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UKRAINIAN STUDENTS IN POLAND: ATTITUDES TOWARDS LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND SECURITY (CASE STUDY OF MARIA CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA UNIVERSITY)[1]

UKRAIŃSCY STUDENCI W POLSCE: POSTAWY WOBEC JĘZYKA, TOŻSAMOŚCI I BEZPIECZEŃSTWA (STUDIUM PRZYPADKU UNIWERSYTET MARII CURIE-SKŁODOWSKIEJ)

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Abstract: Students from Ukraine choose Poland as a place to study because of its geographical proximity and cultural and linguistic similarities. Their numbers increased after the Russian Federation annexed Crimea, military action in the Donbas in 2014 and the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Russian regime justified the aggression with the alleged protection of the Russian-speaking population, which stripped Russian – the daily communication language for a sizable portion of Ukraine's citizens – of its neutrality and turned it into a geopolitical tool. In Ukraine, there have been changes in the perception of the role of language and national identity and their impact on security. The article aims to examine the effect of the war and the experience of studying in Poland on perceptions of national identity, language practices and the understanding of security among Ukrainian students at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University in Lublin. The results indicate that the majority of students perceived an increase in the importance of the Ukrainian language after the Russian invasion and noted the connection between language, national identity and security. Many respondents have changed their language habits, abandoning the use of Russian in favor of Ukrainian. The survey results testify to the increased importance of language as a unifying element and key to a sense of national identity in the face of an external threat.

Keywords: national language, identity, security, Russian-Ukrainian war

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Abstrakt: Studenci z Ukrainy wybierają Polskę jako miejsce studiów ze względu na bliskość geograficzną oraz kulturowe i językowe podobieństwa. Ich liczba wzrosła po aneksji Krymu przez Federację Rosyjską i działaniach zbrojnych na Donbasie w 2014 roku oraz po wielkoskalowej inwazji na Ukrainę w 2022 roku. Rosyjski reżim uzasadniał agresję rzekomą ochroną rosyjskojęzycznej ludności, co pozbawiło rosyjski – język codziennej komunikacji sporej części obywateli Ukrainy – neutralności i uczyniło z niego narzędzie geopolityczne. W Ukrainie nastąpiły zmiany w postrzeganiu roli języka i tożsamości narodowej oraz ich wpływu na bezpieczeństwo. Artykuł ma na celu zbadanie wpływu wojny oraz doświadczeń związanych ze studiowaniem w Polsce na postrzeganie tożsamości narodowej, praktyki językowe i rozumienie bezpieczeństwa wśród ukraińskich studentów Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie. Wyniki wskazują, że większość studentów dostrzega wzrost znaczenia języka ukraińskiego po inwazji Rosji i zauważa związek między językiem a tożsamością narodową oraz bezpieczeństwem. Wielu respondentów zmieniło swoje nawyki językowe, rezygnując z używania języka rosyjskiego na rzecz ukraińskiego. Rezultaty badań świadczą o wzroście znaczenie języka jako elementu jednoczącego i kluczowego dla poczucia tożsamości narodowej w obliczu zagrożenia zewnętrznego.

Słowa kluczowe: język narodowy, tożsamość, bezpieczeństwo, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska

Introduction

The number of foreign students in Poland is steadily increasing (Sewastianowicz, 2024), and one of the nations increasingly choosing Poland as a destination for their studies are citizens of Ukraine. Poland has become one of the most popular destinations for these students due to its geographical proximity and cultural and linguistic similarities. At the same time, a significant increase in the number of Ukrainian students in the country was led first by the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the military conflict it unleashed on the Donbas in 2014 and then by the large-scale invasion in February 2022.

As is well known, the pretext for the hybrid invasion, which turned into open warfare, was the alleged defense of the Russian-speaking population (Заседание..., 2014; Инвестиционный форум..., 2016; Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, 2017; Пленарное заседание..., 2017), who was allegedly discriminated against because of the language of daily communication – Russian[2]. Kremlin ideologue Aleksandr Dugin stated (Dugin, 2015, p. 378), "The war began with language." Thus, using Russian ceased to be a neutral issue and became a geopolitical tool used to revise borders. For the authorities of the Russian Federation, communicating in this language is a marker of belonging to Russian civilization, which the Kremlin treats as a right to decide the fate of Russian speakers living outside Russia's borders.

The large-scale invasion has made significant changes in the perception of the meaning of the national language in Ukraine (Кулик, 2022; Кремінь, 2023). In this context, one significant aspect is the growing understanding of the relationship between language, national identity and state security. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to explore perceptions of this issue by Ukrainian students studying at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University in Lublin (hereafter UMCS) and to understand whether and how the war and the experience of studying in Poland affect the perceptions of one's national identity, the frequency of using one's native language and the issue of security of the students surveyed.

