Attitudes on languages, identities and politics at the Ukrainian Black Sea coast in 2020/21
О отношение к языкам, идентичности и политике на Черноморском побережье Украины в 2020/21 году

Jan Patrick Zeller

Accepted: 29 July 2022 / Published online: 16 September 2022 © The Author(s) 2022

Abstract
This study deals with attitudes and opinions of the population on the Ukrainian Black Sea coast in 2020/2021, a good year before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The basis is a sociological survey conducted in the regions of Odesa, Mykolajiv and Kherson with 1,200 respondents. These regions are a clear target of the Russian offensive against Ukraine, on the grounds of an alleged ideological and linguistic affinity of these areas with Russia. The attitudes and opinions sought in the study cover three domains: firstly, attitudes and opinions on language policy, secondly, on Ukrainian autonomy and identity and the role played by languages in this context, and thirdly, Ukraine’s geopolitical orientation. Respondents were grouped according to their “ethnic/national” self-identification and language preferences, and a comparison was made. Overall, the attitudes of the respondents showed a clear identification with Ukraine and the Ukrainian language and a skepticism towards the Russian state, but by no means a hostile attitude towards the Russian language. A picture emerges that clearly contradicts Russian propaganda and also puts into perspective the difference between southern Ukraine and the center and the west, which has often been emphasized in the past.

Аннотация
В данном исследовании рассматриваются отношения и мнения населения Черноморского побережья Украины в 2020/2021 годах, а именно за год до вторжения России в Украину. В основе исследования лежит социологический опрос, проведённый в Одесской, Николаевской и Херсонской областях с участием 1200 респондентов. Эти регионы являются явной мишенью российского наступления на Украину на основании предполагаемого идеологического и лингвистического сходства данных областей с Россией. Отношения и позиции, которые изучались в исследовании, охватывают три направления: во-первых, отношения и мнения по вопросам языковой политики, во-вторых, позиции касательно украинской автономии, идентичности и роли, которую играют языки в данном контексте, а также, в-третьих, геополитическая ориентация

✉️ J.P. Zeller
jan.zeller@uni-greifswald.de

1 University of Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany
Украины. Респонденты были распределены в соответствии с их «этнической/национальной» самоидентификацией и языкамиыми предпочтениями, и таким образом был проведён сравнительный анализ. В целом установки респондентов показали чёткую идентификацию с Украиной и украинским языком и скептическое отношение к российскому государству, но ни в коем случае не враждебное отношение к русскому языку. Возникает картина, которая явно противоречит российской пропаганде, а также проясняет разницу между югом Украины, её центром и западом, которая так часто подчеркивалась в прошлом.

1 Introduction

This article deals with attitudes and opinions of the population on the Ukrainian Black Sea coast in 2020–2021, roughly one year before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It concerns people’s attitudes and opinions firstly with regard to Ukraine’s language politics, secondly, Ukrainian autonomy and identity and the role of languages in this regard and, thirdly, Ukraine’s geopolitical orientation. We relate the respondents’ attitudes and opinions to their “ethnic/national” affiliation and their linguistic preferences.

Apart from Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014, there are three Ukrainian regions / oblasts on the Black Sea coast – Odesa, Mykolajiv and Kherson. They are important for Russia’s geostrategic and ideological plans under Putin, as an essential part of so-called “New Russia” which Putin and his ideologues believe is to be established (or, in their eyes, was ever-present). In the recent past, the Russian government and its supporters have alleged discrimination, if not persecution, up to and including “genocide”, against the “ethnic” Russian and Russian-speaking populations in Ukraine – often lumping the two groups together and, of course, always without having asked them whether they perceive any discrimination or want to be “protected” by Russia. But there was and often still is talk of a “language conflict” in Ukraine not only in Russia, but also in Western media and among the public. And if in the past there was talk of “two Ukraines”, the regions on the Black Sea Coast found themselves in the “second” Ukraine – the “Russian” and “Soviet” one, not the “Ukrainian” or “European” one. This supposed division was based, for example, on differences in voting behavior, but especially on the linguistic behavior of the population.

However, Riabchuk (2002) had already pointed out that the often quoted “two Ukraines” are a gross simplification if they are understood primarily as a regional distinction. There can be no question of a clear dichotomy. There is also evidence that Russia’s aggression in the past – the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas – has resulted in narrowing differences between Ukraine’s regions and linguistic groups (Riabchuk, 2015; Kulyk, 2016; Pop-Eleches & Robertson, 2018), in the sense of an increasingly strong identification with the Ukrainian state and nation and an increasingly clear skepticism towards Russia. In southern Ukraine, for example, Volodymyr Zelens’kyj won almost all constituencies in the first ballot in 2019, and all of them in the second. This tendency also applies to linguistic behavior – there is considerable anecdotal evidence that formerly Russian-speaking people have turned to Ukrainian since 2014 as a symbol of identification with the Ukrainian nation. This anecdotal evidence is supported by broad statistical data for the area surveyed in this study (Hentschel & Palinska, 2022). Against this background, we use a survey from the years 2020/21 to show how self-declared language preferences and self-declared “ethnicity/nationality” were or were not associated with attitudes towards language policy and also towards Ukraine and Russia before the Russian attack. On the one hand, the data are of
course outdated – in view of the Russian invasion, attitudes may have changed or strengthened. On the other hand, the data collected in this survey represent the situation the claims made in Russian propaganda refer to, and, as will be shown, clearly contradicts them.

