The Ukrainian Language in Polish Public Space after the Russian Aggression against Ukraine in 2022

Abstract

The article presents changes in the function and status of the Ukrainian language in Poland since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In 2021, a summary of the presence of the Ukrainian language in Polish public space was published in Cognitive Studies. The text presents changes in education, medicine, information, entertainment, and other spheres. Moreover, the author presents the results of sociolinguistic research conducted among migrants on the presence of the Ukrainian language in Poland.

Keywords: Ukrainian language in Poland; advertising; language policy; Russian aggression against Ukraine

1 Introduction

The beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24 2022 completely changed the political and linguistic situation. Millions of refugees fleeing the war came to Poland. Often, these people had never planned to go to Poland and, therefore, had never learned Polish.

The arrival of such a large number of migrants from Ukraine to Poland has led to an increase in the presence of the official language of the migrants’ country of residence, i.e., Ukrainian, in the Polish public space, which has since been dynamically Ukrainianized.

The situation of Ukrainian in Poland has already been the subject of interest of linguists (cf. Pawłowski, 2019a, 2019b). It has been thoroughly studied as a separate work (Levchuk, 2021). Since significant changes have occurred in the functioning and status of the Ukrainian language in Poland since the publication of P. Levchuk’s article, the aim of the present article is to supplement previous research with up-to-date information.

2 Results

The linguistic landscape has changed in several important areas that should be presented separately.

2.1 Education

An inevitable revolution is taking place in the educational sphere, as Polish schools have already prepared some solutions in the field of the education and integration of foreigners and Polish citizens schooled in other educational systems (cf. Bucko & Mikulska, 2019, pp. 43–48; Miodunka
et al., 2018). However, the scale of the changes that have occurred required the preparation of a particular legal act and the implementation of new solutions (Levchuk, 2023, pp. 63–73). The introduction of a new regulation (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 645, Journal of Laws of 2022, position 573; Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji i Nauki z dnia 21 marca 2022 r. w sprawie organizacji kształcenia, wychowania i opieki dzieci i młodzieży będących obywatelami Ukrainy, 2022; Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji i Nauki z dnia 10 marca 2022 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie kształcenia osób niebędących obywatelami polskimi oraz osób będących obywatelami polskimi, które pobierały naukę w szkołach funkcjonujących w systemach oświaty innych państw, 2022) allowed the employment of teachers from Ukraine who could teach Ukrainian students in special preparatory classes, in which they focussed on teaching Polish as a foreign language and the language of school education in other subjects. In practice, school principals could employ teachers from Ukraine who could teach individual subjects in Ukrainian and Polish. Intercultural assistants have also appeared in many school institutions. They are people with migration experience who help teachers and students to communicate effectively. In individual schools, with the help of such assistants, adjustments have been made to the educational requirements, in particular subjects for students from Ukraine. There was an option in school electronic registers to choose Ukrainian, which facilitated communication between teachers and parents, at least at a basic level. Polish schools, at least those institutions where there were many students from Ukraine, began to use bilingual signs that signalled where different places in the school were, cf. Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Bilingual signs in a Kraków school. Author’s photos.](image)

P. Levchuk’s survey research shows that at the end of the 2021/2022 school year, as many as 88.4% of Ukrainian students participating in the survey believed that there were enough messages in Ukrainian in their schools (Levchuk, 2023, p. 68).

Even before 2022, individual schools offered the opportunity to learn Ukrainian for children from Ukraine. These were Ukrainian-language schools and institutions with Polish as the language of instruction, e.g., Primary School No. 151, Jagiellonian University in Krakow. There is information in the press that Lublin is also planning to introduce Ukrainian language learning from the 2023/2024 school year (cf. Kremin’, 2023).

