

WHO SPEAKS BELARUSIAN? THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

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The article presents the current situation of the Belarusian language and of its speakers. The analysis is based on empirical material collected with the use of ethnographic methods during the period from 1998 to 2005 and 2010, as well as on information found in the professional literature on this subject and on the Internet. The article explains why Belarusian is seen not only as a communication code, but also as a stigma and a manifestation of political views, and how this situation shapes the attitudes towards the language. Additionally, the article presents efforts focused on the promotion of Belarusian language and culture undertaken by informal groups, such as *Spajemstvo* or “Let’s Be Belarusians!” The article also shows the difference between the perceived and real use of Belarusian in everyday life.

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Artykuł poświęcony jest współczesnej sytuacji języka białoruskiego i jego użytkownikom. Źródłem analiz są materiały empiryczne zebrane metodą etnograficzną, podczas badań prowadzonych od 1998 do 2005 i w 2010 roku, literatura tematu oraz dane, pochodzące z Internetu. Wyjaśnia z czego wynika zróżnicowane postrzeganie języka białoruskiego – jako kodu komunikowania, stygmatu, manifestacji poglądów politycznych i jaki ma to wpływ na stosunek do tego języka. Opisane zostały także działania na rzecz białoruszczyzny i kształtowania środowiska białoruskojęzycznego, podejmowane przez nieformalne grupy, takie jak *Spajemstvo* (lata 90. XX wieku), czy kampanię „Bądźmy Białorusinami!” – funkcjonującą od 2008 roku w Internecie i w rzeczywistości. Ważnym wątkiem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na to, komu przypisywane jest posługiwanie się językiem białoruskim, a kto rzeczywiście z niego korzysta w codziennym życiu.

Keywords: Belarus, bilingualism, grass root movement, national identity, social activism, social organisation, *Trasianka*, vulnerable language

“A person is defined by the language they speak”¹ (KW. Archives. Interview 20). This is what I heard during one of the first conversations I recorded during the ethnological

¹ Orig. “Čalavek eś’c’ tym, na ŕkoj move eñ razmaŭlæ”. All quotations are from recorded and transcribed conversations. The original quotations in Belarusian and the information about the interlocutors (limited to gender, age, place and the year the conversation was recorded) are provided in the footnotes. The entire material collected during research in Belarus is held in the author’s archives.

research I conducted in the Republic of Belarus². At first I thought that these words pertained to me as the researcher, who, not fluent in Belarusian, was asking questions by mixing Polish, Russian and Belarusian words. However, remembering the rule that one should use the language of the researched community, I did not give up and with time, my questions became clearer and the conversations started to flow naturally. It was then that I understood what the above comment about the defining properties of language meant. It referred to the relationship between language and national identity, which was very meaningful in the Belarusian context.

The fall of the USSR and the creation of the Republic of Belarus in place of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) raised many questions for the citizens of this country. One of the questions pertained to language, understood in national and communication terms. However, the answers varied and they depended on the context and the interlocutor. The same was not only true for average citizens, but also for the intellectual elite and power holders.

With this in mind, the objective of this article is to present the current situation of the Belarusian language and to identify and describe its users and the contexts in which the language is being used³. The activities shaping Belarusian culture will also be described.

A FEW NUMBERS

According to the 2009 national census⁴, the population of Belarus is 9,503,807 people, including 7,957,252 (83.7%) Belarusians, 785,084 (8.3%) Russians, and 761,471 (8%) from other nationalities⁵. The language data included in the 2009 census is divided into two categories: the declared language for home communication and the declared language for general communication. Belarusian for home communication was declared by 4,841,319 (approximately 61%) people and 2,073,853 (approximately 26%) declared they use Belarusian for general communication. By contrast, 2,943,817 (approximately 37%) indicated Russian as the language of home communication and

² The research was conducted from 1998 to 2005, and in 2010 in Minsk and the surrounding areas, with the use of ethnographic methodology (conversational interview), and several conversations per person. There were 95 subjects, 80 of them declared themselves to be Belarusian. Out of the 15 non-Belarusians, 11 were Russians. Conversations were conducted in Belarusian, Russian and occasionally in *Trasianka*, a popular language mix in Belarus.

³ The article does not deal with issues related to the use of the Belarusian language in religious institutions (including the Roman Catholic Church). This subject requires a separate, detailed discussion.

⁴ The 2009 census was the most recent national survey in the Republic of Belarus. The next is planned for 2019.

⁵ Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus. http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/perepic/2009/vihod_tables/5.8-0.pdf, access: 23.01.2014. See also: <http://census.belstat.gov.by/pdf/PopulationNation-ru-RU.pdf>.

5,551,527 (approximately 70%) as the language of general communication. Bilingualism was declared by 2,216,374 (approximately 28%) of Belarusians⁶.

