

LINGUISTIC INTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN LITHUANIA

ЛІНГВІСТИЧНА ІНТЕГРАЦІЯ УКРАЇНСЬКИХ БІЖЕНЦІВ У ЛИТВІ

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The article explores the linguistic integration of Ukrainian refugees residing in Lithuania, focusing on their language practices in both family and professional settings. The research is based on the questionnaire of 100 respondents, originally from various parts of Ukraine, currently living in two largest cities of Lithuania: Vilnius and Kaunas. The findings reveal that the majority of the research participants are bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian, with many also fluent in foreign languages. Ukrainian and Russian are the predominant languages used in family communication. In communication with spouses/partners and with children English and Lithuanian are also present. In professional and academic contexts, Russian and English are the most commonly used languages, though many respondents also report using Lithuanian at work or studies. While Russian often functions as a lingua franca in communication with Lithuanians, a shift in language attitude is evident – many participants express emotional detachment from the Russian language and the desire to transition to the Ukrainian language as a result of the ongoing war. This shift reflects a growing desire to maintain Ukrainian as their heritage language.

The paper also reviews literature on the refugees' integration in the host society and the role of language in this process, underscoring the importance of acquiring the host country language. The effective inclusion of refugees into host society is a complex and multifaceted process, influenced by numerous interrelated factors. Language training stands out as a key element among them. Proficiency in the host country's language is fundamental to successful social integration, as it enables refugees to communicate, access services and to fully integrate in a social life. The findings confirm this trend, with the majority of respondents reporting that they have learned or are currently learning Lithuanian. They recognize its value for social integration and for increasing their professional or academic prospects.

Key words: linguistic integration, refugees, Ukrainian refugees, adaptation, host country language.

У статті досліджується лінгвістична інтеграція українських біженців, які проживають у Литві, зосереджуючись на їхній мовній практиці як у сімейному, так і в професійному середовищі. Дослідження базується на анкетуванні 100 респондентів, родом з різних частин України, які наразі мешкають у двох найбільших містах Литви: Вільнюсі та Каунасі. Результати дослідження показують, що більшість учасників дослідження є двомовними – володіють як українською, так і російською мовами, разом з тим багато хто також вільно володіє іноземними мовами. У сімейному спілкуванні переважно використовуються українська та російська мови. У спілкуванні з подружжям/партнером та в спілкуванні з дітьми також присутні англійська та литовська мови. У професійному та академічному контекстах російська та англійська є найчастіше вживаними мовами, однак багато респондентів також повідомляють про використання литовської мови на роботі чи навчанні. Хоча у спілкуванні з литовцями російська часто функціонує як мова міжнаціонального спілкування, спостерігається зміна мовного ставлення – багато учасників висловлюють емоційну відчуженість від російської мови та бажання перейти на українську мову внаслідок триваючої війни. Ця зміна відображає зростаюче прагнення зберегти українську як мову своєї культурної спадщини.

У статті також представлений огляд літератури, присвяченої інтеграції біженців у приймаюче суспільство та ролі мови в цьому процесі, підкреслюючи важливість вивчення мови країни перебування. Ефективне включення біженців у приймаюче суспільство є складним і багатограним процесом, на який впливає низка взаємопов'язаних факторів. Серед них мовна підготовка виокремлюється як один із ключових елементів. Володіння мовою приймаючої країни є основоположним для успішної соціальної інтеграції, оскільки воно дає змогу біженцям опікуватися, отримувати доступ до послуг та повноцінно включатися в суспільне життя. Отримані результати підтверджують цю тенденцію: більшість респондентів зазначили, що вже вивчили або наразі вивчають литовську мову. Вони визнають її роль як для соціальної інтеграції, так і для підвищення своїх професійних або академічних перспектив.

Ключові слова: лінгвістична інтеграція, біженці, українські біженці, адаптація, мова країни перебування.

