**Language Policy and a Continuous Discussion of National Identities in Post-Soviet Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine: A Comparative Analysis of the Public Debates in the Russian-Language Blogs and on News Websites**

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## Abstract

*Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, language policy has become one of the most controversial aspects of nation-building in Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine, which are the focus of the study at hand. The attempts of the political elites to overcome the situation of ‘asymmetrical bilingualism’, inherited from the USSR, when Russian was favoured as the ‘language of intercultural communication’ and the ‘titular languages’ were neglected, are continuously provoking heated debates in the public space and particularly in the mass media.*

*In this research, I attempt to shed light on the complicated relationship between language policy, nation-building, and national identity in Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine. Based on the social constructionist approach to social problems elaborated by J. Kitsuse and M. Spector (2009) and the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse elucidated by R. Keller (2005, 2012, 2013), the study seeks to explain why language-related issues are over-politicised in the public space ever since the three countries (re)established their independent status and how the discourse of language policy has been transformed in the Russian-language blogs and news websites that are chosen for the empirical analysis. The results of my study have explicitly shown the subsequent public debates in 2013-2015 and 2017 reflect that attribution to Ukraine and the support for the state language is no longer based on belonging to the group of ‘Ukrainians’ or ‘Russian-speakers’. At times of political turmoil, being ‘Ukrainian’ means being loyal to the ideas of the country’s sovereignty, political independence and respect for the state language, which becomes the uniting idea for both groups of the discursive conflict. On the contrary, the discussion in Estonian- and Latvian Russian-language blogs and on news websites has demonstrated that the majority of online commenters steadily reproduce the discourse of ‘victimisation’ of Russian-speakers and construct an image of their group as politically, socially and economically disadvantageous group of the population.*

## Introduction

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the re-establishment of independence in Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine, which are the focus of the study at hand, unmasked the controversies of the previous nationality policies that favoured the Russian language and caused several language-related conflicts that still seem unresolved today. ‘Post-Soviet states all contend, in varying ways, with the enduring legacy of Soviet language policies that privileged Russian. Once the dominant and official language of the Soviet Union, Russian continues to play some type of influential role in the policies of these countries’ (Brown, 2013, p. 241).

As Russian-speakers, who lost their politically advantageous position, constitute a significant proportion of the population in Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine, the dramatic shift of power and the change of the language regime aimed at promoting the ‘titular languages’ caused an extremely ambiguous public reaction and led to public, political, and academic debates.

Therefore, the ethnolinguistic landscape, the controversial influence of the Soviet language policy, and deliberate attempts of the authorities to create a new political reality where Estonian, Latvian, and Ukrainian-speakers would enjoy the full spectrum of rights make these cases unique and problematic among other ex-Soviet republics. The following research project, which not only deals with language policy, but aims to understand the logic of constructing language issues as a pressing social problem in the public discourses, offers an interesting perspective and contributes significantly to the ever-growing academic literature on post-Soviet and Eastern European political transformations. Moreover, my study seeks to trace the change of the public attitudes towards language policy in the three countries reflected in the Russian-language online media, especially after the protracted Ukrainian political crisis.

## Case selection

Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine were chosen for the comparative analysis of language policy debates due to several reasons. First, the three countries were developing in the same socio-historical context of the Soviet Union and, consequently, the first years of independence were marked by decisive attempts of the Estonian, Latvian, and Ukrainian governments to reinterpret the experience of the past and choose language policy that would protect the languages of the ‘core’ ethnic groups and help overcome the situation of ‘asymmetrical bilingualism’.

However, the strategies differed in promoting the interests of the core groups, in terms of Brubaker’s definition of a nationalising state. In Estonia and Latvia, the state language has become only one of the instruments of nation-building; the strict citizenship rules based on *jus sanguinis* principles have also turned into an effective means of political exclusion of some groups of the population – largely constituting of ethnic Russians or Russian-speakers who migrated to the Baltics during the Soviet era and were regarded as non-citizens in post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia. The Ukrainian case stands out from the other two examples, as the language was chosen as the main means of nation-building. The complexity of the Ukrainian situation is that linguistic and ethnic boundaries do not coincide; the lines between ‘Russians’ and ‘Ukrainians’ are more flexible than in the case of Estonia and Latvia. After 2013 and the political crisis, ethnic lines have become even more blurred.

Another important criterion for the selection of these cases was **the comparability of the empirical sources.** With the growing popularity of the Internet and ‘digitalisation’ of traditional mass media, news websites and blogs offer almost unlimited possibilities to study the public attitudes on language policy. Search engines such as *Google Advanced Search* and *Yandex Search for Blogs* provided an overwhelming number of the articles and blogs devoted to language issues in Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine. Thus, it was possible to construct a relevant sample, including publications in Russian-language blogs and news websites.

The specific choice of Russian-language blogs and news websites was also determined by other reasons. Although I am aware of certain limitations that the analysis of exclusively Russian sources involves, I believe that the collected empirical materials represent an invaluable source of information for the study of the public debates on language policy in Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine. Based on statistical data, Russian-language new websites and blogs are among the most widely read sources of information in all three countries. For instance, according to the statistics provided by the Open Societies Foundation Report *Mapping Digital Media: Latvia,* ‘DELFI.lv occupied the first place among similar news websites by annual unique users (655,750) in 2010’ (Mapping Digital Media: Latvia, 2011).

