
Andrej Dynko

Language of Streets and Language of the Ploshcha

Evolution and Status of the Belarusian Language after 2000

Immediately after the Ministry of Statistics and Analysis announced a plan to hold a census in 2009, the Francišk Skaryna Belarusian Language Society (TBM) suggested that the census questionnaire should include a question about the language people consider their mother tongue, rather than about the language people normally speak at home. The question about the language people normally use at home was asked during the 1999 census. Colonel Zamiatin, then the official responsible for ideology and culture, introduced the question to justify Łukaŝenka's Sovietisation and Russification policies. However, the answers disappointed him because many respondents used the opportunity to express their support for the Belarusian language. 75 % of the residents of Belarus declared Belarusian to be their mother, 37 % the language they speak at home. Many sociologists interpreted the high percentage of those who said they spoke Belarusian at home as a subliminal protest.

The TBM clearly fears that the number of Belarusian speakers will

not be as high as in 1999, and therefore it will lose one more persuasive argument against the Russification policies of the government. Is there a reason for this fear? In general, how has the language status changed over recent years? No credible surveys have not been conducted on this issue, and indeed could not be carried out under the current authoritarian regime, because many respondents indicate the language they would like to speak instead of the language they actually use. I have analysed information from various sources to see what has changed in the last few years. These changes may seem insignificant, but they can inspire hope in someone like me who speaks Belarusian and is involved in the struggle for freedom.

Book printing: Private publishers replace state ones

Out of the 421 books in Belarusian printed in Belarus in 2005, state publishers

accounted for 92 titles, while the rest were from private publishers. The share of the private and public sectors has changed dramatically since the break up of the Soviet Union and the early years of independence. During the Soviet era, the colonial regime completely controlled the publication of books in Belarusian. In the first few years of independence, the government subsidised book printing. Now state publishers print fewer books than private ones. The largest private publishers are *Bielaŭski Kniazbor* headed by Hienadź Viniarski, *Technalohija* managed by Žmicier Sańko and *Ihar Lohvinau's* Publishing Company. The large number of private publishing companies can be explained by the brisk market demand for Belarusian books.

Education: Back to the USSR

Youth activists staged an audacious performance on 1 September 2006 to mark the Day of Knowledge. They installed a hangman's gallows on Jakub Kołas Square in Minsk and a boy wearing red-green hangman clothes, symbolising the colours of Łukaŝenka's au-

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thorities, 'executed' a book saying "the Belarusian Language" on one cover and "Belarusian History, 10th Grade" on the other. Police arrived at the scene just a few minutes after the start of the performance, but failed to apprehend the youths. Reporters, invited by the protesters, took pictures and wrote articles about the protest against the decision to use Russian for teaching Belarusian history instead of Belarusian.

Statistical data shows that the Belarusian language is maintaining its positions. In 2006, 23.3 percent of pupils were taught in Belarusian-language classes, up from 22 percent in 1989. It is essential that Belarusian retains its symbolic position in the capital. In 1988, there was not a single class with instruction in Belarusian, whereas in 2006 Minsk had four Belarusian-language pre-university schools and classes with instruction in Belarusian in 43 schools. There are several Belarusian schools functioning unofficially of which the Jakub Kolas Belarusian Humanities Lyceum is the most famous. When the authorities attempted to close down this lyceum in 2003, the teachers, children and their parents agreed to continue instruction underground.

Assessments of the Belarusian-language education depend on the choice of a period for comparison. For instance, compared with 1993, when 76 percent of first-graders attended classes with instruction in Belarusian, or even with 1995, when that proportion dropped to 38 percent, last year's 21 percent does not give any reason for optimism.

But on the other hand, the Łukašenka government has not yet managed to limit Belarusian-language teaching to the level of 1988. Unlike now, pupils were granted exemptions from Belarusian classes on a mass scale during the Soviet era. At most schools, Belarusian language instruction started at the age of nine, whereas now it starts at the age of six. Pupils were taught only two subjects in Belarusian — the Belarusian language and literature, whereas now they also learn history and geography. The education ministry's decision allowing for the use of Russian for teaching Belarusian history met with protests like the above-mentioned hangman's gallows and drew criticism from both private and government-controlled press. A correspondent of the state-run newspaper *Zviazda* asked an education ministry official sarcastically whether

authorities planned to use Russian for teaching the Belarusian language and literature in the future. Belarus' state-controlled newspapers usually do not dare to criticise the government's policies in that way.

While numbers of pupils instructed in Belarusian and the contents of Belarusian textbooks are satisfactory, advocacy groups are deeply concerned about the quality of instruction.

