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### LANGUAGE POLICY IN THE TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE (2014–2025). 2<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.4. The ongoing mystery of «classical Ukrainian»

As early as 2022, Russia presented its remedy for the «bad» and «corrupt» Ukrainian language: the development of a «superior Ukrainian» language, or «classical Ukrainian», fabricated in the Russian Federation (Moser 2023). On August 31, 2022, Russian Minister of Education Sergey Kravtsov officially introduced the concept to Putin, declaring that pupils would have the opportunity to learn Ukrainian as their native language if parents and educators so decided. He also announced that a textbook on «classical Ukrainian» was being prepared and would be finished by the end of 2022 (see: the YouTube video with Kravtsov; note Putin’s facial expression in Glava 2022). Subsequently, Russian opinion makers discussed establishing an institution to regulate the use of Ukrainian in Russia (Moser 2023).

Early debates in the Russian media anticipated the subsequent discourse (ibid.). Some argued that Ukrainian should be purified because it had been deliberately contaminated at all linguistic levels by Ukrainian nationalists. Others declared that «classical Ukrainian» was unnecessary because Ukrainian was merely a Russian dialect belonging to the past (ibid.). Some discussants opined that «classical Ukrainian» was «more or less Taras Shevchenko’s language», while others referred to the term as the Ukrainian language of the Soviet period.

Overall, the term «classical Ukrainian» was exclusively used in reference to the textbooks that were to be prepared in Russia for use in the temporarily occupied territories. Therefore, new heated debates arose after Russian Deputy Minister of Education Aleksandr Bugaev announced in an April 4, 2023, interview with TASS that the Russian Ministry of Education had finally «prepared a textbook of the classical Ukrainian language for younger schoolchildren» and was developing another manual for secondary school students (Minprosvshchenija 2023). Bugaev commented:

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<sup>1</sup> See the first part of the article: Moser M. (2025). Language policy in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine (2014–2025). 1 *Movoznavstvo*, (6), 3–20.

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«The textbook will be published. Development for elementary grades has been completed. Work is also in full swing for grades 5–9, so, as we said, the relevant materials and textbooks will be ready. We teach in Russian, but we will create all the conditions necessary for the study of Ukrainian as a native language, as well as other languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation. <...> We are preparing a textbook that will truly reflect all the beauty and purity of the traditional Ukrainian language, which was studied during the Soviet period in accordance with our best pedagogical traditions» (ibid.).

This news needed time to sink in for the Russian audience.

Elena Egorova, the aforementioned former Ukrainian language teacher who now teaches Russian, was one of the few voices who seemingly welcomed the move. When asked «what Russia should do regarding language instruction in the liberated territories», she replied:

«First of all, we need to bring back the classical Ukrainian language that we learned. The real Ukrainian language is a treasure trove from which there is much to learn. The same goes for classical Ukrainian folk songs. They cannot be compared to what people listen to and write today» (Bobylev 2023).

When asked further whether «something in [the language of] the Soviet textbook had to be changed» Egorova answered:

«I don't think we need to change anything much. We should use it as a basis. Perhaps we could include some young authors who are writing now, as literature from our native land. We have them anyway. Not just Sosiura,<sup>2</sup> for example. We could include our poets,<sup>3</sup> about whom we still know little» (ibid.).

Finally, Egorova made it clear that she was not really enthusiastic about any Ukrainian textbooks anyway:

[Interviewer:] «How do you assess the Russian Ministry of Education's publication of a Ukrainian language textbook for primary school pupils and its plans to publish a textbook for secondary school pupils?

[Egorova:] Maybe it's a good idea, maybe not. It's an interesting question» (ibid.).

The Russian outlet «Kommersant» the news about the new textbook under the headline «Russia will deprive Ukraine of its monopoly on the Ukrainian language» (Rossiya lishit 2023). Aleksey Nechaev, a political scientist originally from Kyiv, argued that experts fluent in Ukrainian would be useful in fighting «Ukrainian nationalism», which, he added, still existed due to NATO support (ibid.). He specified:

«For example, intelligence requires the infiltration of agents into various enemy structures and organizations, which means that specialists are needed who can pronounce the word “паланица” (Ukrainian *паланиця* ‘flatbread’. — *М. М.*) without a Ryazan' accent, as Shtirlitz would say. <...> The military also needs specialists, especially for deciphering reports and radio intercepts. And they are

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that people like Egorova mention Sosiura with a positive attitude. After all, this poet was accused of Ukrainian nationalism for his 1944 poem «Love Ukraine» («Любіть Україну») in 1951 (Koshelivets 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Egorova did not provide any names of young poets who write in Ukrainian in the temporarily occupied territories.

necessary for investigations. Try interrogating a captured Hutsul somewhere near Donetsk — that's quite a challenge, because even in Vinnytsia and Zhytomyr, people have trouble understanding Galicians, not to mention in Kyiv» (ibid.).