Based on a report on media landscape in Estonia, ‘the biggest, thriving and influential news portal is Delfi.ee, operated by the Express Group. Delfi.ee runs also a portal in the Russian language. The company has affiliations with other Baltic States and Ukraine’ (Loit, 2011). In Ukraine, Russian-language news websites are among the most widely read among Ukrainian users *(Novoe Vremya opredelilo 15 samych populjarnych ukrainskich sajtov,* 2015).According to the statistical data provided by the Ukrainian online journal *Novoe Vremya,* the 15most visited Ukrainian news websites in 2015 included *Ukrainskaya Pravda, Korrespondent* and *Novoe Vremya*. Hence, the statistical data show that despite the promotion of the state languages in the three countries, Russian-language media are widespread among the local population and can thus be included in the sample.

Another reason for focusing only on Russian-language media is that the articles, comments, and blog entries chosen for the empirical analysis strictly correspond to the aims of the research project. As I aim at investigating *how* and *by whom* language policy is constructed as a social problem in the public discourses, Russian-language media that attract a part of Russian-speakers in three countries (this is especially relevant for the Baltic States) provide an invaluable source of information regarding the strategies of problematisation and de-problematisation of language issues. Russian-speakers who are mostly affected by language policy that favours Estonian, Latvian, and Ukrainian express different attitudes in online media space, which constitute a rich source of material for further empirical investigation. Moreover, the sources in the Russian language provided a great variety of **argumentation patterns** related to language policy; these statements include not only those where Russian-speakers argue about the existence of discrimination in the respective societies but display an opposite view that corresponds to the official rhetoric of ‘overcoming the Soviet past’ articulated by the political elites in Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine.

## Theoretical approach

Based on the social constructionist approach to social problems elaborated by J. Kitsuse and M. Spector (2009) and the research programme of J. Kitsuse and P. Ibarra (2003), this study investigates how language policy is problematised and de-problematised in the public discourses of Russian-language blogs and news websites. In their famous book *Constructing Social Problems,* Kitsuse and Spector stress that ‘the central problem for a theory of social problems is to account for the emergence, nature and maintenance of **claims-making and responding activities**’ (Kitsuse and Spector, 2009, pp. 75-76). Therefore, language policy in Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine, which has never been a purely linguistic notion but rather an extremely politicised phenomenon, represents three unique cases of problematisation. In addition to the theory of social problems, the research programme of J. Kitsuse and P. Ibarra (2003) is seen as a relevant contribution to the study of *claim-making activities.*

They created a thorough and comprehensive classification of **rhetorical and counter-rhetorical strategies.** Whereas **the rhetorical strategies,** such as **the rhetoric of loss** (claim that a valuable object is running the risk of losing its value or is unable to protect itself) or **the rhetoric of entitlement** (claim that everyone should have equal access to public institutions) are used primarily by different social actors in order to label particular social phenomena as social problems, **the counter-rhetorical strategies** are deployed by counter-claimants, i.e. those actors who response to societal claims either by rejecting or accepting them (Kitsuse and Ibarra, 2003).

The theory of secutitisation elaborated by the ‘Copenhagen school’ of security studies (Waever, 1995; Buzan et al., 1998) is also used in my research project as an additional tool for understanding why particular social phenomena are constructed as ‘existentially threatening’. ‘The key idea underlying **securitisation** is that an issue is given sufficient salience to win the assent of the audience, which enables those who are authorised to handle the issue to use whatever means they deem most appropriate’ (Balzacq et al., 2016, p. 495). After the Ukrainian political crisis and the military confrontation with Russia have demonstrated that language issues can be easily transformed from the level of discursive threats to the **real threats** of country’s dissolution. The combination of the social constructionist approach to social problems and the theory of securitisation is considered to be a fruitful approach to studying why language-related issues are continuously provoking heated public and media debates.

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## Methodology

The methodology of the following study is based on the research programme of discourse analysis elucidated by Reiner Keller (2005, 2013 etc.). This approach is called *SKAD (sociology of knowledge approach)* and is based on the premises of M. Foucault and the social constructionist paradigm elaborated by P. Berger and T. Luckmann. Keller emphasises that the main distinction between this approach and other methodologies of discourse analysis is that SKAD concentrates not only on a linguistic or sign-formation level of analysis; it is only supposed to be one part of the overall analysis. It also involves an investigation of social actors, institutionalised practices and processes that participate in discourse production and reproduction; this level goes far beyond simple text analysis, it is the combination of different approaches. Keller states that ‘the essential difference between linguistic and social science discourse research is to be found in the different research interests that are conditioned by the discipline’ (Keller, 2013, p. 74).

He importantly contributes by encouraging social researchers to answer the question what knowledge, common characteristics, causal relations and subject positions are maintained as ‘real’ or ‘true’ through discourse, and what actors and resources are involved in the discourse production and reproduction (for instance, story lines, moral narratives). As I am interested in the processes of constructing the issue of language policy as a social problem, and the social actors involved in it, the methodological framework of Keller seems extremely relevant for this study.

The research process consists of two steps – deep qualitative and quantitative analysis of the selected publications in Russian-language blogs and on news websites. The quantitative analysis is made partly with the help of the computer programme *AntConc* and the maintenance of the electronic field notes. The aim of the quantitative analysis of the texts is to show the number and distribution of the argumentation patterns related to language policy in Estonian, Latvian, and Ukraine online media. The qualitative analysis of the publications encompasses the investigation of the discursive statements (i.e. arguments of both sides of the discursive conflict), institutionalised practices, and social actors who participate in the discourse formation, production, and reproduction. Altogether, the qualitative and quantitative analysis provided an excellent opportunity to identify a rich variety of the argumentation techniques that were used to problematise or, in turn, de-problematise language policy within the discourses of the Russian-language media.

