

“Hybrid” Linguistic Identity of Post-Soviet Belarus

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The issue of Belarusian language politics can be analysed across two different dimensions: as an element of nation-building strategy in post-Soviet Belarus; and as part of a linguistic human rights discourse, which refers to legal, moral as well as emotional aspects of current Belarusian language legislation and practice. These two aspects of the Belarusian language issue have become closely inter-related and are often perceived as mutually dependent. This article explores the social and political context of Belarusian national development, which resulted in the establishment of certain linguistic formulae of Belarusian identity. The linguistic repertoire of Belarusian society can be analysed not in terms of vacillation between two languages—Russian and Belarusian—but as a component of general post-colonial reality. When viewed against the background of several co-existing concepts of Belarusian identity, the linguistic practice of Belarusians can be understood as a manifestation of Belarusian culture’s “hybridity”, which has enabled a majority of Belarusians to avoid alienation and polarity in their perception of others and their language.

Keywords: Belarusian language; linguistic identity; post-Soviet development; post-colonialism; cultural hybridity.

1. Nationalizing strategy: towards a sovereign state

The issue of Belarusian language politics can be analysed across two different dimensions: as an element of nation-building strategy in post-Soviet Belarus; and as part of linguistic human rights discourse, which refers to legal, moral as well as emotional aspects of current Belarusian language legislation and practice. These two aspects of the language issue have become closely inter-related and mutually dependent. The choice of language in daily use in Belarus is often perceived as a political declaration, with Russian viewed as the official language of culture and

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politics, and Belarusian as the language of the political and cultural opposition. This close association came about as a result of the events that took place on the eve of the country gaining independence. Since the early 1990s, the politics of national language in Belarus has been highly politicized and polarized. Belarusian was viewed as a powerful resource of national and political mobilization by national activists in the 1990s, and a language policy was designed to enforce “Belarusization”—an essential element of the nationalizing strategy of the newly independent state.

In Belarus, as in many post-Soviet countries, the national revival was an indivisible part of the complex process of becoming a sovereign state, and of trying to overcome the legacy of totalitarianism and socialist ideology after the fall of the Soviet Union. The introduction of a national ideology as a leading principle of political, social and cultural life in post-Soviet states was considered a “natural” reaction to the failure of the Soviet state and ideology. It provided a framework for new identities, which were desperately needed after the loss of old ideological references (Hall, 1995: 86-88). Nationalism equipped the new nation states with a way of distancing themselves from the old ideological system of values, and national identity was in many cases the only positive reference point which people had at their disposal, when most traditional points of social identification had been dismantled (Salecl, 1996: 418). National issues increased in importance partly because they were, as Katherine Verdery points out, the only organizational forms that were already present and had an institutional history (Verdery, 1996: 85). Nationalism enabled the peoples of Eastern Europe to manage the social disorientation that had arisen at the moment of the old system’s collapse. As Miroslav Hroch writes, ‘The basic precondition of all national movements—yesterday and today—is a deep crisis of the old order, with the breakdown of its legitimacy, and of the values and sentiments that sustained it’ (1996: 75). Nationalism had a certain therapeutic function and its outburst was connected to the demand for a new basis for shaping collective self-consciousness at the threshold of creating a new democratic system. One of the driving ideas of the national revival in post-communist countries, according to Hroch, was “building” capitalism, ‘the completion of the social structure of the nation by creating a capitalist class corresponding to that of Western states’ (Hroch, 1996: 70). In his work on the origins of linguistic nationalism in the Czech national movement, Hroch also stressed that the linguistic demands of Czech nationalists in the nineteenth century acquired a new meaning, centred on the role of language as an instrument of

civil equality. Political mobilization required some national “markers”, which would be easily understood by the lower strata of society. According to Hroch, language was one such instrument of political mobilization (2005: 23).

