

# **Using secondary education in Ukraine as an example, this article analyzes the policy of the newly established state with regard to the language of instruction in the schools. (2005)**

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## **1. Historical background**

Until 1991, Ukrainians had no state and, consequently, no educational system of their own. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, when Ukrainian ethnic territories were ruled by two powerful empires, Austria-Hungary and Russia, Ukrainians were educated either at imperial educational institutions or at teaching establishments maintained by private or public funds. The development of national educational institutions paralleled that of standard (literary) Ukrainian. In the late 19th century, instruction in the native language became one of the basic demands of the Ukrainian national movement—a matter of great cultural and moral significance and of fundamental political principle. If Ukrainians in the Austro-Hungarian Empire managed to obtain limited cultural and educational autonomy in Eastern Galicia, those in the Russian Empire, where the great majority of Ukrainians resided, achieved only episodic results in their struggle for the right to education in their native language. Those rights were nullified by the repressive policy of the tsarist regime, which did not legally recognise the existence of Ukrainian as a distinct language.

During the Revolution of 1917-21 and the short-lived existence of Ukrainian statehood, embodied in the Ukrainian People's Republic and the Western Ukrainian People's Republic, the basis for a national system of education with Ukrainian as the language of instruction was laid, but the right of other nationalities to education in their own languages was also guaranteed.

After 1921, when most of Ukrainian ethnic territory was constituted as part of the Soviet Union, while the western Ukrainian lands were annexed to Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, the question of native-language education became the subject of acute political conflict. In Czechoslovakia, Ukrainians were guaranteed the right of instruction in their own language in institutions financed by the state. In interwar Poland, the Ukrainian population and the authorities waged an extremely bitter conflict over the language question, especially after the introduction of official educational bilingualism (utraquism) in the 1920s, which led to the de facto elimination of the Ukrainian language from the educational system. In Hungary and Romania, the state openly pursued the cultural assimilation of Ukrainians.

In Soviet Ukraine, which was a republic of the Soviet Union and in which ethnic Ukrainians constituted the titular nationality, the communist authorities were obliged to compromise: from 1923 to 1929 they implemented the policy of *korenizatsiia* (taking root), which was intended to win the loyalty of most of the population. That policy provided for the large-scale use of the Ukrainian language in state administration and education and supported the development of Ukrainian culture within the limits of official ideology. The policy was terminated in the early 1930s. A campaign of mass repression was undertaken against the Ukrainian intelligentsia under the slogan of combating nationalism, and part of the peasantry was physically annihilated.<sup>1</sup> these two strata accounted for most of the Ukrainian population. Even so, from the late 1920s to the late 1950s most students in secondary schools completed their studies in the Ukrainian language, although the number of these students was always less than the proportion of Ukrainians in the total population. The number of students in higher educational institutions who studied in Ukrainian never rose above 50 percent.

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<sup>1</sup> According to conservative estimates, during the man-made famine of 1932-33 Soviet Ukraine lost close to three and one-half million people, or more than ten percent of its population.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, according to the official political doctrine of creating a “new historical community, the Soviet people,” a covert policy of linguistic assimilation of Ukrainians was undertaken. A law “On Linking the School with Life” was adopted in April 1959. According to Art. 9, parents had the right to choose the language in which their children would be instructed and, consequently, a school that offered the appropriate language. In formal terms, this legal norm corresponded to the provisions of international conventions on the right to education: the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1963) and the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966). In actual fact, it led to discrimination against the titular nationality, especially with regard to its right to education in its own language. In November 1978, the government of the Ukrainian SSR adopted a special resolution “On Measures to Further Perfect the Study and Teaching of the Russian Language in the Ukrainian SSR” that assigned highest priority to the teaching of Russian in Ukrainian schools and made the study of Russian obligatory in Ukrainian-language schools from the first grade.<sup>2</sup>