Based on the methodological premises of Keller’s discourse analysis, I elaborated on **the two main research questions** that are listed below:

* *1. How, why* and *by whom* is the problem of language policy constructed as a social (and overtly politicised) problem within the public discourses of Russian-language blogs and news websites in contemporary Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine?
* 2. What main argumentation patterns related to language policy can be identified in the selected publications in the Russian-language online media?

## The Evolution of the Discourse of Language Policy in Contemporary Ukraine

The analysed materials encompass 192 articles and 6145 comments published in the most popular Russian-language blogs and on news websites in Ukraine in the period from 2011 to September 2017.

The analysed materials encompass six crucial periods in the public debates on language policy and education, such as the educational reforms of D. Tabačnyk (2011-2012), post-Euromaidan reforms (2013-2015), the discussion on the approval of the law ‘On the Principles of the State Language Policy’ (2012) and the attempt to abolish this law (2014), the role of the language in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (2013-2015) and, finally, the new initiative aimed at complete Ukrainisation of the public space in general, and Ukrainian schools in particular.

The peculiar feature of the Ukrainian discourse is that the arguments in favour of Ukrainian are expressed much more frequently than those for granting Russian the status of the second state language. Paradoxically, Ukrainian-speakers (and Russian-speakers who support them) construct the image of their group as the discriminated sector of the Ukrainian society. This trends has become especially visible in the analysed period of 2013-2015 and 2017. For instance, the reader of the blog section of *Ukrainskaya Pravda* Ira Kovalenko uses **the rhetoric of entitlement** (claim that everyone should have equal access to public institutions) and **the argument of the ‘existential threat’ to Ukrainian** in relation to the ‘second-class’ position of Ukrainian-speakers in their own country. Furthermore, she claims that:

Is outraged by these concessions to Russians. Using my right as an inhabitant of Zaporozhe, I declare that the idea of the second state language is supported only by those people who do not consider Ukraine as an independent state. We should not be deprived of our right of self-identification. Appeasing the claims of the Ukrainophobes, you suggest denying the legitimate right of the MAJORITY (original text) of the patriotic dwellers of the South-East of Ukraine to feel as fully-fledged citizens in Ukraine’ (Ira Kovalenko, 2014).

The trend indicates that not only Ukrainian-speakers but also Russian-speakers construct the image of Ukrainian as a threatened language that needs special protection by the state. For instance, Diana Tkačova expresses **the rhetoric of loss** in relation to the weak and vulnerable position of Ukrainian:

I am a Russian-speaking Ukrainian in Nikolaev. And I sorely lack Ukrainian that I consider as my native language in everyday life; the language that I speak as fluently as I speak Russian. My Russian is not endangered. Why does it need more rights? In the last weeks, it has become dangerous to speak Ukrainian in the streets. Here is the problem. The Ukrainian language needs to be protected in the South-West’ (Diana Tkačova, 2013).

The statements mentioned above perfectly indicate that the Ukrainian political crisis marked an important change in the public attitudes towards language policy and understanding of Ukrainian not only as a key marker of national identity but as an important prerequisite for political independence and stability. Moreover, the extreme rise in **the anti-imperialist arguments** in comparison to the period of 2011-2012 indicates that Ukrainian is understood as, first and foremost, a key instrument of independence, mainly from Russian.

For example, the arguments of the ‘Slavic brotherhood’ could be traced in the discussion on the educational reforms of D. Tabačnyk aimed at increasing the number of lessons of Russian and the Russian literature. In order to support the ‘pro-Russian’ course of Ukrainian politics formed during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovyč, Ljubov’ Dëmina, a blogger on <http://blogs.korrespondent.net>, claims:

It is very sad and bitter that in one part of the United Russian World there is the problem with the most important thing that is the right to study in the native language, to talk freely in that language and get education in the native Russian language (Dëmina, 2011).

The extreme rise of the arguments that supported the idea of Ukrainian as the only state language is the main characteristic of the public debates on language policy in Russian-language online media after 2013. For instance, the blogger Alyona Getʹmančuk tries to depict Russia and Ukraine as totally different, and following different trajectories of political development. Throughout the whole article published on a popular Russian-language online website <http://blogs.pravda.com.ua/>, she develops the idea that Russia and Ukraine have opposing political and economic goals and deconstructs the argument of the ‘Slavic brotherhood’. She states:

You want a special path for Russia. We, in turn, are more and more convinced that the argument about the ‘common Slavic features’, ‘particular Orthodox values’ is just another reason to preserve the situation and not to change the outdated institutions, to abandon the reforms and to scowl at the whole world. Well, or make friends with those who will support any insane act you perform. Believe me, it is much nicer to be in the company of the most developed countries in the world than in the company of Zimbabwe, Sudan, North Korea, Nicaragua, and Venezuela which supported you in the UN General Assembly (Getʹmančuk, 2014).

This statement finely illustrates that an author attempts to construct an image of ‘outdated’, ‘corrupt’, ‘undemocratic’ Russia in opposition to ‘European’, ‘democratic’ and ‘free’ Ukraine that will soon be included in the ‘friendly family of Europe’.

Using the vocabulary of securitisation studies, the ‘existential threats’ to Ukraine as a nation have been transferred from an exclusively military dimension to the societal and political level. Thus, **the argument of the ‘existential threat’** is often used to construct the ‘threat’ to Ukrainian sovereignty and independence where the state language is perceived as the main guarantee of Ukraine’s survival as a nation, political and cultural community. By deploying **the rhetoric of loss,** related to the perceived vulnerable and unstable position of the state language, and even **the rhetoric of endangerment,** creating the images of catastrophes, claim-makers stress that the threat to the Ukrainian language is, first and foremost, the threat to Ukrainian national identity and culture and, even more, to the existence of Ukrainian nation as such. With the rise of nationalist moods after 2013, **the arguments on** **the protection of Ukrainian-speakers’ rights** overwhelmingly dominate in the selected materials.