All of these social, political and economic aspects of Eastern European nationalism were merged in the Belarusian national movement. At the beginning of the society’s systemic transformation, national ideology constituted part of the symbolic capital that became the basis of a strategy of change. Nationalism had the appearance of a liberation struggle, triggered by dependence on the Soviet state which was dominated by Russian culture and language. The political context of national liberation provided ideological justification for the introduction of forced nationalizing policies after the declaration of independence. In Belarus, too, the national language policy formulated within this strategy of nationalization was aimed at reducing the effects of “Russification” and at making Belarusian the main language of public life. A long-term plan was created, which scheduled the “Belarusization” of the education system, the media and public life. In January 1990, the Supreme Soviet adopted a law ‘On Languages in the [Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic] BSSR’. In September 1990 the Belarusian government sanctioned a national programme on the development of Belarusian and the languages of other nationalities in the BSSR, thereby ratifying a decree that established Belarusian as the state language of the republic (*Gosudarstvennaya programma razvitiya belorusskogo yazyka*, 1990). In 1992, Deputy Minister of Education Vasil Strazhau announced that the language used in all pedagogical schools would be Belarusian, and that 55% of first graders would be taught in Belarusian. Notably, he forecast that in 10 years the entire Belarusian system of education would shift to Belarusian. The Belarusian language appeared in educational institutions, on television and radio—all this amounted to a common process of “the return to everything Belarusian”.

However, as Rogers Brubaker writes, nationalism in postcommunist countries ‘is not engendered by nations. It is produced—or better, it was induced—by *political fields* of particular kinds. Its dynamics are governed by the properties of political fields, not by the properties of collectivities’ (Brubaker, 1996: 17). This idea about the principal role of the political processes, which pre-define the configuration of national development of post-communist countries, helps us understand the tendencies and changes in Belarusian national development which were caused by shifts in the political field. Indeed, ‘the Belarusian declaration of independence in 1991 was not a

result of people’s determined battle, but consequences of political circumstances favorable to the Belarusian idea’ (Tornquist-Plewa, 2005). The political changes within the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during “*perestroika*” opened up the possibility of initiating public discussions on problematic issues. Thanks to “*glasnost*”, Belarusian society was given a chance to learn about existing problems and, in the opinion of the Belarusian intelligentsia, one of those problems was the diminishing role of the Belarusian language in Belarusian life. In the middle of the 1980s, about one third of the total population spoke Belarusian in their daily lives, and these were mainly rural inhabitants (Marples, 1999: 50). In 1987, no more than a quarter of first graders in Belarus went to a school with Belarusian primers. There were no higher educational institutions, technical or vocational colleges which taught in Belarusian. Linguistic “Russification” was a warning sign of the progressive assimilation and disappearance of Belarusians in the Russian-speaking cultural universe. While in 1970, 37.3% of all books in circulation in BSSR were in Belarusian, and 36.5% of all newspapers, 10 years later, in 1980, these figures had decreased to 21.4% and 34.0% respectively. The percentage of art books being published in Russian in Belarus had increased from 89.95% in 1981 to 95.3% in 1984. In government institutions and the workplace, Belarusian was practically non-existent (Marples, 1999: 52). In the context of the Soviet ideological project, these data did not appear crucially problematic, as the Soviet people’s development was supposed to lead to the internalization of Soviet life. From that perspective, the replacement of Belarusian by Russian in Belarusian public life was viewed as a sign of the successful “Sovietization” of Belarusians. As Victor Chernov notes, ‘Sovietness was for Belarusians an organic form of expression of their “ethnomarginality”, moreover, it was a way of identifying with the “the Great Country of Soviets”. One can say that due to such identification, an original, Soviet-Belarusian “nationalism” was stimulated—a truly Soviet Belarusian felt that he or she was the “most Soviet of the Soviet”’ (Chernov, 2003: 47). This Soviet formula of “Belarusian-ness” was based on a combination of elements of socialist ideology, such as the egalitarian vision of social organization, with the institutional national form. Being “Belarusian” in a Soviet way did not deny one’s belonging to a larger Soviet community. Speaking Russian and viewing Russian as a “natural” attribute of the Belarusian public and cultural landscape was justified by the *matryoshka* nationalism¹ developed in Belarus and other Union Republics as a result of Soviet nationality policy.