Analysis of data from the 1999 and 2009 census indicates a decline in the use of Belarusian, both for home and general communication. In 1999, 85.6% of Belarusians declared Belarusian as the language of home communication and 41.3% as the language of general communication⁷.

In March 2012, a social organization “Let’s Be Belarusians!” and the Laboratory for Axiometrical Research NOVAK, conducted a survey called *Belarusian, the Language of the Elite and the Opposition*⁸. In this survey, 57.2% declared Belarusian and 78.7% Russian as their language of communication. The total number indicated that 35% of the surveyed population were bilingual. The survey also aimed to assess the number of people, who “know” Belarusian and those who “actually use it”. The results indicated that 23.4% know the language, but only 3.9% use it. The comparison of the 2012 and 2009 data showed a decrease of 10% in the ‘know’ group and of 2% in the “use” group.

Additionally in 2007, the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies conducted a survey pertaining to the use of Belarusian by the President of Belarus. The results indicated that 34.3% did not see the need for the President to speak Belarusian, 34.1% thought that the President should address citizens in Belarusian on special occasions, such as national holidays, and 29.7% wanted the President to use Belarusian in daily communication (Eberhardt 2008, 25).

On the one hand, the above noted examples indicate the decline in the number of users declaring Belarusian as the language they know and use and, on the other hand, they signal an ambivalent attitude to this language. As the result, an application to declare Belarusian as an endangered language was filed and the language was designated as ‘vulnerable’ in the UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger, on 30 May 2013⁹.

THE SITUATION OF THE BELARUSIAN LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

The data presented in the first section of the paper, although important, does not explain the causes of the vulnerable position of the Belarusian language. Therefore, the collected narrations provide additional information on the current situation of this

⁶ Nacional’nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus. http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/perepic/2009/vihod_tables/5.8-0.pdf, access: 23.01.2014.

⁷ Nacional’nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus. http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/perepic/2009/vihod_tables/5.8-0.pdf, access: 23.01.2014.

⁸ Vyniki sacyâlagičnaj apytanki: belaruskâ mova – mova èlity çì apazicyj. <http://www.tbm-mova.by/monitoring17.html>, access: 23.01.2014.

⁹ UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap/language-id-335.html>, access: 04.02.2014.

language. Almost all conversations pertaining to this subject started with an assessment that the language issue is difficult. As justification, people often added that “Belarusians do not speak Belarusian not because they do not want to, but because they forgot how to”¹⁰ (KW. Archives. Interview 16). They also tried to explain the causes that led to this situation. Many historical facts, memories, and stories of personal experiences appeared in the collected narrations. The events mentioned in the interviews went back to the 19th century and included, for example, the ban imposed by the Tsar on speaking Belarusian in public places¹¹, but also to the concerted efforts to develop Belarusian language and culture, called Belarussification¹², which took place during the 1920s and 1930s, or to the repressions imposed by the Soviet authorities on Belarusian intellectuals in the 1930s. Most of the interviewees knew about these events from books and the fact that they recalled them during the interviews indicates that the state of the Belarusian language has long been ambivalent.

Other events recalled by the interviewees took place in the 20th century, and hence had been witnessed by some of them. People evoked the time of World War II¹³ and the post war period, when the Soviet nation was shaped. The Soviet nation building process included tactics such as the strengthening of the pro-Russian administration¹⁴, repatriations¹⁵, increasing the membership of the Communist Party¹⁶, and an increased Russification¹⁷. Out of all the tools used in the process of building the Soviet nation Russification was the most significant as it followed the directive of Nikita Khrushchev, who during the celebration of the 40th Anniversary of the BSSR in Minsk said that “the sooner we all start speaking Russian, the sooner we will build

¹⁰ Orig. “Belarusy ne razmaŭláuć na belaruskaj move ne tamu što ne hoćuć, a prosta âny zabyli âe”.

¹¹ It refers to the 1830s ban on sermons in Belarusian, connected to the revocation of resolutions of the 1596 Union of Brest, which established the Greek Catholic Church in Belarus (Szybieka 2002, 77).

¹² In Belarusian historiography, Belarussification denotes the period of Belarusian language and culture development.

¹³ During World War II approximately 2,700,000 of Belarusians were killed (on in four people). A memorial in Khatyn commemorates the lives lost and all towns and villages that were burnt entirely at the time.

¹⁴ From 1945 to 1955, approximately a million Belarusians (cultural and professional elite) were deported and replaced with Russians. Russians were also placed in the positions of power in the national and local administration (Mironowicz 1999, 183).

¹⁵ From 1947 to 1953, approximately 90.000 Belarusian workers left their homeland and were replaced by Russians (Szybieka 2002, 371).

¹⁶ After 1945, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus adhered to the resolution of shaping the society in the spirit of the Soviet patriotism, and in hatred towards the German invaders (Szybieka 2002, 372–373).

