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**EMPOWERING THE UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE THROUGH THE PRISM  
OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA:  
FOCUSING ON THE ACT ON THE PROMOTION OF EDUCATION  
OF CRITICAL FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

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Despite the diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea and Ukraine were established in 1992, the cooperation between the two countries was not significant in view of Korea's territorial proximity with Russia and many other aspects that prevented Seoul from getting closer to Kyiv. The cultural and educational exchange thus was somewhat limited, which did not allow Ukrainian language education to bloom in full. The situation, however, improved with the implementation of the Act on the Promotion of Education of Critical Foreign Languages in August 2016. The Act aims at cultivating competent personal with a high proficiency in the languages that are regarded as such that could potentially contribute to achieving the Republic of Korea's diplomatic, national security, economic, as well as science and technology exchange goals. Ukrainian was selected to the list of the critical foreign languages. This article has the objectives as follows. First, it aims at analyzing the strategic background of the Republic of Korea's government having adopted the law in 2016. Second, the article shows why the Ukrainian language was selected to the critical language list. Third, the article elaborates on the prospects of the Ukrainian language education improvement on the backdrop of the Republic of Korea's aim of active participation in the post-war reconstruction efforts. It is argued that the reasons for adopting the Act on the Promotion of Education of Critical Foreign Languages should be viewed through the lens of the Republic of Korea's diplomacy as a middle power. This logic led to the Republic of Korea's interest in Ukraine, which in turn prompted interest in the Ukrainian language. On the backdrop of the Republic of Korea's deep interest in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and strategic cooperation with Ukraine amidst the Russia-North Korea's deepening military partnership since 2022, Ukrainian was cited as a government funding priority critical language in accordance with the Second Five-Year Plan (2022-2026) adopted in September 2021 in the framework of the Act.

*Key words:* critical foreign languages policy, diplomacy, middle power, strategy, Ukrainian language.

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**Formulation of the problem.** Foreign language education in the Republic of Korea is very robust, with a primary focus on English and the languages of neighboring countries, including Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. German, French, Spanish, Arabic, and Vietnamese are also among the most preferred foreign languages to study in the Republic of Korea. These languages are among those that can be selected as subjects for the national university entrance exam, the Republic of Korea's College Scholastic Ability Test (Korean: *suneung*) [1].

At the same time, since the late 2010s, the Republic of Korea's diplomatic strategy embraces self-empowerment through building diplomatic connections with different countries from various continents while promoting Korea's national brands, such as K-pop, which indicates the movement of spreading Korean pop culture across the world, and K-beauty, which aims to promote Korean cosmetic beauty brands globally [2]. In recent years, the high level of Korea's civilian-military dual-use science and technology

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development, amid North Korea's threats and the reemergence of military competition between the democratic and non-democratic country blocs, led to the emergence of new Korean national brands, such as K-Defense and K-Space. Both K-Defense and K-Space aim to promote the Republic of Korea's defense and space technologies worldwide [3]. These actions should not be interpreted as the Republic of Korea's search for economic leverage, but rather as the nation's pursuit of national empowerment through the middle power diplomacy.

Amid this dynamic in Korea's diplomacy, it became clear that Korean nationals' mastery of the core foreign languages mentioned above would not be sufficient to equip the Republic of Korea with all the resources necessary to achieve Korea's diplomatic and strategic goals on a global scale [4 : 1421–143]. On the backdrop of these challenges, the Act on the Promotion of Education of Critical Foreign Languages was adopted in August 2016. Among the 53 critical languages selected at that time, Ukrainian was mentioned as the critical language of the "Eurasian region". These language-related lawmaking developments in the Republic of Korea raise the following questions. First, what are the Republic of Korea's diplomatic, strategic, and policy preconditions towards the critical language legislation? Second, why was the Ukrainian language selected as a critical foreign language that needs government support? Third, how has Ukrainian language education in Korea improved since, and what are the prospects for future improvement?