As a consequence, the use of Ukrainian in the sphere of education shrank inexorably for a period of 40 years—in the mass media, publishing, scholarship and education. If in 1957 the proportion of students in Ukrainian-language schools was 74 percent, by 1981 it had diminished to 54.6 percent and by 1989 to 47.5 percent.<sup>3</sup> The Ukrainian language (which was the state language, according to the Constitution of the Ukrainian SSR) was being forced out by Russian, which enjoyed the status of an official *lingua franca* in the Soviet Union. Ukrainian was marginalized, losing social status and prestige. In eastern and southern Ukraine, Ukrainian-language schools were closed en masse or converted into Russian-language schools throughout the 1980s. By the mid-1980s, in the largest industrial centers, Donetsk and Luhansk had no Ukrainian schools at all (although ethnic Ukrainians there made up more than half the population), while Zaporizhia had one, Kharkiv two (Ukrainians accounted for more than 60 percent of the population), and Odesa three (54 percent).

## 2. Language and Education in Independent Ukraine

Once Ukraine gained its independence, it faced the task of carrying out a standard nation-building project: Ukraine had been created; now it was time to “create Ukrainians.” Quite naturally, the educational system was to play a central role in that process, and the creation of a nation was regarded by the authorities and by much of society as restitution of the titular nationality’s cultural and educational rights. Accordingly, the reform of the educational system began with Ukrainisation. The centralized, hierarchical educational system inherited from the Soviet Union presented excellent opportunities for the rapid administrative Ukrainisation of education by initiative from the top. In carrying out this programme, the state had to take account of the multiethnic character of Ukraine, which has 130 various ethnic and national groups, of which the Russians are the most numerous (17.3 percent). The proportion of other ethnic and national groups that might require or demand education in their own languages (Belarusians, Crimean Tatars, Romanians, Moldavians, Jews, Poles, Hungarians, and Greeks) ranges from 0.1 to 0.6 percent of the population of Ukraine [reference statistics](#). For the most part, the cultural and educational needs of these groups in their areas of compact settlement could be satisfied without arousing serious problems or conflicts, with the exception of the Russians and the Crimean Tatars.

The question of language of instruction in Ukraine is part of a larger problem, mainly involving the (sometimes hidden, sometimes open) conflict between the task of building a nation-state and the status of the Russian and Russian-speaking population, which was no longer a culturally privileged part of society after 1991 and found itself in the position of a “national minority.” Furthermore, according to most objective analysts, the Russian and Russian-speaking population, which is concentrated mainly in eastern and southern Ukraine and in the Crimea, does not constitute a culturally mobilised and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://zakon.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=8312-11> (visited 20 September 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Janmaat J. G. (2000), *Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Educational Policy and the Response of the Russian-Speaking Population*, [publisher](#), Amsterdam, p. 109.

politically organised community capable of aspiring to political separation. The periodic and sporadic conflicts over the status of the Russian language in contemporary Ukraine are mainly associated with political conjunctures, particularly election campaigns, in which certain political forces exploit the language question in their own interests. These conflicts are also incited by Russia's vigorous cultural expansion, which, on the one hand, exploits Ukraine as a fairly sizable and profitable market for the productions of mass and media culture and, on the other, periodically exploits the question of the status of Russians in the "near abroad" to exercise political pressure as part of its geopolitics.

The Law on Education, adopted on the eve of independence (June 1991) and still in effect (over the past fourteen years, thirteen amendments and supplements have been introduced), asserted that the language of education and upbringing is determined by the Constitution of the Ukrainian SSR (1978) and the Law on Languages in the Ukrainian SSR (1989). That reference was confirmed by art. 7 of the Law on General Secondary Education (1999), but this time with reference to the Constitution of Ukraine (1996).

The Law on Languages in the Ukrainian SSR was adopted in the midst of acute political struggle between national-democratic forces and the communist nomenklatura on the eve of the disintegration of the USSR. Accordingly, its formulations on the language of instruction resulted from a particular compromise between those forces: on the one hand, the law raised the status of the Ukrainian language, especially in education; on the other hand, it comprised distinct rudiments of a privileged status for Russian. Articles 25-29 of the Law on Languages assert that instruction and upbringing in the Ukrainian educational system, from pre-school establishments to universities, is to be conducted in Ukrainian. The study of Ukrainian became obligatory in public schools, but Russian was also designated as obligatory. In compact settlements of citizens of other nationalities, the law permitted the establishment of educational institutions with other languages of instruction.<sup>4</sup>