Therefore, he argued, Russia «had to deprive Ukrainian politicians of their monopoly on language by developing its own, de-ideologized, and adequate version of Ukrainian» (ibid.).<sup>4</sup>

Anatoliy Vasserman, a Russian State Duma deputy who has repeatedly declared that Ukrainian is not a language in its own rights, commented:

«Ukrainian, if anyone wishes to learn it, can be studied in schools as one of the dialects of the Russian language. Many fine literary texts have been written in Ukrainian. This means that we need to preserve this heritage» (ibid.).

Vladislav Berdichevskij, a deputy in the DPR's «parliament», regarded the creation of the Ukrainian textbook as a «futile endeavor», because «the Ukrainian language cannot compete with others» (ibid.).

The aforementioned Russian nationalist publicist Egor Holmogorov commented:

«The [Ukrainian] language [“мова”] was a tool for constructing an “anti-Russia”, and any schoolchild who dares to read texts in it outside the school curriculum will easily see this for themselves. <...> Why take away hours of studying “lines from Aleksandr” (Pushkin. — M. M.), which even describe Ukraine in a much more beautiful way, for the sake of “Taras’s (Taras Shevchenko’s. — M. M.) lies”?» (ibid.).<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, he argued:

*«The purpose of such study is not entirely clear. The Ukrainian language, as a domestic dialect, can be easily learned at home by those who speak it. However, in the liberated territories, people do not speak Ukrainian, but Russian or, in extreme cases, Surzhyk. But the “Ukrainian language” taught in schools has nothing to do with this vernacular. That is why even Ukrainian nationalists often found it difficult to learn. This language can only be useful for one thing: for keeping official records. Now, here’s the question: Who will need to keep official records in Ukrainian in the liberated territories, and why? <...> It is probably safe to say that most Russians today agree with this opinion — at least those who are fighting the enemy on the front lines and helping the army in the rear, as well as those who have experienced all the delights of “Ukrainization” firsthand» (Perla — Medvedev 2023).*

Other commentators posed the provocative question, «Back to the USSR: Will children in Donbas be taught the language of their killers? Do Russian people in southwestern Russia need a Ukrainian language textbook?» (ibid). Some were horrified by the (non-existing) threat of Ukrainian-language official docu-

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<sup>4</sup> Larisa Shesler, a «human rights activist» and former member of the Mykolaiv Regional Council, also emphasized the importance of Ukrainian in the information war: «It so happened that many Ukrainian citizens can communicate in Russian in everyday life and watch Russian TV series, but they receive official information in Ukrainian. Accordingly, some government agencies could successfully convey their point of view in Ukrainian» (ibid.).

<sup>5</sup> According to «Kommersant», Kholmogorov explicitly referred to Iosif Brodskij's infamous poem «On Ukraine's Independence» (ibid.).

ments and noted that the message of the new Ukrainian textbooks «caused outrage among many people» (ibid.). The author asked:

«Is it fair to study Ukrainian in Russian schools? It's not just unfair. It's downright sacrilegious» (ibid.).

Russian nationalist writer Dmitrij Mel'nikov reacted with similar emotions:

«Ukrainian language in elementary school? Are you serious? Why not Polabian or Lower Sorbian?<sup>6</sup> Our children don't need Ukrainian — no matter what variety the Ministry of Education officials, gathered in a close circle, call "classical". Russian/Russian-speaking children speak a language with maximum cultural scope, a thousand-year historical range, and enormous possibilities provided by its synthetic inflectional system. In gymnasiums, Soviet and Russian schools, languages comparable to Russian in their semantic, conceptual, scientific, artistic, etc. content were and are taught. These are languages in which hundreds of millions of people around the world think and speak. This approach to teaching foreign languages to children is completely organic, logical, and has been proven over centuries. But why do younger schoolchildren need Ukrainian? A person can choose this language as a subject of study at a conscious age — if they have such a need. And that's enough. Has the friendship between peoples not yet ended in some bureaucrat's head? Well, let's write textbooks for our primary school pupils in all the languages of the fraternal Soviet socialist republics. Why not? The worst is yet to come. Let the children and their teachers suffer together. Comrades from the Ministry of Education, stop trying to reinvent the wheel! It won't work» (Lixa beda 2023).

Russian State Duma deputy Evgenij Fedorov declared, «Yes, at present, the Ukrainian language should have a status similar to that of German during the Great Patriotic War» (Fedorov 2023). He continued:

«Studying the notorious "classical Ukrainian language" will allow you to understand what is written and spoken in the enemy media faster and better. And in some cases, it will allow you to establish direct contact with native speakers on the other side of the front line» (ibid.).

Clearly, intellectual consistency is not Fedorov's strong suit. If «classical Ukrainian» is meant to differ maximally from standard Ukrainian, then studying «classical Ukrainian» would definitely not be the ideal way to understand authentic Ukrainian.

