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THE LANGUAGE ISSUE IN UKRAINE: LEGAL AND EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN THE BUDJAK REGION

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Abstract. This study addresses the language issue in the Budjak region, located in the southwesternmost part of Ukraine's Odesa oblast. After providing geographical and historical context, recent Ukrainian measures in the field of language policy are commented on, while examining their consequences for heritage language instruction among the linguistically diverse local population. It is shown how political efforts to elevate Ukrainian's status over Russian nationwide are inadvertently disadvantaging ethnic minorities, as are numerous in Budjak. I further argue that the language issue in Ukraine is exceptional in its strong impact on the sensitivities of minority language speakers in the country, in particular those who speak languages other than Russian.

Keywords: Linguodidactology; Ukraine; Budjak; Minority Languages; Language Laws; Language Education

The region of Budjak lies on the lowland steppe in southern Ukraine, extending along the northwestern coast of the Black Sea. Together with Yedisan, which is also a historical region, it forms the Odesa oblast. This oblast is culturally and geographically unique in the Ukrainian context, which affects both local linguistic landscapes and approaches taken to language education.

Budjak was historically part of Bessarabia, a borderland region that largely corresponds to the present-day territory of the Republic of Moldova. Today, some of Bessarabia's northern and southern territories, including the majority of Budjak, now belong to Ukraine. Due to this historical background, the area discussed in this paper is administratively part of Ukraine but differs from the rest of the country in terms of its demographic composition. In the context of Ukrainian statehood, this region plays a strikingly distinct role, as it exhibits by far the most complex ethno-cultural, historical and linguistic constellation in the country. A brief look at the central historical facts is therefore necessary.

From the 15th century onward, the Budjak region became integrated into the Ottoman Empire and saw an influx of Tartar settlers. When the entire region of

Bessarabia fell to the Russian Empire in 1812, the Muslim Tatars were forced to leave, and Christian Orthodox ethnic groups were settled in their place. They immigrated mainly from what is now Bulgaria and brought their various languages with them, which are still spoken in Ukraine today. These newcomers – Bulgarians, Albanians, and Gagauz – founded settlements in which they worked mainly in agriculture and were able to cultivate their languages within their own communities. Additional migration by Moldovans, Romanians, Ukrainians, Russians and Germans further diversified the region, and the ethnic composition remains shaped by all these groups, with the exception of the Germans, who were relocated from Bessarabia before the end of the Second World War (Schroeder 2012, pp. 368).

The Russian administration at the time realized that language planning was needed to enable communication with, and among, the population. Russian was to serve as the *linga franca*, but this could only come about if appropriate educational measures were implemented. Russian was therefore introduced as the primary language in all educational institutions, which resulted in the development of widespread bilingualism at the beginning of the 20th century. From time to time, there were demands from within Budjak's population that local languages, such as Bulgarian or Gagauz, be included in curricula. In some cases, these appeals were successful, and separate textbooks were even produced, for example at the Bulgarian high school in Bolgrad (described in detail in Karaivanova 2018). Yet, in the face of strong measures for Russification, schools were unable to assert themselves as a safeguard for minority languages, and the pressure to assimilate became increasingly palpable in the education system. Thus, the preservation of Bulgarian, Albanian and other languages succeeded only thanks to the geographical and cultural isolation of Budjak's settlements and not due to any benevolent educational policies. From the Russian administration's point of view, promoting these languages would have created unnecessary expenses, compounded by a lack of qualified teaching staff. Furthermore, Bessarabia underwent several changes in state affiliation in the ensuing period, becoming a part of Romania from 1918 to 1940 and again from 1941 to 1944. During this time, the school system was subject to a rigorous policy of Romanianization (Schroeder 2012, p. 133), accompanied by growing suspicion and increasing restrictions on languages other than Romanian (Schlegel 2019, p. 78).

The second half of the 20th century was then decisively shaped by Soviet policies, which again prioritized the strict Russification of all ethnic groups in Budjak. To ensure the effectiveness of this project, it was decided to draw a border between the Soviet republics of Moldova and Ukraine, which divided Budjak between these two territories. Additionally, efforts were made to further solidify Russian as the dominant language of inter-ethnic communication throughout the area. Although the new border was primarily of administrative importance, it did change regional power dynamics by cutting Moldova off from access to the Black Sea.