"Belarusian is mostly used for teaching humanities such as languages, history and social sciences," says Aleś Łozka, chairman of the Belarusian School Society, a group advocating the revival of the Belarusian language. The education ministry is guided by colonial stereotypes, convinced that Belarusian is not good for teaching physics, mathematics or chemistry. "The education ministry likes to emphasise that almost 62 percent of the country's schools provide instruction in Belarusian," Łozka goes on to say. "But these are small rural schools that are gradually being closed down."

In 2006, 75,000 (43.9 percent) of future university applicants chose to take entrance exams in Belarusian rather than Russian during the nationwide standardised testing process. As much as 83.3 percent of university applicants took Belarusian history exams in Belarusian, and the rest in Russian, according to the education ministry. The Francišak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society insists that all standardised tests should be available in both languages.



Anatol Klačuk

When the authorities closed down the Belarusian Humanities Lyceum in 2003, the teachers, children and their parents agreed to continue instruction underground.

TBM: Civic lobbyist

TBM is Belarus' most influential language advocacy group. The society has 15,000 members of whom 5,200 pay membership fees on a regular basis and 2,500 are actively involved in its operation, says historian Aleh Trusau, the TBM chairman. The authorities have closed down hundreds of non-governmental organisations, but they would not venture to suppress the TBM for fear of repercussions.

Political prisoner Pavał Sieviaryniec, in his article published in, said that he had found it easy to re-establish a TBM chapter in Maloje Sitna, a small village where he was serving a forced labour term. He maintains that “the revival of national values is an easier task than the revival of democratic values, but the most difficult task is to revive Christian values.”

Science: Crack down on humanities researchers

The problems of the education sector are similar to those of the humanities research centres, which also rely on state funding and are under close scrutiny of the government.

The Skaryna Centre, which used to do groundbreaking research in the field of humanities, was crushed. The new heads of the academic Institutes of History, Literature and Linguistics, Alaksandr Kavalenia, Valery Maksimovič and Alaksandr Łukašanec, respectively, purged the personnel of dissidents or banned specific research subjects in a way that appeared to follow the traditions of the Brezhnev or even pre-Brezhnev period.

A Belarusian State University (BDU) post-graduate student said she was surprised to hear only two presentations in Belarusian during the first scientific conference that she attended after her six-year maternity leave. The conference on a philological subject took place at a Viciebsk university, but the only two Belarusian-language presenters, including her, came from Minsk. Dissertations are assessed based on ideology and language criteria, not on their scientific merits. Scientific advisers caution against defending dissertations in Belarusian unless their subject deals with Belarusian philology or (albeit an even more risky topic), with history. The High Certifying Commission (VAK), in fact, is working to ensure the compliance of dissertations with state ideology. Several researchers — Aleś Paškevič,



Julija Daraškiewicz

Aleh Trusau, head of the Belarusian Language Society.

BDU assistant professor and chairman of the independent Union of Belarusian Writers, and Jauhien Aniščanka of History Institute who studied the divisions of the Commonwealth and Russia's role in this process — had their doctoral dissertations blocked by VAK for clearly political reasons. Most dissertations on sensitive subjects are killed at the early stage of research.

VAK Chairman Anatol Rubinau was promoted to the post of deputy head of the Presidential Administration for ideology in recognition of his uncompromising fight against dissent. Alaksandr Vajtovič, the former head of the National Academy of Sciences and ex-speaker of the upper parliamentary chamber, described Rubinau as having openly Stalinist political views. Strange as it may seem, this chief ideology officer does not deny advantages of the Western system: “The Western system is based on private ownership in the key sectors of the economy and is characterised by the decentralisation of power with many functions and powers transferred to local government bodies and elected authorities. In principle, the system has proved efficient....

But the Western system was shaped over centuries. It requires certain traditions, education, mentality, well-developed local public structures and forms of interaction between them. This is not just an idea or ideology; this is a certain level of civilisation that cannot be achieved in one day or two or three decades” (*Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, 28 July 2006).

Rubinau is very cynical in admitting the advantages of the Western system, while denying that the Belarusian people are mature and wise enough to assume responsibility for the governance and own assets in the key sectors of the economy, and suppressing “traditions”, including the national language.

The ideology agency's mania to banish Belarusian culture from research institutions is indicative of its liberating potential.

Diplomatic corps: Ambassador Krol's example

Several Minsk-based foreign diplomatic missions have consistently used the Belarusian language. Former US Ambassador George Krol promoted the tradition. Unlike his predecessor, or his German, Russian and Polish counterparts who worked in Minsk at the time, Ambassador Krol learned Belarusian and made his public statements in Belarusian inspiring respect and admiration.