Fedorov continued:

«And, finally, the main question is: What "classical Ukrainian language" is the Ministry of Education referring to? A hundred years ago, there was no such thing as an official Ukrainian language or speech.<sup>7</sup> In most academic sources, the Ukrainian language is viewed exclusively as a means of "everyday communica-

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<sup>6</sup> Polabian is an extinct Slavic language that was once spoken in the Wendland region near Hanover, Germany. Lower Sorbian is a small, endangered minority language in the region of Brandenburg in eastern Germany. Neither of these languages has an immediate connection to Ukraine or Russia.

<sup>7</sup> Fedorov's account omitted the fact that the Russian Empire impeded the advancement of the Ukrainian language through the implementation of restrictive language policies, including the Valuev directive of 1863 and the even more stringent Ems Ukaz of 1876. In the Habsburg Empire, «Ruthenian», which was often called «Ruthenian or Little Russian» and subsequently «Ukrainian», was in broad official use since 1849 (Moser 2011: 667–683).

tion among rural residents, townspeople, ordinary citizens, small traders, artisans, and the less educated segments of society, as well as an instrument of folklore and song and ritual culture”.<sup>8</sup> For centuries, Russian was the only language used by Little Russians in education, science, law, military, and administrative affairs. For centuries, Kyiv was a Russian-speaking city, like all other cities in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> <...> Modern Ukrainian grammar is a product of Bolshevik Russia and nothing more.<sup>10</sup> Before the revolution, there was only colloquial Ukrainian in Ukraine, which in no way can be called classical. If the authors from the Ministry of Education consider Taras Shevchenko’s language to be classical Ukrainian, then he used it exclusively in poetry. All of the author’s prose works are written in good “Pushkin” Russian.<sup>11</sup> <...> Russian has always prevailed in Ukraine – largely because of this bilingualism, constructs such as Surzhyk have appeared. This is a Russian-Ukrainian hybrid language that has been forming for at least three centuries. To this day, the vast majority of residents of central and eastern Ukraine, without even realizing it, speak mainly Surzhyk. For example, in Kiev, Surzhyk became a bizarre mixture of Polish and Hebrew with hints of Little Russian speech more than a hundred years ago.<sup>12</sup> And so it is in every region of Ukraine. All that remains is to decide which specific “Ukrainian language” the Russian Ministry of Education has settled on» (ibid.).<sup>13</sup>

Andrej Medvedev, the deputy chairman of the Moscow City Duma and a correspondent for the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, shared his «expertise» on the history of the Ukrainian language:

«But I would like to understand what “classical Ukrainian language” means. Considering that a hundred years ago, no such language existed. There were dialects, there were variants of codification. But a language is something slightly different. What do they want to offer children? Which version? The language of Pantelejmon Kulish? Mychailo Drahomanov? The language that was invented by Kiev theatergoers and citizens in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries?<sup>14</sup> The classical Lviv variant? And which Lviv variant? If it is the one composed by local “narodniki” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the sensitive guidance of Austrian officials, then not even the Ukrainian politicians of that time knew it. They simply did not understand it. If it is the classical Lviv dialect, then it is ordinary Russian. <...> Yes, people in Lviv spoke Russian. And they considered them-

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<sup>8</sup> Even when considering the Russian Empire, this oversimplified view of Ukraine is not aligning with reality. Modern Ukrainian literature has its origins in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ukrainian was used in the press. A complete Ukrainian Bible translation was made, etc.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Russia became an important official language of the Ukrainian realms only since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The history of the Russian language in Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities began in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Moser 2022).

<sup>10</sup> In reality, modern Ukrainian grammars were first published in the Habsburg Empire in the 1830s, and subsequently in the Russian Empire starting in 1905 (it must be acknowledged that Oleksii Pavlovskyi’s «Grammar of the Little Russian Dialect», published in 1818, cannot be categorized as a grammar in the contemporary sense).

<sup>11</sup> The argument lacks consistency. At that point, even Fedorov admitted that Ukrainian was used in poetry. The statement that Shevchenko wrote almost all of his prose in Russian is accurate. For a detailed analysis of this topic, see: (Moser 2012).

<sup>12</sup> The rationale behind Fedorov’s inclusion of Hebrew in this list remains unclear. Given the total lack of correlation with reality, it is plausible that he sought to elicit anti-Semitic sentiments.

<sup>13</sup> Fedorov also referenced Andrej Medvedev’s comments on Ivan Franko (Medvedev 2023; see below).