Protests ensued but had no meaningful lasting consequences. Hereafter, the Soviet Union's strong Russification efforts were accompanied by educational measures such as compulsory schooling, with a simultaneous lack of instruction in minority languages. In the part of Budjak that now belonged to Ukraine, acquisition of Ukrainian was possible as an optional elective, but this did not offer much promise to local groups and was only half-heartedly taken up, if at all. Russian, therefore, remained unrivaled as the *lingua franca* in Budjak.

Developments in Ukraine have been different since independence, having to do with various socio-political factors. The enactment and continuous amendment of language laws has had a lasting effect on opportunities for language teaching, with serious consequences particularly for genuinely minority languages. These laws have the ostensible aim of positively increasing Ukrainian language use but implicitly entail the devaluation of other languages, being directed particularly against widely spoken Russian. For Budjak, this has had the side effect that other languages, such as Bulgarian, Romanian, Gagauz or Albanian, are also exposed to a certain negative pressure, even though the entire language debate in Ukraine is essentially overshadowed by the bipolarity between Ukrainian and Russian (see for example Olszański 2012, Nedashkivska 2015, Moser 2017, and Dumbrava 2018). Other languages remain on the margins and are in need of alternative solutions to find their way within this difficult reality. To understand what opportunities for heritage language education are available in the Ukrainian territory of Budjak, it is essential to examine the language regulations implemented in Ukraine since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Here, we need to distinguish between the theoretical possibilities and the concrete restrictions they mark, and the practical consequences they entail.

The legal situation in 1989 designated Ukrainian as the official state language, a status formally guaranteed by law, while providing that Russian, alongside other languages, should function as a medium of inter-ethnic communication (Olszański 2012, p. 43). Following Ukraine's independence, the 1992 "Law on national minorities" established equal political, social, economic and cultural rights and freedoms for all citizens of the country, regardless of their ethnic background. It also granted support for the development of national identities (Osipov/Vasilevich 2022, p. 43). Article 10 of the country's 1996 constitution affirms Ukrainian as the sole state language and mandates that the state provide comprehensive support for its dissemination at all levels. At the same time, the constitution guarantees the free use and protection of Russian and other languages. Thus, while Ukrainian was granted exclusive status as the sole state language, Russian was now classified as a minority language and no longer designated a language of inter-ethnic communication as it had been in Soviet times (Olszański 2012, p. 43).

Ukraine signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1999 and ratified it in 2003. What, at first glance, appears a benevolent piece of legislation,

in practice, provides considerable potential for conflict. The charter is intended to protect and promote lesser-used languages, but this status does not apply to Russian in Ukraine. It is actively spoken, or at least passively understood, by nearly all Ukrainian citizens, meaning it cannot truly be classified as a minority language (Moser 2017, p. 173). Moreover, Ukraine's adoption of the charter was not entirely voluntary but was made a condition for the country's accession to the Council of Europe. The latter party insisted that Ukraine transpose this document into national law in a bid to set an example and precedent for other member states, a whole series of which had already refused ratification (Olszański 2012, pp. 44 – 45).

The charter's regulations were particularly problematic for Budjak in light of its population structure. The only official census data were collected in 2001[1] and provide the most comprehensive picture to date of the linguistic and ethnic structure of the territory. At the time, Odesa oblast had a total of 2,455,666 inhabitants, distributed among the following ethnic categories: 1,542,341 Ukrainians, 508,537 Russians, 150,683 Bulgarians, 123,751 Moldovans, 27,617 Gagauz and 1,862 Albanians. These figures highlight that the vast majority of inhabitants in the oblast identified themselves as Ukrainians, though this group in fact dominates only in Yedisan and not in Budjak. The data on ethnic affiliation also do not align with figures on language preference compiled in the same census[2]. In this respect, Ukrainian was reported as dominant by 1,136,571 respondents, Russian by 1,030,090, Moldovan by 92,740, Bulgarian by 119,505 and Gagauz by 22,148. In Yedisan, Ukrainian has a clear majority, though Russian is also widely spoken there. By contrast, Russian and the other minority languages are concentrated in Budjak, where Ukrainian only forms individual language centers but does not have a regional majority.

