

Language policy in Belarus

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Abstract

This short article brings together previous literature on language policy in Belarus. Having formerly been a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and now an established independent nation, the article explores the influence of Belarus' various changes in identity. It reflects broadly on the language policies of the nations it was once a part of, outlining the fluctuating journey of the Belarusian language through periods of widespread usage and acceptance to periods of oppression. A more thorough analysis is provided of the impact of language policy post-independence (and also, of the Law on Languages which slightly predates the declaration of independence), from the initial glimmer of hope provided by the establishment of Belarusian as the sole official language to the long-term decline imposed upon the Belarusian public by pro-Russian 'dictator' Lukashenko. The article concludes by highlighting recent activity that could offer an optimistic outlook for the future.

Keywords: Belarus, Belarusian, Russian, language policy, language choice, language utilisation

1 Introduction

Belarusian is one of the two state languages in the Eastern European country of Belarus, alongside Russian. This article will examine language policies and the positive or negative impact they have had on the language. Firstly, it will provide an overview of the history of pre-independence policy that impacted on the Belarusian language. Secondly, it will explore in detail language policy that has shaped the current state of the Belarusian language in post-soviet Belarus.

2 Pre-1990

Belarusian was once one of Europe's major languages. In 1517, Old Belarusian (or Ruthenian) became the third language in which the Bible was printed in Europe. From the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, it was the official language of the Grand Duchy of

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Lithuania, a former state that extended to the present-day territory of all or part of the majority of the Eastern European states (Belarus Digest (BD) 2011a; Franciśak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society (FSBLS) 2012).

After the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland united to form the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1596, Old Belarusian remained the official language in the former until it was replaced by Polish one century later. According to the FSBLS (2012), this led to a decline in the usage of Old Belarusian in its written form, but it remained widely spoken, particularly for the purpose of telling folklore.

The Commonwealth dissolved in 1795 after which Belarus fell under the territory of the Russian Empire. Shortly after this, the first texts written in the modern Belarusian language started to appear (FSBLS 2012). However, a number of policies were passed that were of a discriminatory nature towards the language. According to the FSBLS (2012), between 1839 and 1867, legislation was passed that:

- prohibited preaching in Belarusian;
- banned the use of Belarusian in educational establishments;
- banned the printing of books in Belarusian.

Despite this, however, there remained a significant population of Belarusian speakers; around six million according to the 1897 Russian Empire Census (FSBLS 2012).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a “literary language and culture revitalization” began, which received state support when Belarus became part of the Union of Soviet State Republics (USSR) in the 1920s (FSBLS 2012). The percentage of schools that taught in Belarusian rose from 28.4% in 1924-1925 to 93.8% five years later. Belarusian became the main language used in newspapers and books in Belarus (then the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR)) and was one of the four official languages of the USSR (Bekus 2013; FSBLS 2012).

Once again the situation turned around in the 1930s when, according to the FSBLS (2012), “around 85% of Belarusian writers and scientists were subject to repressions” and “[t]he majority were executed”. Alongside this, the language was made to be more like the Russian language through the process of Russification (FSBLS 2012), which Bekus (2013:4) argues “led to the marginalisation of ethnic culture and language in public life”. Belarusian continued to be increasingly treated as secondary to Russian up to and including the 1980s (Bekus 2013).

3 Law on Languages and declaration of independence

In January 1990, the BSSR adopted ‘The Law of the BSSR on the Languages in the Byelorussian SSR’, which stated that the sole official language would be Belarusian, with Russian reserved for use in official communication with people from other parts of the USSR (FSBLS 2012; Ulasiuk 2011; Zaprudski 2002). Zaprudski (2002) argues that the purpose of the Law on Languages was to defend the weakened Belarusian language and that the law extended its use in an attempt to restore its status as a major language. A few months after the adoption of this law, the FSBLS and the BSSR’s Ministry of Education met to consider the ways in which the law could be implemented.