<sup>14</sup> Of course, the Ukrainian language of the 19<sup>th</sup> century exhibited a relatively high degree of variation. In any case, nobody doubted that Kulish’s and Drahomanov’s language was the same Ukrainian language spoken by Kyiv «theatergoers and citizens».

selves Russian; the Austrians called them “Rusyns”. Rusyns are not a sub-ethnic group. They are Russian people.<sup>15</sup> By the way, most of the “Ukrainians” in Lviv also spoke Russian and were taught “Ukrainian”. <...> Even if it is a variant of Ukrainian as written by, say, Ostap Vyshnia, it is a language born of Bolshevik Ukrainization. And the result is complete bipolarity. With one hand, we are fighting against “Lenin’s Ukraine”, and with the other, we are strengthening it” (Lixabeda 2023).<sup>16</sup>

Facing criticism, Medvedev continued his crusade immediately. The lengthy headline of his new text read, «In response to my post, where I expressed surprise that children would be forced to learn Ukrainian, and that this was a completely idiotic decision because it is unclear what “classical Ukrainian” is, people started writing to me that I was wrong» (Medvedev 2023). Medvedev explained that there was Ivan Franko’s language and Lesia Ukrainka’s language. He did not discuss the latter at all. Concerning the former, Medvedev pointed out Franko’s Russophile origins<sup>17</sup> and argued that the writer’s «language (dialect)» was «Galician-Russian» or «Carpatho-Russian» and that he «regarded himself as a Rusyn» (ibid.).<sup>18</sup> Medvedev admitted that Franko, «became an active participant in the Ukrainian political movement in Galicia in his mature years» and wrote «in the

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, nobody in Lviv spoke Russian except for those Russophiles, who, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, had learned Russian because they shared Medvedev’s all-Russian views. «Ruthenian» (or just Ukrainian) intellectuals definitely did not standardize their language «under the sensitive guidance of Austrian officials». On the term «Rusyns», see above.

<sup>16</sup> A few days later, an anonymous user nicknamed «pioneer\_ljafd» expanded on Medvedev’s absurd narratives. According to him, the language of «Rusalka Dnistrovaia» (published in 1837) was «ordinary Russian, with minor dialectal variations» (Pioneer 2023). According to the user, «Russians can read this book without any problems, but Ukrainians need it to be translated — otherwise, it’s incomprehensible» (ibid.). He continued, «In reality, what “classical Ukrainian” is is perfectly clear. It is the Ukromova that was created in the 1920s and 1930s under Comrade Stalin’s leadership (interestingly, it was Stalin and not Lenin who was convicted here. — *M. M.*), fabricated and imposed for the purposes of dividing Russia, derussification, and Ukrainization. Ukromova was designed to be difficult for Russians to perceive and understand. The Bolshevik linguists achieved the desired result. The result was a truly pig-like language [which was] only formally related to the Slavic languages» (ibid.). The author offered a link to a Rusyn anti-Ukrainian video statement and commented, «But I wanted to draw your attention to how the Rusyn language sounds. Not only is it understandable, but it is also pleasant to the Russian ear. And it is by no means comical or ugly, unlike oink language [“хрюкомова”]. And Surzhyk does not cause rejection because it is a living folk language. <...> Should the “Ukrainian language” be banned? It is enough to ignore the vile Ukromova, deprive it of state support, and the Ukrainian undead [“укронежить”] will die out on its own» (ibid.). Similar insane statements were made on the «Chronicles of the Decline of Civilization» Telegram channel (RF sozdali 2023). More absurd narratives about the history of the Ukrainian language can be found in (Rossiya lishit 2023).

<sup>17</sup> It’s true that Franko held Russophile views in his early years. However, he abandoned these beliefs in his early twenties.

<sup>18</sup> «Rusyns» or, «Ruthenen» in German, was the ancient name for all Ukrainians (and Belarusians), and it remained in consistent use outside of Russia. Moreover, it was common opinion that «Ruthenians» and «Little Russians» constituted two branches of one people. Furthermore, it was widely believed that «Ruthenians» and «Little Russians» were two branches of the same ethnic group. Therefore, Josyf Levyckyï’s first Galician-printed grammar in the Habsburg Empire, published in 1834, was entitled «Grammatik der ruthenischen oder klein-russischen Sprache in Galizien» («Grammar of the Ruthenian or Little Russian Language in Galicia») (Moser 2016: 171–218). The «Ruthenians» or «Little Russians» gradually adopted their new name «Ukrainians» during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ukrainian» language, which was then being formed rather artificially by urban intellectuals based on the assumption that this language was closer to the vernacular than literary Russian» (ibid.). Medvedev emphasized that Franko's earlier works differed from his later ones, noting that he gradually became accustomed to forms that were more distant from the Russian language.<sup>19</sup> He pointed out that «in a total of 43 works published during his lifetime, philologists counted more than 10,000 changes» to Franko's language and that more changes were introduced after Franko's death. In contrast, Medvedev argued, Galician «Muscophiles» only wrote in Russian in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, up to the 1930ies. He claimed that Galician «Muscophiles», in contrast, only wrote in Russian from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1930s but neglected to mention that the Russophile activists he quoted usually did not write in authentic Russian at all, but rather in a pseudo-Russian variety. Moreover, Medvedev failed to mention that variation is a common phenomenon, especially in the early stages of language standardization, including the standardization of Russian.