1.1 Promoting the nation in opposition to “Soviet-ness”

The rejection of Soviet ideology and denial of Soviet achievements in the development of the Belarusian national community was first articulated by the Belarusian People’s Front (BPF),² created in 1988. In the Supreme Soviet of Belarus (elected in 1990), the oppositional coalition built on the platform of the BPF counted up to 40 members (out of 360) (Feduta *et al.*, 2003: 14). With the support of members of the Supreme Soviet elected from various registered non-governmental organizations³ representing the Democratic Bloc (like the Belarusian Language Society, the Belarusian Ecological Union, the Workers’ Union of Belarus), the Belarusian People’s Front managed to become the leading political force in defining a strategy for the country’s development. The introduction of a nationalization policy as the major doctrine for social, cultural and political transformation in a situation where nationalist forces still constituted a minority in the Supreme Soviet of Belarus has been explained by Lucan Way as a specific phenomenon of the early post-socialist era. Employing the metaphor of “deer in headlights”, i.e. the incompetence of the Soviet elite which resulted from ‘disorientation and the persistence of outdated leadership norms in the face of rapid regime change’, Way argues that new democratic forces managed to launch reforms and introduce nationalizing policies due to the momentary weakness of governing elites (Way, 2012: 622). Belarusian nationalizing policy was aimed at the realization of a Belarusian nation-building project, which was based on the ethno-linguistic idea of nation and focused on ‘collecting Belarusian folklore, restoring historical buildings and reviving the “real”, not Soviet, Belarusian culture’ (Gapova, 2008: 139). Adherents of this Belarusian idea appealed to the pre- and extra-Soviet experience of Belarusians, and imagined the Belarusian nation as a cultural unity in opposition to both Soviet and Russian (in the pre-Soviet period) colonization. This project was formulated and imagined as a completion of Belarusian nation-formation, which began at the beginning of the twentieth century and, in the opinion of BPF ideologists, was interrupted by the October revolution. Belarusian nationalist ideology at that time had a fundamental strategy that was

[...] present in some form in nationalist discourse everywhere. This involves the construction of an idealized picture of national glory lost at some point in the remote past, and then the projection of this picture as an aspiration for the future. In all cases, this generated a sort of compelling ideological energy that is highly effective in terms of political motivation and mobilization. (Bassin, 2012: 553-534)

In this context, the Soviet period of Belarusian history was viewed as a period of Belarusian alienation from their national idea, which in turn led to de-nationalization; only the fall of the USSR provided them with a chance to resume this interrupted development. According to the plans of nation-minded politicians, the Belarusian nation-building project in the independent state was supposed to be complete within a decade. In addition to re-writing Belarusian history from a nationalist perspective, a major objective of this policy was the transformation of the linguistic situation in the country. Plans were put in place to limit the presence of Russian in various spheres of Belarusian life, gradually turning Belarusian society into a mono-linguistic community.

The new Language Law, passed on 26 January 1990, foresaw an increase in the presence of Belarusian in the country's public life. According to this law, the implementation of changes in the linguistic design of Belarusian society was supposed to take place gradually over the course of the 1990s. It was expected that Belarusian would become the language of science, culture and the media within three years; the language of congresses, conferences, and state decrees within three to five years; of business within five years; and legal matters within a decade.⁴ On September 1990, the existing Law on Languages was supported by a National Programme, which assigned to the Belarusian government the long-term aim of restoring the Belarusian language in education and public life by the end of the century. The Law on Culture, adopted on 4 June 1991, guaranteed the cultural rights of all ethnic groups on Belarusian territory while stressing that ‘the preservation, development, and spread of Belarusian culture and language’ shall constitute one of the priority objectives of state cultural policy (Article 10(3.1)). Similarly, the Law on Education, adopted on 29 October 1991, guaranteed support to the expansion of Belarusian in education.

The new constitution, adopted in March 1994, affirmed the official status of Belarusian, although according to the same constitution Russian was given the status of a language of inter-ethnic communication (Ulasiuk, 2011: 4). In fact this “new” status that Russian acquired in the constitution was the only difference between the part of the constitution related to language issues and the 1990 Law on Languages. This “return” of Russian was not in fact a return, but rather an act of symbolic legitimization of existing linguistic practices in Belarusian society. During the period between 1990 and 1994 the process of de-Russification had just started. Major progress in “Belarusization” was achieved in education, which appeared to be most

open to implementing the Law on Languages, and between 1990 and 1994 the situation in secondary schools radically changed in favour of Belarusian. However, most other spheres of political, social and cultural life in the country were not seriously affected by the policy.