On declaring independence in July 1990, the Law on Languages was partially adopted by the Republic of Belarus and in September 1990, leading on from the pre-independence meeting, a programme was adopted that outlined how the law would be implemented over the course of the next decade. The declaration of independence also led, at first, to an increased level of democracy including a multi-party system, and language became a major topic within political discourse, with two opposing views. Those in power backed the Law on Languages, with its stipulation of Belarusian as the sole official language, arguing that it was a part of the renewed sense of national identity and needed to be protected after the decades (arguably, centuries) of marginalisation and associated decline in usage. One view is that without such support for the Belarusian language, it would simply cease to be important and continue to lose its place in society, which would mean that those who wished to speak their mother tongue would be limited as to the environments in which this could be realised. On the other side of the argument were a number of opposing political parties, such as the Movement for Democratic Reform, which strongly criticised the Law on Languages, arguing that it actually limited freedom of choice, that people should be able to freely choose which language they wish to speak and not be limited to only speaking Belarusian (Bekus 2013; Ulasiuk 2011; Zaprudski 2002). They held the view that Belarus' largest political party, the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), were guilty of nationalism and "russophobia" and labelled the law "antidemocratic and anti-liberal" (Zaprudski 2002:34). They argued for Russian to be given equal status as Belarusian and for choice in the language of education (Zaprudski 2002). According to the BD (2011b), "[i]n the mid-1990s, the language question was one of the most contested in Belarusian politics".

Two laws were passed in mid-to-late 1991; one made reference to the Law on Languages and the other offered some support for it. Language issues continued to be increasingly debated in parliament in 1992 and 1993, and the BPF began to lose support. Attempts to keep the existing language policy within a revised constitution were not supported by parliament, and neither was a subsequent attempt to leave it out (Zaprudski 2002). Meanwhile, Zaprudski (2002:35) states, "[t]he practical implementation of the law on language encountered great difficulties" with some drawing associations between economic difficulties and the new policy's favouring of a weaker language. There was noticeable change in the education system in favour of the Belarusian language, however elsewhere there was little or no effort made to implement the law. One major issue that the implementation of the law faced was that it defined no sanctions for its violation, which effectively served to condone the choice of many to make little or no effort to implement it. Attempts by the Minsk City Council and the FSBLs to provide the law with disciplinary power were dismissed. In addition, no institutions had been established with the purpose of dealing with language issues (FSBLs 2012; Ulasiuk 2011; Zaprudski 2002).

When the new constitution came into effect in March 1994, it undermined the Belarusian language in multiple ways, further reducing the chances of Belarusian regaining the status of a major language. The constitution stated that it was permissible to use Russian not only in international communication (the 1990 Law on Languages having permitted the use of Russian for communication with those from parts of the USSR other than the BSSR), but also in domestic inter-ethnic communication. Furthermore, it provided parents with the right to choose in which language their child would be educated (FSBLs

2012; Ulasiuk 2011; Zaprudski 2002).

4 First president and the 1995 referendum

In July 1994, Alexander Lukashenko became the first president of the Republic of Belarus. Lukashenko had openly supported pro-choice side of the language debate during his presidential bid (Zaprudski 2002).

The debate started to heat up in the autumn of 1994 with a failed attempt to initiate a referendum on the official language of Belarus and other issues, a pro-choice demonstration and a pro-Belarusian demonstration as well as various associated campaigns all taking place. Lukashenko then announced his intentions to hold a referendum, but permission was not granted by parliament. Nevertheless, Lukashenko went ahead and held the referendum in May 1995, which resulted in Russian gaining equal legal status as Belarusian with 88.3% of votes in favour (53.9% of all eligible voters). This referendum was highly controversial, violating the Law on Referenda and the constitution, as well as attracting criticism from international bodies such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the US State Department for a number of issues including the tight control of the views expressed in the media (FSBLS 2012; Nohlen and Stöver 2010; Preiherman 2012; Ulasiuk 2011; Zaprudski 2002). Subsequent to the result of the referendum, the Belarusian PEN Centre (1995, as cited in Zaprudski 2002:38), an association of literary professionals, released this statement on the likely impact it would have on the Belarusian language:

In practice, the introduction of Russian as the second official language will affirm today's real disparity of the Belarusian language and will assist in eliminating it, which means a continuation of the policy of russification and denationalisation of the Belarusian people previously pursued by the Russian empire and then the USSR.