In October 1992 the Ministry of Education issued a decree according to which, by 1 September 1993, the proportion of first-grade pupils studying in Ukrainian in the schools of Ukraine was to correspond to the proportion of ethnic Ukrainians in any given region.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, this decree was carried out according to methods of bureaucratic administration, with inadequate cadres of trained and retrained teachers and insufficient quantities of textbooks and instructional materials in the Ukrainian language. This, indeed, was the culmination of the process initiated by the Law on Languages (1989). The tempo of Ukrainisation of elementary schools was most rapid in 1989-91: if in 1987/88 an average of 15 percent of pupils in lower grades were studying in Ukrainian, by 1991 that percentage had risen to 53.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of the 1993/94 school year, 66 percent of pupils in lower grades were studying in Ukrainian across the country<sup>7</sup> (while Ukrainians made up 72.7 percent of the population). At the same time, secondary education in general was being Ukrainised, also by means of decrees and administrative measures, under conditions of chronic lack of funds and technical resources and against the background of the economic decline that lasted until 2000 and greatly complicated the task of supplying the requisite material and financial wherewithal for the process. In many cases, there was a mere pretense of going over to the Ukrainian language, or the process was sabotaged, especially in regions where the proportion of Ukrainians in the population barely exceeded 50 percent (the Donbas; Odesa). Generally speaking, however, the Ukrainisation of schools met with a positive response from most of the population, including Russophones (with the exception of the Donbas and the Crimea, where the policy of Ukrainising schools was seen as an encroachment on the cultural rights of the Russian and Russian-speaking population on the part of the state). The principal methods of Ukrainising the schools (aside from decrees) were: establishing Ukrainian classes in Russian schools; converting Russian schools into Ukrainian ones (with parental consent); going over to Ukrainian for subjects previously taught in Russian; publishing more textbooks and literature on

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://zakon.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=518-78-%EF>.

<sup>5</sup> *Zbirnyk Minosvity* (1992), no. 19.

<sup>6</sup> [Author](#) (1991), "Natsional'na shkola na Ukraïni. Interv'iu zastupnyka ministra narodnoï osvity M. S. Khomenka," *Literaturna Ukraïna*, 3 January 1991, [Page](#)

<sup>7</sup> Janmaat J. G. (2000), *Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Educational Policy and the Response of the Russian-Speaking Population*, [publisher](#), Amsterdam, p. 113.

instructional methods in the Ukrainian language; increasing the number of students in higher pedagogical training institutions specialising in Ukrainian language and literature; and modifying plans and programs of instruction so as to increase the number of “Ukrainian studies subjects” (Ukrainian language and literature; geography and history of Ukraine; the introduction of the course “Ukraine and I” in elementary schools).

In 1999, at the behest of a group of parliamentarians, the Constitutional Court of Ukraine [give the number of the case, eventually the site of the decision](#) considered the question of how the Law on Languages was being implemented and stressed the need for the obligatory introduction of Ukrainian in all government institutions without exception. The Council on Language Policy established as part of the presidential administration in February 2000 developed a draft decree “On Supplementary Measures to Expand the Use of the Ukrainian Language as an Official Language,” which took effect in June of the same year. For the nth time, it pointed out that the educational system should be brought into line with the ethnic composition of the population.<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of numerous difficulties associated with lack of time, funds, and the markedly administrative and bureaucratic character of the Ukrainisation of education, the 1990s marked a clear turning point in the “nationalisation” of secondary education.

Official statistics are as follows:<sup>9</sup>

Table 1. Percentage of students in general secondary schools studying in Ukrainian across the country

Year	1989	1991	1994	1998	2001	Ukrainians as a proportion of the general population, 2001	Ukrainians as a proportion of the general population, 1989
Proportion of students studying in the Ukrainian language	47.5	49.3	56.5	62.8	69.8	77.8	72.7

If one considers the data through the prism of Ukraine’s regions, it becomes apparent that the greatest changes took place in the central and southern parts of the country and in the capital.