Several considerations prompted this research:

– the increase in the number of Ukrainian students in Poland, which makes research on their experiences more relevant than ever before;

[2] It should be noted that due to centuries of colonization of Ukrainian lands by Russia and long-term Russification, for some Ukrainian citizens, their native language (Ukrainian) is not the language of everyday communication, which is Russian (see: Kulyk, 2013; Kulyk, 2014).

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– the impact of geopolitical events in the form of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine, which has caused new experiences and changes among Ukrainian students, both regarding identity and perceptions of security;
– the growth of national consciousness in Ukrainian society, of which students from Ukraine in Poland are a part;
– changes in perceptions of national identity, attitudes toward Ukrainian and Russian as the identity markers and languages of daily communication;
– assistance to Ukrainian citizens, among whom are also students, including monolingual Russian-speaking students, affected by the experience of forced migration caused by the war, which is very often provided in Poland in Ukrainian.

The theoretical basis for examining the issue mentioned above is provided, among others, by the theory of social identity (Henri Tajfel (Tajfel, 1981), John Turner and Penelope J. Oakes (Turner, Oakes, 1986), which allows us to understand the importance of the national language for the formation of Ukrainian identity under conditions of conflict. The importance of the national language for state security, on the other hand, stems from the securitization theory (Barry Buzan (Buzan, 1998), Ole Wæver (Buzan, Wæver, 2003) et al.).

Ukrainian Citizens at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University

Students from Ukraine have had the opportunity to study in Poland for many years, but in recent years, especially after changes in immigration and education laws (Ustawa..., 2013; Ustawa..., 2018), they have become a significant group of foreign students at Polish universities. According to the report, students from Ukraine and Belarus are the largest, dominant group at Polish universities: "In the 2022/23 academic year, 48,056 Ukrainians and 12,014 Belarusians were studying in Poland, for whom Poland's proximity, EU membership and cultural proximity are important. In the case of Ukrainians, the war caused by Russia's aggression was of great importance" (Perspektywy, n.d.).

As at other Polish universities, students from Ukraine can study at the UMCS under multiple modes: for a fee, like all foreigners; free of charge based on the Card of the Pole, a Permanent Residence Card, a C1 certificate in Polish language skills, and after the large-scale invasion – based on temporary protection due to the war in Ukraine (Ministerstwo Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego, 2022). As of April 1, 2020, 1022 Ukrainian citizens were studying at the university, in 2021 – 890, and at the end of June 2023 – 701 students, which accounted for more than half of all 1,371 foreign students at UMCS (data obtained from the UMCS Foreign Student Services Team). As part of the recruitment process conducted in the 2022/2023 academic year, 398 Ukrainian citizens were admitted to the first year of study, including seven for doctoral studies. 175 people began their studies free of charge, 164 full-paid studies, and 59 people based on temporary protection. In addition, the enrollment decisions of 23 paid studies students were changed, and they also received temporary protection. A total of 82 people, i.e., almost one in five Ukrainian citizens in the first year, took up studies at the ICU fleeing the war. The largest number of Ukrainian students of all years were at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism – 183, at the Faculty of Economics – 141 and the Faculty of Philology – 122. In contrast, in other faculties, the number of Ukrainian students was less than a hundred.

Methodology

The research was conducted remotely using an anonymous questionnaire distributed to Ukrainian students at UMCS. The study aimed to understand the impact of war and migration on Ukrainian students' national identity,

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language use and sense of security. The study posited the following research hypothesis: the Russo-Ukrainian war and the experience of studying in Poland affect the perception of national identity, the mother tongue, and its significance for the perception of security among Ukrainian students at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin.

Before the study, the following research questions were posed:

Do they use their mother tongue (national language) in daily communication with family and friends?

1) Has the frequency of using Ukrainian and/or Russian changed after the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine?
2) Does the length of stay in Poland affect their language habits?
3) Has their attitude towards the Ukrainian language changed after February 24, 2022?
4) Do they perceive a connection between the national language and identity?
5) Do they perceive a connection between language and security?

The questionnaire included 10 questions, 7 close-ended and 3 open-ended, about perceptions of language, identity and security:

1. How old are you?
2. When did you come to Poland?
3. What part of Ukraine do you come from?
4. What nationality are you? (open-ended)
5. What language do you speak at home? (open-ended)
6. What language do you speak with your friends and acquaintances? (open-ended)
7. Has your attitude towards the Ukrainian language changed after February 24, 2022?
8. Is there anyone in your surroundings who consciously stopped speaking Russian after February 24, 2022?
9. Do you notice a connection between language and national identity?
10. Do you notice a connection between national language and security?