Special examination papers were created for eighth-grade students or children who came to Poland after the beginning of the Russian aggression. As part of the compulsory Polish language exam, students received the following support: extended working time, a bilingual Polish–Ukrainian dictionary, task instructions written in Ukrainian, and different assessment rules (cf. Centralna Komisja Egzaminacyjna, 2023a). These measures also applied to the mathematics exam – the instructions were written in Ukrainian, and it was also possible to write a short answer in Ukrainian (cf. Centralna Komisja Egzaminacyjna, 2023b). However, this proposal of instructions written in Ukrainian could have been fairer to the students. During the nine months before taking the exams,
they had already had mathematics lessons in Polish. Some specific mathematics terms that appeared during this exam, e.g., the Ukrainian name for a prism, *pryzma*, and a task using this word appeared in the exam. Introducing Ukrainian into exam tasks requires common sense to avoid harming students when creating supportive measures. The content of tasks was also translated in the foreign language exam, although 25.9% of students from Ukraine chose Russian for this exam ([*Ekzamen vos’myklasnyka v Pol’schi,* 2023]). It should also be clearly emphasized that Ukrainian was the only language into which the instructions for exam tasks were translated, and this is the first such case in the history of exams for eighth graders. Ukrainian as a modern foreign language should appear in the high school leaving examination in the Polish education system in the 2025/2026 school year ([*Journal of Laws of 2023,* position 366; *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji i Nauki z dnia 23 lutego 2023 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie egzaminu maturalnego,* 2023]). This is yet another strengthening of the position of Ukrainian in the Polish education system.

The Education Ministry’s regulation allows children from Ukraine to complete compulsory education online under the Ukrainian school curriculum. This possibility has led to the establishment of schools in Poland that teach according to Ukrainian curricula and in Ukrainian but are not formally controlled by either the Polish supervisory authorities or the relevant authorities in Ukraine. The appearance of such facilities, especially in large cities such as Warsaw, Krakow, and Wrocław, has advantages and disadvantages. Still, the most crucial issue is the legal regulation, which must be resolved.

In addition, it is also worth mentioning Ukrainian kindergartens, which operate similarly to Ukrainian schools and require the introduction of separate legal regulations.

The local government authorities in Krakow have created an out-of-school support project titled “A Sunny Support Space”. Children and adults can visit branches of this network and take advantage of the programs offered for children and adults. The primary language of communication is Ukrainian, and thus this is another place, outside schools, where children can communicate in Ukrainian.

Academic centres have started offering free Ukrainian language courses for anyone interested, mainly Poles, who are interested in learning Ukrainian as beginners. Similar language courses at various levels are conducted by, among others, the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Centre for Eastern European Studies at the University of Warsaw. Interest in Ukrainian could be much higher if Ukraine had a system of certifying Ukrainian as a foreign language according to European standards.

### 2.2 The Medical Sphere

Apart from education, the medical sphere is an important field from which migrants from Ukraine often come. Primary healthcare in many medical facilities has a hotline offering consultations in Ukrainian, e.g., Scanmed, LuxMed, CM Damian, and others. On the official public healthcare website for Poles, patient.gov.pl, it is also possible to choose a menu for people from Ukraine in Ukrainian. ([*https://pacjent.gov.pl/tag/pacjenci-z-ukraini; Patsienty z Ukrainy,* n.d.]). With the arrival of many people from Ukraine, the medical sphere, just like the banking sector before 2022, is increasingly introducing Ukrainian to attract customers, with financial benefits for their company.

### 2.3 The Information Sphere

The media remained outside the influence of Ukrainian before 2022. Currently, attention should be paid to the activities of the public broadcaster Polish Radio, which has strongly supported Ukrainian citizens in Poland since the beginning of the Russian aggression. Before the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian-language programming was broadcast for only three hours daily, whereas now it is broadcast almost all day. Additionally, the first station of Polish Radio broadcasts information
in Ukrainian at 10 a.m., 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. There has been a vast increase in the presence of Ukrainian in the media sphere because it is difficult to find a similar situation in another country (cf. Hilniop, 2022a).

Apart from radio, it is worth paying attention to the increasing amount of advertising messages that can be seen and heard in Ukrainian. For example, the Polish convenience store chain Żabka provides Ukrainian subtitles for their advertisements (see Hilniop, 2022b). Similar messages in Ukrainian can be heard in Lidl and other supermarkets, and when choosing self-service checkouts, you can select Ukrainian as a language option. This is an excellent opportunity for migrants who have poor knowledge of Polish.