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** Since the introduction of the law, the Korean academic community has seen several publications on how this legislation may influence foreign language learning in the Republic of Korea overall and in each specific language. Professor Jeong Kyung Park of the Division of African Studies at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies is among the first contributors to the topic. In his first topic-related article published in 2018, Park discusses the overall effectiveness of the Act for teaching African languages and the issues that may arise during implementation [5]. Park's 2021 publication discusses the implementation of projects associated with the Act in general, along with the development of standardized curricula, customized textbooks for A1 and A2 levels, and evaluation systems for Swahili explicitly designed for Korean undergraduate students [6].

In 2023, Heeyeun Ann of Dankook University published a paper on how the Act on the Promotion of Education of Critical Foreign Languages helps cultivate translators of Korean cultural content, thereby spreading Korean pop culture worldwide, particularly in Arabic-speaking countries [7]. While not explicitly stated as such, from this paper, it can be inferred that the education of critical foreign languages in the Republic of Korea has the objective of further spreading Korea-produced content and thus accumulating more national power through conducting Korea's cultural diplomacy abroad rather than consuming foreign-produced content inside the country. Hayann Lee of the Institute of EU Studies at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies also mentioned the diplomatic and national strategic imperatives behind the legislation on critical foreign languages in the Republic of Korea. At the same time, her publication mostly underscores the projects for the European languages designated as special foreign languages, while identifying potential challenges, rather than focusing on the reasoning behind the Act's implementation in the first place [8].

The only publication to date in the Korean academic community that sheds some light on the rationale for the Republic of Korea's government decision to implement the Act is the 2025 paper by Sora Lim and Jieun Kim. The authors state the reason for the legislation as follows.

*“The Korean government has expanded overseas missions to strengthen diplomatic capabilities [...] as part of a strategy to prepare for competition to secure energy [and other economic] resources, expanding support for Korean national and Korean businesses’ overseas while also strengthening cultural exchange activities. [...] The demand for regular and irregular [foreign language] exams designated specifically for government officials of various Korea’s official national administrative offices and institutions, such as the Republic of Korea’s National Intelligence Service, Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises and Startups is also on the rise.” [10 : 184].*

While informative, this explanation lacks depth and specific details on why the government of the Republic of Korea felt urgency to boost knowledge of the so-called critical foreign languages among both the ordinary Korean citizens and military and government officials starting since 2016. There is also a lack of up-to-date research on why the Ukrainian language was selected for the critical foreign language list. Thus, the academic novelty of this paper is twofold. First, the paper underscores the Republic of Korea’s diplomatic strategy of a middle power, which uses the tools of public, cultural and normative diplomacy abroad. Secondly, the growing importance of Korea-Ukrainian relations amid the novel military competition between democratic and non-democratic blocs is cited as the reason the government of the Republic of Korea decided to empower the education of Ukrainian as a critical foreign language in Korea.

### **I. The Republic of Korea’s middle power diplomacy, Korea-Ukrainian relations and empowerment of the Ukrainian language in the Republic of Korea.**

#### **3.1. Defining middle power.**

Considering the above, it is necessary to first briefly outline the concept of a middle power, particularly Korea’s concerns in middle power diplomacy. Middle power is a state actor that is neither a great power nor a small power in terms of material capabilities. In other words, in terms of military and economic power it is located somewhere in the middle in between the great power and small powers on the hierarchical ladder of international actors. At the same time, middle power countries can conduct intense, influential diplomacy and even speak out on international issues and promote new international standards and norms, even though those norms sometimes conflict with the normative rules established by the great power nations. Among the first attempts to conceptualize a middle power is a study by J. King Gordon that aimed at explaining Canada’s unique diplomatic strategy. As to J. King Gordon, while being mostly pro-U.S. on major diplomatic issues, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century Canada sometimes created tensions in bilateral relations with the U.S. by forming a coalition of like-minded non-great-power states. By doing so, Canada used to oppose to some of the U.S.-imposed international rules and norms in cases when these rules were perceived by Canada as not beneficial for weaker state actors or simply unfair [11], [20].