The survey was conducted in early July 2023, at the end of the academic year. 170 Ukrainian students from various faculties at UMCS took part, with a breakdown of respondents. First-year students (75 respondents) were surveyed separately since they started their studies after the large-scale invasion. As for the responses of the remaining upper-year students (95 respondents), it was important to examine whether the experience of living in Poland for an extended period also affected their perceptions of language, identity and security.

A limitation of the survey was that respondents were students at a single university, Maria Curie-Sklodowska University in Lublin, which may affect overall representativeness results.

The age and background of the respondents

Among first-year students, 36% of respondents were 17–18 years old, 24% were 19–20 years old, and 40% were over 21. Notably, in the Ukrainian education system, the norm for graduate students is 17–18 years of age, meaning these individuals came to Poland to study immediately after graduating from high school. The largest group (61.1%) among upper-year students were those aged 19–20, which is typical of those who began their studies immediately after high school and are now in their second or third year. 30.5%, on the other hand, were those aged 21+ who may have started college late or were in their upper years of study, such as their fourth year. 8.4% of upper-year students were 17–18-year-olds who were likely to be in their second year of college, having started at age 17 or sometimes even 16.

Most first-year students (50.7%) arrived after the start of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, possibly due to the escalation of the armed conflict, which may have influenced their decision to study abroad. A significant number of students (49.3%) arrived earlier, but after 2014, when events related to Russia's annexation of

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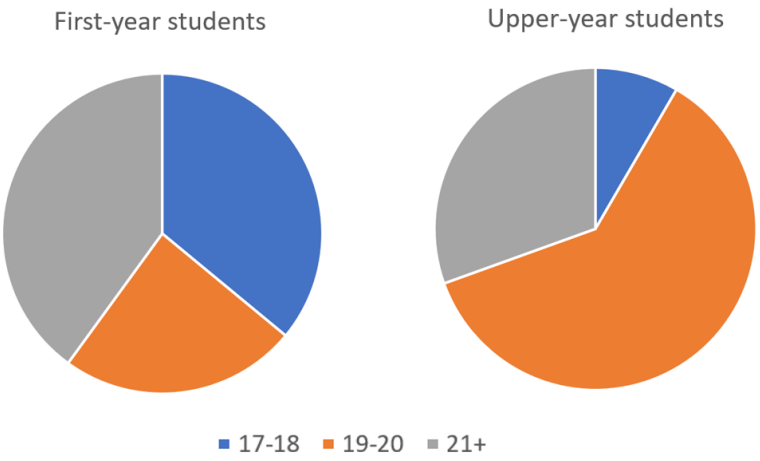

Figure 1. Age of Respondents[3]