The study is of a descriptive nature; analytical statistical methods, which also take into account other possible influencing factors on the attitudes and the various dependencies between them, are dispensed with in favor of a broad presentation of the results. Particular attention is paid to apparent contradictions between opinions and attitudes that, at first glance, appear to be either mutually exclusive or at least contradictory, or seem to imply one another. This seems necessary (and interesting) because respondents sometimes follow a different logic than is laid out in a survey.

2 Data

The data come from a sociological survey which was carried out in 2020/21 as part of the project “Hybridization from two sides: Ukrainian-Russian and Russian-Ukrainian code-mixing in the context of the sociolinguistic situation in Southern Ukraine along the Black Sea coast” (Hentschel & Reuther, 2020).1 This project was primarily aimed at substandard Ukrainian-Russian mixed speech (hereinafter: URMS), the so-called Suržyk. As part of the project, 1,200 people were interviewed, 400 each in the three oblasts of Odesa, Mykolajiv and Kherson. The city of Odesa itself – the only metropolis in this area – was not part of the survey.2 The survey asked about different linguistic preferences and affiliations, like frequency of language use, first language(s) and mother tongue(s), but also about agreement or disagreement with statements concerning language policy, general geopolitical orientation and questions of the independence and identity of the Ukrainian nation. Respondents could express their agreement or disagreement decisively (completely agree/disagree) or more cautiously (tend to agree/disagree) or leave the question unanswered. This survey followed a survey carried out in central regions of Ukraine in 2014, shortly after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas. The statements presented to the respondents in the survey at that time were largely identical to those in the present survey. The results can be found in Hentschel and Zeller (2016) and Zeller (2021). Although the results of these two surveys can only be compared with caution since they were conducted at different points in time, we will come back to the data from 2014 in this article where it seems appropriate. We restrict our analysis to the statements most relevant to the research focus presented above. As far as the languages/codes are concerned, we limit ourselves to statements relating to Ukrainian and/or Russian. Those referring to attitudes towards URMS / Suržyk must be reserved for further investigation.

3 Analysis

Of the 1,200 respondents, 1,078 declared themselves to be of Ukrainian “ethnicity/nationality” and 122 of Russian “ethnicity/nationality”. During the Soviet Union, the citizens’ “na-

1This project is funded as an Austrian-German cooperation by the FWF – Der Wissenschaftsfonds (no. I 4189-G30) and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, no. 41946937), headed by Tilmann Reuther and Gerd Hentschel respectively.

2The reason for not considering the city of Odesa is the project’s focus on Suržyk. For metropolises in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine, a clear dominance of the Russian language and a rather minor role of Suržyk is usually assumed. The proportion of Russian-speaking people in the Odesa Oblast as a whole, i.e. including the city of Odesa, is certainly higher than shown here.
Nationality and primarily used language/code

3.1 Language politics

3.1.1 Perceived importance of the language issue

We start with the question of whether, in the opinion of the respondents, the language issue was an important factor in political conflicts in Ukraine (Fig. 2).³

The language issue was seen as more important by the respondents of Russian nationality – three out of four agreed that it was one of the most important reasons for the political conflicts in Ukraine – than by the other groups, including the primarily Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality. Nevertheless, in the other groups about half of all respondents said that the language issue is related to political conflicts in Ukraine. Of those

³The “no answer” category has been placed in the middle of the bars as this allows a visual comparison of the proportions of agreement and disagreement. There is no intention whatsoever to imply that providing no answer is to be understood as something between agreeing and disagreeing.
who provided an answer (1,028), 63.8% agreed. This percentage is quite a bit higher than the figure of 46.8% from the survey in central Ukraine in 2014 (Hentschel & Zeller, 2016, p. 641).

3.1.2 The state language

The most obvious language policy issue is that of the state language. In Ukraine, the language with this status has been the Ukrainian language since 1989, i.e., still in the late Soviet period. Making Russian the second state language was an unfulfilled promise made, for example, by future President Viktor Yanukovych during the 2009 election campaign, with an eye on the electorate in the east and south of the country. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with three statements: Ukrainian should remain the sole state language, Russian should be the sole state language, or Ukrainian and Russian should both be state languages (Fig. 3).

The option that received the most support was to keep Ukrainian as the sole state language (Fig. 3.1). More than 60 percent of respondents agreed (69.7% of those who responded). Almost every second person even did so decisively. About a third of all respondents agreed that both languages should be state languages (42.1% of those who responded to this statement; Fig. 3.2). Not even one in ten believed that Russian should be the sole state language (8.9% of those who responded; Fig. 3.3). The majority clearly rejected this possibility, two out of three did so decisively.
All groups were in agreement with regard to the latter statement: only a small minority supported Russian as the sole state language, with no major differences between the groups. There were however differences between the groups for the other two options – Ukrainian as the sole state language or both languages as state languages. The agreement here was diametrically opposed.

Of the respondents of Russian nationality, three out of four supported the option of having two state languages. This level of support is clearly higher than among the primarily Russian-speaking Ukrainians, where almost half of the respondents agreed, which was still more than those who disagreed. Among the primarily URMS-speaking respondents, those who agreed with the statement were already the minority. Not even one in five of the primarily Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians agreed that both Ukrainian and Russian should be state languages.