However, it should be noted that despite the predominance of the arguments in favour of Ukrainian as the only state language and the rise of anti-Russian sentiments, the arguments that supported Russian were always widely present throughout the whole period of 2011-2017 selected for the analysis. This tendency may be interpreted as a clear sign of the subdivision of the Ukrainian society into two groups depending on their attitude towards either Ukrainian or Russian.

For instance,the debates on the attempt to abolish the language law of 2012, which granted Russian the regional status in several Ukrainian regions and led to mass protests against this law, reflect a contradictory idea about the place of Russian-speakers in post-Euromaidan Ukraine. **The argument of the equality and protection of Russian-speakers’ rights** was expressed by the Ukrainian journalist Aksinya Kurina in 2014. Unlike other bloggers and commentators, who mostly accused Putin of the political instability and chaos in Ukraine, Kurina blamed the Ukrainian authorities and their consistent efforts in promoting Ukrainisation all over the country, including the Crimea, which had traditionally and historically been Russian-speaking. She stresses:

What is happening now in the Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine is the result of the humanitarian politics of Kiev. I agree that Putin has never cared about the problems of the Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine and that he plays his strange geopolitical game. Of course, it is true, but if he had not enjoyed the support in the Crimea, the invasion would not have happened. Millions of Russian-speaking Ukrainians do not feel at home in their own country’ (Kurina, 2014).

Kurina uses **the rhetoric of entitlement** in relation to the ‘weak’ and ‘vulnerable’ position of Russian-speakers in Ukraine and, as a remedy for the problem, Kurina proposes to grant Russian-speakers equal rights with Ukrainian-speakers to stop the collapse of the country. Her article, which was published in *Blogs Ukrainskaya Pravda*,received an extremely provocative response, mostly from the Ukrainian-speaking audience of the website, who claimed that Ukrainian-speakers were always discriminated against in their own national state.

These findings correspond also the main conclusion presented in the article *Bilingualism in Ukraine: Value of Challenge?* by István Csernicskó and Réka Máté (2017) who claim that the reluctance of the Ukrainian political elites to take into consideration the rights of a sizeable Russian-speaking group and forceful Ukrainisation was one of the reasons why the peaceful demonstrations against the decision of Yanukovyč to sign the agreement with the EU resulted in a bloody conflict and secessionist movements in the East. They are also critical about the ‘romantic’ perception of the Ukrainian language that the political elites are trying to translate into the masses. István Csernicskó and Réka Máté (2017, p. 29) argue that ‘in the circumstances of the current serious crisis this policy does not contribute to social consolidation, nor reconciliation and does not solve the crisis’. Thus, it may be one of the reasons why the analysis of the symbolic role of the languages in 2013-2015 and the legal status of Russian show the opposite results. The extreme presence of pro-Russian sentiments connected with the ‘discriminated’ position of Russian-speakers may indicate that the society seeks to resolve the never-ending language problem and to find the balance between the need to ukrainise public space and to protecting the rights of a significant part of the population.

The general conclusions about the perceived discrimination of Ukrainian-speakers expressed in blogs and on news websites correspond to the findings of other researchers (see, for instance, Kulyk, 2015). According to the results of the public survey reflected in his article titled *One Nation, Two Languages. National Identity and Language Policy in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine*, one of the biggest changes in the perception of Ukrainian national identity took place since 1991 and is reflected in the increased political alienation from Russia and the higher salience and respect for the Ukrainian language. The overall findings related to the Ukrainian case indicate the rapid evolution of the discourse, and the dramatic shift in the public perception of the country’s legitimate place in the world order and the role of the state language.

The perception of Ukraine’s national identity has been drastically changed in the analysed articles, anticipating *the Revolution of Dignity*, and following this event. Whereas the debates over the educational reforms reflected a relatively high level of support for the Russian language and the presence of the arguments of ‘Slavic brotherhood’, the discussion after 2013 focused on the view of Ukraine as a legitimate part of Europe where the state language served as the guarantee of ‘European prospects’ and a marker of societal prestige.

For instance, the head of the public movement with an ambivalent name ‘The Union of Russian-Speaking Nationalists’ Sergej Zamiljuchin claims that in the open military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Ukrainian media and cinema should not be oriented towards products in Russian, but should try to create high-quality products in the state language. He also stresses:

The creation of the Ukrainian-language environment depends on the amount of Ukrainian on TV, radio etc. It will encourage every citizen of Ukraine to return to the language of their ancestors. TV, radio, schools, universities are the places of high prestige, and the masses tend to use the language that is practiced by the elite’ (Zamiljuchin, 2015).

This discursive statement (and many similar utterances and examples cited above) illustrate that the idea of Ukraine’s national identity has been drastically changed. The dividing line between ‘Ukrainians’ and ‘Russsians’ that were mostly based on the attribution to a particular linguistic group (a more ethicised view of the nation) in the period of 2011-2012 has been changed to a civic understanding of Ukraine. The subsequent discussions in 2013-2015 and 2017 reflect that attribution to Ukraine and the support for the state language is no longer based on belonging to the group of ‘Ukrainians’ or ‘Russian-speakers’. At times of political turmoil, being ‘Ukrainian’ means being loyal to the ideas of the country’s sovereignty, political independence and respect for the state language, which becomes the uniting idea for both groups of the discursive conflict.