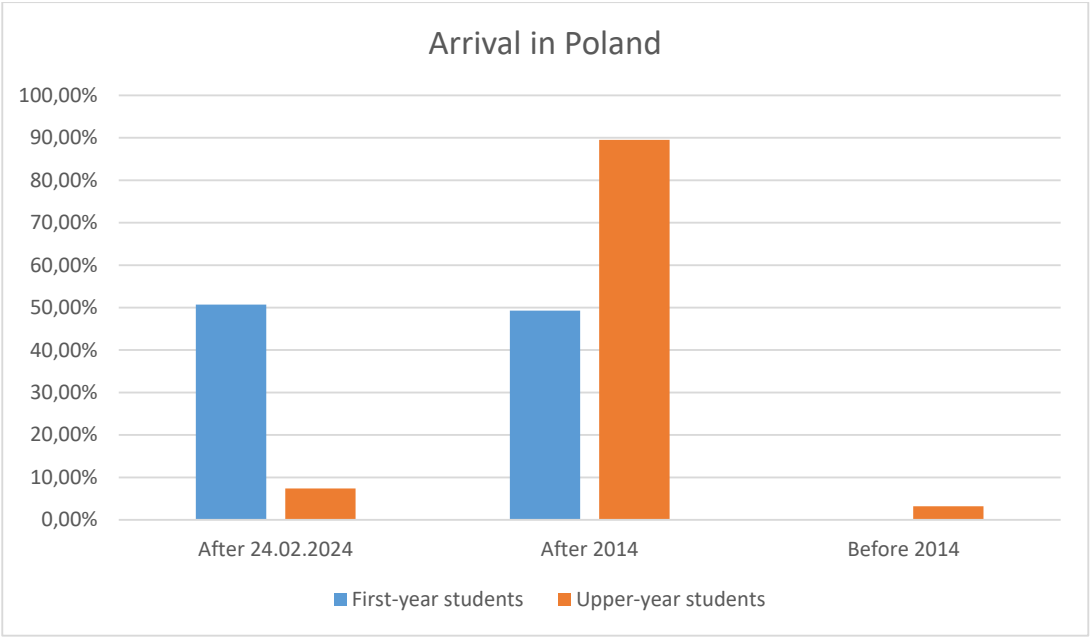

Figure 2. When respondents arrived in Poland

Crimea and the hybrid invasion of Donbas took place. These students had more time to integrate into Polish society and be educated in Polish schools, which may have influenced their sense of identity and adaptation to life in Poland. Of the students with higher grades, a small group (3.2%) came to Poland before 2014, while the vast majority (89.5%) came to Poland after 2014, suggesting that they had already spent several years in Poland. A small percentage (7.4%) of upper-year students arrived after the start of the large-scale invasion, i.e., they may have decided to go to study in Poland in response to Russia's escalation of the armed conflict.

[3] All data in this article comes from own research, conducted via Online Survey in July 2023 at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University.

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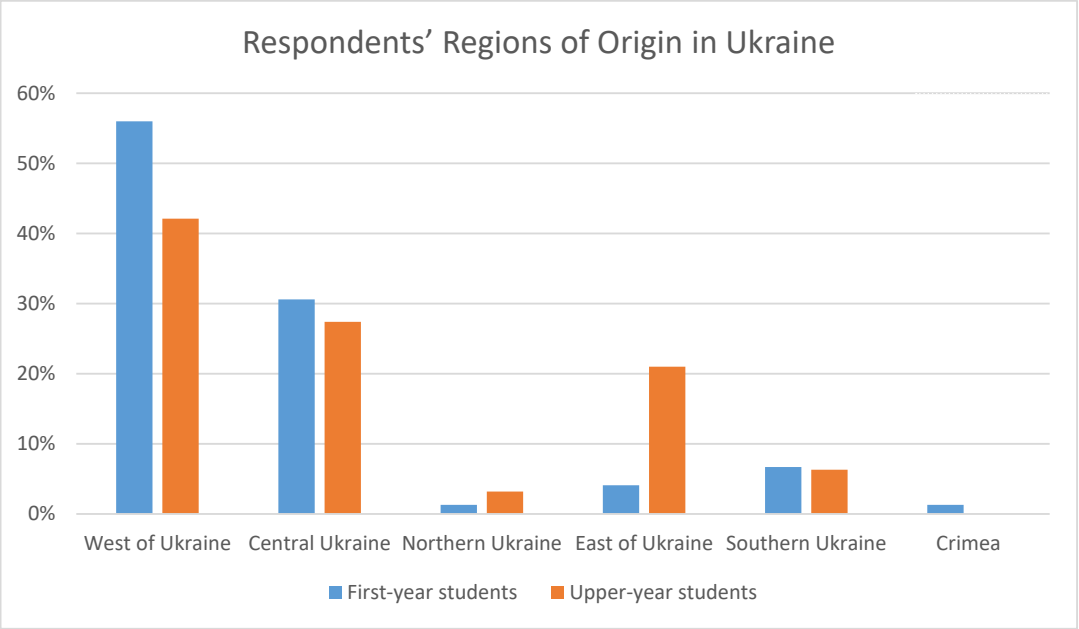

Figure 3. Respondents' Regions of Origin in Ukraine

More than half (56%) of first-year students come from western Ukraine, a region historically and culturally close to Poland. A significant number (30.6%) of students come from the central part of Ukraine, indicating a strong regional interest to study in Poland. Fewer students come from southern (6.7%) and eastern (4.1%) Ukraine. A few students come from northern Ukraine (1.3%) and Crimea (1.3%). The largest group of upper-year students also come from western Ukraine (42.1%) but in a smaller percentage than first-year students. The share of students from central Ukraine (27.4%) is slightly lower than first-year students. A similar percentage as among first-year students, suggesting a stable level of interest in studying in Poland from this region. A much higher rate of first-year students come from eastern Ukraine (21%), which may indicate a longer tradition of migration to Poland from that region or a greater need to migrate due to the ongoing hybrid Russian invasion of the Donbas since 2014. However, a much smaller proportion of students (3.2%) in the upper grades came from northern Ukraine, while no students came from Crimea.

Nationality and language of communication

Those of Ukrainian nationality significantly outnumber the first and second groups of students: 89.3% in the first year and 93.8% in the upper years, 9.3% in the first year and 3.1% in the other years identify their nationality as Polish and a small group of students indicated their nationality as mixed (1.3% as Polish-Russian and 3.1% as Ukrainian-Polish).