Australia is another example of the traditional middle power. While being one of the significant U.S. security partners, Australia organized a multilateral movement known as the Cairns Group initiative against unfair agricultural export norms established by the United States in the WTO in the 1980s. Research on Australia’s diplomacy at that time has broadened the understanding of middle power diplomacy as a concept in international re-

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lations [12], [20]. As such, the concept of middle power diplomacy was used by countries that supplement or modify the somewhat unfair international norms established by great powers. In doing so, the middle powers mostly use the mechanisms of coalition building with smaller like-minded nations for the common good of the whole international society. In pursuing their middle power diplomacy for the common good, they are viewed as “good international citizens” and thus possess enough diplomatic power that cannot be ignored by great power actors, such as the U.S., China, and Russia [20].

### **3.2. The Republic of Korea’s middle power diplomacy.**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s led to the emergence of a liberal international order, and some economically advanced countries at that time came to be regarded as rising middle powers in the 2000s. This time was marked by the Republic of Korea, Türkiye, Brazil, and Indonesia emerging as new middle power nations on the international stage [13], [20]. Specifically, the Republic of Korea’s emergence as a middle power came through international events such as the G20 summit held in Seoul in 2010, followed by the hosting of the multinational cyberspace assembly in Seoul dedicated to international cybersecurity issues. The solidification of the Republic of Korea’s middle-power status was heralded by the creation of MIKTA in 2013. MIKTA is an informal consultative group of “middle power” countries that includes Mexico, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Türkiye, and Australia to strengthen global governance through cooperation on international issues, such as international economic development, international security and peace, and multilateral cooperation across continents. In other words, it was created to show that global governance is more than unilateral decisions of the U.S., China, and Russia. As such, multilateral initiatives on emerging security, including cyber, artificial intelligence (AI), outer space security, and emerging economic issues, have also become the core of Korea’s foreign strategy [14].

However, Korea’s diplomatic and strategic efforts in the early 2010s somewhat did not manage in succeeding to the full extent, despite the high level of the Republic of Korea’s foreign policy efforts. International relations scholars such as Gilbert Rozman emphasized that it may not be easy for the Republic of Korea to perform its middle power diplomacy in full due to regional characteristics of Northeast Asia. In fact, the Republic of Korea is surrounded by non-democratic North Korea, Russia and China which in many cases refuse to participate in the Republic of Korea’s organized initiatives in view of their different perception of diplomacy and security. While Japan is an only liberal democracy bordering with the Republic of Korea, the difference in interpretation of the World War II events and Japanese war crimes at that period is the stumbling stone in the Korea-Japanese bilateral relations [15]. Thus, Korea’s search for collective power among similar middle power countries must be pursued through its participation in formats outside Northeast Asia, such as ASEAN+3, MIKTA, and the regions like Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

To overcome these challenges and promote Korea-style middle-power diplomacy in regions beyond Northeast Asia, the government of the Republic of Korea has enacted a series of new legislation since the mid-2010s to strengthen the country’s strategic power. As the regions of Eastern Europe and Central Asia were viewed as a possible location with many like-minded middle-sized state actors, the administration of President Moon Jae-in approved the New Northern Policy in 2017. The New Northern Policy was a diplomatic strategy aimed at engaging the so-called “northern” countries, those located to the north of the Republic of Korea. Namely, these are the former Soviet Union countries that were often

viewed as a “gate” connecting Asia and Europe. While Russia was still in the center of President Moon’s diplomatic strategy as he believed Russia could be used as a possible leverage in inter-Korean relations, the Eastern European countries, including Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, as well as the post-Soviet countries of Central Asia, were perceived as possible coalition members in the Republic of Korea-led middle power efforts.

This strategy somewhat complemented the diplomatic strategy of Moon’s predecessor President Park Gyun-hye, who adopted a Public Diplomacy Act of 2016 which aimed at “improving the Republic of Korea’s image and prestige in the international community by forming foundations to strengthen public diplomacy and enhance the efficiency thereof by providing for matters necessary for public diplomatic activities.” [16]. The Act on the Promotion of Education of Critical Foreign Languages, adopted in August 2016, was in fact a continuation of President Park’s effort to promote the Republic of Korea’s middle power efforts all over the world. And while the conservative government of President Park Gyun-hye and liberal government of President Moon Jae-in had somewhat opposing views in how the Republic of Korea should perform its diplomacy amidst the U.S.-China/Russia great power competition, their view on the middle power coalition building was somewhat similar: to succeed as a global middle power, the Republic of Korea had to reach out to the middle-sized countries outside the Northeast Asian region. The critical foreign languages education promotion in Korea was perceived as a tool to foster Korea’s strategic human resources in this field. As the biggest country in Europe and the gateway in between Europe and Asia, Ukraine was seen as a perfect match for the Republic of Korea’s diplomatic and strategic ambitions. And to improve the relations with Ukraine and other countries in the region, fostering the manpower with the foreign language abilities was crucial.