The pro-Belarusian voice was weakened further by the lack of BPF representatives in the new parliament elected in May and December 1995. The government did not waste any time in implementing the new policy of language choice, particularly in the domain of education. The Ministry of Education introduced the option of taking an entrance exam for higher education and special secondary educational establishments on the Russian language instead of the Belarusian language within a week of the referendum. The next month, they introduced guidelines that stated it was up to parents to decide in which language their child would be educated from kindergarten to fourth grade. This change made a quick, stark impact, with an increase from 25% to 62% of children being educated in Russian in first grade, consequently causing the percentage studying in Belarusian to fall from 75% to 38%. A further fall to 32% was seen in 1996, with Russian becoming the language of first grade education for 68% of children. Similar but less significant movement in the language of education was seen in higher grades (Giger and Sloboda 2008; Ulasiuk 2011; Zaprudski 2002).

Beyond the steep decline in the number of children being educated in Belarusian, the referendum result and subsequent changes to language policy led to deeper issues.

Precisely because of the increased demand for Russian-language education and the consequential decreased demand for Belarusian-language education, those who did wish to have their children educated in Belarusian were forced into a difficult situation. Due to the lack of support for Belarusian-language education, there were often not enough applications in any given school to warrant forming a Belarusian-language class, meaning parents had the choice to either give up their wish for their children to be taught in Belarusian or look elsewhere. This created a domino effect with school after school only offering Russian-language education, in some cases meaning those wishing for their child to be taught in Belarusian having to frequently move their children. Complaints against the violation of linguistic human rights were regularly dismissed. Concerns about the way in which the Russian language had been forced into the education system were raised by the United Civil Party of Belarus (FSBLS 2012; Giger and Sloboda 2008; Zaprudski 2002).

The Law on Languages was then revised three years later in 1998, with the only amendments being the Russian language having equal status and the removal of a statement about the need to protect the Belarusian language. Throughout the late 1990s the dominance of Russian became prevalent in local and national administrative bodies with increased repression of the Belarusian language. The use of the Belarusian language started to become associated with the voice of the opposition and resistance to Lukashenko and his government (Bekus 2013; FSBLS 2012; Giger and Sloboda 2008; Zaprudski 2002). Zaprudski (2002:40) argues that the state policy of the late 1990s was to “[force] Belarusian out of normal, everyday use and into the realm of a marginal “opposition-related” phenomenon”.

5 Current situation

In figure 1 below, it can be seen that the language policy of Lukashenko’s government has resulted in a dramatic drop in the prevalence of the Belarusian language in Belarusian society.