64.8% of first-year students have used it among family only, and 9.3% are mostly in Ukrainian. Both languages, Ukrainian and Russian, are spoken in communication with family members by 8%, while Russian is spoken mostly by 10.7% and only by 1.3% exclusively. A small percentage (2.6%) speak Ukrainian and Polish, which is indicative of Polish roots, and 3.3% speak so-called Surzhik, a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian. The majority of upper-year students also use only Ukrainian (51.6%). Still, their percentage is lower than among first-year students. This may indicate that changes in language practices caused by Russian aggression

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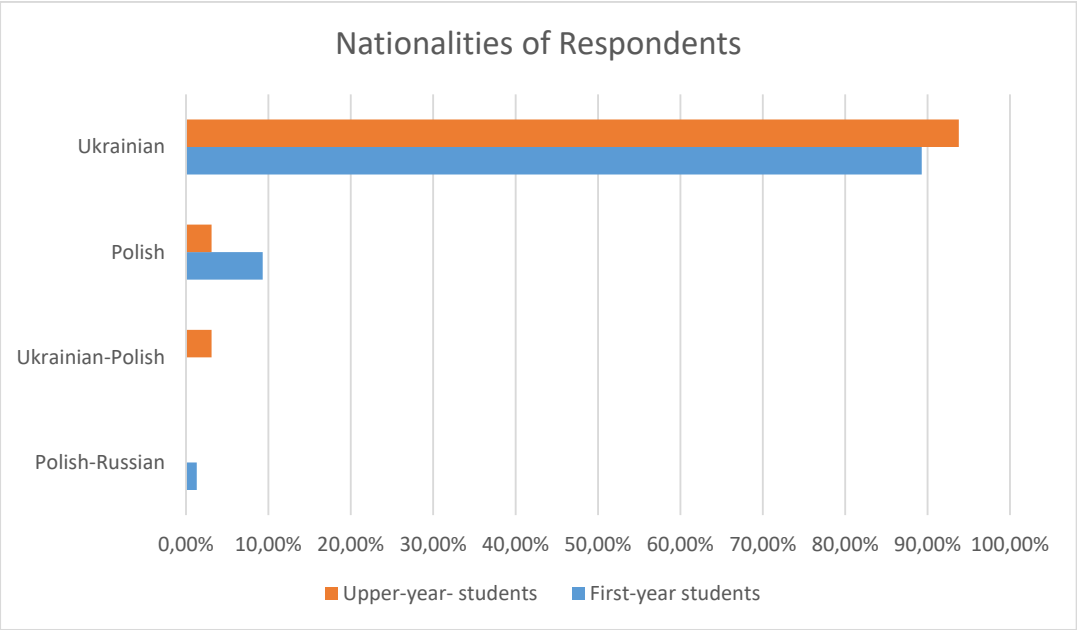

