

---

*Peer-reviewed*

---

## In the Beginning Was the Word: The Role of Language and Culture in Peace Operations

### Na počátku bylo slovo: Úloha jazyka a kultury v mírových operacích

**Nadia Gergało-Dąbek**

Centre for Eastern Europe, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland

**Abstract:** The article examines proposals for post-war peacekeeping in Ukraine, emphasizing that future missions must integrate linguistic and cultural competence as strategic assets rather than auxiliary skills. Drawing on experiences from NATO and UN operations, it argues that knowledge of the local language markedly improves trust, intelligence gathering, and operational safety. Because Russia's war is fundamentally an identity-driven, imperial conflict aimed at erasing Ukrainian nationhood, relying on Russian language or Russocentric expertise would reproduce "imperial knowledge" and undermine mission legitimacy. The study contends that only Ukrainian-centered, decolonized preparation – grounded in cooperation with Ukrainian scholars and institutions – can ensure the effectiveness and social acceptance of any stabilization force deployed after the war.

**Abstrakt:** Článek se zabývá doporučeními pro poválečné mise na udržování míru na Ukrajině, přičemž zdůrazňuje, že budoucí mise musí začlenit jazykovou a kulturní kompetenci jako strategické přednosti, nikoli jako doplňkové dovednosti. Na základě zkušeností z operací NATO a OSN tvrdí, že znalost místního jazyka výrazně posiluje důvěru, usnadňuje sběr zpravodajských informací a zvyšuje bezpečnost operací. Vzhledem k tomu, že ruská agrese je v podstatě identitárním, imperiálním konfliktem usilujícím o vymazání ukrajinské státnosti, spoléhání se na ruský jazyk nebo rusocentrické odborné znalosti by reprodukovalo „imperiální znalosti“ a podkopávalo legitimitu mise. Studie konstatuje, že pouze ukrajinocentrická, dekolonizovaná příprava – založená na spolupráci s ukrajinskými vědci a institucemi – může zajistit účinnost a společenskou přijatelnost případné stabilizační síly nasazené po válce.

**Keywords:** Cultural Competence; Language Support; NATO Missions; Peace Operations; Stabilization in Ukraine.

**Klíčová slova:** Kulturní kompetence; jazyková podpora; mise NATO; mírové operace; stabilizace na Ukrajině.

## INTRODUCTION

In the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, which was hybrid in form from 2014 until February 2022 and transformed into a full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, and continues to this day, the issue of establishing peace, providing security guarantees, and the participation of third-country soldiers as stabilizing forces is being raised with increasing frequency at various levels. The President of the UN General Assembly, Annalena Baerbock, recently mentioned that she allows for the possibility of UN Blue Helmets appearing in Ukraine to help ensure a lasting peace after the cessation of hostilities on its territory, provided a majority of member states support such a decision (UN's Baerbock says... 2025). Although NATO as an organization does not declare participation in a future stabilization mission (Rozmowy są przedwczesne... 2025), several key members of the alliance have announced their readiness to send their soldiers as part of a so-called Coalition of the Willing. The nations belonging to this coalition have recently been intensively working on operational plans regarding the deployment of forces (multinational forces in Ukraine) to provide security after the end of hostilities and to help secure Ukrainian airspace and maritime space (Statement of the Coalition of the Willing... 2025). Among the most active countries within this coalition are the United Kingdom and France. London, under the leadership of Prime Minister Keir Starmer, and Paris, with President Emmanuel Macron, have been promoting the idea of deploying peacekeeping forces after the end of the war since the beginning of 2024 (Emmanuel Macron... 2024). Other countries that have expressed initial readiness include Belgium, Lithuania, Estonia, and the Czech Republic (Jakie państwa... 2025). Lithuania declares the possibility of sending around 200 soldiers, emphasizing that the form of the contribution would depend on the political mandate and the needs of the future mission. The Czech Ministry of Defense also does not rule out the participation of its soldiers, pointing to close coordination with partners within the coalition (Vokál 2025). After a meeting of the Coalition of the Willing on September 4, 2025, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that "26 countries have committed to providing Ukraine with security guarantees after the war" (26 nations...2025). The United States, on the other hand, rejects the participation of ground troops (No US troops in Ukraine... 2025), although it declares readiness to provide air support, which could play a key role in protecting Ukrainian airspace (Gwarancje bezpieczeństwa dla Ukrainy... 2025).