Conversely, when it came to the option that Ukrainian should remain the only state language the proportions of those in favor were different. Here, four out of five of the Ukrainian-speaking respondents agreed and only slightly fewer primarily URMS-speaking respondents shared this view. Among the primarily Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality, slightly more agreed than disagreed. Among the respondents of Russian nationality, only (or still) one in four held this opinion.

As in the central regions of Ukraine (Hentschel & Zeller, 2016), the following was found: The respondents did not always understand the statements to be mutually exclusive. Respondents sometimes agreed, for example, with the statement that Ukrainian should be the sole state language and that both Ukrainian and Russian should be the state languages (though perhaps with varying degrees of decisiveness). This is only inconsistent at first glance. Rather, it shows that some people could live with different constellations. Figure 4 shows which of the options respondents agreed with. The affirmative answers of varying clarity were combined for this purpose (and in the corresponding figures throughout this article). Respondents who did not answer at least one of the three questions were excluded.

In all groups, a comparable proportion wanted Ukrainian as a state language (only Ukrainian, both, or Ukrainian or both), from about 85% among the primarily Russian-speaking Ukrainians to over 90% among the respondents of Russian nationality. However, the opinions were diametrically opposed (as already indicated above in Fig. 3) as to whether this should be alone or alongside Russian. A small proportion could live with both options. It is also clear that only a very small proportion – even among the respondents of Russian nationality – exclusively supported the option of having Russian as the sole state language.
The rest would also agree to two state languages, to either Russian or Ukrainian as state languages, or to all options.

Another option in Ukraine’s language policy that had not only been discussed, but also implemented, was a regional status for Russian in certain Ukrainian regions. The controversial language law of 2012 pushed by Yanukovych’s Party of Regions provided this possibility (Moser, 2015). However, it was ultimately judged to be unconstitutional in 2018. It has been replaced by a new language law in which this possibility no longer exists (Moser, 2022). Respondents were asked whether they would agree to an elevation of the status of Russian in southern and eastern Ukraine. This statement can be linked to where and how the language issue (which would include the question of whether Russian should hold a regional status) should be decided (Fig. 5).

In terms of the possibility of Russian being given a regional status (Fig. 5.1), a similar picture emerged as with the statement on Ukrainian and Russian as state languages. In comparison, however, it is striking that slightly more respondents of Russian nationality rejected the (solely) regional solution, while slightly more Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians agreed with this option.

There was also a gradation between the views of the groups about whether questions regarding the language issue should be decided on a regional level (Fig. 5.2). The most agreement by some margin was to be found among respondents of Russian nationality. However, in all groups more people supported the possibility of regional decisions than the elevation the status of Russian in the south and east.

If we look at the combinations of the two questions (Fig. 6), the differences between the groups are put into perspective to a certain extent. As seen above, a relatively large number of respondents who primarily speak URMS or Ukrainian were of the opinion that the status of Russian in southern and eastern Ukraine should not be raised. On the other hand, many of them were of the opinion that the question should be decided in the corresponding regions which would make such a change a possibility. Thus, without wishing for the status of Russian to be elevated themselves, they nevertheless tolerated the possibility of a different decision being made.

### 3.1.3 Role of the state

Next, we look at the question of how the respondents assess the role of the state in relation to the two languages, Ukrainian and Russian. There were two statements on this: a more drastic
Fig. 6  Language issue on the regional level II (combinations)

Fig. 7  The Ukrainian State and the languages I

one – the Ukrainian state violates rights – and a softer one – the Ukrainian state does not do enough for preservation and development (Fig. 7).

We will start with the softer statement (Figs. 7.1 and 7.2). As for the Ukrainian language, overall agreement and disagreement as to whether the state was not doing enough for the Ukrainian language were roughly balanced, with one in five respondents leaving the question unanswered. However, there were differences between the groups. The majority of primarily URMS-speaking respondents wanted more support for the Ukrainian language. In the case
of primarily Ukrainian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality, agreement with and rejection of the statement were about equally strong. Almost half of the Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality disagreed that the state was doing too little and only one in three agreed. This view was even more prominent among respondents of Russian nationality. Not even one in five agreed, almost two-thirds disagreed.

As far as the state’s treatment of the Russian language is concerned, the levels of agreement and disagreement were also roughly balanced, with even more respondents electing not to answer here. More than half of the respondents of Russian nationality agreed that the Ukrainian state was not doing enough for the Russian language. Agreement dropped among the primarily Russian-speaking Ukrainians, and did so further among the primarily URMS-speaking respondents. The primarily Ukrainian-speaking respondents agreed least often with the statement but even in this group, one in three agreed with the statement that the Ukrainian state did not do enough to support the Russian language, thus almost as many as those who disagreed.