## The Evolution of the Discourse of Language Policy in Contemporary Latvia

The analysed materials encompass 47 articles and 8293 comments published on Russian-language websites and are connected to the three important ethno-political events in Latvian language policy, such as the discussion of the minority school reform (2003-2004), the debates on the future school reform (2014), and the referendum on the status of the Russian language (2012). All of them were extensively discussed among the audience of the most visited news website in the Russian language *DELFI* (<http://rus.delfi.lv/>) and the forum *ImhoClub* (<https://imhoclub.lv/>). Although the infrastructure of both websites is quite different, the investigation of public attitudes towards language policy reveals similar tendencies in the argumentation and distribution of the arguments. Whereas the discussion on *DELFI* is predominantly anonymous, which increases the likelihood of trolls and Internet bots, the debates on *ImhoClub* are moderated by experts and the administrators of the website.

In the course of the empirical analysis, I identified certain **argumentation patterns** related to both Russian and Latvian. The status and the societal position of both languages remains the point of controversy between the visitors of the two websites. The peculiar feature of the whole debates is that the arguments where Russian-speakers are depicted as ‘victims’ of Latvian nation-building overwhelmingly dominate in the selected materials. This fact may be partly explained by the specific focus on the Russian-language media that tend to serve as an important channel of communication for the Russian-speaking community in Latvia, and is therefore biased towards the articulation of the interests of the respective group. However, the overall analysis has revealed the presence of various arguments that support the active promotion of Latvian in all spheres of public life.

Claim-makers are represented by different sectors of the Latvian society, including Russian-speakers themselves, NGOs, and public organisations (for instance, the Headquarters of the Russian schools that initiated the protests in 2003-2004 as well as in 2014), European institutions (OSCE, the Council of Europe), politicians, journalists, and experts. All of them deploy a variety of argumentation techniques and rhetorical strategies, in terms of J. Kitsuse and P. Ibarra’s (2003) classification of language games, in order to justify their claims about the perceived discrimination of Russian-speakers.

**The argument of equality and protection of Russian-speakers’ rights** is the most frequently used argumentation pattern in the public debates on language policy in Latvia. While using this argument, claim-makers admit that the problem of the Russian language exists in Latvia, and that it should be ameliorated by the authorities. In terms of J. Kitsuse and P. Ibarra’s (2003) classification of vernacular resources used to problematise or de-problematise a certain social phenomenon, **the rhetoric of entitlement** is the main strategy for attracting public attention to the status of the Russian language. By using this rhetoric, the participants of the online debates stress that Russian-speakers and other minority groups should have equal access to resources, including public institutions. Moreover, for them even the 25% of votes achieved in the referendum can be interpreted as a positive result, as many non-citizens were deprived of their right to participate in Latvian political life.

One of the strategies employed by commenters is to enhance **the argument of equality and protection of Russian-speakers’ rights** by using a mixture of **comic style** and **civic style** (speaking on behalf of the people)**,** exaggeration and irony. For instance, the long statement of Dmitrij Nekrasov is worth citing, since it is quintessential for the majority of the Russian-speaking community of the website:

The referendum has shown that the reality is different from those imagined by ‘true Latvians’. In their reality, Russians exist but to the same extent like cockroaches, somewhere there, behind the basement. Sometimes they get out but are immediately beaten by a slipper (e.g. the Language Inspection). And now we see that these cockroaches have become organised and have started to demand their rights. It is a big shock! No slippers will be enough to beat them. So, dear Latvians, we are not cockroaches, we are the same citizens as you, no better and no worse than you. The only thing that we need is **equality,** nothing else. If you do not want to admit it, they you have political schizophrenia. It is cured by hunger (Dmitrij Nekrasov, 2012).

The metaphorical comparison of Russian-speakers to insects, and the number of ‘likes’ this statement got from the members of online forum *ImhoClub*, indicate that the question of citizenship and language are among the most painful problems for Russian-speakers; their claims are based on the premise that Russian-speakers should enjoy the same rights as Latvians.

By exploiting the storyline of ‘victimisation’, Russian-speakers and the respective organisations, whose interests are articulated on *DELFI* and *ImhoClub,* appeal to the government and claim that they should have equal access to public institutions, including schools and universities. Moreover, they often stress that they should be treated equally to the ‘titulars’, since Russian-speakers constitute more than one third of the overall Latvian population.

**The economic argument (‘we pay taxes’)** is alsoone of the most frequently used strategies of constructing the social problem. By using this pattern claim-makers insist that they should enjoy the full spectrum of rights, because they pay taxes and make a significant contribution to the Latvian economy.

**Reference to the Soviet past** is also deployed in the selected materials as one of the arguments against Latvianisation of schools; it is stressed that even in the totalitarian Soviet times the Latvian language was not forbidden at schools and universities, whereas modern Latvia that strives for democracy and tolerance severely violates the rights of Russian-speakers. The high presence of **the anti-assimilation argument** detected in the three analysed periods indicates that the course of Latvianisation promoted by the government is perceived as a ‘threat’ to the unique cultural identity of Russian-speakers. For example, one of the participants of the online debate on the minority school reform in 2014 states:

There is no need to compare Latvia with other countries, it is just unfair, and the situation is different. Here we have 40% of Russian-speakers, and the majority of the population understands Russian. The situation with Latvian as the state language is absolutely artificial. I understand the position of my Latvian relatives who fight for their valoda (language in Latvian), but not at the expense of my children! **My language is the language of my ancestors, I will never give up on it**’ (Dunja Moločkova, 2014).