### **3.3. The Act on the Promotion of Education of Critical Foreign Languages and Ukrainian Language.**

The Act on the Promotion of Education of Critical Foreign Languages was adopted in 2016, on the last year of President Park Gyun-hye being in office. Article 2 of the Act clearly states that critical foreign languages are strategically necessary for the development of the Republic of Korea’s national capabilities. Therefore, this legislation aims to strengthen South Korea’s diplomatic capabilities along with improving foreign language education in the country.

As part of a policy analysis behind this legislation, many Korean scholars cite that the Republic of Korea is the only nation within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development that does not have a government-funded undergraduate-level education institution with foreign language programs [8], [9]. In other words, creating the pool of savvy and foreign language-trained highly qualified specialists in the Republic of Korea was not at all a government-controlled process, but was instead entrusted to the very few private university education institutions. However, through the implementation of the Act on the Promotion of Education in Critical Foreign Languages, the government of the Republic of Korea took its share of the burden-sharing in fostering foreign language education in the country.

It is crucial to note that upon the Act’s adoption in August 2016, 53 critical foreign languages were specified, and Ukrainian was already included on that list. However, upon the declaration of the First Five-Year Plan (2017-2021) in accordance with the Act, the Ukrainian language was unfortunately not among the approximately 20 languages selected to receive priority government support during this period. It meant that, while the legal

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importance of Ukrainian language education in the Republic of Korea was legitimized by the Act, the Korean government did not allocate support for empowering Ukrainian language education for the first five years since the Act was adopted. It was not until the Second Five-Year Plan (2022-2026) adopted in September 2021 that Ukrainian was cited as a government funding priority language, with full-scale government support for the development of specialized Ukrainian-as-a-foreign-language textbooks designed specifically for the Korean undergraduate students [8].

There may be many reasons for this; the most important variables are as follows. First, the Ukrainian-language climate in Ukraine was not yet consistent in the mid-2010s. In fact, with many Russian-speaking Ukrainian government officials who often used Russian-language entrepreneurs on their business trips to the Republic of Korea, the Korean government may not have felt an urgency to expand Ukrainian-language education as a foreign language in the mid-2010s during the First Five-Year Plan. In other words, as scholars underscore, the widespread transition to Ukrainian from Russian inside Ukraine was only visible after the full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine in 2022 [17].

Second, it was not until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that the Republic of Korea started to cooperate more with the countries of Eastern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe other than Russia. Even though the New Northern Policy of President Moon Jae-in in the second half of the 2010s aimed to foster deeper cooperation with post-Soviet middle-sized state actors, Korea's bilateral relationships with Russia were always given priority. At the same time, the deployment of the North Korean troops to support the unlawful Russian warfare against Ukraine since 2022 pulled the Republic of Korea's diplomatic focus away from Russia. With the Russian government officially boosting North Korea's outer space and nuclear programs, and evidence of Russian space engineers supporting North Korea's Malligyong reconnaissance satellite program designed specifically to spy on the Republic of Korea's military assets in particular, the Republic of Korea's relations with Russia went under deep scrutiny [18]. This dynamic of Russia aligning with the Republic of Korea's biggest threat – the North Korean regime – brings the Republic of Korea and Ukraine closer diplomatically and strategically, while creating an even greater need for Ukrainian language education in Korea.

Lastly, the Republic of Korea aims at active participation in the Ukraine post-war reconstruction. As Korean policymakers and scholars underscore, through its participation in the Ukraine reconstruction project, the Republic of Korea should actively support the new security world order alongside the West and strengthen Korea's standing as a middle power. As the Ukraine post-war reconstruction project is expected to serve as the most meaningful example of new approaches on post-war reconstruction since the Marshall Plan, the government of the Republic of Korea hopes that lessons from it will be utilized when the unification and integration of the Korean Peninsula arrive [19].