Public service announcements in Ukrainian can be heard in Polish airports, e.g., Warsaw and Krakow. This is crucial for passengers who travel by train and coach to Poland due to the closure of Ukrainian airspace and then transfer to flights in Poland.

In the information sphere, there are many Ukrainian-language websites that often provide information necessary for migrants from Ukraine to feel comfortable in Poland. We have taken some of the data in this article from these websites.

2.4 Museums, Cinemas, Libraries and Books in Ukrainian

Ukrainian was already present as one of the languages of tour guides or audio guides, but in the face of a massive increase in migrants from Ukraine, it has also appeared as one of the languages of messages addressed to visitors, cf. Figure 2.

![Figure 2](image1.png) **Figure 2.** Museum in Sucha Beskidzka, Małopolska (left). Museum of Photography in Kraków, Małopolska (right). Author’s photos.

The interest in showing films in Ukrainian is increasing. Children’s movies, such as Mavka. Lisovna Písnia (Mavka: The Forest Song), which enjoyed worldwide success, are also shown in Poland in the Ukrainian-language version (cf. Sharapova, 2023). Moreover, you can find films in Ukrainian in the popular Polish cinema chain Helios (cf. Fil'my ukrains'koi v kinoteatrakh Helios u Pol'shchii, 2022). On Facebook, you can find special groups where lovers of Ukrainian films in specific cities share information about movies in Ukrainian in their town, e.g., in Krakow – Ukrainian Film Screenings in Krakow. ([https://www.facebook.com/pokazy.filmow.ukrainskich/](https://www.facebook.com/pokazy.filmow.ukrainskich/); Pokazy Filmów Ukraińskich w Krakowie, n.d.) or in Wroclaw – Ukraine Cinema ([https://www.facebook.com/DCFKinoUkraina/](https://www.facebook.com/DCFKinoUkraina/); KinoUkraїna, n.d.).

The arrival of large numbers of migrants from Ukraine has forced the book market to introduce Ukrainian titles to its shelves in bookstores. The famous Polish chain Empik offers an extensive selection of books for children (cf. Empik, 2023). There is also a list of bookstores, mainly online, where you can buy books published in Ukrainian, e.g., SovaBooks, Readswoję, Knizka.pl,
Ukrainian associations increasingly maintain Ukrainian libraries, making books available to those interested. Such libraries can be found in Warsaw (the Ukrainian House) and in Krakow (the Zustrich Foundation). In addition, individual educational institutions, mainly schools and extracurricular centres where there are many Ukrainian children, have books in Ukrainian in their libraries. Public libraries also have Ukrainian collections, e.g., the Provincial Public Library in Krakow.

2.5 Ukrainian Companies in Poland

Some Ukrainian companies that are well-known and recognized in Ukraine also started operating in Poland before 2022. For example, it is worth mentioning the famous chain of bars serving L’viv liqueurs, Pijana Wiśnia, which can be found in many cities in Poland (see https://pijanawisnia.pl/; Pijana Wiśnia, n.d.). Customers can communicate in Ukrainian there without any significant problems. Similarly, the well-known Ukrainian chain Galia Baluvana, which sells frozen homemade meals, is entering the Polish market, albeit under the brand name Multicook (cf. Za kordonom – tse vil’na nisha, 2022). A restaurant and a shop with this name already operate in Krakow and sell their products in several places in Krakow (cf. https://multicook-krakow.com/; Multicook – Handmade Food, 2023). However, the most visible example of a Ukrainian company operating in Poland is the private postal company Nova Poshta, which operates in Poland as Nova Post (see https://novapost.com/uk-pl; Nova Post Polszcha, n.d.). It is a well-known company among Ukrainians and is the most often chosen for shipping letters, orders, and parcels. In Poland, Nova Post offices operate in Warsaw, Krakow, Katowice, Wroclaw, Gdansk, Rzeszow, Lublin and Lodz. Customer reviews show that you can communicate in Ukrainian there without any problems.

