

UKRAINIAN FOR FOREIGNERS IN THE PERIOD OF RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES¹

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of Ukrainian as a foreign language (UFL) has evolved significantly, particularly in response to Ukraine's changing geopolitical and social conditions. Historically influenced by the status of Ukrainians within the Soviet Union, the teaching of UFL has shifted from being perceived as a cultural curiosity to a practical necessity. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has further transformed the landscape, with new motivations emerging among learners, including solidarity, political positioning, and a desire to aid in Ukraine's reconstruction. This study examines the motivations of foreigners learning Ukrainian from 2003 to 2023, revealing a broad spectrum of reasons, ranging from professional utility to personal beliefs. The findings underscore the growing importance of Ukrainian as a language of resistance, identity, and future rebuilding, marking a significant shift in lingouidactics and the role of UFL in the global context.

Keywords: Ukrainian as a foreign language; language situation in Ukraine; motivation for learning language; applied linguistics; language pedagogy; second language acquisition.

¹ I express my sincere gratitude to the Armed Forces of Ukraine for keeping me alive. I write this article at a time when my family, friends and students are forced to hide in the bomb shelters for up to 12 hours a day, saving themselves from Russian missile and drone attacks; when hundreds of Ukrainians, military and civilian, adults and children, are dying every day at the hands of the Russian occupiers; when in my country the rashists (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruscism>) have mined the Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant and are blackmailing all the world with the use of nuclear weapons. I appeal to all international organisations to stop the Russian crimes against the Ukrainian people. This article is written during a research stay at the Institute for Slavic and Caucasian Studies at Friedrich Schiller University Jena (under the direction of Prof. Dr. R. von Waldenfels), thanks to a DAAD scholarship, German Academic Exchange Service. I would also like to thank Dr. E. Krauss (Friedrich Schiller University Jena) for her valuable comments and communication, as well as to Prof. Dr. T. Kovalova (Karazin Kharkiv National University, Ukraine) for her inspiration for the English version of this article.

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of Ukrainian as a foreign language largely depends on the status of the language in Ukraine and its perception by the country's citizens. From a chronological perspective, the teaching of Ukrainian as a foreign language (UFL) has gone through several phases and is now facing new challenges related to the Russian-Ukrainian full-scale war and mass migration caused by it. With the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, not only the geopolitical situation but also the social, economic, academic, and psychological conditions of life in the country have changed dramatically, resulting in changes in glottodidactics (language pedagogy) dealing with the teaching of Ukrainian as a foreign language.

Before turning to the specific context of teaching UFL and the results of my 2022–2023 study of motivation among foreigners learning it, I would like to give some key facts about the Ukrainian language. It is the national language of Ukrainians. It belongs to the East Slavic group of the Indo-European language family. It is the official language of Ukraine and also has official status in Poland, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, Hungary, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Czech Republic (in addition to these countries, it is also spoken in Belarus, the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Argentina, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and other countries where Ukrainians live). It is spoken by about 45 million native speakers (most of whom live in Ukraine) and is one of the thirty most widely spoken languages in the world and the second or third most widely spoken Slavic language after Russian and probably Polish (Mozer 2019; Ethnologue 2023).

2. THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN UKRAINE

The language situation in Ukraine has long been the subject of discussion, debate, and in-depth research in the fields of politics, sociology, cultural studies, ethnology, and beyond. Studies on the position of the Ukrainian language are conducted in academic circles and described in journalism in Ukraine and abroad (Besters-Dilger et al. 2019; Drozdov 2024; Ebel, Khudov 2023; Hentschel, Palinska 2022; Kiss 2022; Kovalova 2020; Kulyk 2024; Zelenina 2024, and others). The historical and cultural factors of its formation can be traced back to the time of Kyivan Rus, through the prohibitions of the Valujev Circulaire (1863)

and the Emsky Ukaz (1876)², to the long period of statelessness. In the USSR, speaking Ukrainian was often dangerous not only in official but also in private spheres of life. The effective methods of Russification forced many people to switch to the "commonly understood" language (Russian) because it was the only one that allowed them to get a good education, build a career, get a state apartment to live in, etc. However, not all Ukrainians made this compromise, showing national consciousness and language resistance. Thus began the perception of the Ukrainian language as a language of resistance, patriotism, and self-identification: I am a Ukrainian, not just a 'Soviet'. At the same time, there was a cultural perception, rooted in Romantic literature, of the Ukrainian language as the "kalyna" (мова калинова / mova kalynova, viburnum language, viburnum is the symbol plant of Ukraine), "nightingale" i. e. the second (after Italian) most melodious language in the world. Very often, it was interpreted in the way that it is a self-sufficient reason for Ukrainian to be studied and used by Ukrainians themselves, if only for its beauty, melodiousness, and tunefulness, but also because it is the language of their ancestors, their heritage. Most of the foreigners who were interested in learning Ukrainian were members of the Ukrainian diaspora, children and grandchildren of Ukrainians who went abroad for various reasons and at various times.