We come now to the more drastic statement, i.e., whether, according to the respondents, the Ukrainian state violated the rights of Ukrainian-speaking and/or Russian-speaking citizens (Figs. 7.3 and 7.4). As far as the Ukrainian language is concerned, the groups largely agreed. Three out of four respondents saw no violation of the rights of Ukrainian-speaking citizens, more than half in all groups responded decisively. There were however marked differences between the groups when it came to the rights of Russian-speaking citizens. Overall, more than half of the respondents saw no or hardly any violation of the rights of Russian-speaking citizens, yet almost every third did. Rejection was more pronounced among the primarily Ukrainian- and URMS-speaking respondents, while rejection and agreement were at about the same level among primarily Russian-speaking respondents (with more explicit rejection than explicit agreement). More than half of the respondents of Russian nationality saw a violation of the rights of Russian-speaking citizens, however, even in this group, every third did not see it that way. However, here – as with some other questions – the option “tend to disagree” could potentially be interpreted as a cautious or partial acknowledgment. An interpretation of the answers based on this assumption would then mean that only half of the respondents had not noticed any signs of violation of the rights of Ukrainian-speaking citizens, and only one in three in the case of the rights of Russian-speaking citizens.

Again, one would think that the statements would contradict one another – a desire for support for Russian would normally not be attributed to someone who is in favor of more support for Ukrainian, and vice versa. However, as Fig. 8 (8.1) shows, this was not always the case. All conceivable combinations were well represented. One in four felt that Ukrainian was not sufficiently supported, but saw no such need for Russian. The proportion of those who felt this way was slightly higher among the primarily URMS- and Ukrainian-speaking respondents than for the respondents seen as a whole, and slightly lower among the primarily Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality. This combination barely occurred among the respondents of Russian nationality. The opposite combination – a need for support of Russian, but not Ukrainian – was somewhat more common overall. About half of the respondents of Russian nationality only felt that Russian needed support. Among the Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality the number was significantly lower, but still the most common combination. One in four saw no need for a greater support by the state for either Ukrainian or Russian. This combination was slightly less frequent among the URMS-speaking respondents and was most common among the respondents of Russian nationality. On the other hand, one in four respondents was of the opinion that the Ukrainian state did too little for both languages. There were slightly more respondents of this opinion among the URMS-speaking respondents and slightly fewer among the respondents of Russian nationality, yet still one in five.
Figure 8.2 makes it clear that the absolute majority of respondents either tended to believe or were convinced that the rights of neither language group were violated. This was clearest among the respondents who primarily spoke URMS and Ukrainian; among the respondents of Russian nationality, only (or still) one in three saw no violations of rights at all. The only other common combination was the opinion that only the rights of Russian-speaking persons were violated. Half of the respondents of Russian nationality saw things this way, and one in three primarily Russian-speaking Ukrainians. For the primarily URMS- and Ukrainian-speaking respondents it was only (or still) one in five. Only a small proportion recognized a violation of the rights of both language groups or of only Ukrainian speakers, with similarly low proportions in all groups.

At the end of this section we look at the combinations of the responses to both the soft and the drastic statement for the two languages (Figs. 8.3 and 8.4). There are essentially two combinations of opinions regarding Ukrainian: The first one is that the Ukrainian state does not violate the rights of Ukrainian speakers and supports its preservation and development adequately. This opinion is held mainly by the respondents of Russian nationality and to a lesser extent by the Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Or, second, the Ukrainian state does not violate rights, but does not support Ukrainian sufficiently. This opinion is held mainly by the URMS-speakers and also but somewhat less strongly by the Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking Ukrainians. It is rare among the respondents of Russian nationality.

As far as Russian is concerned, the two opposite extreme combinations are the most common, both roughly equally common overall. The first combination of opinions represents the
view that the state does not violate rights and does enough for preservation and development – this is the most common combination among primarily Ukrainian-speaking and URMS-speaking respondents with over 40 percent answering in this manner. The second combination is the more negative view of the situation whereby respondents stated that the state both violates rights and does not do enough for Russian. This is the most common combination among Russian-speaking Ukrainians and respondents of Russian nationality. However, both extreme opinions are well represented in all groups. Compared to the assessment of the state’s actions with regard to Ukrainian, the intermediate opinion that the state does not violate rights but could do more to support the Russian language is less common, and most frequently found among primarily URMS-speaking respondents.

3.2 Ukrainian identity

3.2.1 Ukrainian independence and originality

Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with three statements relating to the national independence of Ukrainians: 1) Ukrainians are an independent nation, 2) There is a difference between the Ukrainian and the Russian culture and 3) Ukrainians are a part of the Russian nation (Fig. 9).

In all groups it was clearly assumed that there is a separate Ukrainian nation (“Українці є самостійною нацією”; Fig. 9.1). Although the agreement was most pronounced among the respondents who primarily spoke Ukrainian and URMS, four out of five respondents of Russian nationality also agreed. As for the perceived difference in culture, we see clear differences between the compared groups (Fig. 9.2). Primarily URMS- and Ukrainian-speaking respondents saw a difference between Ukrainian and Russian culture. Again, there is a striking discrepancy between the attitudes of the respondents of Russian nationality, who rarely saw a difference, and primarily Russian-speaking Ukrainians, where opinions were balanced. Finally, about half of the respondents of Russian nationality stated that Ukrainians are part of the Russian nation (“Українці є частиною російського народу”; Fig. 9.3). In the other groups, including the Russian-speaking Ukrainians, the notion that Ukraine belongs to the Russian nation was clearly rejected, but this reaction was not as clear as the agreement with the autonomy of the Ukrainian nation. As is evident in the reactions to the individual statements some respondents viewed apparently contradictory responses to be simultaneously
correct. Figure 10 shows the different response combinations with regard to the statements on the autonomy of the Ukrainian nation.