Introduction. The beginning of a full-scale war of Russia against Ukraine in 2022 brought significant changes not only to Ukraine, but influenced the whole world. Millions of Ukrainian citizens were forced to leave the country and search for shelters globally. According to official data almost 7 million people fled Ukraine as of February 2025 [1]. The

Baltic states displayed unwavering solidarity by welcoming Ukrainian war refugees. Notably, Lithuania exhibited the highest intake among the Baltic states, around 94,000 refugees applied for asylum and temporary protection. The peculiar feature of Ukrainian migration is the fact that majority constitute women and children – about 70%, which is quite contrary to

2015–2017 refugee crisis in Europe when the number of woman then was about 30% [2].

Migration is naturally linked to the process of adaptation, with communication serving as the essential means through which adaptation becomes possible across all spheres of life – social, economic, medical, educational, and cultural. One of the reasons Ukrainian war refugees chose Lithuania as a place of refuge was the shared language. It is known, that “large differences between the culture and language of the source and destination countries may constitute barriers to migration” [3, p. 343]. Owing to their common Soviet Union past, both Ukrainians and Lithuanians can communicate in Russian, which serves as a *lingua franca* for the two nations.

The analysis of recent research and publications. Refugees face numerous challenges during migration, among which language adaptation is particularly significant. Ongoing migratory processes, whether driven by war, economic hardship, political or religious persecution or other personal circumstances, contribute to the growing phenomenon of multilingualism. Pavlenko and Blackledge [4] explore how individuals and communities negotiate their identities within multilingual contexts, emphasizing the complex interplay between language and identity. Integration, as many scholars highlight, is a two-sided process: while migrants bring their own languages and cultures into host countries, they also strive to learn the host language, which is essential for social inclusion and active participation in the society.

In the current context of the war in Ukraine and broader geopolitical shifts, the linguistic adaptation of refugees has become a crucial area of study, particularly for fostering inclusive and resilient societies. Ager & Strang [5] offer a comprehensive model for understanding refugee integration, particularly within the UK context, while Pavlyk et al [6] identify key factors that support linguistic integration of refugees. Research by Blasiak-Tytula & Shevchuk-Kliuzheva [7] sheds light on the family language policy of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. However, the linguistic adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania remains understudied and calls for further scholarly attention.

The **aim of this article** is to study the linguistic repertoire of Ukrainian war refugees in Lithuania, as well as their readiness for a linguistic integration in the host country.

Results and discussions. A lot of Ukrainians who were forced to leave their native country due to the war and look for refuge in different countries around the world are trying to adapt to new realia now. Adaptation is happening in all the spheres of life:

social, cultural, economic, medical and of course, linguistic. The Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its Protocol emphasize the role of refugees’ integration, stresses the importance to “facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees” [8].

Integration is “a dynamic and multi-faceted two-way process leading to full and equal membership in society” [9, p. 7], benefits for all sides that are involved. It presupposes refugees’ readiness to adjust to new conditions without the need to give up on their cultural identity, as well as host community to be ready to welcome refugees and meet their diverse needs.

The ability of refugees to successfully integrate into host societies is influenced by a range of interrelated factors. Ager & Strang’s conceptual framework of integration identifies four core domains: markers and means (such as housing, employment, education, and health); social connection (including social bridges, social bonds, and social links); facilitators (language and culture knowledge; as well as safety and stability); and foundation (rights and citizenship) [5, p. 170]. Each domain is interconnected and plays a crucial role in the overall integration processes of refugees.

Effective inclusion of refugees in the host society requires a multifaceted approach. Among the most widely endorsed measures are the establishment of new social contracts; the implementation of mentorship and integration guide programs; the formal recognition of existing skills, which helps facilitate access to the labor market. Meeting the special needs of vulnerable groups is also important. But one of the most fundamental components sustaining all these efforts is language training, which serves as a gateway to other aspects of integration [9, p. 4]. Language proficiency is particularly vital for accessing employment and education opportunities and for fostering social adaptation in a new country.