By using this argument, many online commenters stress that they want to be integrated and not assimilated in Latvian society. Moreover, many Russian-speakers who participated in the discussion blamed the authorities in the deliberate attempts to create ‘Latvians’ from them.

Although the attitude towards the referendum and the minority school reform in 2004 and 2014 were mostly negative, arguments that supported Latvian as the only state language were also noted in the selected materials. The peculiar feature of the discourse of the Russian-language online media is that the perception of the school reform has changed slightly since 2004. Whereas **the argument of better economic opportunities** was the proclaimed goal of the minority school reform and expressed by Latvian officials in 2004, **the integration argument** dominates in the discussion of 2014. **The argument of Latvia’s unity (‘one nation – one language’)** is also one of the most frequently deployed strategies to respond to the claims about discrimination of Russian-speakers. By using this argument, counter-claimants’ stress that Latvian should be the only state language, a means of societal integration and a guarantee of the country’s unity.

In response to this storyline of Russian-speakers ‘victimisation’, the user Eduard deploys **the anti-imperialist argument** in connection with **the argument of Latvia’s unity (‘one nation – one language’)** in the debates on the minority school reform. He appeals to Russian-speakers:

Dear Russians, I am addressing this speech to those, whom I cannot force to perceive Latvia as Latvia, and not as the outskirts of the Russian or Soviet Empires. Latvia cannot provide you with the comfortable conditions for representatives of other nationalities, without the division of the country into two parts. The language should be a uniting factor for all these groups. Why should it be the former imperial language? Stay Russians, Belarusians, Georgians, but since you are living in Latvia, stop being ‘the ambassadors of the Empire’. The Russian language and people should not be a uniting factor, otherwise, why should Latvia exist in this case? (Eduard, 2014).

An interesting trend related to the use of **counter-rhetorical strategies** (strategies used to de-problematise the language problems) can be observed in Latvian discourse of language policy.

Latvians officials, whose opinions are also published on <http://rus.delfi.lv/> and <https://imhoclub.lv/>, make extensive use of **antipatterning** (declaring the claim to be not a full-scale social problem, but rather only a number of isolated events) to prove that a language problem does not exist in Latvia or constitute a ‘threat’ to the societal position of the state language.

The **counter-rhetoric of insincerity** (suspecting hidden motives of claim-makers)is deployed by the former President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, who blames Russian-speakers and the organisations that promote their interests of having hidden motives in creating an image of Latvia as an ‘undemocratic’ country. She stresses:

The protests against the educational reform are politically driven and aim at the alienation of Latvia from the EU. As the President notes, the organisers of the protest want to attract the attention of the whole world to Latvia as the country, where the rights of minorities are violated. Another aim of the protests, supported from Russia, is to make Russian one of the official language of the EU and as an official language in Latvia (*DELFI*, 2004c).

Thus, the peculiar feature of the process of de-problematisation of language issues in the Russian-language media is that the authorities almost exclusively appropriate the right to reject the claims about Russian-speakers’ perceived discrimination.

The strategy of **telling anecdotes** is also found in the selected materials; references to personal experience are often used by counter-claimants (politicians and those who support their views on *DELFI* and *ImhoClub)* to contradict the claim and reject the view about Russian-speakers’ discrimination. In contrast to claim-makers, who construct a more positive view of the Soviet past, counter-claimants create a negative image of the USSR, where Latvian was neglected and underrepresented in the public domains. In this case, reference to the Soviet period is used in order to justify an ‘affirmative action’ undertaken by the Latvian elites in order to raise the prestige of Latvian in society. Moreover, the dissemination of **the argument of the ‘existential threat’ to Latvian** is used by counter-claimants in order to reject the claims about ‘special rights’ for Russian-speakers in Latvia. For instance, the user Elza Pavila, who expressed her opinion on the results of the language referendum in 2012, claims:

The question about the status of the Russian language is unimportant and unnecessary. Generally, I think that it is wrong to fight for the language because the root of the problem is not in it. If the Russian language was officially and legally established as the second state language, it would inevitably displace Latvian, which is the language of a small (on a global scale) nationality, and thus is not protected from extinction by the number of its speakers (Elza Pavila, 2012).

Two discursive communities of Russian- and Latvian-speakers deploy conflicting ideas of Latvia’s national identity. Whereas Russian-speakers construct a more inclusive view of the Latvian nation, where they constitute a ‘core’ group of the population along with the titulars, their virtual opponents create a more exclusive model of the Latvian nation, where the state language appears to be the most effective means of societal integration, and where Russian-speakers are attributed the role of a minority group. Unlike in Ukraine, where the discourse of language policy and education has dramatically changed in the last five years, the discussions in the Russian-language online media in Latvia steadily reproduce the image of Russian-speakers as the ‘discriminated’ sector of society.

## The Evolution of the Discourse of Language Policy in Contemporary Estonia

The analysed materials encompass 50 articles and 2326 comments published on the most popular the Russian-language the news website in Estonia called *DELFI* (<http://rus.delfi.ee/>) and in several Estonian blogs on [www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com). The publications cover the three important ethno-political phenomena in Estonian language policy, such as the minority school reform (2010-2015), the adoption of the Language Act (2011), and the activity of the Language Inspectorate (2013).

The analysis of the public debates on various events related to language policy has revealed that **the argumentation patterns** expressed by ordinary Internet users in Estonia are similar to those articulated in the Latvian discourse of the Russian-language online media. Thus, the decision to group these two cases is based not only on their territorial proximity, but also on the similar policies of active promotion of the state language and the reaction of the Russian-speaking community in the respective countries. Like in Latvia, the Russian-speaking audience tends to portray themselves as a ‘discriminated’ group of the population.