Since Ukraine gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the perception of the Ukrainian language in general and the methods of teaching it have shifted significantly towards an understanding of it as a language of use necessary for solving the everyday problems of people living in Ukraine. This was primarily the result of the transition to a market economy, a change in thinking, and the restoration of Ukraine's state status. In simple terms, the situation can be described as follows: until 1991, it was enough to know Russian, now it turns out that something more is needed because Ukrainian is the only official language in Ukraine, and this must be taken into account, if only in official international contacts. In the Ukrainian market (which with its 46 million consumers is a large market not only in Europe but also in the world), in the early 1990s, there was hardly any question of translating the instructions for imported goods such as building materials, machinery, household appliances, electronics, software, etc. into a language other than Russian.

However, it has become apparent that the Ukrainian public is demanding that manufacturers abide by the Ukrainian Constitution and translate their product descriptions

² These were the linguicidal facts of the Russian imperialist chauvinism aimed at increasing the Russification, national, spiritual and political oppression of the Ukrainian people. They banned the publication and import of Ukrainian books and musical works, the translation of foreign literature, the staging of plays and concerts with Ukrainian songs, and the teaching of Ukrainian in primary schools. (Danylenko 2019; Rudnyckyj 1976; Saunders 1995).

into Ukrainian, and even a separate NGO has been established to help achieve this goal³. Universities and academic institutions abroad have reconsidered their attitude toward the Ukrainian language, firstly because it is the language of a large Slavic country and secondly because many scientific studies have been published in it (including outside Ukraine). As a result, interest in the study of the Ukrainian language has grown among historians, ethnologists, cultural scientists, linguists, and international experts in Eastern Europe. Moreover, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, foreigners were able to freely enter Ukraine, which turned out to be a veritable "gold mine" for tourists with its rich and interesting unknown culture, beautiful nature, mountains and sea, and affordable prices. Entrepreneurs, meanwhile, found a skilled workforce and an open market that offered good conditions for starting a business.

3. METHODS AND ANALYSIS OF THE MATERIAL

After Ukraine's independence, the categories of foreigners who began to learn Ukrainian have expanded significantly. They now include not only foreigners with Ukrainian roots, but also diplomats and employees of embassies and official missions in Ukraine, private entrepreneurs and top managers of multinational companies, academics (including linguists, for whom Ukrainian has often become a third or fourth Slavic language), travellers and tour operators. The data presented in this article are based on the opinions of two target groups of foreigners. All of them studied Ukrainian in individual classes or in private language schools in Lviv and Kyiv: (1) 121 people in 2003–2021 and (2) 118 people in 2022–2023.

Since the goal was to obtain the opinions of the widest possible range of respondents from different social groups and to identify their motivations for learning Ukrainian as a foreign language, the survey was not conducted among students of state and non-state academic institutions, since members of this group have a relatively clear answer to this question: they are motivated to learn Ukrainian by their desire to get an education and start a career. Such a reference group is quite limited in age (19–27), and students' education is often not financed by themselves, but by their parents or state organizations (this is especially true for students from India, China, Malaysia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Egypt, etc.). And it is these organizations that can influence young people's decisions about where to study and what language to learn. On the one hand, it is technically easier to survey

³ This is about the organisation *И так поїмуть* operating 2012–2024. [И так поїмуть! – Вікіпедія \(wikipedia.org\)](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/И_так_поїмуть).

university students because they all attend group classes, but all of the above factors would greatly limit the diversity of respondents we could obtain in the private sector.