¹⁷ Russification intensified after the 1945 toast by Joseph Stalin, in which he called the Russian nation the leading power of the Soviet Union (Szybieka 2002, 372). In 1951 censorship of literature was imposed and the number of Belarusian newspapers and periodicals was reduced. In the 1960s the majority of cultural institutions used Russian as the official language (Mironowicz 1999, 188–189, 211).

communism”¹⁸ (Szybieka 2002, 375). The implementation of this postulate was visible in the public and private sphere and most of all in education¹⁹. The ubiquitous Russian popularized Communist propaganda while pushing national Belarusian messages to the level of ethnography and folklore (Radzik 2000, 76). These concerted efforts contributed to the “progress of denationalization and de-Belarusification” (Lucèvič 2010, 236). Moreover, the Soviet propaganda of that time promised benefits resulting from using Russian. One of the interviewees recalled:

“At the time I was more keen to use Russian, but it was my parents’ fault, because they decided for me. They thought that speaking Russian was more prestigious”²⁰ (KW. Archives. Interview 27).

The spread of education in Russian²¹, to the detriment of Belarusian schools, was a sign of those times. In that period, Belarusian schools kept functioning only in smaller towns and villages. All city schools were Russian. They offered classes in Belarusian, but only as an elective subject. Additionally, a rule allowing exemption from learning Belarusian on the grounds of a doctor’s note and parents’ request was introduced (Dubànecki 1997, 45, Trusau 2007, 115). One of the interviewees spoke about it:

“When I started school, you did not have to study Belarusian. Parents provided all kinds of excuses, be it health reasons or family problems. Any reason was good to get an exemption from Belarusian class”²² (KW. Archives. Interview 58).

At the end of the 1960s, a division had occurred with respect to the use of language. Russian became the language of cities and Belarusian the language of rural areas. Hence, the city was associated with Russian, education, social advancement, and with the elites while the country was equated with Belarusian, lack of education, backwardness and lack of culture. This issue was strongly emphasized in the interviews:

¹⁸ This was a paraphrase of the 1956 Tashkent resolution stating that ‘Russian should become the second official language for all nations belonging to the Soviet Union and it should be the source of lexical enrichment for their native languages’ (Mironowicz 1999, 210).

¹⁹ From 1949 to 1951, a seven-year primary education was mandatory and it was extended to eleven years after 1959. Due to the initial lack of Belarusian teaching staff, Russian teachers were brought in. Later, local Belarusian teaching staff was trained, but the teachers’ education was in Russian. Initially, it led to bilingualism at schools. After 1951, Belarusian was no longer obligatory as the language of instruction or examination. Beginning in the 1970s, the programs of study were designed in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) (Szybieka 2002, 375, 400).

²⁰ Orig. “À bol’s aryntavaušà na ruskuù movu, u gètym vïnavatyâ mae bac’ki – àny zrabili takì vybar, tamu što ruski àzyk ličylsà znač’ bol’s prèstyžna”.

²¹ All institutions of higher education provided instruction in Russian (with the exception of the Departments of Philology, where one could specialize in Russian or Belarusian).

²² Orig. “Kagda à pastupila ũ školu bylo tak, što nas asvabadžali ad belaruskava àzyka, to est’ po kakim- liba pryčynam: to po sastaàn’ni zdaroviâ, to es’li ũ kago-ta nepalnacènnaâ sâm’ à. Lùbaâ pryčyna padhodžila dlâ tavo što by asvabadzic’ rebënka ad belaruskava àzyka”.

“When I arrived in Minsk in 1981, I felt strange, but I knew that in the cities people did not speak Belarusian. My cousins, who went to the city to study, told me about it. They had adopted the Russian lifestyle and they spoke Russian, so I also tried to speak Russian, when I moved there”²³ (KW. Archives. Interview 94).

With time, terms such as, “the language of the country”, “rural language”, “farmer’s language”, “futureless language”, “dirty language”, and “broken Russian” became equated with Belarusian, while terms such as, “high language”, “language of education”, and “language of intelligent people” became to denote Russian.

The first significant signs of change occurred in the 1980s and were brought about by protests organized in defence of Belarusian. The protests included letters²⁴ written by Belarusian intellectuals to Mikhail Gorbachev and an underground publication *Mother Tongue and the Moral-Aesthetic Progress*²⁵ by Aleg Bembel (1985)²⁶. These efforts resulted in small incremental changes in the attitude towards the Belarusian language and its speakers. It showed that also educated people speak Belarusian. Subsequent changes occurred after the fall of the Soviet Union, when the independent Republic of Belarus was being formed. The beginning of the 1990s was the time of concerted efforts in rebuilding the prestige of the Belarusian language, which was established as the official language of the Republic²⁷. The assessment of these changes by the interviewees was ambivalent, although no one doubted that Belarusians should speak “their language”, that is Belarusian. However, the interlocutors remarked that the return of Belarusian to official status stemmed from the political agenda rather than from the actual need to use Belarusian²⁸. Moreover, the protagonists who had earlier been

²³ Orig. “Kali â pryehala ũ 1981 godze u Minsk, mne bylo dziŭna, ale â ũžo vedala, što ũ goradah ne gavorac’ pa-belarusku. Mne gëta kazali mae svaâki âkiâ ũžo vuçylisâ ũ goradze j perajšli na ruski lad i gavaryli pa-rusku, tamu j â staralasâ ũ goradze gavaryc’ pa-rusku”.