In 2012, Ukraine adopted the law "On the fundamentals of state language policy" (commonly known as the "Kivalov-Kolesnichenko language law"), which was presented as an important step toward linguistic equity in the country. Referencing the Charter of Regional and Minority Languages, the law stipulated that any language spoken by at least ten percent of a given population could assume the same functions as Ukrainian in that region. Based on this provision, six languages were granted regional language status in the country. For instance, Bulgarian was designated a regional language in the city of Znamyanka and the Vilshansky district in the Kirovohradska oblast, as well as in the Bolhradsky district of the Odesa oblast, where Bulgarians made up an absolute majority at over 60% of the population. Despite this legal recognition, the law's practical impact remained minimal due to a lack of comprehensive competence in language training, across various forms of education, which would also have had to follow. Austrian linguist Michael Moser is thus of the opinion that reality in Ukraine worked against the spirit of the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (Moser 2017, pp. 171 – 172). Although the law appeared well-intentioned on paper, it faced massive criticism from various institutions from the outset and was broadly deemed unlawful. However, these

concerns were completely ignored by the politicians around the then President Viktor Yanukovych. At the same time, it was now possible to achieve precisely what had previously been impossible *de jure*, namely the widespread introduction of Russian as an official language with practically equal rights all across the state (Moser 2017, p. 172).

It is important to recall that the 2012 language law also provoked grassroots resistance, with complaints made against companies and providers that did not offer Ukrainian-language services (Moser 2017, p. 176). This outpouring was obviously directed against the dominance of Russian from the point of view of the plaintiffs, but scholars have suggested that discussions about the linguistic regulations led to some uncertainty among minority groups in Budjak about their own linguistic status (Schlegel 2019, p. 25). On the other hand, for the numerous local minorities, the language law meant that there was no practical need to offer all services in Ukrainian, as Russian's position as the regional *lingua franca* was now strengthened legally.

Even more problematic for the linguistic reality in Budjak was that the debate about language regulations centered almost exclusively on the competition between Ukrainian and Russian. Although the use of other languages was not legally suppressed, it was also not adequately promoted. Following the Maidan riots in Kyiv, the subsequent fighting in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions and the annexation of Crimea, the language issue in Ukraine became highly politicized, and the 2012 language law was repealed in 2014 (Moser 2017, pp. 177 – 178).

In Budjak, contemporary Ukrainian nation-building efforts were viewed skeptically, and there was little enthusiasm for its innovations. The background to the upheavals at Maidan was also viewed critically. When hostilities first began in the east of the country, there were fears that a similar scenario could develop in the far south-west of the Odesa district. However, the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the region spoke against this eventuality (Schlegel 2019, pp. 25 – 26).

In 2016, Ukraine adopted a new education law, which came into force in 2017, coupled with so-called decommunization laws that led to the renaming of many places in Budjak. The education system was now mandated to be exclusively in the Ukrainian language. Furthermore, the first to fifth school grades were allowed to be taught in other languages only between 2018 and 2020, but not afterward. Effectively, schools for national minorities were to disappear completely (Dumbrava 2018: 29). Although these regulations do not entirely preclude minority language learning in the school system, they contribute to the local atmosphere of apathy towards the recent Ukrainization of the state as described by Schlegel (2019), Csernicskó et al. (2020) and Bochmann (2022, pp. 31 – 32).

But there was still no end in sight to Ukraine's overbearing language

policy regulations. In 2019, the Verkhovna Rada passed the "Law on supporting the functioning of the Ukrainian language as the state language" and forwarded it to the president to sign. It contains regulations on language use in favor of the Ukrainian language, which were designed to be quite strict in their initial phase, but ultimately dispensed with such planned mechanisms as a language police force based on the Latvian model. What this law does is provide for Ukrainian to become the most important language in numerous spheres of everyday life and be implemented as the language of inter-ethnic communication. Furthermore, according to Article 25, print media in another language may only be distributed if the same number of copies is also published in Ukrainian (Masenko 2021, pp. 111 – 112). While Masenko emphasizes in her paper that this provision drew criticism from Russian-speaking political representatives, she also mentions the resentment that this legal situation has now also aroused in Hungary, though without going into the substantive context and explaining the Hungarian side's concerns. But one need not fully comprehend the situation of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine to understand that print media in a minority language primarily serve the purposes of language preservation and maintenance. There is no question that the newly mandated translation and parallel distribution of all content in Ukrainian cannot serve this goal and is also extremely costly. The folly of this policy becomes particularly salient given that, although Ukraine has 17 recognized ethnic minorities, only 0.8% of the total population identifies a language other than Ukrainian or Russian as their mother tongue (Masenko 2021, p. 117). This makes it very clear how the focus on Ukrainian-Russian linguistic competition and the resulting language policies that indiscriminately mandate Ukrainian use are out of touch with reality in regions like Budjak, where they nevertheless impact minority speakers and their institutional structures.