4. VARIOUS MOTIVES FOR STUDYING UFL – SURVEY RESULTS

The survey allowed me to identify a wide range of reasons for studying UFL; often, respondents mentioned several reasons at the same time, lying at the intersection of professional, personal, social, and other spheres of life. Thus, several types of motivation can be distinguished:

4.1. *Ukrainian is necessary and useful*

Although multinational companies operating in Ukraine often require their employees – depending on the type of work and position – to have a good command of English, their foreign owners and managers also learn Ukrainian: an American woman, 42 y.o., a manager in a multinational company in Lviv, tells us:

I have a professional translator at work, but what do I do after work? I have to order food in a restaurant, call a cab, and go to the store. My translator and I have become friends, and he is happy to help me, but I don't want to be dependent on him. I can learn Ukrainian on a basic level.⁴

Ukraine is rich in customs and traditions, interesting holidays, and superstitions that accompany people all the time. Until recently, the content of UFL teaching has often focused on the transfer of knowledge about ethnographic culture. However, it turned out that learners were more interested in everyday culture and a communicative approach to teaching. In the words of a Swiss (30 y. o., director of an IT company in Ukraine):

It's very interesting to see nativity plays at Christmas and to eat an Easter cake at Easter, but it's much more important for me to understand what the employees of my company talk and think about every day, what they write about in their Ukrainian chat rooms.

⁴ This and the following quotations are translated by me (S.B.).

Another respondent – a Norwegian, 53 y. o., a company director in Novoyavorovsk – says:

It's good to understand why Ukrainians don't take things across the threshold, but I have to communicate with managers to distribute tasks, and some of them don't speak English, so I'm learning Ukrainian.

A Polish woman, 37 y. o., a businesswoman from Bialystok, who came to Lviv to learn Ukrainian in order to better understand her future Ukrainian employees who will work in her company, thinks the same.

From these examples we can see a shift in the perception of Ukrainian as "bearer of tradition" to Ukrainian as "essential, necessary and useful".

4.2. Solidarity and aid

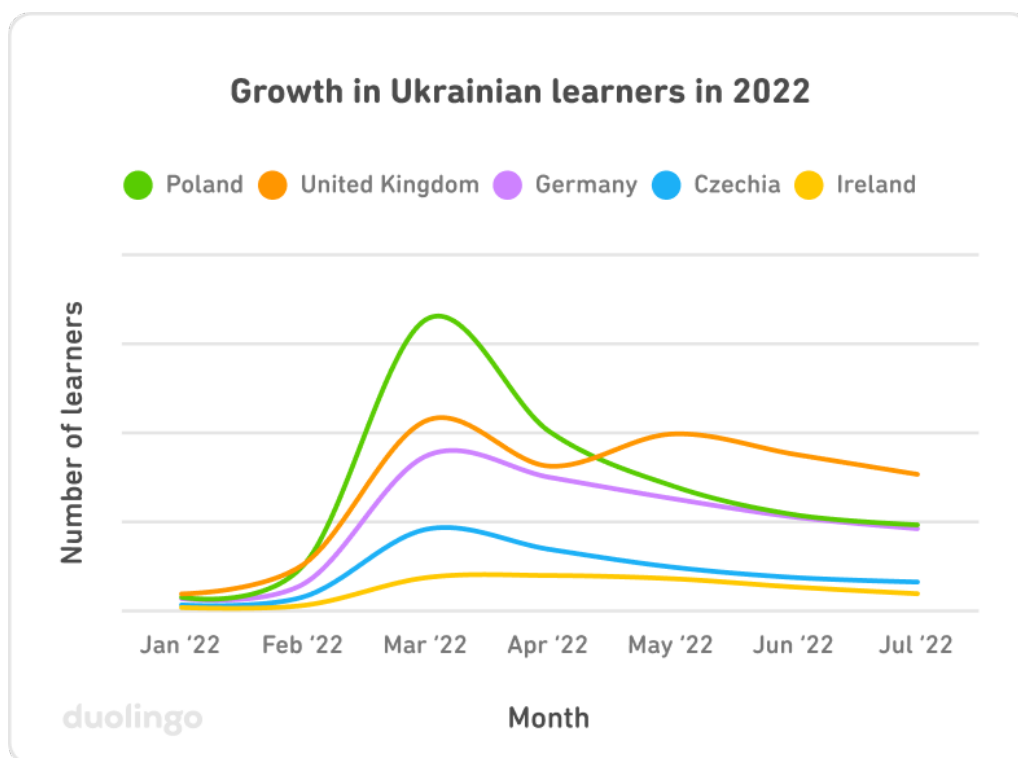
Duolingo, an electronic language learning platform, recorded a huge spike in Ukrainian language learning in the immediate aftermath of the full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine 2022⁵. The biggest trend in 2022 on its website was a surge in interest in Ukrainian: after February 24 0222, more than 1.3 million people worldwide began learning this language.