Figure 4. Respondents' Nationality

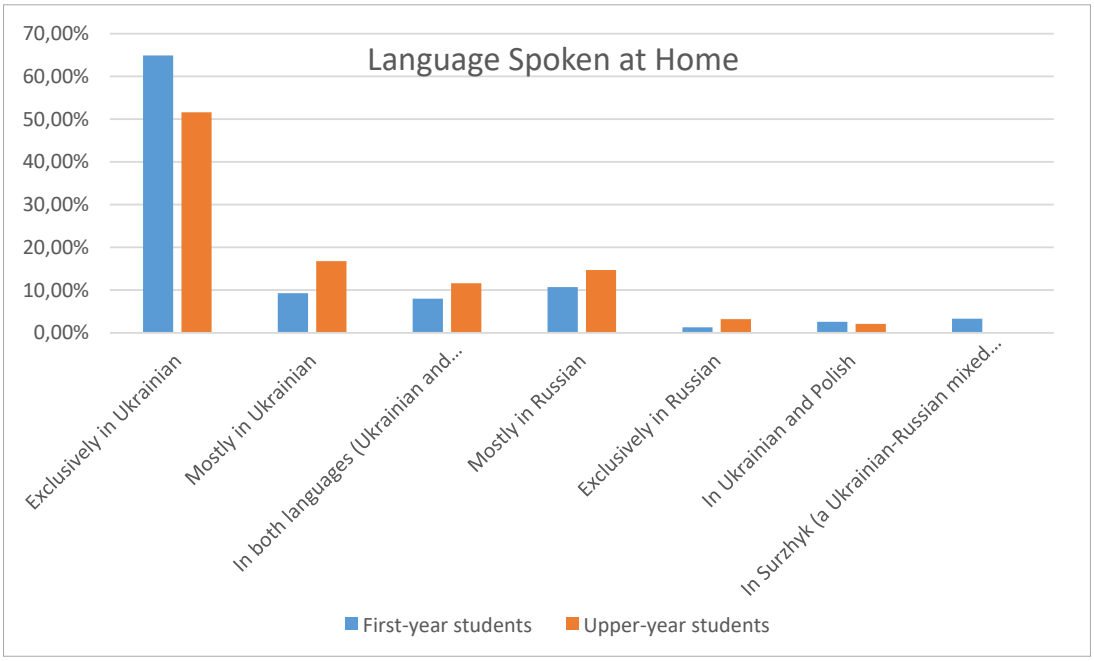

Figure 5. Home Language of Respondents

have affected them less. Within families, 16.8% of respondents speak Ukrainian, while 11.6% use both languages. Russian is the main language of communication for 14.7% of respondents. For 3.2%, it is the only language used, which may be because a higher percentage of senior students come from eastern and southern Ukraine than among first-year students.

More than half of first-year students (54.7%) speak to friends and acquaintances exclusively,

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Figure 6. Language of Communication with Friends and Acquaintances

and 17.3% mostly in Ukrainian. 18.7% communicate in both languages (Ukrainian and Russian), while 4% mostly speak Russian and 1.3% exclusively. Among upper-year students, 38.9% speak Ukrainian exclusively and 18.9% mostly. A smaller percentage of upper-year students use Ukrainian exclusively when speaking with friends, which may indicate greater linguistic diversity and the influence of other languages. A higher rate (29.5%) of senior students use both languages, Ukrainian and Russian, with 6.3% speaking mostly Russian and 5.3% speaking only Russian, which may indicate a greater influence of this language in their social circles. In comments, several students indicated that they speak Russian more often because of the Belarusians who study with them.

Attitude towards the national language and changing language habits

The overwhelming majority of first-year students (80%) feel an increase in the importance of the Ukrainian language after the large-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on February 24, 2022. On the other hand, a smaller group of students (16%) did not notice a change in their attitude toward their national language. In comparison, the importance of the Ukrainian language decreased for 4% of students. Some of the 4% group indicated in their comments that they want to learn Polish as soon as possible, which may be the reason for the decreased importance of the Ukrainian language during their stay in Poland. Among upper-year students, the importance of the national language also increased (75.8%), which may indicate a strengthening of national identity and pride in the mother tongue after a prolonged stay abroad. In addition, after the outbreak of the large-scale invasion and the influx of refugees into Poland, the country saw a sharp increase in the demand for Ukrainian speakers, resulting in a growth in the prestige of the Ukrainian language in the eyes of Ukrainians, including Russian speakers. The ubiquitous inscriptions in Ukrainian for refugees contributed to their "soft Ukrainianization" (Gergalo-Dabek,

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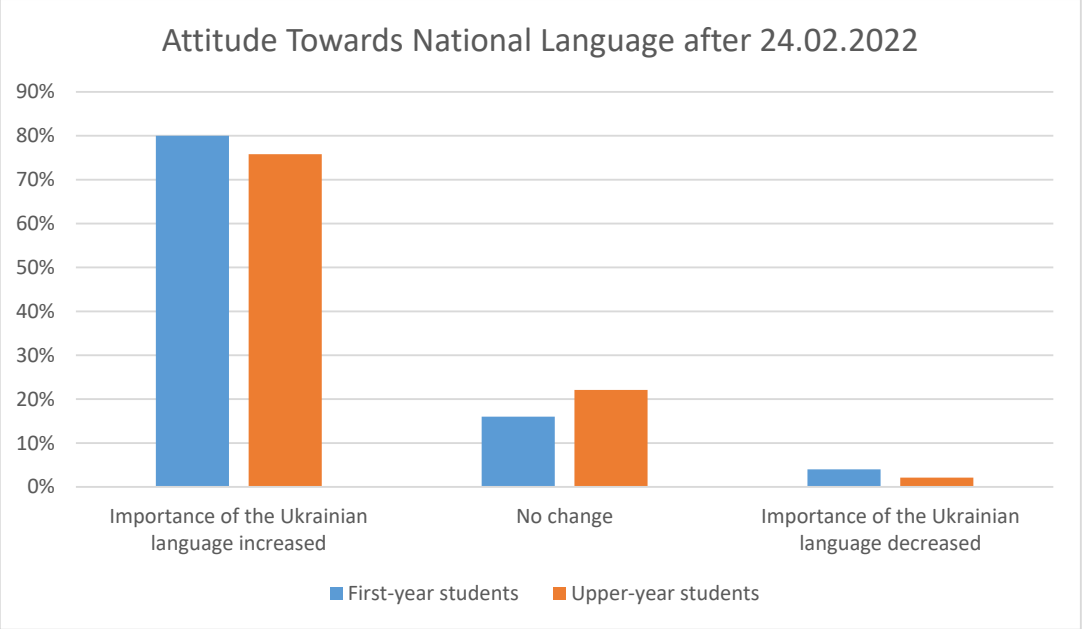