According to European Council on Refugees and Exiles, policymakers and service providers must be prepared to address not only physical and psychological trauma, but also cultural and religious differences, as well as the impact of language barrier on the integration process [10, p.5]. Thus language proficiency is more than a response to state expectations; it constitutes a critical means for refugees to navigate and participate in the society, enhancing their prospects for employment, education, and social inclusion [3].

For Ukrainian war refugees, the process of integration in terms of language has been relatively easy, as Russian, which had been historically imposed on the citizens of all the former Soviet republics,

became a lingua franca for the two nations. Though there is only one state language in the Lithuanian Republic, a significant portion of the population, particularly among the older generations, remain fluent in Russian. For some Ukrainian refugees, this shared language background became a decisive factor when choosing Lithuania as a destination country.

During the soviet era, Russian was a compulsory language across all member states. As Pavlenko & Blackledge note, “if we trace the shifts in the status of Russian after the 2 World war, Russian was imposed on the population of the newly appropriated Baltic republics in order to transform Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians into Soviet citizens.” [4, p. 2]. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Baltic states initiated the process of restoration of national values, with language playing a central role here: legal citizenship required proficiency in the state language. Lithuania, for example, as part of its post-independence nation-building strategy, actively pursued linguistic homogeneity, reducing the use of Russian from all spheres of life [11]. And though Ukrainian refugees can rely on Russian or English as a lingua franca, they are expected to learn their host country language. Being able to speak the main language of the host community is identified as central to the integration process [5, p. 182].

In practice, many Ukrainian war refugees in Lithuania have indeed used Russian as an initial means of communication. However, a significant number have also begun learning Lithuanian, facilitated by the availability of free language courses provided by the state for the newcomers. The process of learning a foreign language is multifaceted and usually influenced by a number of factors. Ukrainian researchers Pavlyk et al., investigating the issue of refugees’ linguistic integration, single out the following key determinants of host language acquisition among refugees: the degree of similarity or difference between native and target languages; educational background; cultural proximity (for example, shared Soviet heritage); norms of behavior; physical conditions (visual or hearing impairments due to the age) and psychological factors (depression or trauma); and aspects of social identity and self-representation [6, p. 36]. Successful language integration carries substantial benefits both – for refugees and host society members – reducing barriers to mutual understanding and facilitating social interaction, supporting cohesive community-building.

Methodology and Study Results. Aiming to examine the linguistic situation of Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania, focusing on their ability to linguistically integrate, the study was conducted in 2023. The

research methodology involved, in particular, a soci-olinguistic survey helped to collect data revealing the issues concerning Ukrainians’ daily language use in family, social and professional contexts in Lithuania. The respondents were Ukrainian immigrants living in Lithuania, mainly refugees who were forced to flee their home country after the beginning of a full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022.

The majority of Ukrainian war refugees are women, as there are severe restrictions for men to leave Ukraine during the martial law. These are mainly working-age people, between 20 and 60 years of age (see Table 1). The participants of the research are Ukrainians representing various parts of Ukraine, the majority originating from the eastern cities and villages of Ukraine, which are either under the occupation or were first attacked by Russian troops. Half of the participants originate from the eastern part of Ukraine – 50%, the second largest group are the representatives of the central part – 26%; western part comes next – 13%; followed by the groups from the South (8%) and the North (3%).

The respondents of the questionnaire have various educational background: higher, vocational education, PhD holders and students, etc. The number of respondents with higher education prevails – 55%.