## 1 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.1 Problem Statement and Research Questions

The discussion about the shape of the future mission already raises questions about the scope and priorities of preparations. At the same time, as noted by the well-known Ukrainian journalist and political commentator Vitalii Portnikov, in numerous talks about establishing peace and providing Ukraine with security guarantees, the essence of this war is almost completely overlooked (Portnikov 2025). For its source is not the fear of Ukraine's potential accession to NATO, a dispute over borders with Russia, demilitarization, or control over territory, but rather Russia's fundamental drive to deny the distinctness of Ukrainians as a nation. Some researchers argue that "Russia's war with Ukraine is a new kind of war – an «identity war» – a war that is waged primarily for the appropriation of Ukrainian cultural identity and historical heritage, rather than for political or economic resources" (Mishalova, Hordiichuk & Sokolovskiy 2024, 73). As Norman Davies emphasizes, "most observers agree that the roots of Russian aggression lie in the country's deep-rooted attitudes to culture and history. In line with Russia's nationalist traditions, Putin denies any place for a separate Ukrainian identity" (Davies 2022). Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine is thus imperial and genocidal in nature, aiming to erase Ukraine's language, culture, and statehood. Therefore, until this issue is acknowledged as the actual basis of the conflict, which is the complete deprivation of Ukrainians of their national identity, any forms of truce, agreements, or security guarantees will remain fragile and unstable.

This perspective has a direct impact on the planning of future peacekeeping and stabilization missions in Ukraine and their effectiveness. The aim of this article is to highlight the strategic importance of linguistic and cultural competence in peacekeeping operations and to attempt to formulate recommendations for future stabilization missions in Ukraine. Finding answers to the following research questions will help achieve the set goal:

1. Do previous NATO and UN peacekeeping and stabilization missions confirm that support based on knowledge of the local language and culture increases their effectiveness?
2. Is the existing knowledge about Ukraine, perpetuated in Western academic, expert, and political circles, sufficient and reliable, or, on the contrary, does it require urgent "inventory" and critical deconstruction as marked by imperial thinking?
3. Does the choice of communication language in a stabilization mission – Ukrainian or Russian – affect its relations with, trust among, and perception by the Ukrainian population?

The study is based on the following research hypothesis: incorporating the Ukrainian language and cultural competencies, purged of "imperial knowledge," into the preparation of a future peace mission in Ukraine is a prerequisite for its effectiveness and social legitimacy.

## 1.2 Methodology

This article employs a methodology of content analysis, qualitative analysis, and discourse analysis. It utilizes case studies of previous NATO and UN peace missions. The theoretical framework of this study is derived from several strands of research on language and culture. One of them is Robert Phillipson's concept of linguistic imperialism, which demonstrates that the dominance of a single language is a tool of political and cultural control over subjugated nations (Phillipson 1992). In the case of Ukraine, the Russian language has for centuries served precisely this colonizing function, and after the country regained its independence in 1991, it became a primary tool of Russian neocolonial policy and hybrid information warfare, aimed at maintaining a sphere of influence and preventing the country's full cultural and political sovereignty.

Furthermore, approaches from the field of cultural and societal security studies (Buzan & Waever 1998) indicate that language can be securitized—that is, recognized as a key resource of national security and identity. The postcolonial perspective (Fanon 1986; Said 1993; Thompson 2015, 2020; Riabczuk 2013, 2022, et al.), in turn, is indispensable for understanding how the Russian imperial narrative contributed to the marginalization of Ukraine, its language, culture, and history, depriving the country of its identity and agency on the international stage. Finally, the critique of “imperial knowledge” (Thompson 2015, 2020; Riabczuk 2013, 2022) is useful for demonstrating that Western institutions, including Slavic and East European area studies, have for decades perpetuated Russocentric narratives, condemning Ukraine to “invisibility.”

A key dimension that connects these perspectives is the fundamental role of language for national identity (Gellner 1991, Smith 2008). In the case of Ukraine, which for centuries experienced policies of denationalization and Russification, the Ukrainian language has become not only a means of communication but also a primary marker of community, a vehicle of historical memory, and a symbol of resistance and sovereign aspirations. In the history of the Ukrainian nation, the struggle for the language has always been part of the struggle for independence. Therefore, using this language is a political and cultural act – an affirmation of the distinct identity and agency of Ukrainians.

## 2 LESSONS FROM NATO AND UN MISSIONS

The history of the American military demonstrates that a lack of cultural preparation among soldiers has repeatedly led to defeats and losses. In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition that language and intercultural competencies are also fundamentally important in the military sphere. The changing nature of conflicts (from large-scale wars towards asymmetric stabilization missions) has made linguistic and cultural competencies as important as military strength (van Dijk & Soeters 2008, 321). Communication issues, once reduced to simple commands and basic information exchange, have gradually been recognized as a strategic component of operational planning, impacting the effectiveness of combat operations, the safety of soldiers, and the building

of relationships with civilian populations. Reflection on this issue has opened a new field of research and practice, showing that in military operations, it is necessary to move beyond traditional technical and tactical categories.