The proportion of those respondents who recognized Ukrainians as having at least a certain degree of autonomy clearly predominated in all groups. The majority was of the opinion that Ukrainians are a separate nation and not part of the/a Russian nation. However, a not inconsiderable proportion of respondents were of the opinion that both are true: although the Ukrainians are a nation on their own, they are nevertheless part of the Russian nation. This option was most often chosen by respondents of Russian nationality. The few who said that Ukrainians are neither part of the Russian nation nor an autonomous nation are difficult to interpret. They may have meant that Ukrainians have not yet become one nation – but are definitely not part of the Russian nation. Here, too, a certain independence seems to have been assumed. However, the proportion of respondents who gave this combination of responses was very small. A significant proportion of those who denied any independence was found only among the respondents of Russian nationality – clearly more than among the primarily Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality.

### 3.2.2 Languages and Ukrainian culture

Figure 11 shows how the languages – Ukrainian and Russian – were related to Ukrainian culture in the opinion of the respondents.

The majority of respondents agreed that the Ukrainian language preserves Ukrainian culture (Fig. 11.1). Although there was less agreement with this statement among the respon-
The majorities of all groups rejected the statement that the Ukrainian language was a threat from the Russian language. Therefore, acknowledging the importance of the Ukrainian language does not seem to imply the assumption of a threat from the Russian language. This is shown in Fig. 12.

In all groups, the prevailing view was that while Ukrainian preserves Ukrainian culture, Russian does not threaten it. A combination of the opinions that Russian is a threat but that Ukrainian does not help preserve the culture was very rare. The opinion that neither of the two statements applies was relatively common among the respondents of Russian nationality and among the primarily Russian-speaking Ukrainians. The opinion that the Ukrainian language preserves the Ukrainian culture and that Russian poses a danger was found above all among the primarily Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians – but was also in the minority there.

### 3.2.3 The individual

While the previous questions were on an abstract, general level, the following statements look at the role of the individual (Fig. 13).

We begin by asking whether Russian and Ukrainian identities are – in the eyes of the respondents – mutually exclusive or not (Fig. 13.1). Overall, the majority of all respondents believed that one cannot be Ukrainian and Russian at the same time. Primarily Ukrainian-or URMS-speaking respondents were most skeptical about this idea. Nevertheless, one in four or one in three respondents respectively considered this to be possible. Among the Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality, about every second respondent agreed that it was possible to be both Russian and Ukrainian, and among the respondents of Russian nationality the number was much higher – four in five respondents agreed with this statement.

The next statements are related to whether the status of being Ukrainian is related to the languages a person knows. In all groups, almost everyone agreed that as a Ukrainian you have to know the Ukrainian language (Fig. 13.3). However, the majority also thought that all Ukrainians should know Russian (Fig. 13.4). Here, however, we find differences between the groups. Respondents of Russian nationality clearly agree, as do Russian-speaking Ukrainians. But even among the Ukrainian-speaking respondents, slightly more than half agreed.

Finally, there was the question of whether the Ukrainian language is a necessary requirement for being Ukrainian (Fig. 13.2). The clear majority believed that all Ukrainians should know the Ukrainian language. However, only a minority believed that one must speak the
language in order to be Ukrainian. Even among Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, a clear majority agreed that one could still be Ukrainian without speaking the language. Now we turn to the question of how both assumptions are related (Fig. 14).

The opinion that all Ukrainians should be proficient in Ukrainian and that one is Ukrainian only if one speaks Ukrainian was expressed most frequently by the respondents who primarily spoke Ukrainian and URMS. But even in these groups, the most frequent combination of attitudes was that one should know Ukrainian, but that one can also be Ukrainian without speaking Ukrainian. This combination was even more common among the primarily
3.3 Politics

3.3.1 Geopolitical orientation

How should Ukraine orientate itself geopolitically? Respondents were asked whether they would agree with Ukraine’s integration into the EU and/or with a common state with Belarus and the Russian Federation, the “East Slavic” states (Fig. 15).

The possibility of a common state with Belarus and Russia (Fig. 15.1) was clearly and for the most part decisively rejected by all respondents of Ukrainian nationality, most clearly of all by the Ukrainian-speaking respondents. In the case of respondents of Russian nationality, the two directions were balanced. Approval for EU membership (Fig. 15.2) was not as clear as the rejection of state unity with Russia and Belarus. A quite clear simple majority for EU membership was found only among the Ukrainian-speaking respondents. Among the URMS and Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality, agreement and disagreement were roughly equal but there was more decisive disagreement than decisive agreement. Among the respondents of Russian nationality, an absolute majority was against membership, most were strongly opposed to this possibility.

Figure 16 shows the combinations of both statements – EU membership and/or state unity with Belarus and Russia.

