hello" or "Can I help you?" in Ukrainian sends a powerful signal that this is a safe space, even if the conversation that follows is in Russian or a mix of Russian and Ukrainian.

Annex: Methodology

This study was conducted between July 2022 and October 2022 and comprised four parts:

1. A review of changes in the language policy and legislation of Ukraine over the last 20 years was the basis for the design of qualitative research tools.
2. An online questionnaire on language use in Ukraine to 97 language specialists (researchers, academics and translators). We received 19 responses providing information on available databases and studies.
3. Eight semi-structured online interviews with key informants, including five of the survey respondents. We purposively sampled three more informants because of their specific expertise in the use of Russian, Romani and Crimean Tatar in Ukraine. These experts were recommended by language service providers.
4. Seven online case study interviews with people who live in Ukraine (or lived in Ukraine up to February 2022) about their native language, language use, and linguistic identity.

The study has a number of limitations. Its results cannot be generalized to the entire territory of Ukraine and cannot be compared with statistical data on language use in Ukraine available from the 2001 census. However, we can use the results of this qualitative study to illustrate the significant changes that have taken place in Ukraine over the past 20 years with regard to linguistic identity and language use.