As Hanna Schreiber notes, “the cultural factor was not initially taken into account by political elites. It seemed that Iraq and Afghanistan could be approached in a conventional manner – by utilizing decisive technological, numerical, operational, and tactical superiority. [...] The necessity to change the way operations were conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan thus forced a reach into an area previously scarcely present in the modern military: the social sciences and humanities, with a particular emphasis on cultural studies. Consequently, the training systems in many armies around the world began to be changed from this perspective, starting with the US Army. The new concept of Cross-Cultural Awareness (CCA) was intended to ensure success in operations conducted by the West in Central Asia and the Middle East” (Schreiber 2013, 13-14).

This conclusion emerged, among other sources, from the experiences of American commanders in Iraq: when General Peter Chiarelli, Vice Chief of Staff of the US Army, former Commanding General of Multi-National Corps – Iraq, asked his brigade commanders “what was the number one thing they would have liked to have had more of, and they all said cultural knowledge” (Bados et al. 2010, 29). General Chiarelli’s words, confirming that knowledge of culture is becoming as important as weaponry or technological advantage, are also reflected in the experiences of other missions.

An example that demonstrates the importance of language and culture in implementing a peace mission is the experience of the Polish Military Contingent. As a result of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, pursuant to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1031 of December 15, 1995, international peacekeeping forces were established – IFOR (Implementation Force), followed by SFOR (Stabilisation Force), operating under NATO leadership in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Polish Military Contingent participated in the SFOR operation from 1996 to 2004, carrying out stabilization tasks and supporting peacebuilding in the region. As evidenced by the analysis of the Polish Military Contingent’s experience, despite numerous challenges and problems, a significant influence on the implementation of tasks was the fact that “the local population viewed the Poles positively, which resulted from socio-cultural proximity (Slavic origin), linguistic factors (quick acquisition of basic phrases in the local language), [...] Polish soldiers quickly established contact with the local population” (Kozerawski 2024, 63). The ability of peacekeeping and stabilization mission soldiers to use the local language allows for a better understanding of local conditions, a faster response to threats, and more effective protection of the civilian population.

Michael Kelly states that in the context of military interventions, language becomes a key operational and cultural tool. In his view, NATO had an overly general language policy, reduced to interoperability in the English language, while actual solutions were improvised and shaped locally. In his article titled “Issues in institutional language policy: lessons learned from peace-keeping in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” the researcher concludes that decisions delegated to commanders and unit practices, as well as the role of local interpreters who provided continuity and cultural knowledge, were of fundamental importance. According to this researcher, the case study of Bosnia proves that for the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations, flexibility and the decentralization of

language solutions are crucial. These solutions should consider local realities, the role of interpreters, and the socio-cultural specificities of a given region, rather than merely formal political declarations (Kelly 2011).

Researchers Mamadou Pouye and Ali Maksum also highlighted the importance of language skills for peace missions. Analyzing the experiences of policewomen from Banda Aceh, who participated in the MINUSCA operation in the Central African Republic between 2020 and 2021, the authors show that knowledge of the French language – despite a lack of systemic support and professional teaching institutions in Indonesia – proved crucial for effective communication with the local population and international partners, and for building trust on the ground (Pouye, Maksum, 2024). This case study illustrates that even contingents trained to the highest standards in police or military skills can fail if they do not account for the linguistic dimension, and the determination of individuals cannot replace the need for institutional support in developing the linguistic and cultural competencies of future mission participants. Therefore, language proficiency is not just a technical skill, but a bridge to building trust, cooperation, and effective communication in peace operations.

Similar conclusions are drawn by Andrea van Dijk and Joseph L. Soeters, who in their analysis on the role of language in the military point out that language competencies are not merely a communication tool, but a key factor for operational effectiveness and safety. The researchers show that in the context of multinational and asymmetric missions, it is the ability to use the local language – alongside the support of professional interpreters – that determines soldiers' capacity to build relationships, gain trust, and acquire reliable information: "in the study of problems and shortcomings during peace operations, all respondents identified language as one of the main factors impeding the mission's progress" (van Dijk & Soeters 2008, 321). A lack of adequate language preparation leads not only to misunderstandings but also to real threats to the life and health of soldiers and the civilian population, and therefore should be treated as a strategic element of operational planning.

General Raymond Odierno, guided by his experiences in Iraq and the guidelines of the National Security Strategy, established the Regionally Aligned Forces (RAF) concept in 2012. This concept involved preparing units for operations in specific regions, encompassing not only combat training but also knowledge of the language, history, and culture of their partners. The idea was intended to enhance operational effectiveness and international security. The benefits of soldiers possessing cultural competencies include: operations become more effective, soldiers develop professionalism and self-awareness, units gain a stronger esprit de corps, and it becomes possible to build lasting relationships with local partners.

As Louise Askew argues in her analysis, the challenges associated with providing linguistic support (translation, interpretation) during NATO peacekeeping operations have evolved from improvised and unprofessional beginnings in Bosnia to the development of formal doctrine (Askew 2019, 245-247). NATO's unprecedented involvement in direct combat since the 1990s led to the development of doctrines (Joint Doctrine Note) that emphasize the importance of linguistic and cultural support as a "critical enabler" for operational success, while distinguishing between the costly training of linguists and the cheaper general cultural awareness.