Table 2. Proportion of students in general secondary schools studying in Ukrainian (Central and Southern Ukraine)<sup>10</sup>

	1991	2001
Central oblasts		
Zhytomyr	76.7	96.3
Poltava	74.3	93.0
Sumy	48.5	83.4
Chernihiv	67.1	93.7
Cherkasy	75.8	95.6
Kirovohrad	62.2	89.3
City of Kyiv	30.9	91.1
Southern oblasts		
Dnipropetrovsk	31.1	67.8
Zaporizhia	22.7	44.7
Odesa	24.5	47.0
Kherson	51.7	76.0

<sup>8</sup> Kuzio T. (2002), “The Nation-Building Project in Ukraine and Identity: Towards a Consensus,” in: Kuzio T. and D’Anieri P. (eds.), *Dilemmas of State-Led Nation Building in Ukraine*, Westport, Conn., [place](#), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Sources: Janmaat J. G. (2000), *Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Educational Policy and the Response of the Russian-Speaking Population*, [publisher](#), Amsterdam, p. 113; <http://www.ukrcensus.gov.ua/results/general/nationality/>; <http://education.gov.ua/pls/edu/docs/common/secondaryeduc.ukr.html> (sites visited 20 September 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Official statistics posted at [http://education.gov.ua/pls/edu/docs/common/secondaryeduc\\_ukr.html](http://education.gov.ua/pls/edu/docs/common/secondaryeduc_ukr.html) (site visited 20 September 2005).

Mykolaiv	43.5	74.3
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Secondary education was Ukrainised most slowly in the Donbas, where the proportion of pupils studying in Ukrainian rose on average from 5 to 15 percent (Ukrainians constitute 57 percent of the general population in the region). In the Autonomous Republic of the Crimea, where Ukrainians make up 24 percent of the population, a mere 0.9 percent of pupils have the opportunity to study in Ukrainian.<sup>11</sup> It was in these regions, with a large proportion or a majority (as in the Crimea) of Russian or Russian-speaking residents, that the official policy of Ukrainisation aroused the most protest, both from the local bureaucracy and from a large part of the population. The complaint has usually been (and remains) that the cultural and educational rights of that part of the population are being violated, especially the right to study in one's native language. The government's efforts to introduce Ukrainian as a language of instruction mechanistically, by means of decrees and the simple conversion of schools from one language to the other, affords grounds for such argumentation. At the same time, one cannot avoid noting that if the violation of the rights of Russian speakers in these regions is more in the nature of a projection, mainly a hypothetical danger, the violation of the right of Ukrainians to instruction in their own language is a fait accompli—a legacy of the Soviet period that has not yet been overcome. It is also worth noting that, according to analysts' observations, opposition to the general policy of introducing Ukrainian as the official language has not spread to the sphere of education (with individual exceptions).<sup>12</sup>

If the rather dramatic change in the status of the Russian language since 1991 has periodically given rise to sporadic conflict (and continues to do so), changes in the status of languages of other national minorities have been mainly positive in nature. Until the late 1980s, Ukraine had no schools or classes with minority languages of instruction. In areas of compact settlement of national minorities, instruction took place in Russian. In the course of the 1990s, the cultural and educational needs of the basic national groups that demanded instruction in their own languages were generally satisfied. The greatest problem was that of creating appropriate conditions for the Crimean Tatars, who were repatriated to the Crimea en masse: in the first half of the 1990s, almost 250,000 returned, creating a certain amount of tension with regard to the provision of instructional facilities in the Crimean Tatar language. By early 2001, the 22,000 secondary schools in the Crimea included 2,200 Russian, 68 Hungarian, 97 Romanian, 10 Polish, and 10 Crimean Tatar schools. [Reference stats](#)

<sup>11</sup> See [http://education.gov.ua/pls/edu/docs/common/secondaryeduc\\_ukr.html](http://education.gov.ua/pls/edu/docs/common/secondaryeduc_ukr.html); <http://www.ukrcensus.gov.ua/results/general/nationality/>.

<sup>12</sup> Fournier A. (2002), 'Mapping Identities: Russian Resistance to Linguistic Ukrainisation in Central and Eastern Ukraine', *Europe-Asia Studies* 54, no. 3, pp. 425-27.