Table 1
Survey “Languages of Ukrainians in Lithuania” (2023). The participants. Own research

Gender	
Female	78%
Male	22%
Age	
Up to 20	23%
20 – 60	74%
60 – and more	2%
Origin (geographical parts of Ukraine)	
Eastern part of Ukraine	50%
Central part of Ukraine	26%
Western part of Ukraine	13%
Southern part of Ukraine	8%
Northern part of Ukraine	3%
Participants’ Education	
Higher education	55%
Still studying	20%
PhD	9%
Secondary education	9%
Vocational and technical education	7%

We asked the participants to name their native language. The note ran that native is the language which a person acquires naturally, usually from his/her family members. If parents are actively communicating with their child in two languages since

his/her birth, then these two languages are considered native, for example Ukrainian and Russian. The majority of the respondents named Ukrainian as their native language, for 36% of the respondents Russian is the native language and 5% indicate both Ukrainian and Russian as their native languages. Notably, the comments from several respondents suggest that Russian evokes negative emotions and a sense of shame. A respondent from the central part of Ukraine, specifically Kyiv, expressed this sentiment by stating, “It (the native language) is Russian, but it’s not my fault, I try to eradicate it from the use”. A student, originating from the East of Ukraine mentioned, “Unfortunately, my first language was Russian. But I learned and communicated it not according to my wish, but under the pressure of the surrounding. Now I am a mature citizen of Ukraine, so I have decided for myself to cherish Ukrainian values, as a result – I basically don’t communicate in Russian. Only with Lithuanians, when I cannot do it in Lithuanian or English”. Such language attitude can be explained by the traumatic effect of the war, when people feel the need to renounce the language, which is associated with negative emotions and experience.

The research participants are fluent in foreign languages too. The most popular foreign language is English – 88%, followed by Lithuanian – 78% of respondents, though the level of mastery may not be high, as the respondents were asked to mention all the languages they can speak, even if the fluency is low. Many respondents can also speak Polish (31%) and German (22%)

Table 2
Survey “Languages of Ukrainians in Lithuania” (2023). The native language & foreign languages. Own research

Which is your native language?	
Ukrainian	58%
Russian	36%
Both	5%
Other	1%
What languages can you speak (even if the level of knowledge is low)?	
Ukrainian	98%
Russian	90%
English	88%
Lithuanian	78%
Polish	31%
German	22%
French	10%
Spanish	7%
Italian	5%
Romanian	3%

Studying family language policy is of crucial importance, because the role of the home language in preserving nation’s cultural heritage can never be overestimated. As Blasiak-Tytula & Shevchuk-Kliuzheva emphasize, understanding the components of family language policy is essential for supporting refugees’ language development and social-emotional well-being as they navigate a complex linguistic and cultural landscapes [7, p. 32]. In our study we concentrated on three domains of family communication: language use with parents, with spouses or partners, and with children. The findings reveal that the primary languages used among Ukrainian families in Lithuania are Ukrainian (48%), Russian (41%), or combination of both (7%). However, in communication with spouses and children – as opposed to parents – two additional languages emerge: the host country language, Lithuanian, and the global lingua franca, English (see Table 3). In the context of displacement, the family becomes a crucial site for heritage language maintenance, serving not only to preserve language but also to reinforce cultural identity and foster a sense of ethnic belonging among Ukrainian refugees.

Table 3
Survey “Languages of Ukrainians in Lithuania” (2023). Family context languages. Own research

What languages do you use with your parents?	
Ukrainian	48%
Russian	41%
Ukrainian & Russian	7%
I don’t have parents	4%
What languages do you use with your spouse/partner?	
Russian	33%
Ukrainian	32%
Ukrainian & Russian	6%
English	4%
Lithuanian	3%
Lithuanian & English	2%
I’m not married/I don’t have a partner	20%
What languages do you use with your children?	
Ukrainian	52%
Russian	22%
Ukrainian & Russian	6%
Lithuanian	1%
I don’t have children	19%

In the professional context (see Table 4) Ukrainians in Lithuania predominantly use Russian (50%). The second most frequently used language is English (28%), followed by Ukrainian (26%) and Lithuanian (20%). These patterns indicate that

Ukrainians are actively integrating a new (host country) language in their language repertoire across various domains, including family and professional contexts. Proficiency in the host country language serves not only as a response to state policies or integration requirements, but also as a strategic means of facilitating social assimilation. Moreover, it enhances access to the labor market and broadens educational possibilities [3].

