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Under the current circumstances in Ukraine, most bilingual people ultimately become Russian-speakers

So-called bilingual Ukrainians constitute quite a large group of the population. Surveys that allow for two native languages, such as the 2007 survey by the Razumkov Centre, show that 21.5% of those polled cannot decide whether Ukrainian or Russian is their native language, this figure is particularly high in the South at 25.5% and East at 32.2%. The number of bilinguals in these regions equals or exceeds that of people who list Ukrainian as their native language.

BETWEEN TWO LANGUAGES

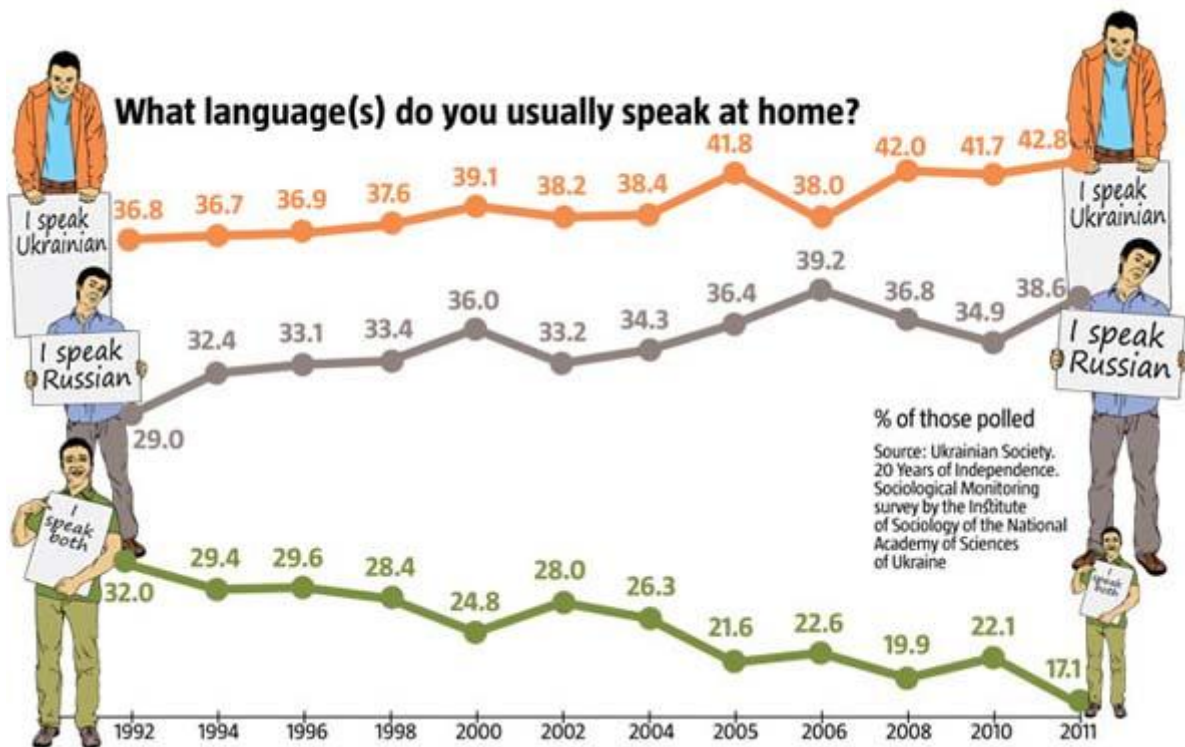
Long-term sociological monitoring shows that the idea of Ukraine being a bilingual country, quite popular in some political circles, does not hold water. Over the past two decades, Ukraine has been undergoing the continuous blending of bilingual environments. According to the Institute of Sociology at the National Academy of Sciences, the share of Ukrainians who speak Ukrainian at home has grown from 36.8% to 42.8% in 2011, while the number of those who speak Russian at home has increased from 29% to 38.7% over the same period. The main contributors to this are people who spoke both languages at home: their share has shrunk from 32% to 17.1%.