Some of the most common reasons why people usually learn the language are for study, work and travel, and the number of people interested in learning the culture is growing. But this year, we noticed a new reason: solidarity. (Duolingo 2022)

The staff at the free language learning app based this claim on data from more than 500 million users.

⁵ The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation has shocked the world. Not only former residents of Ukraine, but columnists and intellectuals from all over the world have written about it. Progressive countries are helping Ukrainian men and women fleeing the war. Governments have set up special social support programmes for them, and ordinary people often offer them free accommodation.

Figure 1: Number of Duolingo users learning Ukrainian in 2022.



Vertical axis: number of UFL learners. Horizontal axis: months in 2022 (Duolingo 2022).

In the first six months after the invasion, the number of Ukrainian language learners grew:

- more than sixteen times compared to last year in Germany,
- more than sixteen times in Poland,
- more than fifteen times in the Czech Republic, etc.

Duolingo explains this by the fact that these countries have received the largest number of Ukrainian refugees. By taking in their compatriots, Ukrainians and Ukrainians abroad are returning to their roots, remembering the language of their great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers, and often starting to learn it from scratch. What's more, since volunteers, non-governmental organizations and businesses are also involved, the Ukrainian language is being taught to people who previously had no connection with Ukraine.

American, 57 y. o., middle school teacher says:

I'm not of Ukrainian descent, but I'm learning Ukrainian so I can talk to Ukrainian immigrants at church. This is a Ukrainian church that sends a lot of aid to eastern Ukraine and has taken in a lot of displaced people from there. They don't speak English

yet, and I want to tell them about my family and America and listen to their stories. I have a lot of compassion for them.

4.3. The choice of Ukrainian language is a political position, an indicator of "friend" or "enemy."

“The language law is crucial in times of war. Therefore, the degree of its observance should be as high as possible. Today it is no longer possible to discuss whether the Ukrainian language is a marker of difference on the line between "own" and "foreign". To do otherwise is to play into the hands of the enemy, who systematically uses language as one of the tools of war,” said Taras Kremin, Commissioner for the Protection of the State Language, Ukrainian politician (quoted in Andrieieva 2024).

A similar opinion is reflected in the answers of female respondents of the same survey. A Georgian woman, 52 y. o., a human rights specialist working for an international organization in Ukraine, says:

Ukraine has managed to preserve its identity, unlike Belarus, for example. Now the choice of the language of communication is a political position, a pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian way of thinking. In Georgia, fortunately, the younger generation does not know Russian. I speak Russian, but I live in Kharkiv, Dnipro, Kyiv and speak Ukrainian – as a rule people switch to Ukrainian with me. I'm always sad when this doesn't happen from time to time. I also need Ukrainian to understand Ukrainian media, which I often explore.

The German, 44 y. o., a military adviser on the unification of Ukrainian standards with NATO at a military academy, says:

The Ukrainian army was very post-Soviet, russified from the language of command to the official and unofficial rules of operation and methods of warfare. I am an adviser on the unification of Ukrainian standards with NATO, so I am helping Ukraine to move away from Soviet standards and to join the new, more effective methods of warfare. In such a context, it's bad to learn Russian (even though it's an international language), so I'm learning Ukrainian. It seems to me that nowadays, Ukrainians are an indicator of something progressive and pro-democratic.

The Ukrainians also have a significant tactical advantage over the Russian aggressors because they understand the aggressor's language, while the aggressors do not know Ukrainian. Hence the numerous codes, slogans, memes and other jokes on the subject. "The Ukrainian language distinguishes us from others: the enemy can dress in uniform, wear our colours, but cannot speak our language⁶.

4.4. Ukrainian is the language of heroes who help defend the truth.

The example of heroic Ukrainian military servants and the deeds of ordinary people inspire foreigners who come to fight on the side of Ukraine, risking their own lives and health. They are the ones who form military "foreign legions" and learn the Ukrainian language in order to communicate with the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Our soldiers are taking advantage of NATO's experience on training grounds in Germany, Poland, the UK and other countries, and military instructors are enthusiastically learning the Ukrainian language to get closer to a nation fighting for its independence and culture. The first phrases they learn are "Glory to Ukraine" ("Слава Україні!"), "Glory to the heroes" ("Героям Слава!") and "I love Ukraine» ("Я люблю Україну").