²⁴ It refers to the letters written in 1986 and 1987 and signed by 28 and 134 renowned writers, scientists, journalists and artists, respectively.

²⁵ Orig. *Rodnae slova i maral’na-ëstëtyčny pragrës*.

²⁶ Similar protests also took place earlier. Already in 1956, Bronislav Rževuski, Professor at the Pedagogical Institute in Grodno wrote a letter to the BSSR authorities in defence of the Belarusian language. In 1957, Lavon and Michas Bely posted fliers all over Minsk, informing the public about this letter. The same year, an article by Barys Sačanka entitled *Šanavac’ rodnuju movu* was published in the periodical *Literatura i Mastactva*. In 1968, students from the Public Belarusian University demonstrated against the Russification. Finally, in 1977, an anonymous at the time author (in fact Alâksej Kauka) published a letter entitled *To My Russian Friend* (Szybieka 2002, 389–415).

²⁷ Article 17 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, dated 15 March 1994 establishes Belarusian as the official language. The Constitution also guarantees freedom of communication in Russian, which is regarded as the language of international communication.

²⁸ Nelli Bekus has noted that, at the time, the language policy centred around the ethno-linguistic project of Belarusification, which focused on the Belarusian language, while rejecting everything that was related to the Soviet times and the Russian language. She deemed it a mistake of the Belarusian patriotic opposition, because in her opinion, the Belarusian nation was shaped under the rule of the Soviet Union, together with the modernization of the society. Therefore, the idea of the Belarusian nation is not in

involved in eradicating Belarusian became its biggest supporters and propagators in the new Republic, which resulted in an inconsistent message:

“If someone steps up on a podium and says that it is our duty to speak Belarusian and then you visit them in their home and their children speak Russian, then you ask a question: Who is he preaching to? Why do you tell others that Belarusian is important, but you and your family do not have it in high regard? When I notice this, I do not believe you anymore and I will not do as you tell me”²⁹ (KW. Archives. Interview 5).

Moreover, the fast pace of re-Belarusification often felt as the language was being forced on the speakers. However, the interviewees also talked about the positive sides of the process, such as the return of Belarusian as the language of instruction in schools and the idea of a 10% salary bonus for those that spoke Belarusian. Overall, the interlocutors admitted that communicating in Belarusian was important, but that it should not have been forced.

The language issues reappeared when Alexander Lukashenko became the President of Belarus in 1994. The interviewees emphasized that this event marked the return to the policy of Russification³⁰. One of the signs of this policy was the referendum of 14 May 1995 asking citizens whether Russian should also have the status of the official language in Belarus. 83.3% of voters supported this option³¹, which resulted in an amendment to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, proclaiming two official languages, Belarusian and Russian. This amendment was added to the Act of 26 January 1990 on Languages in the Republic of Belarus³². It is important to note how the regulation pertaining to the use of Russian and Belarusian was formulated, especially how the conjunctions ‘and’, and ‘or’ were applied in the text of the document. The first conjunction is inclusive while the second one is exclusive³³, which impacts the interpretation of the language regulation. The conjunction “and” was used in the article sanctioning two official languages. However, the conjunction “or” was used in the articles pertaining to the use of language in the following areas of public life:

opposition to the Soviet experience and the Russian language is not perceived as a foreign language, but rather it is an integral part of the Belarusian cultural heritage (Bekus 2011, 120–122).

²⁹ Orig. “Kali čalavek vyhodzić na trybunu i gavoryc’ što trëba kab byla belaruskaja mova, a pryhodziš da aġonaj haty, a aġo dzieci razmaŭlajuć pa-rasejsku. Dyk dlà kago Ź ty gëtyà lozungi kidaŭ? Čamu ty gavarysz inšamu, što gëta ešć kaštoŭnasć a sam gëtaga ne ŭaŭlâeš sabe i svaëj sâm`i? I kali â adzin raz zlavil çabe na gëty, to â bolš tabe ne veru. Â ne budu rabic’ tak âk ty kaŭaš”.

³⁰ However, analysts assess the situation differently. Mainly, they notice the populist character of A. Łukaszenko’s actions and they see it as a part of his strategy to ensure the continuation of the language policy from the times of the BSSR (cf. Bekus 2011, 122).