2.6 Support for Ukraine in Polish Public Space

From the very beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, all public space in Poland has been hung with Ukrainian symbols. The Ukrainian flag could be seen in various public places, on the Internet, pinned to the clothes of politicians, journalists, and citizens. In this text, we are most interested in inscriptions in Ukrainian, which also appeared in public places. As an example, I give Swietokrzyska Street in central Warsaw, cf. Figure 3.
2.7 Other Spheres
Following the start of the Russian invasion in 2022, there was a surge of volunteers working in city and commune offices, helping Ukrainians by translating necessary information. In later months, this practice disappeared. We can also find applications in Ukrainian on the website of the Ministry of Digitization (Ministerstwo Cyfryzacji, 2022). Ukrainian is present at aid points for migrants from Ukraine.

The increasing presence of Ukrainian is noticeable in the religious sphere, along with the growing number of believers who have come to Poland. No particular changes in this area are noticeable.

There have been no significant changes in public transport either, apart from the increase in ticket machines where Ukrainian has appeared as a language option. A similar situation is also present at self-service ticket offices of various retail chains and mobile network operators, who often sell packages with numbers even for free, in order to acquire new customers.

In the banking sector, which was the first to appreciate the potential profits from introducing Ukrainian as a customer service language, there has been no increase in the presence of the language. It is worth mentioning, however, that as the number of Ukrainians who have bank accounts increases, banks are also increasing the amount of information provided in Ukrainian (see PKO BP, 2023).

The ease of converting Ukrainian currency into Polish currency and vice versa has led to a reduction in the importance of intermediaries in the transfer of money between the countries, which has led to the lack of an increase in the Ukrainian language in this sphere.

2.8 The Presence of Ukrainian in the Opinion of Migrants from Ukraine
Do the migrants themselves think that Ukrainian is sufficiently present in Poland? I decided to ask them. We used the profitest.pl platform and a traditional (paper) questionnaire version to conduct survey research. The research was conducted from April 12, 2022, to August 30, 2022, and involved 1,503 respondents living in Poland. Most respondents were aged 30–45 (55.2%), 20% were aged 46–60, and 28.1% were aged 13–29. The oldest research participant was 77 years old. Regarding gender, women dominated (88.2% of respondents, men – 11.8%). In this paper, I only present the results regarding the presence of the Ukrainian language in Poland.

When asked whether Ukrainian is sufficiently present in messages for foreigners in Poland, I received the following answer, cf. Figure 4.

| Is the Ukrainian language sufficiently present in messages for foreigners in Poland? |
|-----------------|----------------|
| **Yes**         | **75%**        |
| **NO**          | **25%**        |

**Figure 4.** The presence of the Ukrainian language in Poland, in the opinion of migrants from Ukraine. Own study.

As shown by the data presented, % of respondents believe Ukrainian is satisfactorily present in messages published in Poland for foreigners.

3 Conclusion
It is worth noting that, apart from English, Ukrainian is the only language that functions on such a large scale in Poland. Nowadays, Ukrainian can be heard everywhere – most often in public
places. Russian is also often heard, which naturally creates a struggle for influence between the languages. Still, the power of Ukrainian seems to be more vital from the perspective of assessing the political situation and other factors influencing the power of the language (cf. Miodunka, 1990). On the other hand, in other countries where there are significant numbers of Ukrainian refugees the presence of Ukrainian is not as noticeable as it is in Poland (cf. Levchuk, 2022), which allows us to conclude that the Polish authorities are loyal and supportive towards the Ukrainian language.

However, it is good to remember that it is up to the Ukrainians themselves whether their language will continue to have such a good position in various spheres. Polish language policy has never dealt with such a large influx of migrants and may approach this phenomenon differently in the future. From my perspective, a good solution would be to increase the role of the Polish language in Ukraine, which will naturally reflect the functioning of Ukrainian in Poland.

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Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji i Nauki z dnia 21 marca 2022 r. w sprawie organizacji kształcenia, wychowania i opieki dzieci i młodzieży będących obywatelami Ukrainy (Dz.U. z 2022 r. poz. 645). (2022).

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