The 2019 law furthermore prohibits the use of minority languages – which were previously allowed in secondary schools – as primary languages of instruction. This policy directly affected the schools in Budjak, where instruction was previously provided in Russian, Romanian (for both Moldavans and Romanians) and Bulgarian, among others. Under the new regulations, these languages were no longer permitted, and all instruction had to be given in Ukrainian. Anyone who was nevertheless interested in strengthening their mother tongue at school had to attend separate extracurricular classes. In addition to Ukrainian, university education could now also be conducted in the languages of the EU and in English, but not in Russian (Besters-Dilger 2023, pp. 4 – 5). Even if the allowance for the "languages of the EU" may have been to preempt anticipated criticism of the restrictions by Hungary[3] and Romania, it is still obvious that these measures inhibit innovative didactic concepts for the teaching of local heritage languages (based on the description in Vesselinov 2019). Thus, Csernicskó et al. (2020, p. 51) note:

> "The state has neither the right nor the ability to check all its citizens whether they can speak Ukrainian or not. However, this provision is capable of intimidating minority language speakers."

That also explains Klaus Bochmann's (2022, p. 32) conclusion:

> "Aujourd'hui, dans les écoles déclarées roumaines, ou hongroises, on n'ose plus faire d'affiches dans ces langues, il n'y a que très peu de livres, les examens doivent être passés en ukrainien. Il n'est plus possible d'acquérir des livres et des produits de presse de Hongrie ou de Roumanie."

Furthermore, the law "On autochthonous peoples of Ukraine" was passed in 2021 defining which ethnic groups are considered among the nation's "autochthonous peoples", followed by the 2022 law "On national minorities (communities)", which specifies which ethnic groups may be considered "national minorities". All of these issues have scarcely been investigated from the perspective of the multiethnic and multilingual Budjak population, and little is known about how individual minority groups position themselves in relation to them.

Linguistic Ukrainization at numerous levels of society is seen as a response to a long-standing policy of Russification in Ukraine and is a reaction to the perceived threat to the Ukrainian language posed by the dominance of Russian over the decades. As a counter-corrective to its historically inferior status, the Ukrainian language is now to be given priority also in those areas of the country where it has not yet held a dominant position. In the context of this policy of de-Russification, however, all other minority languages are now suffering considerable disadvantages in the education sector, which has even led to diplomatic tensions with Hungary and Romania, as well as criticism from the Council of Europe (Goujon 2023, pp. 71 – 72).

As we have seen, Ukraine has implemented numerous regulations to enforce the Ukrainian language where Russian or other languages have historically dominated. In practice, these circumstances have significant consequences for minority language maintenance and the organization of teaching in all languages other than Ukrainian (Csernicskó et al. 2020, p. 60, Bochmann 2022, p. 32), and it is necessary to follow very closely the legal situation as it develops, as well as the real ramifications of its implementation for local minorities. For instance, the demand for teachers varies considerably between optional and compulsory subjects.

Finally, we clearly need to emphasize that the Ukrainian language laws are not essentially directed against the linguistic diversity in Budjak but represent an attempt to emancipate the country from Russian on an unprecedented scale. The resulting impact on the teaching of minority languages in Budjak is, therefore, not an intended consequence but rather collateral damage, for which no adequate solutions have yet been found to ensure justice for all those involved.

NOTES

1. http://pop-stat.mashke.org/ukraine-ethnic2001.htm (31.01.2025).
2. http://pop-stat.mashke.org/ukraine-lang2001.htm (31.01.2025).
3. https://ungarnheute.hu/news/novelliertes-ukrainisches-minderheitengesetz-laesst-willkuerliche-auslegung-zu-78064/ (31.01.2025).

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