Media: Going online

The largest-circulation Belarusian-language press are controlled by the government — *Nastaunickaja Hazeta*, which had a print run of 46,000 copies on 1 September 2006, and *Zviazda*, a rather liberal governmental newspaper with sells around 38,000 copies of each issue. The latter saw its circulation fall from 207,000 copies in 1995, the last year of Belarusianisation. The paper has a small readership in cities.

After most independent periodicals were banished from the government-controlled subscription and retail distribution networks Bielpošta and Bielsajuzdruk, Belarusian-language papers saw their circulation plunge (*Rehijanalnaja Hazeta* sells 6,100 copies, *Nasha Niva* 2,700 copies, *Volnaje Hlybokaje* 2,900 etc.) However, visits to Belarusian Web sites went up sharply during 2006 — *Svaboda*, RFE/RL Belarus Service, reported more than 40,000 visitors in April, 2007, and *Nasha Niva* recorded 28,000 visitors.

The authorities' effort (2002-2004) to enforce a 75-percent lower limit on the presence of Belarusian music in radio broadcasts did not seem to be intended, on the surface, to promote Belarusian-language performers, because selection was based on artists' background rather than on the language in which they sing. Nevertheless, the measure gave Belarusian songs greater chances of being picked by radio DJs.

The most serious set-backs for Belarusian in the last five years was the decision of Belarusian television to use Russian for its news broadcasts and the allocation of the frequency formerly used by the state radio station *Stalica* to a Russian language broadcaster.

Most programmes are broadcast in Belarusian on the first and second state radio channels, which have the largest number of listeners across the country, according to Novak, a private pollster. But the language has almost disappeared from the television stations, except for a few remaining programs and commercials in Belarusian.

There is, probably, no need to cite other examples to illustrate that the Belarusian public lacks the will and resolve to resist the government's discriminatory language policy. The intensive Belarusianisation of the early 1990s met only with sporadic and disorganised protests, mainly by former Soviet military officers who had moved to Belarus following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany. The Lukašenka government's Russification

policy also met with limited resistance. Protests took place in Minsk (the underground operation of the Belarusian Humanities Lyceum, occasional demonstrations by students and youths) Hrodna (the case of Ahata Macko and the expulsion of Yauhien Skrabutan from Hrodna State University for the graffiti «Stop Russification»), Horki (the Karalkou family by open protests forced the authorities to provide instruction for their children in Belarusian), and Žodzina (a similar campaign was successfully conducted by the Łapicki family). These were mostly cultural, not political protests, which, however, were part of a broader campaign of resistance to authoritarianism.

Most teachers, parents and activists give preference to behind-the-scenes efforts in defence of Belarusian-language instruction rather than to public protests because they earnestly believe that disturbances provoke the authorities into using a powerful repressive mechanism.

Rock music: Belarusian-language role models

Rock musicians chose a different strategy. Like some writers and artists, they did not try to hide their civic position and openly condemned the authorities' policies. Bands like NRM, Zet and Neuro Dubel (Minsk-based punk rockers who declared their decision to switch to Belarusian in 2003 starting with the song *Ja Pamru Tut* [I Will Die Here], although they wrote lyrics in Russian in the 1990s) have released rebellious songs that inspired the young generation. A broadcasting ban imposed on about 20 bands made their music even more attractive. Tens of thousands of pirate copies of their discs are distributed, while artists like Lavon Volski can attract thousands of fans to their concerts without advertising.

Rockers entertained protesters during week-long tent-camp demonstration held at Kastryčnickaja Square in Minsk

after Lukašenka's declared re-election for a third presidential term in March 2006. Their appearances were received more enthusiastically than speeches of politicians.

Politics: Language of prisoners

"A. Milinkievič fluently replied in Russian and Belarusian depending on the language of a question," noted Belorusy i Rynok, the country's leading independent business weekly, after Belarusian television had broadcast first televised addresses by presidential candidates. Milinkievič was the only candidate who willingly spoke in Belarusian. Otherwise the Belarusian language was absent from the 2006 presidential elections, both from other candidates' statements and the manifestos.

The four presidential candidates, including Milinkievič, failed to raise the language issue and offer ways to change the status quo. The pro-democracy coalition, which represented diverse political forces and desperately sought to create itself an attractive image, left the complicated language issue off its agenda and concentrated on socio-economic promises in a bid to attract un-



Andrej Lankievič

Lavon Volski, rock singer.

decided voters who supported neither Łukašenka nor the major opposition parties. Regretfully, no surveys were conducted after the election to assess the strategy's effectiveness.