An American, 71 y. o., a brigadier general, said:

Training the Ukrainian Armed Forces is the most important mission I have ever undertaken. I have never felt before that my job is so important. I need to know at least a basic level of Ukrainian in order to communicate with Ukrainians. For me, this is a way of showing respect to Ukraine.

A Canadian, 62 y. o., a colonel, tells us:

I started learning Ukrainian before 2014, when I was part of a Canadian mission at the Yavoriv training area. My great-grandfather emigrated first to England and then to Canada, but I wasn't interested in my background until I accidentally came to Ukraine. Now I am just happy, happy to be a part of the future victory of the Ukrainians. I have never been so proud of the land of my ancestors as I am now!

⁶ See video posted on Yehor Firsov's channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=au6H9DSpfSk>. Formerly an environmentalist parliamentarian, he is now a soldier in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, a specialist in tactical medicine and evacuation. On his channel he tries to publish war videos that he manages to shoot..

An American staff sergeant, 49 y. o., puts it this way:

I really enjoy communicating with Ukrainian soldiers in their language. We make instant contact and often become lifelong friends. Ukrainians defend their country, democracy in Europe, and fight for the truth. I am very happy to work with them!

4.5. Ukrainian as the language of reconstruction and the future of Ukraine.

Many foreigners still live and work in Ukraine, many have managed to keep their private businesses here, many are involved as volunteers and are helping the local population in various ways to survive the tragedy of the war. A Canadian, 59 y. o., a surgeon, tells us:

I took a leave of absence to come to Ukraine and help the military hospitals. I know I won't have time to "cure everyone" during my 25 days here, but I really want to help. I have started learning Ukrainian online to understand my patients. After winning the war, I am seriously thinking about opening a private rehabilitation clinic here.

German, 34 y. o., manager, announces:

I will be rebuilding Ukraine after the war and have an idea of how to run a real estate business here, so now I am preparing and learning Ukrainian.

The Norwegian legionnaire, wounded near Luhansk, says:

I like Ukraine and Ukrainians, I am learning Ukrainian because I want to return here after the war and settle in Odesa.

4.6. Ukrainian instead of the language of aggressors and occupiers.

Students who study Ukrainian, often study Russian at the same time. Their main motivation is to understand the reasons for the outbreak of full-scale war in 2022 and to find answers to the question of how Russian society, which tolerated its president for 20 years and then allowed war crimes to be committed, could have been degraded. «Professional scholars of Russia – history, language, literature, culture, sociology, geopolitics, etc. – have overlooked or failed to notice (or refused to notice) the most important thing – the degradation

of Russian culture and society that led to the current Russian fascism. How could Russian scientists, whose duty it is to analyse and "understand the deep Russian soul," overlook fascism?» (Zabuzhko 2024).

It is no secret that many Slavic studies departments around the world have long focused on Russian, the language of what was once the world's largest country, the language of international communication, and one of the official languages of the United Nations. Although it represented the land of a hostile, non-democratic camp on the other side of the Iron Curtain, diligent scholars have found in it the beauty of the works of Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy. To this day, many institutions call themselves "Slavic and Russian Studies," an eloquent testimony to the numerical dominance of Russians in Slavic studies. Nowadays, many of them, while improving their Russian or starting to learn Ukrainian, also ask a reasonable question: how come, focusing on Pushkin, they failed to see the irreversible processes taking place in modern Russian society and culture⁷?

One of the American students of Ukrainian, a 67 y. o. university professor, remarked in despair:

I've spent my life building bridges between Russian and American culture, organizing student exchanges, spreading democratic values among young people, but I don't understand how this could happen... How we could not see the brutality, the outbreak of war, the killing of Ukrainians.

An Englishwoman, 28 y. o., an Oxford student and head of a charity helping Ukrainians, said:

I moved to Kharkiv to help people replace windows smashed by rashist gunfire during the winter. I know most people in the Kharkiv region speak Russian, but I don't feel comfortable learning it now, so I'm learning Ukrainian to talk to people and understand their problems. At Oxford, the topic of my research project was a Russian poet from the early 20th century, but I don't want to have anything to do with that criminal culture anymore, so I changed the topic to a study of Ukrainian war prose from 2022.