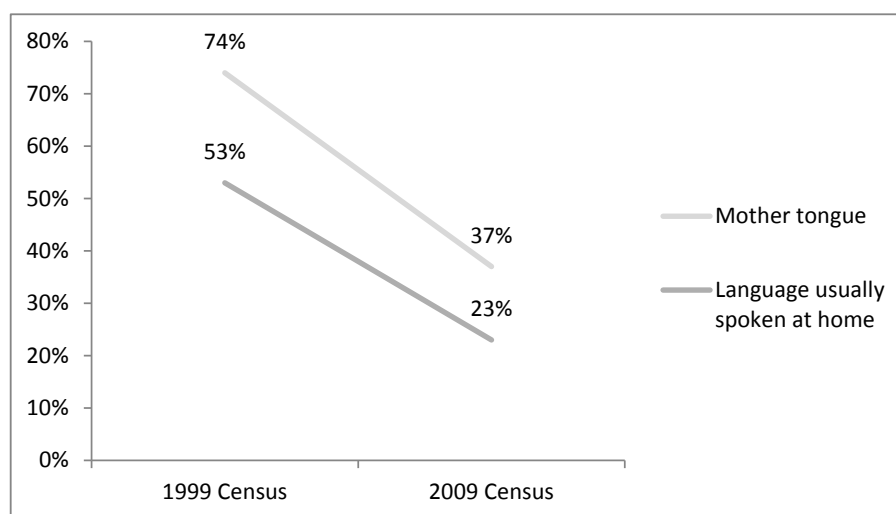


Figure 1: Prevalence of Belarusian language in society (FSBLS 2012)

Using the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (Lewis and Simons 2010), Lewis *et al.* (2013) place the Belarusian language at level one, meaning that “[t]he language has been developed to the point that it is used and sustained by institutions beyond the home and community”. However, Moseley (2010), on behalf of UNESCO, classifies the language as “vulnerable”, meaning “most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)”. The BD (2011b) states that “[e]ducation and schooling in the Belarusian language are marginalized, and Belarusian is almost never used in official communication”. In 2011, Belarusian was the sole language of education for only 18% in school (a drop of 14% from 1996), 12% in kindergarten and 1% in university. A number of rights have come to be regularly violated for Belarusian speakers, including access to their own language in the areas of communication with administrative bodies, laws, education, media and commerce (FSBLS 2012; Giger and Sloboda 2008).

In the last few years, however, the future of the Belarusian language has started to look slightly more positive than had been the case for the previous decade and a half. Whilst it is widely felt that the government’s position remains pro-Russification, it has become easier for citizens to exercise their rights. Smok (2013) states that “as the political environment is changing, Lukashenka is less concerned with the “opposition” language. The government lets lower level bureaucrats deal with it”. Smok (2013) reported a number of recent cases in which the linguistic human rights of Belarusian people to the use of and access to the Belarusian language had been successfully defended:

- in January 2013, tickets for public transport in Minsk started to be printed in Russian, but a campaign successfully managed to get this change reverted;
- in August 2013, a campaign was successful in getting announcements on the underground in Minsk to be made in Belarusian, after new announcements had been given in Russian;
- in September 2013, Hlieb Labadzenka successfully sued his district’s director of housing services for responding to him in Russian when he had written and requested a response in Belarusian, which broke the law with regard to how to address people.

These three cases, which have received support from authorities, illustrate a recent trend towards the citizens of Belarus exercising their linguistic human rights as a means to reverse the decades of Russification they have faced and to resist any further Russification (Smok 2013). The FSBLS (2012) state that the majority of people agree that it should be compulsory for both languages to be used in public institutions and that Belarusian should actually dominate.

Work is being published on the ways in which the Belarusian language can counter a history of Russification. In a monograph described in a review as “a pioneering work in the troubled world of Belarusian orthography and word formation” (McMillin 2013), Harbacki (2012) outlines to what degree the Belarusian language has been subject to Russification. He goes on to identify feminisation of agent nouns as a way of countering this, in that Belarusian has historically favoured more feminine forms where Russian has historically had a patriarchal, masculine preference.

Even the FSBLs are somewhat optimistic about the future status of the Belarusian language based on successful recent work and cases and the results of attitudinal surveys, but they state that the recent increase of pressure must be maintained (FSBLs 2012; Smok 2013).

6 Conclusion

The Russification of Belarus, through the state-supported dominance of the Russian language, and also the Russification of the Belarusian language itself, remain contentious topics within current discourse in the fields of politics, the media and academia, nearly two decades after Russian was given equal status as Belarusian as a state language. However, whilst the impact of Lukashenko's government's controversial language policies on the Belarusian language has been immense, positive signs are starting to emerge and further hope might be drawn from the potential for a new president in 2015, whether or not they are deemed to be democratically elected (Moscow Times 2013).

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