Thus, **the argument of equality and protection of Russian-speakers’ rights** is overwhelmingly present in all analysed discussions in both Estonia and Latvia. This pattern is indelibly linked to **the rhetoric of entitlement** and the claim that Russian-speakers should have equal access to public institutions, including education.

For instance, the blogger Alex Inside (<http://alex-inside.livejournal.com>) expresses his negative attitude towards the governmental initiative to ‘estonianise’ Russian schoolchildren and lists 16 reasons against studying in a non-native language. Moreover, he claims that ‘Estonia is not a monolingual but a bilingual country’, and ‘if we speak about assimilation, it is better to do so in a country that cares for you’ (Alex-Inside, 2012).In another statement, he uses **the economic argument (‘we pay taxes’)** and stresses that Russian-speakers should be considered as equal citizens to Estonians:

I am a taxpayer. I am an equal member of the society. I am speaking the language used by one third of the population. I want my children to study in their native language. I want the society to be 100% effective for each and every member (Alex-Inside, 2012).

This opinion is also supported by another blogger, Jesenija (<http://jesenija.livejournal.com/>), who argues:

Thus, we deal with the deliberate marginalisation of a significant part of the Estonian society that has a negative impact on the representatives of the titular nationality, because all social processes are interconnected. That is why education in the Russian language is necessary not only for Russian residents of Estonia, but for Estonians themselves, if they want to live in a modern and healthy society (Jesenija, 2012).

**The economic argument (‘we pay taxes’)** and **the argument of political divide and destabilisation** are displayed by commenters to blogs and news websites in order to portray Russian-speakers as the main ‘victims’ of contemporary nationalisation policies. Moreover, Estonian politicians are often blamed for a deliberate speculation on the language issue, distracting public attention from more ‘acute’ social and political problems and for inciting ethnic tensions.

**The argument of Estonia as a ‘defective democracy’** is extensively present in the selected materials and is used to construct an image of Estonian as a ‘marginal’ European state that violates the rights of a significant part of the population. One of the users aptly named Estonia as *‘the country of the democratic apartheid’.* The oxymoron expressed in this statement is a perfect characteristic of the controversial attitude towards Estonia’s political development since the re-establishment of its independence. Like in the previous discussions on the minority school reform and adoption of the language law in 2011, the image of ‘true’ Europe that is represented by developed Western countries is discursively opposed to the view of a ‘non-democratic’ Estonia that excludes significant numbers of its residents from political and economic life of the country. The discussion on the activity of the Language Inspectorate in 2013 reveals an extremely negative attitude from the majority of Russian-speakers; the existence of the Language Inspectorate that checks the level of the state language proficiency among non-titular population in Estonia does not correspond to the principles of democracy. Thus, one of the users argues:

We also live and work here, **we pay taxes** and **we want to speak our NATIVE language.** Democracy does not exist in this country. Children should get in-depth knowledge at school; servile subordination to the Estonian language should not be promoted’ (Riina, 2013).

Similar to the Latvian case, the minority school reform whose proclaimed goal is to raise the competitiveness of Russian-speaking school graduates on the educational and labour markets, is negatively perceived by the majority of the Russian-speaking audience of *DELFI* and *LiveJournal* as a possible ‘threat’ to their cultural identity and their societal and political position in Estonia. The Language Act, which was adopted in 2011 and expanded the power of the Language Inspectorate in the supervision of public institutions, was almost unanimously perceived as deliberate ‘discrimination’ of Russian-speakers. The discussion in 2011 appears to be unique among the analysed periods in the three countries, where the arguments are usually constructed among two lines – either for the state language, or for granting Russian the status of the second state language. In case of debates about the language law in 2011, no arguments in favour of Estonian have been identified.

The activity of the Language Inspectorate is also evaluated negatively by the overwhelming majority of *DELFI* readers. However, some arguments in favour of Estonian were also identified, and include **Estonian as the basis of state sovereignty, the anti-imperialist argument, and the argument of Estonia’s unity (‘one nation - one language’).** By using these statements, counter-claimants, who reject the existence of the problem of Russian-speakers’ perceived discrimination, and who are mainly represented by the Estonian political elites, argue that Estonian should play a crucial role in societal integration and uniting different groups of the population. Finally, **the argument of Estonia’s unity (‘one nation - one language’)** is articulated by *LiveJournal* bloggers as a counter-claim to the arguments of Russian-speakers who construct the problem of their discrimination. For instance, one of the users states:

If Estonians do not want Russian in their country, it is their right, isn’t it? It is their country, they are free to establish their rules. Estonia should have only one language. The same situation exists everywhere in the world (ya-regisha, 2010).

Similar to the Latvian case, the counter-claimants construct a negative image of the Soviet times, where the Estonian language was underrepresented and discriminated against Russian, and therefore the authorities have the legitimate right to implement the policy that favours Estonian-speakers. It should be noted that unlike in Ukraine and Latvia, where **the argument of the ‘existential threat’** has been systematically detected in the overall discussion (especially in the materials on Ukraine), the similar argument is almost absent in the Estonian case.

The peculiar feature of the Estonian discourse of language policy is that the two online communities of ‘Estonians’ and ‘Russian-speakers’ also express the conflicting ideas of Estonian national identity. Whereas claimants exploit a more inclusive view of the Estonian nation, where Russian-speakers represent the second ‘core’ group of the population, counter-claimants challenge this view and emphasise that Estonians have the legitimate right to establish the language regime, aimed at promoting the state language, in all public domains.