The number of those who wanted neither membership of the EU nor a common state with Russia and Belarus was comparable in all groups – around one in three was in favor of this option, which in this sense can be viewed as a neutral status. The very small proportion of those who wanted both (while it is not clear whether these responses indicate approval for “either – or” or “both – and”) was similar in all groups as well. Clear differences between the groups were found in terms of combinations in which only one option was approved and the other rejected. The Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians were clearly only in favor of joining the EU, and this was also the most common combination among the other groups of Ukrainian nationality. The respondents of Russian nationality differed clearly here – also from the Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality. Among the respondents with Russian nationality the common state with Belarus and Russia and no wish for an affiliation to the EU was the most common combination. But at least every fifth person...
Finally, let us come to the statement that has come true in the most gruesome way: *Russia is a threat to Ukraine’s independence* (“Росія є загрозою для незалежності України”; Fig. 17).

At the time of the survey, i.e., about a year to a year and a half before the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, around half of the respondents saw a threat to independent Ukraine from the Russian state, and only three out of ten were decisively of the opinion that Russia posed a threat to Ukrainian independence. Slightly more of the primarily Ukrainian-speaking respondents held this opinion, and slightly fewer of the primarily Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality. About a third saw no threat from Russia, whereby the proportion was slightly less among the Ukrainian-speaking respondents and slightly higher among the Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality. Once again, the opinions of the respondents of Russian nationality differed. An absolute majority saw no threat to Ukrainian independence from the Russian state, and the majority of them decisively disagreed with this statement.

In Fig. 18 we combine the question of the threat to Ukrainian independence posed by Russia with the question of the threat to Ukrainian culture posed by the Russian language (see Sect. 3.2.2).
The most common combination was: There is a threat from the Russian state, but not from the Russian language. This was also the most common combination among all respondents of Ukrainian nationality. Even among respondents of Russian nationality, every fourth person held this combination of opinions. A high proportion of Ukrainian-speaking respondents also saw a threat to the Ukrainian culture from the Russian language, mostly but not always in addition to the threat from the Russian state. Only around 15 percent of the Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians saw no threat at all. This opinion was more frequent among the other two groups of Ukrainian nationality, and the absolute majority among the respondents of Russian nationality.

4 Final observations, discussion and summary

The observations made in this article relate to the situation on the Ukrainian Black Sea coast about a year to a year and a half before the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. The first observation is of enormous importance, but will only be briefly mentioned here since a much more in-depth analysis is provided by Hentschel and Palinska (2022): According to the respondents, Ukrainian as the language of everyday use was in a much better position on the Ukrainian Black Sea coast at the time of the 2020/21 survey than the idea of the “Russian-speaking” or even “Russian” south would lead one to believe.

The attitudes and opinions of the Ukrainians on the Black Sea coast discussed here correspond to this finding: On the whole, there were consistent majorities in favor of Ukrainian and Ukraine: for Ukrainian to remain the sole state language, for all Ukrainians to be able to speak Ukrainian, for the importance of Ukrainian for the preservation of Ukrainian culture. There were also clear majorities that Ukrainians are an independent nation and not part of the Russian nation.

On the other hand, there was no dislike of or even hostility towards the Russian language but rather a tolerant or even positive stance. Overall, the respondents differentiated between Russia as a state and the Russian language. They were clearly more skeptical about the former. A majority saw Ukrainian as important to Ukrainian culture, but Russian was not seen as a threat. According to the majority, all Ukrainians should be able to speak Ukrainian, but Russian was also considered important. In the eyes of most respondents, one could even be Ukrainian without speaking Ukrainian – thus, de facto as a speaker of URMS or Russian. This willingness to differentiate is all the more remarkable given that at the time of the survey the Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine had been going on for years. Overall, a liberal and also self-confident attitude is evident. This fits the picture that is also drawn by others: Already during or after the Maidan, many Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians had
expressed their solidarity with Russian-speaking Ukrainians and recognized the support of many primarily Russian-speaking Ukrainians for the goals and ideals of the Maidan (Kulyk, 2014). And even the fact that the Russian language was seen by some respondents as a threat to Ukrainian culture does not necessarily indicate a hostile attitude to Russian – it can be interpreted as concern about the fate of the Ukrainian language. Of course, people have the “Belarusian model” in mind, in which both languages have equal rights on paper, but the Belarusian language only plays a marginal, often symbolic role (Zaprudski, 2007; Kittel et al., 2018).

On the whole, the attitudes and opinions of Ukrainians on the Black Sea coast in 2020/21 were similar to those from central Ukraine (including the regions of Dnipro, Kharkiv and Chmelnyc’kyj) from 2014 (Hentschel & Zeller, 2016; Zeller, 2021; there, however, respondents of Russian nationality were not taken into account in the analysis due to their relatively small number). Compared to the central Ukrainian data, which one should bear in mind were collected at a different point in time, the respondents from the Black Sea coast regions examined in this study voiced somewhat less agreement with the statement that Ukraine should seek integration into the EU, that Russia poses a threat to Ukrainian independence, that the Russian language threatens Ukrainian culture, and that Ukrainian should be the only state language. There was somewhat more agreement that the state violates the rights of Russian-speaking citizens and does not support Russian sufficiently, that the language issue is important, that Ukrainian and Russian should both be state languages, that one can be Russian and Ukrainian at the same time, that all Ukrainians should know Russian and that decisions about the language question should be made on a regional level. However, the differences must be seen against the background of the general, clear identification with Ukrainian and Ukraine as outlined above. These differences are slight and in no way correspond to an absolute, nor even a clear difference between the Ukrainian center and the Black Sea coast. By no means do the attitudes and opinions fit the image of the “Russian” south of Ukraine, of a “New Russia” as it is portrayed by Putin and his ideologues and supporters.