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reality of Ukraine, where there is no effective official language policy, is such, that bilingualism is generally an interim step towards russification. In 1992-2010, the blending of bilingualism in favour of the Ukrainian language, something that would make perfect sense in the Ukrainian state, has only been seen in the West of the country where the share of bilingual people shrank almost threefold, from 19% to 6%, due to an increase of Ukrainian-speakers. Meanwhile, other regions are undergoing russification. Only 1% of the 5% of bilinguals eventually switched to Ukrainian in Central Ukraine compared to 4% who opted for Russian. In the South, 1% of bilinguals became Ukrainian speakers while 9% switched to Russian. As a result, the share of those who speak Russian at home has grown from 43% to 54% in the South and from 56% to 64% in Eastern Ukraine.



SHAPED BY CIRCUMSTANCES

Ukrainian-speaking people have been the obvious source for making up the bilingual community. An April 2002 survey by the SOCIS Centre (its results are in line with those of the All-Ukrainian Census held a few months earlier) makes it clear that the group speaking both languages at home is largely made up of people who list Ukrainian as their native language – 65% compared to 34% of those who said that Russian was their native language. The same 34% spoke Russian at home compared to 44% of those who only spoke Ukrainian at home, while 21% spoke both languages “depending on circumstances.”

In Sumy, where 24% of the population considers Russian to be their native language, 25% spoke Russian at home, while only 29% of the 75% of those who considered Ukrainian to be their native language spoke exclusively in Ukrainian at home, while 46% spoke both. In Kharkiv, 4% of the 28% who said their native language was Ukrainian spoke it with their family, while 19% switched between the two languages, “depending on circumstances”. In Kherson, only 4% of the 59% who listed Ukrainian as their native language spoke it at home, compared to 43% who spoke both. In Mykolayiv 60% listed Ukrainian as their native language with 10% speaking only Ukrainian at home and 40% switching to Russian. 10% of those polled in Donetsk said Ukrainian was their native language, 39% of the population being ethnic Ukrainian. Less than 1% of them spoke Ukrainian while as many as 87% spoke only Russian and 12% spoke both languages “depending on circumstances.” According to the Razumkov Centre, 39.9% of Kyivites spoke Russian at home in 2005 compared to 18.1% who spoke Ukrainian and 41.2% who were circumstantial bilinguals. The latter group is largely comprised of Ukrainian-speakers, who have been russified to a greater or lesser extent.

The share of bilinguals among young and middle aged people has shrunk several times over in favour of Russian. According to the Institute of Sociology at the National

Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, the share of middle-aged Ukrainian-speakers grew from 36% to 39% over 1992-2010, while the number of Russian-speakers increased from 29% to 37% over the same period. The change among young people was 33% to 36% and 34% to 39% respectively. In other words, the share of Russian-speakers under the age of 30 is not simply higher than that of Ukrainian-speakers, it is also outpacing the latter. Mass culture and the media have a determinant influence on the language preferences of young Ukrainians since they are much more effective than such factors as the language in schools and government institutions.

DISCOURAGED FROM SPEAKING UKRAINIAN

The research of factors discouraging people to speak Ukrainian, conducted by the Institute of Social and Political Psychology at the National Academy of Pedagogical Sciences and the National Institute for Strategic Studies in 2006, revealed four groups of disincentives: 1) reluctance to be seen as a maverick, don't know the Ukrainian language and think of Ukrainian as an "uncool" language; 2) psycho-ideological stubbornness which includes ideological preferences, reluctance to yield to "pressure", fear of personal change; 3) derogatory attitude towards Ukrainian and the "unattractiveness" of the language; and 4) treatment of communication in Ukrainian as something second-rate coupled with the lack of a Ukrainian-speaking environment or the need to speak Ukrainian, after all, "everybody understands Russian".

This hierarchy of disincentives is mostly seen in Central Ukraine. Students in Southern, Eastern and Western Ukraine feature psycho-ideological stubbornness as the factor that has the most impact. Russian-speaking students, particularly in regions where the Russian language prevails, are more reluctant to switch when spoken to in Ukrainian, while 90.6% of young Ukrainian-speakers are ready to answer in Russian.

Despite the declared tolerant attitude towards the Ukrainian language, Russian-speakers are ready to protect their right to speak their own language more aggressively, while the tolerance of Ukrainian-speakers, especially in Central Ukraine, is coupled with the readiness to give ground in choosing a language because of the "uncool" and "unattractive" status of Ukrainian and "no necessity" to speak it in an environment where everyone understands Russian.

(The Ukrainian Independent NewsMagazine).