On April 6, 2023, an anonymous author hiding behind the pseudonym serg07011972 quickly reacted to the alleged publication of the new «classical Ukrainian» textbook in a particularly aggressive «LiveJournal» entry (serg07011972, 2023). The blogger sharply criticized the Russian officials responsible for the new textbook, referring to them as «noviopy».<sup>20</sup> This is what serg07011972 wrote:

«The Noviopy, the group ruling the Russian Federation, are doing everything possible to ensure the swift defeat of the Russian Federation in the war against “ukraine”<sup>21</sup> and the West behind it. The sole purpose of “ukraine” is the extermination of Russians and the complete destruction of Russia in any form. And the “ukrainian language”, invented by the Austrians and Bolsheviks, is the main tool

<sup>19</sup> In fact, none of the words Medvedev pointed out is genuinely Russian: *взгляд* was also based on Polish *wzgląd*, depending on the actual meaning of the noun; *воздух* is a loan from Church Slavonic, *войско* was adopted from Polish, and *вчера* is a form that is widespread in southwestern Ukrainian dialects.

<sup>20</sup> The openly racist term, *новиопы*, or *новиобы*, was introduced by the Russian nationalist writer Dmitrij Galkovskij in 2012. It is an acronym for *новая историческая общность* ‘new historical community’, referring to all «non-Russian persons born on the territory of the USSR and Russia». It has been widely used «after the start of the war in Ukraine» (Enotov 2023). Galkovskij defined this term with a certain degree of aggressive obscenity: «And here we come to the question of what this “НОВАЯ Историческая Общность” or, in short, “новиоп(б)” is. I replaced the “B” with a “P” to match the spoken pronunciation, as this VERY accurately characterizes the essence of the new sub-ethnic group. These are several million artificially created “new Europeans” in Eastern Europe who resemble Americans: on the one hand, [they are] childishly aggressive, and on the other, unnecessary [“не пришей рукав”]» (quoted after Enotov 2023). Two comments are in place: 1. The acronym clearly alludes to a Russian swearword (“еб-” ‘fuck’); 2. *не пришей рукав* is short for common *не пришей к низде рукав*, with Russian *низда* ‘cunt’. «Enotov» (clearly a pseudonym) comments on the meaning of *новиопы*: «As Galkovskij writes, Noviops were created by the Bolshevik regime as a counterweight to Russians of mixed Ukrainian-Jewish-Caucasian-Central Asian origin. Broadly speaking, the word “новиоп” has become a meme and even an insult popular among Z-activists. They call anyone who condemns Russia's actions and the policies of the Russian authorities a noviop» (ibid.). «Enotov's» post features a variety of caricatures of «noviopy» which the blogger himself characterizes as «racist».

<sup>21</sup> The author intentionally avoids using capital letters when referring to Ukraine. This mirrors the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences' allowance of informal communication referencing Russia and Putin without capitals on September 21, 2023 (Kolomiets 2023).

for maintaining “ukrainian identity”, without which the existence of “ukraine” is impossible. Thus, any support for the “ukrainian language” is military support for “ukraine” and the West in the destruction of Russians and Russia. Any support by the Russian Federation for the “ukrainian language” is the most extreme manifestation of the policy of state Russophobia. In this regard, let’s take a look at what the new Minister of Education of the Russian Federation, Kravtsov, is doing (his real surname is Braun; he became “Kravtsov” quite recently when he was appointed to a high government post in the Russian Federation)» (serg07011972, 2023).

By contrast, the above-mentioned philosopher and head of the Department of Sociology and Management at V. G. Shukhov Belgorod State Technological University, Mihail Ignatov, seemingly supported the introduction of textbooks written in «classical Ukrainian»:

«But what we must do without fail is reconcile them (Ukrainian children. — *M. M.*) with their cultural roots, use education to show them that Ukrainian culture is not what the criminal Nazi regime in Kiev represented it as. <...> This includes, for example, the beautiful poems of Taras Shevchenko. In general, I am in favor of children not feeling like pariahs simply because they were born in a territory once ruled by evil people. And here, precisely, a sound study of Ukrainian culture, its positive aspects, including through knowledge of the language, can play a positive role. But, again, this is a serious educational challenge» (Rodionov 2023).

Subsequently, Ignatov was asked:

«Do we have specialists in the Ukrainian language, is there such a subject at Russian universities’ philology departments? What do scholars think about this topic (the language or the South Russian dialect spiced with Polish loans) <...>?» (ibid.).

He replied:

«It’s hard to say for everyone. For example, we have them in Belgorod. However, there are no specialized departments in universities. Moreover, the classical Ukrainian language as we understand it and the new language that has been introduced in Ukraine in recent years are, as they say, two very different things. I think that, in general, there are few such specialists in Russia. However, there are many of them in the new territories. Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Crimea, Kherson — you can find such specialists there. Of course, we must understand that the teaching of the Ukrainian language here and there must be different — it is necessary to create a new educational program that takes into account the goals and objectives set by our state. <...> I think that the residents of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia will also follow Donbas’s example in the end» (ibid.).