The importance of language and cultural sensitivity in operations has been the subject of intense military attention and analysis for several decades. The U.S. Army is increasingly recognizing the importance of language competence and cultural sensitivity in military operations and is developing programs aimed at increasing the number of soldiers with key language skills (Wood 2007). The most important of these is the O9L program, launched in 2003, which recruits so-called “heritage speakers”—individuals raised in Arab, Afghan, or other families who are familiar with the language and culture of regions affected by military operations. These volunteers, often motivated by patriotism or the possibility of obtaining U.S. citizenship, make a significant contribution to operational security by preventing attacks and supporting communication with local populations. Simultaneously, the Department of Defense is developing the Language Corps, a database of individuals with critical language skills who could be used in both military and humanitarian missions. It also collaborates with universities to strengthen the language skills of future officers through ROTC. In the long term, additional languages are planned, including African and Chinese, and the overall effort is viewed as an investment in the Army’s ability to operate effectively in a culturally diverse environment. Another example is the Language Enabled Airman Program (LEAP) run by the American Air Force Language and Culture Center (AFCLC) (Language, cultural skills... 2025). The program aims to develop soldiers’ linguistic and intercultural competencies to strengthen cooperation with allies, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region – a region characterized by exceptional linguistic, cultural, and strategic diversity. Knowledge of allied languages and cultures – from Japanese to Tagalog and Korean – enables more effective negotiations, joint exercises, and daily cooperation, while also increasing interoperability and deterring potential adversaries. Language and culture are not only tools of communication but also bridges of trust and respect, reducing the risk of armed conflict.

According to Arthur Cebrowski, a retired US Navy Admiral and veteran of the Vietnam War and Operation Desert Storm, “knowledge of the enemy’s culture and social structures may be more important than knowledge of its order of battle” (cited in: McFate 2005, 24). Mirosław Smolarek states that “every soldier participating in a peace operation, even as part of a national contingent, must know at least the English language and, if possible, basic phrases and expressions in the local languages or dialects, because at any moment they may become an arbiter, a mediator, and only through the ability to communicate effectively can they defuse crisis situations” (Smolarek 2003, 139-140). The literature on the subject consistently reiterates one conclusion: a lack of linguistic and cultural preparation reduces the effectiveness of missions and the trust of local communities.

### 3 IMPERIAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE INVISIBILITY OF UKRAINE

Although Ukraine is geographically and culturally closer to the West than Iraq or Afghanistan, knowledge about its history, language, and culture remains limited and often distorted by stereotypes rooted in Russian narratives and propaganda. This Russian narrative is so pervasive that it appears even in Western children’s books, where Russia is

presented as the sole heir of Kyivan Rus', while Ukraine and its historical role are erased or absorbed into the Russian past (Maliei 2023). As noted by the American researcher Ewa Thompson, knowledge about Central and Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, reaches American students from Russian sources, which condemn it to invisibility: "Ukraine is [...] perceived as an ancient province of Russia, which, under the influence of its western neighbor, began to pretend to be a separate nation." (Thompson 2015, 16). As historian Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva points out, it has historically transpired that most Slavic Studies departments at Western universities operate, in effect, as Russian Studies (Yak protydiaahy... 2025). Consequently, the curricula are still dominated by a Russocentric narrative of Eastern European history, which blocks the "visibility" of Ukrainian history. The term "imperial knowledge" was used by Ewa Thompson to describe a narrative produced and disseminated for centuries by powerful imperial institutions. According to this researcher, "imperial knowledge" about Russia was dominant in many Western think tanks and institutes for Russian studies, which, "instead of providing knowledge about the heart of darkness in Moscow, were [...] and to some extent still are centers of Russian propaganda (of course, there are exceptions)" (Thompson, 2023). The Ukrainian intellectual Mykola Riabchuk argues that "imperial knowledge" "has strongly influenced Western media, the academic community, popular culture, and public opinion. It was not only accepted but became the norm" (Riabchuk 2022, 20).

The thesis of the normative power of "imperial knowledge" is confirmed by other scholars, who point to its specific and far-reaching consequences in Western scholarship and politics. Professor of History at the College of Staten Island/City University of New York, Susan Smith-Peter, explicitly called for a "moral inventory" of research on Russia, which had unwittingly reinforced its narrative and portrayed Ukraine as a state "without history" (Smith-Peter 2022). This "addiction to the Russian-statist perspective" has two key, tangible consequences:

First, it has created a self-reinforcing historiographical loop. Smith-Peter argues that scholars, reliant on Russian state archives, have normalized the state's dominant vision. This focus preempted a critical discussion about decolonizing the narrative, as even local archives often revealed "another level of the state, rather than a new story." Consequently, Ukrainian Studies are sidelined as a separate tradition not integrated into this pervasive "statist" narrative.