Table 4
Survey “Languages of Ukrainians in Lithuania”
(2023). Professional context languages.

Own research

What languages do you use at your work / studies in Lithuania most often?	
Russian	50%
English	28%
Ukrainian	26%
Lithuanian	20%

Proficiency in the host country language is crucial for refugees, as it significantly enhances their social and economic mobility, facilitates access to essential services: employment, education, healthcare, and the legal system. Host language proficiency is often regarded as a key indicator of “sufficient assimilation” [12, p. 237]. As the findings of our research show (see Table 5) the vast majority of the respondents (85%) have either already learned or are currently in the process of learning Lithuanian. The primary motivations for learning the host country language include a sense of respect for the receiving society and the pursuit of better employment opportunities.

Table 5
Survey “Languages of Ukrainians in Lithuania”
(2023). Host country language. Own research.

Have you learned / are learning Lithuanian?	
Yes	85%
No	15%
What are the main reasons that motivate you to learn Lithuanian?	
Respect for the nation	75%
Career opportunities	60%
Social communication	56%
For personal communication	50%
Plan to live in Lithuania after the war	22%
Beauty of the language	18%
For academic purposes	16%

According to the survey results a significant majority of the respondents recognize the importance of learning the host country language as a key component of successful integration into Lithuanian

society. They view proficiency in Lithuanian not only as a means of improving their communication with local residence but also as a way to demonstrate their respect for the host nation. Moreover, participants believe that learning Lithuanian can enhance their professional and academic opportunities. Fluency in Lithuanian is seen as a means of establishing a shared communicative space, and facilitating social integration. The study by Feuerverger [13] proves that bilinguals, who feel strong connection to both their heritage and host cultures, tend to exhibit high levels of biculturalism. For those planning to build their future in Lithuania, linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness are especially important, as they contribute significantly to long-term integration and identity formation.

Conclusions. Following the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine, a significant number of Ukrainians sought refuge in Lithuania, with language considerations playing an important role in their choice of destination. Due to a shared Soviet past, both Ukrainians and Lithuanians often use Russian as a lingua franca. To better understand the linguistic repertoire of Ukrainians in Lithuania, their language preferences, as well as their attitude towards the host country language, a research initiative was conducted in the summer of 2023. The findings of the research allow us draw the following conclusions:

1. The primary languages spoken within refugee families in Lithuania are Ukrainian and Russian, with frequent switching between the two. The qualitative data from respondents reveal a significant shift in their language attitudes: many participants express their intention to deprive Russian from their everyday communication. This change is closely linked to the trauma of the war and the negative associations evoked by the Russian language. In addition to Ukrainian and Russian, Lithuanian and English have also entered the family linguistic environment, while communicating with partners and children.

2. In the professional sphere, Russian and English are the most commonly used languages. Though Lithuanian is less frequently employed, research findings prove that some respondents are making active efforts to incorporate it in their professional context.

3. The majority of the respondents acknowledge the crucial role of the Lithuanian language in the process of integration into Lithuanian society. Many have already learned or are currently studying Lithuanian. The main reasons that stipulate Ukrainians to learn the host country language are respect for the receiving nation and expanding professional and educational opportunities.

Thus, the linguistic repertoire of Ukrainian war refugees in Lithuania is diverse and is still expanding. Most respondents are bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian, although there is a clear intention to prioritize Ukrainian in a family context, it is viewed as a part of cultural preservation, resistance and language maintenance. Russian, still used as a *lingua franca* especially in social and professional contexts,

often evokes negative emotions as a result of trauma of the war. English and Lithuanian have emerged as important additions to the linguistic repertoire, especially in the professional and educational settings, resulting in multilingualism and facilitating Ukrainians' integration. The study thus highlights the dynamic nature of refugees' language use and the immense role of languages in societal integration.

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