³¹ The reported participation rate in this referendum (approximately 80%) was very controversial and doubts were voiced with respect to the accuracy of the reporting.

³² The most recent changes to this Act were introduced in July 2011. See the webpage of: Zakon Rëspubliki Belarus, 26 studzëna 1990 g. N 3094-XI, Ab Movah U Rëspubliki Belarus’. http://tbn-mova.by/laws1_8.html, access: 23.01.2014.

³³ Sometimes the conjunction ‘or’ is inclusive or clarifying.

technical documentation, democratic rights (voting), courts (including civil, administrative, criminal, and notarial)³⁴, public services (transportation, communication, health care, and commerce), education (although detailed regulations also make use of the conjunction “and/or”), research, cartography, and trademarks. On the other hand, the conjunction “and/or” is used in articles pertaining to public administration and its documentation (including personal identity documents), academia (meetings and conferences), culture, media, military, international agreements, adverts and commercials. The conjunction “or” appears once in the article pertaining to the provision of legal protection. Average citizens do not notice these nuances, because they are convinced that the law ensures them the right to both languages, which is guaranteed by their equal official status. However, in reality the Russian language has a privileged position³⁵.

Other activities confirming Russification, mentioned by the interviewees, included: limited use of Belarusian in the media, closing of Belarusian periodicals, a decreasing number of books published in Belarusian, and closing of Belarusian schools. All these issues are highlighted by the Tavarystva belaruskaj movy imâ F. Skaryny (TBM)³⁶, which is lobbying for changes in the actual status of the Belarusian language³⁷. One of the ongoing campaigns of TBM is filing official requests with the authorities and publishing the replies on the TBM’s website³⁸. One such reply to the inquiry pertaining to school closures reads that the issue is not the number of schools, but the number of children who attend them. On 12 January 2009, the Ministry of Education released information that a total of 91,290 children started school in 2008/2009, including 73,579 (83.3%) children enrolled in Russian language schools and 14,712 (16.7%) in

³⁴ An interesting article on the use of official languages in the legal system of Belarus and the requirement for document translation is available on the webpage of: <http://www.tbm-mova.by/pubs28.html>, access: 23.01.2014.

³⁵ I was able to confirm this during my visit to Minsk in 2010. As a foreigner temporarily living in Belarus, I had to register my place of residence with the local authorities. The registration form I was given was only in Russian. I was told that the equivalent form in Belarusian did not exist. Other examples include instructions for computer use provided to the participants of the 5th International Congress of Belarusian Studies or signs posted around the city, such as notices about conservation works (despite the fact that the name of the company performing the work was in Belarusian, *Minska spadčyna [Heritage of Minsk]*), etc.

³⁶ The F. Skaryna Belarusian Language Society was established in 1989. Its objectives are to defend the language rights of Belarusians and to support the development of Belarusian language and culture. More information is available at the TBM website: <http://www.tbm-mova.by>, access: 23.01.2014, also 29.04.2018.

³⁷ These objectives are included in the TBM’s document *Strategy of the Belarusian Language Society. The Belarusian Language Development in the 21st Century* prepared by Zaprudski S., Anisim A., Koščanka U., Kručkou S., Maldzis A., Tabolič A., and Cychun G., available at the TBM’s website: <http://www.tbm-mova.by/mova.html>, access: 23.01.2014.

³⁸ In 2015, the idea of sending requests to the national and local authorities and to various institutions took on a form of monitoring the ease of access and the freedom to use the Belarusian language in various areas of life. The published reports indicate how and where the law on the equal status of the Belarusian and the Russian languages is upheld. See: <http://www.tbm-mova.by/monitoring.html>, access: 29.04.2018.

Belarusian language schools³⁹. These numbers confirm the low status of Belarusian, although the choice of education in Russian is not surprising. Taking into consideration that education in Russian has been mandatory since the 1930s, attending schools with the Russian language has become “natural” for many people. It might be why

“Belarus is the only country in the Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS) without a *Russkiy Mir* Centre [an institution for the promotion of Russian language and culture], while there are eight such centres in the neighbouring Ukraine” (Wierzbowska-Miazga 2013, 28).

This indicates that Russian has a strong position in Belarus, while Belarusian and attitudes towards Belarusian are determined by the environment. When Belarusian is used for challenging the authorities, it becomes the synonym of opposition and is viewed negatively. Outside this context, it is just another means of communication.

As the result, Belarusians function in a system of two languages, Belarusian and Russian, and in the increasingly popular *Trasianka*⁴⁰. *Trasianka*, as the communication code, is created by mixing Belarusian and Russian, although more languages may be included in the mix. The choice of languages and the percentage of elements from each language in *Trasianka* depend on the region. For example, *Trasianka* spoken near the Russian border would include more Russian elements, while spoken near the Polish border would include more Polish words. Some of the interviewees were convinced that *Trasianka* is mostly used by people from rural areas while linguists claim that

“*Trasianka* is more often used by people holding administrative and technical positions in rural areas and also by the inhabitants of small and medium towns than by uneducated rural population” (Smułkova 2000, 92).