Second, this perspective has actively censored and marginalized alternative narratives. Smith-Peter provides powerful evidence from her own experience: her research on Ukrainian identity was rejected by reviewers who claimed the "Ukraine material didn't fit." Worse, when published in Russian, her work was almost co-opted without her knowledge, as an added footnote derided Ukrainian identity as "anti-historical and false." (Smith-Peter 2022). This demonstrates how the imperial framework actively suppresses dissenting voices.

Ultimately, this "imperial knowledge" is not an abstract concept but has direct political consequences. Smith-Peter concludes that scholars must use their expertise to «uncover the origins of Russia's horrific war crimes» and reject the imperialistic ideas that drive them. Her call for «recovery» from the addiction to the Russian state is a direct challenge to the academic community to stop being a passive conduit of imperial narrative and to actively center Ukrainian sovereignty and identity in their work.

According to Botakoz Kassymbekova, Western scholarship for decades marginalized the problem of Russian imperialism (Kassymbekova 2023). The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 did not lead to a reflection on the imperial character of the Russian state – in contrast to the decolonization in Africa and Asia, which sparked a broad academic debate. In the West, the myth that the USSR was a “nation-creator,” not a colonizer, became entrenched. As a result, Moscow was ascribed a natural right to a “sphere of influence.” This explains why Western politics and scholarship remained silent in the face of the wars in Chechnya or Russia’s later aggressions in Georgia and Ukraine. As Kassymbekova emphasizes, Western scholars all too often adopted the perspective of the Russian state as a given, which led to the struggles of non-Russian nations being treated not as fights for independence but as “extreme nationalism”.

It was only the full-scale invasion of 2022 that made it clear that the failure to decolonize our thinking about Russia was a serious cognitive error. Therefore, incorporating the Ukrainian perspective – its language, culture, and history – becomes not only a matter of scholarly rigor but also a crucial prerequisite for understanding the essence of the current war, a principle that finds its counterpart in the modern paradigm of military power. As Stanisław Jarmoszko noted, “a soldier’s participation in war is increasingly less reliant on physical strength, in favor of knowledge, intellect, and conceptual thinking. [...] In this context, one can posit the thesis that the value of an army is increasingly measured by its ability to generate and utilize knowledge” (Jarmoszko 2004, 7). In this light, for a future peace mission, this necessitates basing its preparations on decolonial knowledge, developed in cooperation with Ukrainian researchers and institutions.

In this context, it is worth drawing attention to the Global Coalition of Ukrainian Studies (GCUS) – an international academic platform established in 2024 through the initiative of Ukrainian state institutions, including the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ukrainian Institute (see: Global Coalition of Ukrainian Studies). Its goal is to develop and internationalize research on Ukraine as an independent historical and cultural subject, rather than—as “imperial knowledge” has long portrayed it—a peripheral area of the former Russian Empire. The coalition brings together universities and research centers from various countries, creating a shared space for academic collaboration, knowledge exchange, and the development of curricula that reflect the Ukrainian perspective. GCUS represents a decolonized approach to knowledge about Eastern Europe: it restores Ukraine’s epistemic subjectivity and fosters new narratives that reflect its authentic historical, linguistic, and cultural experience. Incorporating the expertise and research output of this coalition into the planning of future peacekeeping missions in Ukraine could not only enrich them with reliable contextual understanding but also ensure that their conceptual foundations align with the principles of respect for Ukraine’s linguistic and cultural sovereignty.

#### 4 LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF RESISTANCE AND SECURITY

Given that Ukraine’s Russification was the result of centuries of colonization, Russian functioned as a tool of domination rather than natural linguistic evolution. For

centuries of Russian domination over Ukrainian lands, the suppression of the Ukrainian language served as one of the empire's main tools in undermining Ukrainian identity. The imperial ideology denied the very existence of a separate Ukrainian language, portraying it instead as a mere dialect of Russian. As Robert Phillipson notes, the dominant language is imposed on subjugated nations as a means of control (Phillipson 1992, 73). For several decades after the collapse of the USSR, many citizens of Ukraine regarded Ukrainian as their native language, even though they used Russian in everyday life (Kulyk 2014) - a result of historical subordination and linguistic interference typical of imperial contexts.