The reactions to two statements diverge from this picture, at least at first glance: a relatively large number of respondents believed that the language issue was one of the most important reasons for the political conflicts in Ukraine and, furthermore, not the majority, but a relatively large number believed that the Ukrainian state violated the rights of Russian-speaking citizens.

It is worth noting the relatively high level of agreement that the language issue is an important reason for the political conflicts in Ukraine. The mention of “political conflicts” in this statement is probably crucial here. The language issue is indeed one that various politicians had repeatedly raised in their election campaigns – certainly not always for the sake of the given language itself – and which had led to heated political debates. This is probably what the respondents had in mind, and not so much the langue issue on the personal and social level. Moser (2022, p. 411) also states that “language policy plays a much more important role in political discourse than in the personal experience of the Ukrainian population” (“die Sprachenpolitik im politischen Diskurs eine wesentlich wichtigere Rolle spielt als im persönlichen Erleben der Bevölkerung der Ukraine”). In other recent surveys, too, the majority of respondents did not feel that the languages “oppose each other”, but that they “peacefully coexist”, or at worst “compete with each other” (Zalizniak, 2020).

Let us now consider the statement that the Ukrainian state is violating the rights of Russian-speaking citizens. The absolute majority disagreed, but around a third agreed. Among the Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality, agreement and disagreement were balanced, among respondents of Russian nationality the majority believed that the Ukrainian state did violate the rights of Russian-speaking citizens. The new language law
(which came into force on July 16 2019 with a transition period until 2022) “On ensuring the functioning of Ukrainian as the state language” (“Про забезпечення функціонування української мови як державної”) is certainly of importance here. It replaced the unconstitutional Language Law of 2012, which provided the possibility for regions with more than 10% native speakers of a given language to have that language recognized as an official regional language. The aim of the new language law is to enable citizens to have the “right to information and services in the state language and to create the conditions for full-fledged development of the Ukrainian language in all spheres of public life” (Moser, 2022, p. 411).

This law is also controversial, and of course it was taken up by the Russian propaganda. In the school system, too, a transitional period ended in September 2020, which was intended for the nationwide implementation of Ukrainian-language teaching in secondary schools (with exceptions for Crimean Tatar and EU languages, see Moser, 2022, p. 412). Many Russian-speaking respondents (but by no means all) may have seen their rights violated here. Psychologically, of course, it is understandable that people consider a situation that applied in the past as their “right” and a deviation from it as a violation of rights. Still, the long history of the functional limitation of Ukrainian and the more than thirty-year period in which people could have adjusted to the current situation with Ukrainian as the sole state language should certainly also be taken into account. It is significant that this view is more common among respondents of Russian nationality (here too by no means an opinion held by all) than among the Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality.

Of course, it should be noted that there were definitely differences between the groups examined. The attitudes towards the statements mostly followed the same order: Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians were more skeptical about Russian and Russia and more enthusiastic about Ukrainian and Ukraine. URMS-speaking respondents followed, with the difference often only slight, or the two groups were even on a par. Then came Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality, and finally respondents of Russian nationality.

The results reveal that the views of Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality often differed from respondents of Russian nationality. Even if the former were somewhat more skeptical on many statements than respondents who primarily spoke Ukrainian, they were closer to them on many questions than they were to the (comparatively few) respondents of Russian nationality. Both groups – Russian-speaking Ukrainians and respondents of Russian nationality – agreed (in the sense of minor differences in the response behavior of both groups, not in the sense of consistent agreement or disagreement) about whether the Ukrainian language preserves Ukrainian culture (yes), whether the Russian language poses a threat to the culture (no), whether all Ukrainians should be able to speak Russian (yes), and also whether Ukrainians are a separate nation (yes). Aside from the last statement, these are all questions about the role and importance of languages.

The consensus between both groups was less clear when the role of the Ukrainian state in relation to the Russian language was included (The Ukrainian state violates the rights of Russian-speaking people; The Ukrainian state does too little to preserve and develop the Russian language; Which language(s) should be the state language; Should the status of Russian be raised in the South and East).

And the disagreement between respondents of Russian nationality and Russian-speaking respondents of Ukrainian nationality becomes very clear on the questions of whether Ukraine should form a state with Russia and Belarus, whether Russia poses a threat, whether one can be Russian and Ukrainian at the same time, whether there is a difference between the cultures, whether Ukrainians are part of a Russian nation, whether the language issue is an important reason for political conflicts, and also whether language-political decisions should be made in Kyiv or at the regional level – so there is more to this than merely language
preference. To a certain extent, one can deduce attitudes towards language and its connection with identity and culture from language use, but not, or much less, political attitudes. It must be emphasized once again that the (comparatively few) respondents of Russian nationality did not all answer in the same way; they were by no means all skeptical or even hostile to Ukrainian and Ukraine. The group often diverged from the others (e.g., on the question of whether Ukraine should form a state together with Belarus and Russia), but sometimes the differences to the other groups were also small (e.g., on the question of whether all Ukrainians should be able to speak Ukrainian). One can assume that respondents identify with Ukraine (as a state or as a nation), when these same people said with an overwhelming majority that one can be Ukrainian and Russian at the same time.