Finally, we need to ask how different spheres of life impact the use of the above noted languages. The interviewees stressed that the choice varies and depends on the context (the situation, places, people involved in the conversation, but also the ability to communicate – an ease in code switching is noticeable in these situations). However, some regularities in the use of language can be established. The majority of interlocutors mentioned the use of *Trasianka* in the home environment. Very few people declared the use of pure Belarusian or Russian in those circumstances. The mixed language also dominates in informal situations (for example during breaks at schools or on the street). However, at school and at work (and in other formal situations) Russian is the dominant language while Belarusian is rarely used. On the other hand, Belarusian has become “an export language” of sorts, because people who travel⁴¹ (mostly to Western countries) try to speak Belarusian (if it is required).

³⁹ List Ministerstva adukacyi Rëspubliki Belarus ad 12.01.2009 No 06–17/7231/ds. <http://tbn-mova.by/pubst8.html>, access: 23.01.2014.

⁴⁰ The word *Trasianka* is derived from the word *treści* meaning “to chop” or “to mix” (Sudnik and Kryūko. eds. 1999, 666).

⁴¹ Obviously, apart from speaking foreign languages, mostly English.

THE USE OF BELARUSIAN

Looking at the speakers of Belarusian in the above-noted context, the interviewees distinguished two groups. The first group includes people from rural areas, but also blue-collar workers, who as the first generation have moved to the city, and older people who have left their villages to move in with their children living in the city. This shows that city dwellers can also speak Belarusian, assuming they come from the country⁴². Hence, speaking Belarusian determines membership of a social group, which follows the stereotype instilled during the times of the BSSR (Belarusian is the language of rural areas and Russian is the language of the cities). The second group of Belarusian speakers includes people with higher education, especially intellectuals with a background in humanities⁴³. Thus, the group includes Belarusian philologists, who often teach Belarusian, writers, and artists. The fact that this group was singled out by the interviewees may be seen as the continuation of the view instilled at the times of the BSSR, that the only form of Belarusian spoken in the cities is professional jargon. On the other hand, the interlocutors claimed, those intellectuals constitute a group especially interested in literature, history, art and broadly understood culture. Moreover since 2000, teenagers and young adults are increasingly counted amongst the speakers of Belarusian. One of the interlocutors noted that:

“there is a noticeable tendency amongst the youth to speak Belarusian, because it brings them prestige”⁴⁴ (KW. Archives. Interview 5).

Another interviewee added:

“Young people who see their future in the independent Belarus, begin to be interested in the Belarusian language”⁴⁵ (KW. Archives. Interview 72).

Andrej Dyńko, editor in chief of *Nasza Niwa*, a Belarusian weekly, made similar observations:

“Belarusian is no longer the rural language of the kolkhoz [collective farm in the Soviet Union] and of [local] broadcasting. It is the language of young people, artists, and intellectuals. It is the language of protest, nonconformism, punk, challenges, and of western way of thinking” (2007, 62).

⁴² The dominant view is that all Belarusians come from a rural background.

⁴³ It is important to note that science background is not in opposition to an interest in humanities. For example, Professor Jury Hadyka, who initiated research on Belarusian culture, is a physicist and a philosopher of religion.

⁴⁴ Orig. “Užo sârod moladzì vidac’ tэндэncyû razmaŭlác’ pa-belarusku. Gëta dlâ âe prëstyžna”.

⁴⁵ Orig. “Da belaruskaj movy pryhodzic’ moladz’ âkaâ z’vâzyvae svaŭ budučynû z suverënnaj krainaj”.

Hence, small changes are visible in the attitudes of the speakers of Belarusian⁴⁶ as well as in attitudes towards the speakers themselves. The environment plays a significant role in this process. The creation of a Belarusian-friendly environment is not easy, yet not impossible. The activities of informal groups such as *Spajemstvo*, NGOs such as the World Association of Belarusians *Bačkouščyna* or of independent institutions of culture, such as the art gallery “Ū” in Minsk are a proof that it is possible.

Spajemstvo was established in 1996 in Minsk⁴⁷. Its founder, a psychoanalyst, wanted to create a space, where people who wished to communicate in their mother tongue (Belarusian) but had no opportunity to do so at home or at work, could come together. At first the group met at the clinic, then at the offices of the Minsk branch of the Belarusian National Front (BNF) and finally at the building of the Belarusian Language Society. In principle, anyone could become a *spajemnik*, however, meeting notices were published in *Naše Slovo*, a Belarusian newspaper, which indicates a specific readership. In general, new members were introduced to the group by the old members. Members of the group included people of various educational and professional backgrounds. What brought them together was the need to speak Belarusian. One of them said:

“Today, a person who is interested in speaking Belarusian is alone and needs a group of people with similar interests”⁴⁸ (KW. Archives. Interview 40).