Although many Ukrainian citizens still use Russian in daily life - a legacy of prolonged Russification - this cannot justify the use of this language by soldiers of a future peace mission. Russian is, after all, a tool of the Kremlin's geopolitical expansion, a pretext for annexation and occupation, and its presence in the public sphere has repeatedly been used as an argument to question Ukraine's territorial integrity. In contrast, the Ukrainian language has risen to the status of a symbol of freedom, resistance, and security - it is not merely a means of communication but also a line of defense against aggression (Gergalo-Dąbek 2023). It is through this language that the citizens of Ukraine manifest their agency and distinguish "their own" from outsiders. In the context of a war, where the very fact of speaking Ukrainian could be a matter of life or death, and words like *palianytsia* became a shibboleth to identify saboteurs, the state language fulfills an irreplaceable function. It is worth noting that, according to a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), the majority of Ukrainians - 87% - fully or partially support soft (strategic) Ukrainization. At the same time, the radical approach, which calls for banning the use of Russian even in everyday life and a complete shift to Ukrainian, is acceptable to 63% of respondents, while 32% partially or completely reject it (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2025).

Furthermore, the psychological dimension must also be taken into account: for many citizens, especially those who experienced Russian occupation or captivity and were liberated, the very sound of the Russian language is laden with trauma. The voices of foreign soldiers using Russian could evoke fear and distrust instead of a sense of security, which would negatively impact the mission's effectiveness. As noted by the First Lady, Olena Zelenska, the Ukrainian language resonates in the world as the language of resistance and perseverance. In contrast to the Russian language, which - not only for the citizens of Ukraine but also beyond its borders - is associated with the language of aggression, brutality, and cruelty, Ukrainian is the language of humanity, the language of culture, and a stand against modern barbarism (Zelenska ...2023).

Despite the decades of accumulated expertise in teaching the Russian language at Western institutions, any temptation to leverage this foundation must be overcome. As Ewa Thompson, Mykola Riabchuk, and other researchers demonstrate, Western knowledge about the region has for decades been filtered through "imperial knowledge" - Russocentric sources, institutes, and language. Therefore, continuing to train personnel in Russian replicates the same cognitive errors and perpetuates this distorted image. For soldiers of a future peacekeeping/stabilization mission, the Ukrainian language is therefore both an operational requirement and an epistemological correction: it provides direct access to sources, local media, legal norms, and administration in Ukraine; it builds

legitimacy and social trust (using the host nation's language = respect for sovereignty); it reduces vulnerability to information manipulation and "cultural translations" imbued with an imperial code; it enhances security (better recognition of local sentiments, idioms, warnings, and conflict-prone signals); it facilitates interoperability with Ukrainian services, local governments, and NGOs (procedures, documents, and decision-making chains operate in Ukrainian); and finally, it supports the ethical conduct of operations (precise communication with the civilian population, informed consent, data protection, documenting violations). Importantly, good practices already exist – such as the Ukrainian course once developed for the Peace Corps – which can be immediately utilized as training modules. In other words, Ukrainian in mission training is not a symbolic gesture, but a tool for effectiveness, security, and the decolonization of the Western perspective on this state.

As noted by Tadeusz Iwański and Sławomir Matuszak, experts on Ukraine from the Centre for Eastern Studies with years of experience, knowledge of the Ukrainian language plays an extremely important role in conversations and building relationships with Ukrainians, and its significance has grown even further in recent years (Iwański & Matuszak 2025, 183). In the past, Russian often dominated in analyses concerning Ukraine, reflecting the situation in Ukraine itself during Yanukovich's era, when Russian was widespread in the media and public sphere. However, as the aforementioned researchers argue, following political changes and especially after Russia's full-scale aggression in 2022, speaking with Ukrainians in Russian has become unacceptable (Iwański & Matuszak 2025, 182-184). Currently, the Ukrainian language dominates in contacts with Ukrainians and is an indispensable communication tool, and its use has become an expression of respect towards partners and the social realities of Ukraine. In other words, the Ukrainian language has ceased to be an option and has become a necessity – both in research and in communicative practice with Ukrainians after 2022.

In a future international peace mission, securing the "hearts and minds" of the civilian population will be no less important than providing security. In this context, it is worth recalling the saying attributed to Nelson Mandela: "If you speak to a man in a language he understands, you speak to his head. If you speak to him in his language, you speak to his heart." Therefore, the appropriate choice of means of communication should be Ukrainian – the language of a nation defending its very existence, and a language that, before the eyes of the world, has become a symbol of dignity, solidarity, and humanity.

## RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of historical case studies from NATO and UN peacekeeping missions (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Afghanistan) confirms the research hypothesis. The effectiveness and social legitimacy of stabilization operations are significantly enhanced by the linguistic and cultural preparedness of the deployed forces. Experiences from these missions consistently demonstrate that knowledge of the local language and culture is not a mere supplement but a "critical enabler" for building trust, ensuring soldier safety, gaining reliable intelligence, and achieving operational goals. The ability

to communicate directly with the local population, as seen in the Polish contingent in Bosnia, transforms the mission from an alien force into a partner, fostering cooperation and stability. In light of these announcements, it becomes particularly important to draw lessons from previous peacekeeping and stabilization missions conducted by NATO states. One of these lessons, as demonstrated by prior operational experience, should be treating language and culture not as a supplement to logistics, but as a strategic element of the entire operation's success.