**Conclusion.** This paper argued that the Act on the Promotion of Education of Critical Foreign Languages in August 2016, which designated 53 foreign languages as critical and such that could enhance the global standing of the Republic of Korea on the world stage, should be viewed from the prism of the Republic of Korea's middle power diplomacy beyond the Northeast Asian region. The selection and eventual prioritization of Ukrainian as a critical foreign language in the Republic of Korea's law reflect structural shifts in the country's diplomatic orientation from Russia to Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and Central Asia. Specifically, the allocation of the government funds on empowering the Ukrainian

language education in the undergraduate program in Republic of Korea during the Second Five-Year Plan (2022-2026) should be viewed as a urgency of diplomatic rapprochement between the Republic of Korea and Ukraine amidst the military alignment between Russia and North Korea as well as the Republic of Korea hopes to contribute to the Ukraine post-war reconstruction project in future. In other words, Ukrainian-language education in the Republic of Korea cannot be separated from diplomacy. In view of this, starting from 2025, the Department of Ukrainian Studies at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies aims at nurturing the top-level experts in Ukrainian studies by providing classes in “Ukrainian Post-War Reconstruction”, “Foreign Commerce of Ukraine”, “Diplomacy of Ukraine”, and “Security of Ukraine” along with language classes as a crucial part of the effort.

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## **РОЗШИРЕННЯ МОЖЛИВОСТЕЙ ВИВЧЕННЯ УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ МОВИ ЯК ІНОЗЕМНОЇ В РЕСПУБЛІЦІ КОРЕЯ: ЗАКОН “ПРО СПРИЯННЯ ВИКЛАДАННЮ КРИТИЧНО ВАЖЛИВИХ ІНОЗЕМНИХ МОВ”**

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Незважаючи на те, що дипломатичні відносини між Республікою Корея та Україною були встановлені ще у 1992 році, співпраця між двома країнами була незначною, враховуючи територіальну близькість Кореї до Росії та інші дипломатичні фактори. Довгий час культурний та освітній обмін був дещо обмеженим, що заважало повноцінному розвитку та поглибленню вивчення української мови корейськими студентами. Однак ситуація покращилася з прийняттям у серпні 2016 року Закону “Про сприяння викладанню критично важливих іноземних мов”. Закон має на меті підготовку компетентних кадрів з високим рівнем владіння мовами, які вважаються такими, що могли б потенційно сприяти досягненню стратегічних цілей Республіки Корея в галузі дипломатії, національної безпеки, економіки та науки і технологій. Українська мова була включена до переліку критично важливих іноземних мов. Ця стаття має на меті наступне. По-перше, стаття спрямована на аналіз стратегічного підґрунтя ухвалення даного закону урядом Республіки Корея у 2016 році. По-друге, пояснюється, чому саме українську мову було обрано до списку критично важливих мов. По-третє, у статті розглядаються перспективи змінення позицій української мови в Кореї на тлі прагнення уряду Республіки Корея активно брати участь у післявоєнній відбудові України і посиленні своїх дипломатичних позицій у Східній Європі в цілому. В статті стверджується, що причини прийняття Закону “Про сприяння викладанню критично важливих іноземних мов” слід розглядати крізь призму дипломатії Республіки Корея як держави середньої сили. Ця логіка призвела до зацікавленості Республіки Корея в Україні, що, своєю чергою, викликало інтерес до української мови. На тлі глибокої зацікавленості Республіки Корея в післявоєнній відбудові України та стратегічній співпраці з Україною в умовах поглиблення військового партнерства між Росією та Північною Кореєю з 2022 року, українська мова була названа пріоритетною критично важливою мовою для державного фінансування відповідно до Другого п'ятирічного плану (2022-2026), прийнятого у вересні 2021 року в рамках Закону.

**Ключові слова:** політика критично важливих іноземних мов, дипломатія, держава середньої сили, стратегія, українська мова.

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