## Conclusions

Based on the results of my empirical investigation, I have highlighted the five main aspects that distinguish the Ukraine case of language policy on the one hand and the two Baltic cases on the other hand. The first four arguments are related to the observed differences in the public attitudes and argumentation patterns related to language policy and the fifth statements focuses on the similarities between the three cases.

**Argument 1. The Ukrainian case of language policy development and the subsequent discussion in the Russian-language online media differs significantly from the two Baltic cases in several aspects.**

The major dividing line between Ukraine and the two Baltic cases lies in the perception of which group of the population should be regarded as the ‘victim’ of nation-building. The analysis of the selected materials shows that the argumentation patterns where Ukrainian-speakers are constructed as the ‘discriminated’ group and the Ukrainian language as ‘threatened’ by the existence of Russian are dominant in the majority of selected publications. On the contrary, the overwhelming majority of the statements that support the introduction of Russian as the second state language were found in the Estonian and Latvian discourses on language policy.

**Argument 2. The difference between Ukraine on the one hand and Estonia and Latvia on the other hand lies also in the main argumentation patterns and social actors who articulate their positions in blogs and on news websites.**

The public debates in Russian-language online media in Estonia and Latvia revealed the presence of unique arguments that were not designated in the Ukrainian discourse. These statements include **the** **economic argument (‘we pay taxes’)** and **the anti-assimilation argument**. So, the main **‘existential threats’** constructed by Russian-speakers in the two Baltic countries circulate around their perceived unequal economic position and the fear of losing their unique cultural identity. The majority of online commenters claim that they want to be integrated and not assimilated in the respective societies. The peculiar feature of the two Baltic discourses is that social actors are commonly subdivided along linguistic lines.

On the contrary, **‘the existential threats’** constructed by Ukrainian Internet users are focused on the possible loss of Ukraine’s territory and political independence, supported by the increased number of **anti-imperialist (e.g. anti-Russian)** sentiments. Moreover, the dissemination of **the argument of Ukraine’s unity (‘one nation – one language’)** reveals the growing tendency of understanding Ukrainian as the guarantee of the country’s cultural and national survival. The presence of these arguments may indicate that for many visitors of Ukrainian news websites and blogs, the position of the state language is perceived as ‘weak’ and ‘vulnerable’ in comparison to Russian. The study has also shown that Russian-speakers express their continuously growing support for Ukrainian as the only state language, especially after 2013.

**Argument 3. The difference between Ukraine and the Baltics can be also observed in rhetorical and counter-rhetorical strategies.**

Based on the classification of language resources elucidated by J. Kitsuse and P. Ibarra (2003), **the rhetoric of entitlement** is the main strategy for constructing the issue of Russian-speakers’ perceived discrimination as a social and political problem in Estonia and Latvia. While using **argument of** **the equality and protection of Russian-speakers’ rights** and **the rhetoric of entitlement,** online users *claim* that they should have equal access to public institutions and education in Russian in particular.

In the case of Ukraine, **the rhetoric of entitlement** is used by both sides of the discursive conflict – by those who stress that Ukrainian should be the only state language and those who argue that Russian-speakers should also enjoy the full spectrum of rights. However, in addition to this strategy, **the rhetoric of loss** is also frequently deployed in the Ukrainian discourse, where the state language is described as the main ‘victim’ of nationalisation policies.

The de-problematisation of language issues also differs in the three countries. The two Baltic cases represent a classic example of constructing the issue of language policy when Russian-speakers and the organisations that represent their interests *claim* that language issues exist in their societies, and the authorities respond to their claims either by rejecting or accepting them. In this sense, the Ukrainian case is much more complicated and diverse. The *two contradictory claims* related to language use are articulated by a significant number of supporters – those who *claim* that both Ukrainian and Russian are discriminated against. In case of Ukraine, it is difficult to draw clear boundaries between claimants and counter-claimants.

**Argument 4. The three cases also differ in their perception of identity.**

The analysis of the public debates in 2013-2015 and 2017 shows that the idea of Ukrainian national identity has evolved from a more ethicised view based on the idea of Ukrainian as a key marker of national identityto the perception of Ukraine as the legitimate part of Europe. Whereas the boundaries between ‘Russians’ and ‘Ukrainians’ were mostly based on linguistic preferences in the period of 2011-2012, the dividing line between the two groups is now based on the civic understanding of the Ukrainian nation, which first and foremost includes political loyalty to the state and orientation towards the West.

In contrast to the view of Ukrainian *Europeanness*, Latvian and Estonian Russian-speakers constructed an opposite view where the Baltic states could only be regarded as the part of ‘true Europe’ if they respect the minorities’ rights and include them in ‘the imagined community’ of Estonian and Latvian nations. This idea is totally different from the other case, where more Russian- and Ukrainian-speakers tend to value the Ukrainian language as the guarantee of country’s political survival and independence, mainly from Russia.

**Argument 5. Despite the significant differences observed in the course of the empirical analysis, the current discussion on language policy shows the clear sign of convergence of the Ukrainian and the two Baltic discourses.**

An interesting trend of *‘discursive decommunisation’* was observed in my study. The Baltic political course after 1991 aimed at gradual decommunisation and elimination of the former imperial language from the public space. The minority school reforms launched in the 2000-s followed these goals precisely. Although the Ukrainian case appears to be rather different to the two Baltic countries, the overall trend shows that the process of derussification has already started and was dramatically intensified at times of political turmoil. The analysis of the new wave of Ukrainisation in 2015 and 2017 and the rise of anti-Russian sentiments within the public discourse perfectly illustrate that the rhetoric of the Ukrainian authorities after 2013 closely corresponds to the official discourse of Estonia and Latvia.

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