When it comes to a stabilization mission in Ukraine, acknowledging this role is fundamental for establishing an authentic dialogue and building relationships based on respect, rather than replicating historical dependencies. Combining these perspectives allows us to treat the Ukrainian language in a future stabilization and peace mission not only as a communication tool but also as a strategic factor determining the operation's effectiveness and the building of social trust. If Western states, international organizations, and allied armies treat the Ukrainian language and its cultural specificity as a secondary element, in practice they may unknowingly replicate the imperial patterns of the Russian narrative ("the Ukrainian language does not exist" or "it's just a dialect of Russian"). This would undermine the mission's legitimacy and social trust, because in the eyes of Ukrainian citizens, their language is simultaneously a line of defense, a symbol of resistance, and a guarantee of agency. The Ukrainian language should not be an optional communication tool in a future mission, but a strategic condition for its success. Using Russian by soldiers of foreign armies could be perceived as a continuation of the negation of Ukrainian identity, thereby strengthening distrust and wartime trauma.

In conclusion, incorporating the Ukrainian language and decolonial cultural competencies into the preparation of a future peace mission is a fundamental prerequisite for its effectiveness and social legitimacy. The analysis leads to a clear answer to the posed research questions: 1) historical missions confirm that local language and cultural support increase effectiveness; 2) existing Western knowledge about Ukraine is insufficient, unreliable, and requires an urgent "inventory" and critical deconstruction from imperial thinking; 3) the choice of Ukrainian as the mission's language of communication is crucial for building positive relations, trust, and perception among the local population.

The findings presented in this article can serve as an inspiration for further research on the role of language and culture in modern peacekeeping and stabilization operations. The research results can form the basis for formulating recommendations for shaping training programs, doctrinal documents, and standard operating procedures for future missions in Ukraine and other post-colonial contexts.

***This article was prepared without any external financial support.***

***The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in connection with the publication of this article and that all ethical standards required by the publisher were accepted during its preparation.***

## REFERENCES:

- Admirał z NATO ucina spekulacje: „Rozmowy są przedwczesne.” 2025, August 23. *Interia.pl*. <https://tinyurl.com/vz36dub6>
- Askew, Louise. 2019. “Providing Language Support for NATO Operations: Challenges and Solutions.” In *The Palgrave Handbook of Languages and Conflict*, 231–249. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bados, Victor, Jose Martinez-Ferrer, and Len Lavella. 2010. *Guidelines for Commanders and Staffs: Operationalization of Culture into Military Operations (Best Practices)*. Mando de Adiestramiento y Doctrina.
- Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Davies, Norman. 2022, October 2. “A Short History of Language in Ukraine.” *The Spectator*. <https://tinyurl.com/36j98984>
- Emmanuel Macron nie wykluczył, że Europa wyśle żołnierzy na Ukrainę. 2024, February 27. *Rzeczpospolita*. <https://tinyurl.com/mryvaaj7>
- Fanon, Franz. 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Markmann. Pluto Press. (Original work published 1952)
- Gellner, Ernest. 1991. *Narody i nacjonalizm*. Translated by Tomasz Hołówka. Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Gergało-Dąbek, Nadia. 2023. “Ukrainian Language as a Symbol of Resistance against the Invasion of the Russian Federation.” *Wiedza Obronna* 285 (4). <https://doi.org/10.34752/2023-c285>
- Global Coalition of Ukrainian Studies. n.d. “Global Coalition of Ukrainian Studies.” <https://www.gcus.org/en/>
- Gwarancje bezpieczeństwa dla Ukrainy. Donald Trump mówi o „wsparciu powietrznym” USA. 2025, August 20. *Rzeczpospolita*. <https://tinyurl.com/3a7z5ehs>
- Iwański, Tomasz, and Sławomir Matuszak. 2025. “„Ukrainie sława”, ekspertom biada: wyzwania i dylematy analizy ukraińskiej.” In *Uporządkować rzeczywistość. Poradnik analityczny Ośrodka Studiów Wschodnich*, edited by Wojciech Konończuk and Marek Menkiszak, 175–191. Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia.
- Jakie państwa są gotowe wysłać wojska na Ukrainę? Mówi się nawet o 10 krajach. 2025, August 21. *Portal Obronny*. <https://tinyurl.com/3pjz8e8>
- Jarmoszko, Stanisław. 2004. “Tendencje rozwoju współczesnych sił zbrojnych.” In *Socjologiczne aspekty wojska i obronności*, edited by Jan Zajdzik and Tomasz Iwanek, 7. Wydawnictwo Polskie Przedsiębiorstwo Geodezyjno-Kartograficzne S.A.
- Kassymbekova, Botakoz. 2023, January 24. “How Western Scholars Overlooked Russian Imperialism.” *Al Jazeera*. <https://tinyurl.com/36jyvazf>
- Kelly, Michael. 2011. “Issues in Institutional Language Policy: Lessons Learned from Peacekeeping in Bosnia-Herzegovina.” *European Journal of Language Policy* 3 (1): 61–80.