Figure 7. Attitude Towards the Ukrainian Language after 24.02.2022

2024, pp. 158–159). At the same time, a significant portion of upper-year students (22.1%) did not notice any change in their attitude toward the Ukrainian language, and for 2.1% its importance diminished. This could be because studying at a Polish university they mainly use Polish.

Figure 8. Is there anyone in your surroundings who consciously stopped speaking Russian after February 24, 2022? (Multiple answers allowed)

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70.6% of first-year students stressed that they and those around them have consciously given up speaking Russian after February 24, 2022. 22.7% of respondents reported that more than five people around them had also given up speaking Russian. This suggests that the increased aversion to Russian is due to the Russian invasion, in which the Kremlin used the language as a tool to justify its military aggression against Ukraine. As in the group of first-year students, upper-year students (58.9%) also noted a resignation in speaking Russian in their environment. A larger proportion of respondents (33.7%) indicated that more than five people around them had given up speaking the language of the aggressor state.

Language, identity and security

The results indicate that the overwhelming majority of first-year students (86.6%) perceive a connection between language and their national identity. The survey shows that language is a communication tool for these students and a key element in their sense of national and cultural belonging. A small percentage of respondents (13.4%) are unsure whether there is such a connection or cannot clearly define it. The majority of upper-year students (80%) also see a connection between language and national identity. This confirms language is a key element of national identity for most Ukrainian students studying in Poland. A slightly higher rate of respondents (14.7%) compared to first-year students indicated that it was difficult for them to say whether there was a connection between language and national identity.

The majority of first-year students (82.7%) see a connection between language and national security. The result indicates for students it is not only a tool for communication and is not a neutral issue but an important aspect of national security that can carry a threat (Russian) or protection from it (Ukrainian). A small percentage of respondents (17%) are unsure whether there is such a relationship or cannot clearly define it. The majority of upper-year students (77.9%) also see a connection between language and national security. This confirms that for many of them, language is a key element in their sense