Interestingly, Łukašenka did not make a single statement in Belarusian during his campaign, unlike during the 2001 presidential election. Probably, Łukašenka's 2001 campaign managers sought to disorientate pro-democracy nationalists unhappy with the selection of trade union boss Uładzimir Hančaryk, who could not speak Belarusian fluently, as the opposition's common candidate. In 2006, Łukašenka had no chance to outperform Milinkievič in terms of appeal for nationalists.

Being absent from the campaign, Belarusian dominated in speeches, songs, and signs at Kastryčnickaja Ploshcha (Square) during protests in the wake of the election. It was the everyday language of many of the 1,200 jailed protesters. The concentration of Belarusian-language speakers at Akrescina Street, where the jail is located, was higher at the time than in any other street of the capital.

Government discourse: Finance in order to control

There is not a single Belarusian speaker in the Łukašenka government. There is not a single Belarusian speaker among the officers of the Armed Forces and the Committee for State Security (KGB). The composition of society is much different, especially taking into consideration the fact that the language's cultural value is greater than its role as a means of communication. Therefore, Łukašenka's discourse is ambivalent. It perpetuates the Soviet stereotype that the Belarusian language is something secondary, temporary, additional, transitional, inferior, not self-sufficient, mostly symbolic, but on the other hand ancient, indigenous, popular and folksy.

The Łukašenka government recognises the language's right to exist in a certain social and cultural niche, but denies its right to claim dominant status in the state, just as it denies Belarusian culture equal status with Russian culture.

Government establishments maintain a certain limited proportion of cultural products in Belarusian. In 2006, plays in Belarusian accounted for 38 percent of the theatres' repertoires, as Deputy Culture Minister Uładzimir Rylatka noted during an interview with *Interfax*. The proportion of books published in Belarusian is between 12 and 15 percent of the total number of printed copies.

The Łukašenka government is guided by the Soviet government's principle "finance in order to control." The government finances dull literary magazines led by KGB placemen, academic institutions led by KGB placemen who sack prominent scientists, and theatres that remove Kupała's *Tutejšyja* from the repertoire because the play is very popular with nationalists. The simulacrum profane culture. The same does the hyper-simulacrum — a Russified version of the Belarusian language, which has been developed since 1933 on the initiative of Iosif Stalin, and which is being enforced by the current Belarusian authorities.

The authorities seek a total control, including over the language. In a recent move, Łukašenka ordered the adoption of changes to the Belarusian spelling and punctuation intended to ban a handful of the remaining independent publications and cultural projects for using "unauthorised" orthography. The changes were blocked in 1998 and 2003, but enacted in 2006. Since then, the word "president" must be always capitalised in Belarusian, whereas in Russian the same word requires a lower case. By the same logic, in a couple of years the authorities may be sentencing proofreaders and editors to forced labour for failure to comply with the new requirement.

Despite the authorities' suspicious attitude to Belarusian speak-

ers, some representatives of the ruling elite use Belarusian. Culture University Rector Jadviha Hryharovič and Michail Finbierh, director of the National Symphonic and Variety Music Orchestra, both always speak Belarusian in public. Interestingly, Ms. Hryharovič was appointed to the 2nd Council of the Republic, the upper chamber of the Łukašenka-controlled parliament, while Mr. Finbierh was given a seat on the 3rd Council of the Republic, as if the authorities do not want to have more than one Belarusian speaker in the upper house.

Łukašenka and his entourage found themselves in a dilemma as far as language and other aspects of ethnic identity are concerned. On the one hand, the public expects them to be wise and far-sighted leaders who build and consolidate the independent state. The growing appetites of Russian capitalists cause concern and prompt the authorities to reinforce barriers that defend the country from Russia's economic expansion. Naturally, ethnic identity, including the Belarusian language, is one of these barriers. On the other hand, the Belarusian ruler fears national sentiments and the possibility of using these sentiments to bolster state ideology, because of a powerful irrational element. The regime does not want the Belarusians to be loyal to the nation, but it wants them to be loyal to the president, the owner and chief executive of the financial and industrial group called the Republic of Belarus.