Following the example of Donbas meant, of course, the ultimate ousting of the Ukrainian language from all schools. This goal could be achieved even more easily by claiming that there were no qualified Ukrainian teachers available. After all, teachers of Ukrainian from the temporarily occupied territories had just been retrained to teach Russian. Furthermore, they could hardly be trusted as they did not and could not have any idea what «classical Ukrainian» really is.

### **2.5. Much Ado About Nothing? Are there any textbooks on «classical Ukrainian»?**

Despite all the heated debates, those sincerely interested in «classical Ukrainian» (including the author of this study) have not had the opportunity to see the frequently announced textbooks.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> I have contacted many people, including those who still have limited contact with individuals remaining in the temporarily occupied territories. To no avail.

As mentioned above, Andrej Bugaev, the Russian Deputy Minister of Education, declared as early as April 2023 that a textbook on «classical Ukrainian» had already been prepared for younger schoolchildren, and that another manual for secondary school students was also being developed (Plamenev 2023). Bugaev added that all the necessary «materials and textbooks will be ready». Obviously, he implied that this would happen before the start of the new school year in early September. At that point, Ekaterina Altabaeva, the Deputy Chair of the Federation Council for Science, Education and Culture, commented that the specialists of the Ministry of Education had «carried out extensive and very important work». She argued that «it was essential to prevent the continued use of language textbooks published in Ukraine», because «all textbooks published in Ukraine in recent decades have been permeated with hatred for Russia, the Russian language, and Russian culture» (as quoted in indirect speech in: Erofeeva 2023). Contrary to Bugaev's statements, the «Senatinform» article continued, «There is no need for such textbooks in higher classes yet: if teaching is conducted in the native language, then this is already an in-depth study of it. And in grades 10–11, it usually follows a humanities, mathematics, or natural sciences profile» (ibid.).

On 13 April 2023, Tat'yana Vasil'eva, the Russian Deputy Minister of Education, confirmed in an interview with RIA Novosti that the new textbook would be introduced the following school year, starting September 1, 2023 (S 1 sentyabrya 2023).

Then, two and a half weeks before the start of September, Deputy Chairman of the Regional Government of Kherson Oblast, Sergei Cherevko, spread the obvious fake news that «new Ukrainian language textbooks have been published in Kherson Oblast» (Mel'nik 2023). With certain pathos, Cherevko explained:

«However, a Ukrainian language textbook has already been prepared so that anyone who wishes to do so can have the opportunity to learn this beautiful language, knowledge of which undoubtedly enriches the spiritual world of any person» (Georgiev — Pavlovskaya 2023).

But Cherevko's main message was a whole other story. He announced that «work on adapting the region's education system to Russian Federation standards is “in full swing”» but would take three to five years.

In April 2024, Russian Minister of Education Sergey Kravtsov announced that «new textbooks were supposed to be delivered to schools in the DPR, LPR, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions, but the progress of this process was not covered by the media» (Minprosveshchenija 2024). Notably, they were just «supposed to be delivered»... At the same time, the Ministry of Education replied to a request by Russian Television International that «in 2023, in accordance with the stated needs of the new subjects of the Russian Federation, 11,456 copies of textbooks were delivered (DPR — 600, LPR — 0, Zaporizhzhia region — 6,383, Kherson region — 4,473)» (ibid.).

At that point, the Ministry presented new figures on the number of all schoolchildren studying Ukrainian, regardless whether as a «native language» or on an elective basis. As of April 8, 2024, the figures for the DPR were as follows: «In the 2022–23 academic year, 9,160 schoolchildren (5.9%) studied Ukrainian, and in the 2023–24 academic year, 1,509 schoolchildren (1%) are studying it. The subject «Native Language (Ukrainian)» is not studied. Regarding LPR, «in the 2022–23 academic year», in the 2022–23 academic year, 112 schoolchildren

(0.17%) studied Ukrainian, and in the 2023–24 academic year, 94 schoolchildren (0.14%) are studying it. Native language (Ukrainian) is not studied as a subject». As for (the temporarily occupied territories of) Zaporizhzhia Oblast, «in the 2022–23 academic year, 18,182 schoolchildren (47.23%) studied Ukrainian, in the 2023–24 academic year, 17,648 schoolchildren (43.41%) are studying it, including 5,950 students studying the subject “Native Language (Ukrainian)” in grades 1–4». As for (the temporarily occupied territories of) Kherson Oblast, «In the 2022–23 academic year, 11,198 schoolchildren (62.4%) studied Ukrainian, and in the 2023–24 academic year, 12,287 schoolchildren (61.47%) are studying it, including 3,528 students studying the subject “Native Language (Ukrainian)” in grades 1–4» (ibid.). Notably, no data was provided for Crimea [!]. We will now present the Russian data in the following table:

Region	Schoolchildren studying Ukrainian in 2022–23	Schoolchildren studying Ukrainian in 2023–24
DPR	9,160 (5.9%)	1,509 (1%)
LPR	112 (0.17%)	94 (0.14%)
Zap.	18,182 (47.23%)	17,648 (43.41%)
Khers.	11,198 (62.4%)	12,287 (61.47%)
In sum	38,652	31,538

In other words, 11,456 copies of the Russian textbook on classical Ukrainian had allegedly been prepared at a time when 38,652 schoolchildren were studying Ukrainian, while 31,538 would have needed them in the following school year. Russian officials had claimed they would produce the textbooks «in accordance with the stated needs of the new subjects of the Russian Federation» (Minprosveshchenija 2024).

As for grades five through eleven, the Ministry declared that «the Ukrainian language is studied during the hours allocated in the curriculum, which is developed by participants in the educational process (academic subjects, courses, modules chosen by students and parents), as well as during extracurricular activities, optional classes, clubs, and sections» (ibid.).

As far as the Ukrainian textbook for grades five through nine is concerned, Kravtsov had promised on April 4, 2023, that his Ministry was working on it when he announced that the textbook for grades one through four was complete (see above). A few days later, on April 10, 2023, TASS reported that the ministry planned to compile the higher-grade textbook by the end of 2023 (Uchebnik 2023). Kravtsov explained, «We took Soviet textbooks written in pure Ukrainian and adapted them together with our colleagues and methodologists from the DPR and LPR» (ibid.).

In April 2024, the Russian Ministry of Education announced that the advanced textbooks were also finished: «In 2023, the FRNBU [Federal State Budgetary Scientific Institution] “Institute for Education Development Strategy” developed textbooks on the subject of “Native Language (Ukrainian)” for grades 5–9» (Minprosveshchenija 2024). When Russian Television International asked the Ministry who authored the new textbooks, they only named the FRNBU agency, not the authors. Readers learned from Olena Shapurova, the then-“Minister of Education” of Zaporizhzhia Oblast, that «among the reviewers was a representative from the Zaporizhzhia region» (Shkol’niki 2023).

Overall, it must be noted that the absurdity of the «classical Ukrainian» textbooks know no bounds. Interestingly, it was the Russian television channel RTVI which pointed out a particularly interesting fact: When Minister Kravtsov presented the allegedly completed textbook for grades one through four to the Russian news agency RIA Novosti on June 23, 2023 (My 2023), one could see the authors' names: O. Ye. Huminskyi and N. I. Rashpyl. RTVI commented:

«Both Oleksandr Huminskyi and Natalia Rashpyl are teachers from Crimea. However, it is safe to say that this is not the textbook that the Ministry of Education has in mind. The “Ukrainian Language (Native)” textbook by Huminskyi and Rashpyl was published long before the start of the military operation, in 2019, and it was used in Crimean schools. Nevertheless, in the catalog of the Prosveshchenie publishing house, this textbook (or rather, four textbooks, one for each school year) is presented as a “new release for September 2023”» (Min-prosveščeniya 2024).

However, at the same time, the Ministry also noted that Ukrainian language textbooks for grades 1–4 and 5–9, developed in Russia, are not yet included in the current edition of the Federal List of Textbooks (FPU) (*ibid.*).

According to the Ministry, the situation was as follows: In accordance with Paragraph 9 of Order No. 1053 from Russia's Ministry of Education, dated December 2, 2022, «On the Approval of the Procedure for Forming the Federal List of Textbooks Approved for Use in the Implementation of State-Accredited Educational Programs of Primary General, Basic General, and Secondary General Education», the specified textbooks will be sent to the Ministry of Education of Russia for review with the aim of including them in the FPU (*ibid.*).

And this was not the end of the story. As RTVI correctly emphasized, the situation with the certification of Ukrainian language teachers is also not quite clear, since Russian universities simply did not offer such a specialization (*ibid.*).

At the same time, the Ministry declared that for the time being, «Educational programs for training personnel in the specialty of “Ukrainian language teacher” are not being implemented» (*ibid.*).

In summary, the strange tale of the ghost textbooks of «classical Ukrainian» only makes sense when viewed alongside a Russian online «Dictionary of Sociolinguistic Terms», where the first two words of the definition of «classical language» read: a dead language” (Slovar' 2025).<sup>23</sup> In this sense, the aforementioned draft order of June 22, 2025, which abolished all teaching programs for Ukrainian due to the «changed geopolitical situation in the world», can be interpreted as the most significant step toward «classical Ukrainian».