⁷ See the discussion 'Pushkin is not to blame' (Пушкин невиноват) for how Pushkin is now being used as a tool of ruscism in the hands of the dictatorial regime (Zelenina 2024).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Undoubtedly, the war brought many changes in the social, demographic, intellectual, cultural, and academic life of Ukraine and Ukrainians at home and abroad. The language situation in the country changed dramatically, as did the attitude towards Ukrainian as the state language, consolidating the nation and the language of resistance, while Russian became the language of the occupying power, the aggressor, and ruthlessness largely. There has also been a shift in emphasis on glottodidactics, especially in the composition of those interested in learning Ukrainian and their motivations. Comparing the respondents of 2003–2021 with those of 2022–2023, it is clear that new categories of foreigners have emerged among the respondents: military and medical personnel; volunteers who come to Ukraine to help survive the war; volunteers who help Ukrainians in their own countries (USA, Canada, Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, etc.); entrepreneurs who prepare to rebuild the country after the war and start their own businesses here. Different type of motivation for learning a foreign language was also identified: solidarity and help. The survey showed that foreigners consider Ukrainian a necessary and useful language for life, a political position in opposition to rashism, a marker of "friend or enemy", and the language of Ukraine's reconstruction and future.

Postscript

Due to lack of space, in this article, I have refrained from describing such important methodological issues related to the teaching of Ukrainian as a foreign language as the use of computer technologies and electronic text corpora in teaching (Buk 2010, 2012) or the creation of student corpora (Buk 2007). A separate topical issue is the growing problem of learning Ukrainian as an inherited language (Turkevych 2021; Montrul, Polinsky 2021), which is not addressed in this article. Ukrainian children who were forced to move abroad with their parents are now educated in local schools, and many educational institutions have created special integration classes for them to reduce stress – especially if they previously did not speak the language of the country where they live now. NGOs and governmental organisations for Ukrainians abroad, as well as Ukrainian churches, have established and/or expanded Ukrainian-language Sunday schools. This situation is not unique in the 21st century due to the processes of mass labour migration, interethnic marriages, seasonal tourism, etc.

The sociolinguistic, historical, cultural and geopolitical aspects of this issue require separate in-depth research.

However, I cannot leave out the question of the teaching of UFL in Germany. Ukrainian studies in Germany, which played an important role in preserving Ukrainian identity both under Soviet occupation and in the diaspora, have a long tradition. Many academic centres and universities in Germany have shown, and continue to show, an interest in the study of the Ukrainian language and therefore offer relevant courses. All such institutions dealing with Ukrainian issues in Germany, Austria and Switzerland (2004–2015) have recently been described by T. Shevchenko in her work "Ukrainian Studies in Academic Centres of the German-speaking Area" (Shevchenko 2016). It contains information "about the main trends in the development of Ukrainian studies in German-speaking countries, the directions and specifics of research and teaching activities of scientific centres in the field of Ukrainian studies in the last decade" (ibid.: 3).

The specificity of teaching UFL to German-speaking audiences, the analysis of textbooks and teaching materials aimed at German-speaking consumers has been described by many researchers (Amelina 2016; Brunner 2008; Turkevych 2021). Many textbooks and teaching materials for native speakers of German have been published (e.g. Amir-Babenko 1999; Amir-Babenko, Pfliegl 2005; Anhalt-Bösche 1996; Börner, Grube 2020; Dniprova 2015; Kolbina, Sotnikova 2004, 2020; Klymenko, Kurzidim 2012; Schubert 2008; Spiech 2020; Taranov 2013, 2016; Ukrainisch 2021). They are now freely available in bookshops and both academic, university and public city libraries.

From my own experience, both teaching UFL and participating in international Slavic studies conferences, I know that many German scholars in Slavic and other disciplines speak Ukrainian well and successfully use it in analysis and research in the humanities (Besters-Dilger et al. 2019; Hentschel, Palinska 2022; Kuße 2018; Lahjouji-Seppälä et al. 2022; Quasthoff et al. 2016, etc.).

German Slavists have strongly condemned the Russian attack on Ukraine (Stellungnahme 2022; Landsberg 2022), and various German institutions have funded a number of scholarships for Ukrainian scholars and students to support them during the war. Germany actively organises joint scientific conferences, seminars, cultural meetings, literary clubs and readings on Ukraine and Ukrainian studies (see, for example, Ukrainian Club Jena 2022–2024).

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Polish version of the article is published in the journal *Polski w Niemczech / Polnisch in Deutschland*. №11–12. 2023–2024. S. 143–157.