The government's policies consist of incoherent and often conflicting steps, indecisive restrictions and fake support, empty promises and threats. In an attempt to reconstruct the Soviet indoctrination and control system penetrating all layers of society from grassroots upward, the authorities introduced state ideology in 2002 and established ideology offices, which work closely with the KGB, within the executive authorities. But the effort met with cold reaction of the public. The security and law enforcement agencies, which have not changed

much since the Soviet era, embrace and strictly follow the government's "ideology guidelines," while private businesses stay unaffected because they are not interested in the preservation of the Lukashenka-style stability. Economic conditions and ownership relations have changed in the last 15 years, so has the mass mentality.

Advertising: Ideal beauty

The advertising industry exploits mass mentality stereotypes. Some manufacturers have consistently used Belarusian in their advertisements and commercials. Unlike in the early 1990s, not only Belarusian producers but also international corporations' dealers in Belarus were using Belarusian in the 2000s: Samsung with its commercial "Imagine Ideal Beauty," Renault with "For Those Who Always Win," Gallina Blanca, Pepsi, Poland's *Sniezka* to name but few. Even Russia's MTS uses a Belarusian-language slogan — a good illustration of the trend.

The use of Belarusian to advertise goods targeting youths and consumers with higher-than-the-average income reflects a change in public perception of the language.

This may help explain why after 12 years under the rule of Łukašenka (who once gave unequivocal instructions to his government by his statement that "it is impossible to say great things in Belarusian. This is a poor language. There are only two rich languages in the world — English and Russian,") 2.4 percent of pupils were willing to receive instruction in Belarusian in Minsk in 2006, whereas not a single pupil was taught all subjects in Belarusian in the Belarusian capital in 1988. Both the underground Belarusian Lyceum and the Łukašenka-supported 23rd Gymnasium are held in high esteem in the capital. Among their students and graduates are children of high-ranking officials, big businesspeople and artistic elite families.



Julija Daraškiewicz

The use of Belarusian to advertise goods targeting youths and consumers with higher-than-average income reflects a change in public perception of the language.

Belarusian is no longer the language of villages, collective farms and radio programmes transmitted via cable. This is the language of teenagers, non-establishment youths, artistic circles, intellectuals, street protesters, people with pro-Western views and non-conformists. This is the language of challenge. It excites strong political sentiments in ordinary Belarusians.

Any comparison of Belarus with other nations would be flawed because the country has stuck in a time warp. Belarusian nationalism emerged quite late — in 1880s-1890s in the backward Russian Empire. It was not until the late 1990s that the international community started to take interest and show solidarity with Belarus' civic society.

Catalan, Ukrainian or Irish?

In the early 1990s many Russian-speaking intellectuals predicted that Belarusian would suffer the same fate as Gaelic, saying that like the Irish, Belarusian nationalists would speak the

language of colonisers and Belarusian would die out.

Belarusian nationalists, for their part, hoped that the language would see a broader use as result of government support and positive discrimination against other languages, similar to the situation in Ukraine, where 80 percent of the pupils receive instruction in Ukrainian and influential media and politicians use the Ukrainian language.

Their dreams have not come true, and in a symbolic development just one month before the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Łukašenka employed his propaganda machine once again to win a referendum that enabled him to run for the presidency an unlimited number of times.

Catalonia is an example that inspires hope for the revival of Belarusian. The percentage of local residents who speak Catalan in everyday life or can speak Catalan has been rising since the fall of Franco's dictatorship. Democracy gave Catalan culture an opportunity to develop, while improvements to the secondary and higher education system created opportunities for those who want to learn and speak the Catalan language.

One cannot see through ice which way the river flows. It is not until the dictatorship falls that it will be possible to see whether the Belarusian national spirit weakened or strengthened during Łukašenka's rule. Only a free and fair election can show the level of support for political forces that seek the revival of Belarusian and want it to be the country's only official language.

Clearly, as long as Belarusian remains the language of the heart it retains a chance of becoming also the language of minds. As long as Belarusian is the language of choice of protesters at Kastryčnickaja Ploshcha, it has a chance to become the language of choice for people in the streets. Belarusian intellectuals occasionally voice concern about the politicisation of the language and its use as a symbol of a certain political force.

However, since the language is associated with protest and a national liberation movement, it attracts young people. In this sense, Belarusian is in much better position than it was in the late Soviet period. The authorities' maniacal efforts to block communication between Belarusian-speaking intellectuals and the public and suppress Belarusian schools, scholars and periodicals prove that the authoritarian government sees the language as a political tool that helps stir up public activity. This is the way it is. Among Belarus' regions, Homiel has the lowest percentage (17 percent) of pupils taught in Belarusian. This is the region where Łukašenka gains the largest percentage of votes in every election.

The fate of the Belarusian language and culture is inseparable from the fate of democracy and civic society.