Another person added:

“I work in an international environment and I miss the warm Belarusian support network, I miss someone that I could talk to ... I need close friends”⁴⁹ (KW. Archives. Interview 44).

Membership of the *Spajemstvo* varied, although there was a core group of about ten to twelve people who attended the meetings regularly. Although the form of the meetings and objectives of the group⁵⁰ resembled therapy sessions, the meetings meant much more to the participants. They provided an opportunity to meet friends and some people continued their friendship outside of the formal group meetings. Soon, the group began to organize other activities, such as bonfires, trips around Belarus, and staged a play by Janek Kupała, entitled *Paŭlinka*. The group continues to meet

⁴⁶ It is especially visible on the Internet, where an increasing number of comments come from people who use Belarusian. This group includes public figures, such as Mikita Najdzionau, the leader of the band HURMA. See: Mikita Najdzionau: W twórczości jestem całkiem białoruski. <http://eastbook.eu/2014/01/country/belarus/mikita-najdzionau>, access: 22.06. 2014.

⁴⁷ My attendance of “Spajemstvo” meetings made me aware of the existence of other groups of this kind. I learned that there were a few of them in Minsk and also in other cities, e.g. in Maladzyechna and Grodno.

⁴⁸ Orig. “U naša vřemâ kali čalavek incerësuecca belaruskim ŕykom, èta značyc’ što ěn sam ì ŕnu patrëba adnadumcaŭ.”

⁴⁹ Orig. “Maâ praca absalûtna ìnternacyanal’naâ ì mne brak ščyraga plâča belaruskaga, z kim možna spakojna pagavaryc’ (...) mne trëba lŭdzej blizkih”.

⁵⁰ Objectives included: improvement of language skills, learning about Belarusian culture, finding people with similar views, self-improvement, and the development of Belarusian patriotism.

today, although the deciding factor nowadays is a long-lasting friendship rather than the need to speak Belarusian.

Another example of shaping the Belarusian-speaking community is the “Let’s Be Belarusians!” campaign initiated and organized by the World Association of Belarusians *Bačkouščyna* in 2008. The campaign is conducted both online and one the ground⁵¹. The objectives of the campaign include educating the public about the value of Belarusian language and history. The name of the campaign is very telling as it calls for the creation of a community by organizing social and cultural events aimed at all inhabitants of Belarus, regardless of their language, national identity or political views (Garoška 2009, 4). The campaign encourages consistent use of Belarusian in all its activities and is characterized by a high level of professionalism, cultural acumen and artistic quality. Some of the projects include: a postcard series entitled “We are Different!”⁵², the production of music albums of new bands singing in Belarusian, computer keyboard stickers enabling typing in Belarusian on keyboards with Latin alphabet, an animated film about the history of Belarus⁵³, and a series of short films showcasing places of historical importance all over Belarus and encouraging travel around the country⁵⁴. Another educational series, employing elements of fantasy has the same objectives⁵⁵. Moreover, the “Let’s Be Belarusians!” campaign supports the organization of many cultural events⁵⁶ and provides current information about these events on its website. An increasing number of people participate in this wide range of activities. Consequently, more people realise that “culture improves the quality of life” and that “speaking Belarusian is modern and provides a good foundation for the future”⁵⁷ as the slogans of the campaign say. Undoubtedly, the activities of “Let’s Be Belarusians!” help to increase the number of Belarusian speakers and help to promote the status of Belarusian as the language of public communication.

The third example of promoting Belarusian and supporting creativity is the art gallery “Ŭ”⁵⁸, established in 2009 in Minsk. The main objective of the gallery is to shape an active artistic community, but also to provide a space for various cultural, educational, and social events. Since the beginning of 2014, the gallery has been offering free Bela-

⁵¹ Organisation’s webpage: Budz’ma belarusami!. <http://budzma.org/>, access: 22.06.2014.

⁵² Eight postcards present symbols of Belarusian identity. They include renowned Belarusians, such as Francysk Skaryna (philosopher, writer and printer), Józef Drozdowicz (painter), Stefania Staniouta (actress), Borys Kita (mathematician), Pesnary (a folk-rock band) and cultural symbols such as the kontusz sash, manufactured in Slutsk, Hussar wings, and the letter “Ŭ”.

⁵³ Available at: http://files.budzma.org/video/mult/BUDZMA_BELARUSAMI_H264.mp4, access: 22.06.2014.

⁵⁴ Available at: Kraj BY. <http://budzma.by/category/kraj-by>, access: 22.06.2014.