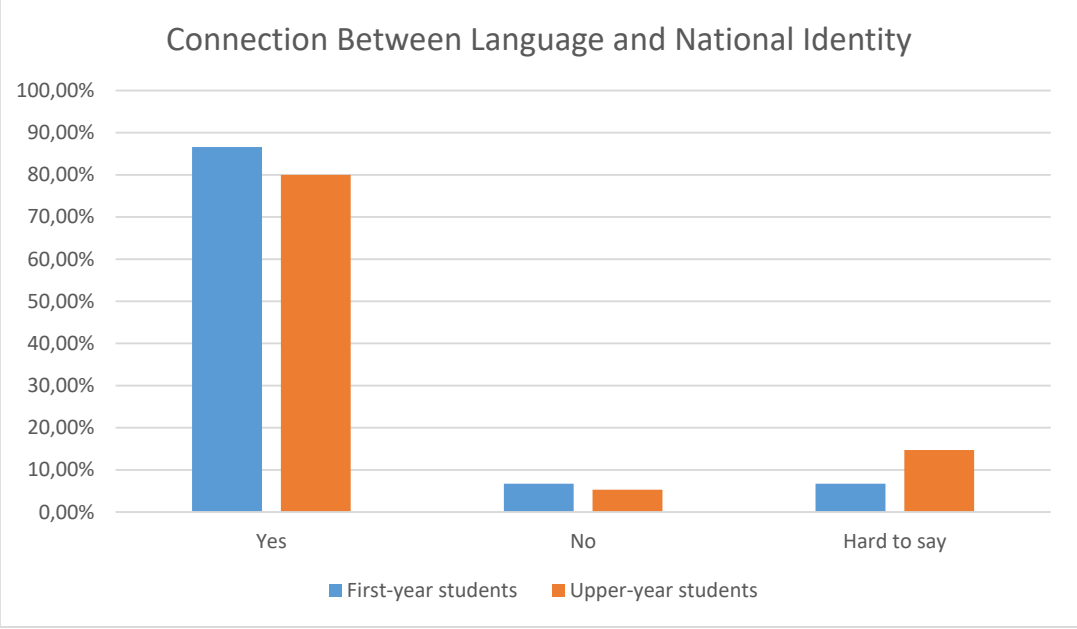

Figure 9. Noticing the Connection Between Language and National Identity

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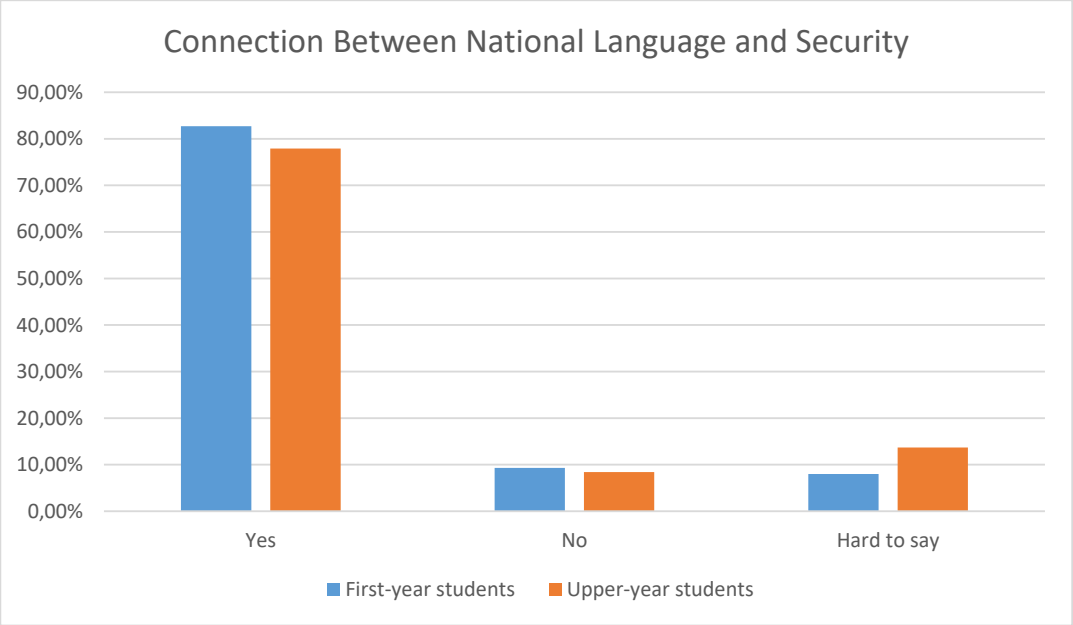

Figure 10. Noticing the Connection Between National Language and Security

of national security, especially in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. A slightly higher percentage of respondents (21.1%) compared to first-year students said it was difficult for them to say whether there was a connection between language and national security.

Conclusion

Based on the data collected on Ukrainian students at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University in Lublin, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents perceive a strong connection between language and national identity. More than 80% of first-year and senior students consider language a key element of their national identity. The increased importance of the Ukrainian language is noticeable among both respondent groups, highlighting its role as a unifying factor for Ukrainians in the face of the war against the invaders. A large proportion of students (more than 80% in the first-year group and around 78% among the senior group) also see a connection between language and national security. This is due to the experience of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and the propaganda regarding the supposed defense of the Russian-speaking population, and then the effect of the large-scale invasion in late February 2022. However, Ukrainian is slightly more important for first-year students than for upper-year students. Although the percentage of those who define their identity is lower, they are more likely to speak Ukrainian and recognize its importance for identity and security. Upper-year students, most of whom left Ukraine before the large-scale invasion, are less likely to abandon their language habits from Russian to Ukrainian. The implication is that the large-scale invasion had a greater impact on those in Ukraine at the time.

Influenced by these events, some respondents changed their language habits in favor of greater use of Ukrainian upon arrival. The results suggest language matters to young people, especially in the time of war. Most respondents noted an increase in the importance of the Ukrainian language, which is related to Russian becoming the epitome

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of danger. For years after Ukraine regained independence, the language issue divided Ukrainians and disintegrated society. For most Ukrainian students of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, the Ukrainian language has now become a common ground and a value that unites and consolidates them. In this context, promoting the national language can serve to strengthen national identity, social and political cohesion and thus increase the country's resistance to external threats.

Limitations of the study, such as its focus on a single university and the fact that less than half of all Ukrainian students at UMCS participated, suggest the need for further research to understand better and adequately support the integration process of Ukrainian students in Poland. At the same time, it seems important to support Ukrainian students in developing their national, cultural and linguistic identities in their new environment. There is a need for extended research on the relationship between language, identity and state security, especially in the context of changing international realities. Future research can provide more detailed information on the effectiveness of various language and identity policies in the context of defending the state against external threats.

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