- Kozerawski, Dariusz S. 2024. "Polski kontyngent wojskowo-cywilny w międzynarodowej operacji wsparcia pokoju SFOR w Bośni i Hercegowinie." *Problemy Techniki Uzbrojenia* 168 (1): 43–67. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0054.4793>
- Kulyk, Volodymyr. 2014. "Soviet Nationalities Policies and the Discrepancy between Ethnocultural Identification and Language Practice in Ukraine." In *The Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe*, edited by Mark Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin, 202–221. Cambridge University Press.
- Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. 2025. *Stavlennia do okremykh variantiv movnoi polityky v Ukraini*. <https://tinyurl.com/5czfe4r4>
- Language, Cultural Skills Critical to Enhancing Indo-Pacific Interoperability. 2025, April 28. *Indo-Pacific Defence Forum*. <https://tinyurl.com/yruwx62d>
- Maliei, Antonina. 2023. "Battle for the History." *Texty.org.ua*. <https://tinyurl.com/2kkkd2t5>
- McFate, Montgomery. 2005, March–April. "Anthropology and Counterinsurgency: The Strange Story of Their Curious Relationship." *Military Review*.
- Mishalova, Olena, Olha Hordiichuk, and Oleh Sokolovskyi. 2024. "Russia's War in Ukraine as a 'War for Identity' and Appropriation of Cultural Tradition." *Ethics in Progress* 15 (1): 73–94. <https://doi.org/10.14746/eip.2024.1.4>
- Phillipson, Robert. 1992. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Pouye, Mamadou, and Ali Maksum. 2024. "Language Skills and Successful Mission of UN Peacekeepers: A Case Study of Acehnese Policewomen." *LINGUA* 19 (1): 109–121.
- Riabczuk, Mykoła. 2013. "Colonialism in Another Way: On the Applicability of Postcolonial Methodology for the Study of Postcommunist Europe." *Porównania* 13: 47–59. <http://porownania.amu.edu.pl/attachments/article/284/MYKO%C5%81A%20RIABCZUK.pdf>
- Riabczuk, Mykoła. 2022. *Czternasta od końca. Opowieści o współczesnej Ukrainie*. Znak.
- Said, Edward. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. Knopf.
- Schreiber, Hanna. 2013. *Świadomość międzykulturowa: od militaryzacji antropologii do antropologizacji wojska*. Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Smith, Anthony. 2008. *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Smith-Peter, Susan. 2022, April 1. "What Do Scholars of Russia Owe Ukraine?" *Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia*. <https://tinyurl.com/phrz7sr6>
- Thompson, Ewa. 2000. *Trubadurzy imperium. Literatura rosyjska i kolonializm*. Translated by Anna Sierszulska. Universitas.
- Thompson, Ewa. 2015. "Slavic but Not Russian: Invisible and Mute." *Porównania* 16: 9–18.
- Van Dijk, Andrea, and Joseph Soeters. 2007. "Language Matters in the Military." In *Armed Forces and Conflict Resolution: Sociological Perspectives*, 303–325. Emerald.

Vokál, Vladimír. n.d. "Černochová připustila vyslání vojáků na Ukrajinu. Metnar to považuje za hazard." *Idnes.cz*.

Wood, Sara. 2007, May 25. "Army Sees Importance of Language, Cultural Sensitivities in Operations." *U.S. Army*. <https://tinyurl.com/5amucmay>

Portnykov, Vitalii. 2025, September 8. "Koly z'iavliať sia umovy dlia zakinchenñā viiny." *NV.ua*. <https://tinyurl.com/w94yx8s3>

Zelenska, Olena. 2023, February 27. "Ukrains'ka mova zvuchyt' u sviti iak mova oporu ta stiikosti..." *Vinnyts'ka oblasna viis'kova administratsiia*. <https://tinyurl.com/fx66c99b>

Tairova-Iakovleva, Tetiana. 2025, April 23. "Yak protydiiaty rosiis'komu hhrand-naratyvu? (Ch. 1/2)." YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hDiHFSP7Es>

26 Nations Vow to Give Ukraine Postwar Security Guarantees, Macron Says. 2025, September 4. *Reuters*. <https://tinyurl.com/mvut7m2h>

UK to Lead Headquarters of Multinational Force Ukraine. 2025, September 3. *UK Defence Journal*. <https://tinyurl.com/4xm42s9b>

UN's Baerbock Says Blue Helmets Could Help Safeguard Ceasefire in Postwar Ukraine. 2025, September 14. *Deutsche Welle*. <https://tinyurl.com/5ahpf226>