⁵⁵ Example: In the Land of the Dragon, available at: U pošukah cmoka!. <http://budzma.by/country/cmok.html>, access: 22.06.2014.

⁵⁶ For example the annual Festival of Belarusian Advertising and Communication “Ad.Nak!”

⁵⁷ See: About Us. <http://budzma.by/about>, access: 22.06.2014.

⁵⁸ Gallery webpage: Galerèà sučasnaga mastactva “Ŭ”. <http://ygallery.by/>, access: 22.06.2014.

rusian language lessons under the heading “Language or Coffee”. The lessons are the idea of Kaccâryna Kibal’čyč, a Belarusian journalist working in Moscow, who organised the first free Belarusian lesson there in 2013. Lessons in Minsk are taught by Alesia Litvinouska and Hleb Labadzienka. Students’ are of all ages, come from all walks of life, and are at various levels of Belarusian language proficiency. Their motivation for attending the lessons also varies and includes passion for learning, the need of conversation in Belarusian, finding something to do in their free time or meeting new people. The motivation that brings people to the gallery is not important for the organisers, because the objective is to improve the attitude towards Belarusian and to increase the number of Belarusian speakers⁵⁹. It is worth noting that as early as 2014, these meetings were officially registered as an organization called: “Social and Cultural Institution for the Development of the Belarussian Language and Culture «Mova Nanova»”⁶⁰. Since then, the meetings have been organized as free language courses in Minsk and other cities in Belarus – indeed everywhere where there are people wishing to learn the language and a volunteer teacher, who wants to teach them. People who are learning the language or are speakers of Belarusian can find useful information on a special portal <http://www.movananova.by/>. The portal offers teaching materials, Belarussian literature (written texts and audiobooks), articles on Belarusian issues, Belarusian films and foreign ones translated to Belarusian (for all age groups), theatre plays, and Belarusian pop music, etc. The portal also encourages participation in various initiatives, such as register of people who declare Belarusian as their first language, which was launched in 2016. Although by April 2018, only 1,900 people have registered, the majority of them are young, which may indicate the change in attitudes towards the Belarusian language.

The examples described in this paper are not exhaustive by any means. Moreover, it needs to be emphasised that the majority of these projects are grass root activities and indicate the strengthening of national identity among Belarusians.

IN PLACE OF A SUMMARY – THE BELARUSIAN LANGUAGE AND THE BELARUSIAN IDENTITY

For the past few years, Belarusian intellectuals have been discussing the issue of Belarusian in the context of national identity. However, the passing of time and the challenges of the contemporary world make an increasing number of people accept the bilingual option, providing that Belarusian and Russian have an equal status (as opposed to the current situation described in this paper). One of the proponents of this idea, Piotr Rudkouski, claims that:

⁵⁹ See: Mowa ci kawa. Darmowe lekcje białoruskiego w Mińsku. <http://www.polskieradio.pl/75/921/Artykul/835293,Mowa-ci-Kawa-Darmowe-lekcje-bialoruskiego-w-Minsku>, access: 22.06.2014.

⁶⁰ Orig. “Socyjalna-kulturnaâ ustanova razviccâ belaruskaj movy i kultury «Mova Nanova»”. <http://www.movananova.by/prakursy/>, access: 29.04.2018.

“Bilingualism does not threaten Belarusian identity. Language is a value, but not an absolute value. An abandonment of our language or its rejection would be a serious ethical error. The nation would not disappear, but a certain value, something extremely precious would be lost” (2009, 114).

However, is the Belarusian language treated as something valuable by Belarusians? The stories collected during my research indicate that it is. My interviewees appreciated the importance of the Belarusian language in shaping their national identity and at the same time they refused to treat it as a symbol. Instead, they insisted that Belarusian is a language for communication. On the other hand, the historical language context, especially in the previous century, is the reason why speaking Belarusian is not an essential element of Belarusian national identity. The existing bilingualism (Belarusian-Russian) and an increasing use of *Trasianka* may lead to the weakening of Belarusian national identity or it may create its new (different) quality.

The words of Alexander Lukashenko confirm the ambivalent language situation in Belarus. In his speech of 22 April 2014, he said:

“If we stop speaking Russian, we will lose our mind and if we forget how to speak Belarusian, we will stop being a nation”. At the same time, he declared support for ‘the development of Russian on the level equal to the mother tongue [Belarusian]’⁶¹.

This last sentence was wildly commented on the Internet, showing polarisation of views and the noticeably paradoxical situation of the Belarusian language in Belarus. Moreover, it has proven that the issue of the Belarusian language is vital not only for academics, but for citizens too.

Translated by Zofia Orly

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⁶¹ Lukaŝenko zaŝiŝaet russkij âzyk, no obeŝaet razvivat’ ego naravne s ‘matčynaj movaj, <http://news.tut.by/society/396153.html>, access: 22.04.2014.

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