The results also show that initially contradictory statements were often not perceived as a contradiction. The respondents’ differentiation between the Russian language and the Russian state and the fact that in the opinion of the respondents all Ukrainians should be able to speak Ukrainian but one can also be Ukrainian without speaking Ukrainian have already been mentioned. The apparent contradictions were most evident in the question of national autonomy / independence. The second most common combination was that Ukrainians are part of the Russian nation and a separate nation, whereas the most common was that Ukrainians are a separate nation and not part of the Russian nation. Apparently, partially overlapping identity models were at work here. To a certain extent, this puts the results from surveys in which only one of the two directions is asked into perspective. For example, in 2021, two-thirds of Odessa residents surveyed agreed that Ukrainians and Russians are one people (Ukrainians’kyj Instytut Majbutn’oho, 2021). As we have seen, this does not preclude them from also accepting Ukrainian independence, and of course it did not mean that an integration into the Russian Federation was desired.

It is to be expected that, given the Russian attack and the terrible crimes committed by Russian soldiers against the civilian population, some of the attitudes and opinions presented here have changed. The bombs are also falling on the primarily Russian-speaking people in Ukraine and on those of Russian nationality.

**Acknowledgements** The underlying data were collected in the project “Hybridization from two sides: Ukrainian-Russian and Russian-Ukrainian code-mixing in the context of the sociolinguistic situation in Southern Ukraine along the Black Sea coast”, funded as an Austrian-German cooperation by the FWF – Der Wissenschaftsfonds (no. I 4189-G30) and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, no. 419468937), headed by Tilmann Reuther and Gerd Hentschel respectively.

**Funding Note** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

**Declarations**

**Statement of conflict** The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit [http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).
References

Hentschel, G., & Reuther, T. (2020). Ukrainisch-russisches und russisch-ukrainisches Code-Mixing. Untersuchungen in drei Regionen im Süden der Ukraine. *Colloquium: New Philologies*, 5(2), 105–132. https://doi.org/10.23963/cnp.2020.5.2.5.

Hentschel, G., & Taranenko, O. (2021). Bilingualism or tricodalism: Ukrainian, Russian and “Suržyk” in Ukraine. Analysis and linguistic-geographical mapping. *Die Welt der Slaven*, 66(2), 268–299. https://doi.org/10.13173/WS.66.2.268.

Hentschel, G., & Palinska, O. (2022). The linguistic situation on the Ukrainian Black Sea coast – Ukrainian, Russian and Suržyk as “native language”, “primary code”, frequently used codes and codes of linguistic socialization during childhood. *Russian Linguistics*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11185-022-09259-4.

Hentschel, G., & Zeller, J. P. (2016). Meinungen und Einstellungen zu Sprachen und Kodes in zentralen Regionen der Ukraine. *Zeitschrift für Slawistik*, 61(4), 636–661. https://doi.org/10.1515/slaw-2016-0039.

Hentschel, G., & Zeller, J. P. (2017). Aspekte der Sprachverwendung in zentralen Regionen der Ukraine. *Wiener Slavистischer Almanach*, 79, 37–60.

Kittel, B., Lindner, D., Brüggemann, M., Zeller, J. P., & Hentschel, G. (2018). *Sprachkontakt – Sprachmischung – Sprachwahl – Sprachwechsel. Eine sprachsoziologische Untersuchung der weißrussisch-russisch gemischten Rede „Trasjanka“ in Weißrussland*. Berlin: Peter Lang.

Kulyk, V. (2014). Einheit und Identität. Sprachenpolitik nach dem Majdan. *Osteuropa*, 64, 227–237.

Kulyk, V. (2016). Language and identity in Ukraine after Euromaidan. *Thesis Eleven*, 136, 90–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513616668621.

Moser, M. (2015). Pushing the “regional language” – Ukraine’s law “On principles of the state language policy” in force. In G. E. Brogi, M. Dyczok, O. Pachlovska, & G. Siedina (Eds.), *Ukraine twenty years after independence: assessments, perspectives, challenges*, Roma (pp. 189–211).

Moser, M. (2022). Geschichte und Gegenwart des Russischen in der Ukraine. Ein Überblick. *Die Welt der Slaven*, 67(2), 393–423. https://doi.org/10.13173/WS.67.2.393.

Pop-Eleches, G., & Robertson, G. B. (2018). Identity and political preferences in Ukraine – before and after the Euromaidan. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 34, 107–118. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1452181.

Riabchuk, M. (2002). Ukraine: one state, two countries? *Tr@nslit online*, 23. Retrieved April 19, 2022, from https://www.eurozine.com/ukraine-one-state-two-countries/.

Riabchuk, M. (2015). ‘Two Ukraines’ reconsidered: the end of Ukrainian ambivalence? *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 15(1), 138–156. https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12120.

Zalizniak, H. (2020). Language situation change in Ukraine as a result of the revolutionary events of 2013–2014 (Findings from a mass survey). In D. Müller & M. Wingender (Eds.), *Discourse and practice of bilingualism. Contemporary Ukraine and Russia/Tatarstan* (pp. 71–88). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Zaprudski, S. (2007). In the grip of replacive bilingualism: the Belarusian language in contact with Russian. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 183, 97–118. https://doi.org/10.1515/IJSL.2007.006.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.