### **3. Conclusions and outlook**

Despite all the official rhetoric about the «appreciation for the Ukrainian language», it is clear that Russia's war against Ukraine is also a war against Ukrainian identity and, particularly, against the Ukrainian language. By summer 2025, the former double-bind strategy of combining fake propaganda about «appreciation

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<sup>23</sup> To be precise, the dictionary's generally accepted definition continues: «A dead language that has left a deep mark on the culture of a given cultural and linguistic area; thanks to the high level of internal structural and functional development and prestige achieved at a certain historical stage, such a language usually acquires a supra-ethnic character even during its natural existence; it has numerous texts of high socio-cultural value <...>» (Slovar' 2025).

for the Ukrainian language» with an ongoing process of linguistic had turned into an openly brutal campaign against the Ukrainian language.

In June 2024, a Human Rights Watch report clearly addressed Russia's violation of international law in the field of education, including not only the forceful Russification of the school system, but also the introduction of military training in schools, the pressure to obtain Russian passports,<sup>24</sup> the introduction of textbooks falsifying history to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine, ongoing threats against parents, acts of «filtration» and violence against teachers and the forceful deportation of children (HRW 2024; HRW 2024a; see also: Modina 2024; Ul'yanenko 2024).

Fake initiatives, supposedly aimed at creating a «classical Ukrainian» language, have fueled an ongoing propaganda campaign, which has increasingly portrayed Ukrainian as an «enemy language». The removal of Ukrainian from the schools of the temporarily schools has reached a peak in June 2025 with the abolishment of all Ukrainian language teaching programs due to «the changed geopolitical situation in the world».

In early January 2024, Putin had issued an order pertaining to all territories that were under his control. The objective of the directive was «to change the name of the curriculum module about language from “native language and/or state language” to “language of the people of the Russian Federation and/or state language of the republic of the Russian Federation”» (Goble 2025).<sup>25</sup> Until that time, the Ukrainian language had been designated as a «native language and/or state language» in the temporarily occupied territories. Henceforth, it was no longer accepted as a «language of the people of the Russian Federation and/or state language of the republic of the Russian Federation». At that juncture, Putin had already ordered that a new draft law on the languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation be developed and submitted to the State Duma by May 1, 2025. This law would make major changes to the 1991 version. In early January 2025, President Putin instructed his administration to establish a «State Register of Languages Spoken by Russia's peoples» (V Rossii 2025; see also: Goble 2025a). The register was to be completed after the introduction of the new Russian language law. The source material for this information was the scholarly monograph «List of languages in Russia and their vitality status», published by the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences as a preprint in 2022 (Koryakov et al. 2022). In this academic publication, Ukrainian was still listed and characterized as a relatively vital «language in Russia». It is not likely that this will still be the case in the upcoming official Register.

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<sup>24</sup> Individuals who did not obtain Russian passports for 2025 forfeited all associated rights. In early 2025, citizens of Melitopol received an interesting picture postcard (Silenko 2025). The postcard features a photograph of a smiling girl wearing ribbons in the colors of the Russian flag, accompanied by the following caption: «Halushko — Glushkova. Change your passport, change your surname. Let's cleanse ourselves of the imposed Ukrainian identity».

<sup>25</sup> Paul Goble commented: «This may seem on first glance a small thing, but it is likely to cast an enormous shadow on the future. <...> This dropping the reference to “native” detaches languages from the ethnic communities which speak them and makes it easier for Moscow to insist that these languages are not theirs from time immemorial but those of the republic in which they are spoken, reducing still further the possibilities of those who don't have a republic or live within its borders. The fact that Putin made this announcement at a time when the Russian Federation is in the midst of its mid-winter holiday suggests that the Kremlin is aware of how unhappy many non-Russians will be about this change and decided to take this step at time when most residents of that country are focused on celebrations rather than government actions» (Goble 2025).

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### МОВНА ПОЛІТИКА НА ТИМЧАСОВО ОКУПОВАНИХ ТЕРИТОРІЯХ УКРАЇНИ (2014–2025 pp.)

У статті розглядається доля української мови на територіях, тимчасово окупованих Російською Федерацією. У березні 2014 р. Росія анексувала Крим. Протягом того ж року Москва надавала підтримку створенню самопроголошених «Донецької народної республіки» та «Луганської народної республіки». З моменту початку повномасштабного вторгнення Росія здобула контроль над додатковими територіями України, зокрема частинами Донецької та Луганської, Запорізької та Херсонської областей, а також, на короткий час, частинами Харківської області. Ця стаття продовжує попереднє дослідження, в якому розглянуто період від 2014 р. до осені 2022 р. (Moser 2023), з акцентом на подальших подіях. Зокрема, у статті аналізуються загальні руйнівні заходи у сфері викладання української мови та суперечливий, переважно лінгвоцидний російський дискурс щодо української мови. Особливу увагу приділено своєрідному наративу про «класичну українську мову».

Ключові слова: українська мова, українська мовна політика, російська мовна політика, тимчасово окуповані території України, лінгвоцид, російський дискурс про мови, «класична українська мова».