1.2 Paradoxes of the democratic freedom of linguistic choice in Post-Soviet Belarus

The new status of Russian in the text of the Belarusian constitution of 1994 also reflected those important changes which occurred on the political scene of independent Belarus. In 1990, among the most active political forces which determined the strategy of the country's development were representatives of the national movement, which imagined a new Belarusian nation as a mono-ethnic and mono-lingual community and intended to develop a state linguistic policy in that direction. This political project was formulated and largely supported by the national intelligentsia, who were possessed by the idea of building a Belarusian nation state on the basis of its ethno-linguistic core. They viewed the future of Belarus exclusively in the context of Europe and followed the pattern of national development represented by other small East European nations (Czechs, Slovaks, the Baltic nations, etc.) in their policies. During the period 1990-1994, however, essential changes took place on the political scene in Belarus. A number of political parties which entered the political arena when Belarus adopted the multi-party system heavily criticized the 1990 language law. The Movement for Democratic Reform, founded in 1991, described this law as "undemocratic", accusing BPF, which remained the main pro-democracy force in Belarus at that time, of Russophobia, isolationism, and of arousing nationalist instincts (Zaprudski, 2002). Paradoxically, both left and right political wings at that time considered the 1990 law to be the wrong way to solve the language problem in Belarus. Liberal parties (like the United Democratic Party of Belarus (UDPB), established in 1990⁵) considered the right to freely choose one's language of education to be one of the most important civic rights which citizens of Belarus should have). The left were also against the language policy of forced Belarusization. They opposed the model of a mono-ethnic and mono-linguistic Belarusian nation with the idea of a two-language state model, which was an unconditional demand of the Movement for Democracy, Social Progress and Justice (MDSPJ) founded in 1991. In 1993, a congress of left-wing movements adopted a resolution which demanded to

‘remove violence and discrimination from language policy, to adopt official bilingualism (Belarusian and Russian), legitimize the right of parents to choose the language of education of their children’ (Zaprudski, 2002: 34).

It is noteworthy that a major deficiency of the language legislation (and of the “Belarusization” policy in general) which drew criticism from all sides was its inconsistency with democratic ideas: a forceful transition to Belarusian was viewed as a loss of democratic freedom of choice. At the moment of collapse of the old system in Belarus, two essentially different trends—national liberation and the democratization of social and political life—collided. In fact this was a revitalization of what Zdenek Suda wrote about nationalism as a most dangerous rival of the liberal democratic current in Eastern Europe, both in the past and the present. From the nineteenth century, Eastern Europe ‘was busy with shaping and defining its various national identities, which at that time was a frustrating full time job for all ethnic groups involved. The emancipation of the individual—liberalism’s primary concern—was given a low priority’ (Suda, 2000: 202). The Belarusian nationalizing language policy and its perception as “non-democratic” by a society that had just been liberated from the ideological pressure of Soviet ideology, replicated the fundamental conflict of interest between national and individual aspects of freedom. People who might have wished to continue using Russian and educating their children in this language were considered potential victims of a non-democratic state policy. In the meantime, while politicians discussed the matter of language politics and the linguistic design of the Belarusian nation (one- or two-language model), society had experienced a heavy deterioration in living standards, which had a negative impact on popular perceptions of state policies in general, including its language and national ideology. The ruling elites which were in power when the nationalizing policy was introduced appeared to be responsible for the economic problems which people had to deal with during the first years of independence. For most politicians of newly established political parties, stressing their disagreement with the nationalizing language policy was one of the easiest ways of demonstrating their closeness to the people. By 1994, both supporters and opponents of “Belarusization” complained: various parties and organizations close to BPF were disappointed by the way the law was being implemented; those who wanted to see Russian as an official language in Belarus stressed their lack of freedom of choice. In the fall of 1994, a committee ‘For Free Choice of Language of Education’ was founded under the auspices of the Slavic Union in order to protest

against forced "Belarusization". The fate of the "Belarusization" policy was pre-ordained by the outcome of the 1994 presidential election, when the extremely populist politician Aliaksandr Lukashenka became president. In May 1995 he initiated a referendum in which Russian was introduced as a second official language. In practice this meant that all achievements in promoting Belarusian were reversed, and the very idea of forcefully replacing Russian with Belarusian was brought to an end. Deprived of exclusive legislative support, Belarusian returned to the margins of public life, while the linguistic design of Belarusian society became voluntary. The equal status of Russian and Belarusian introduced by the 1995 referendum led to a predictable shift back to Russian in schools. Parents now had a right to choose the language of their children's education. The results of this "democratic turn" in national language policy were predictably unfavourable for Belarusian: the number of first-grade students learning in Russian increased from 25% in 1994 to 62% in 1995; correspondingly, the number of students who studied in Belarusian decreased from 75% to 38%. Issues of "discrimination" surfaced again in 1999, when in February the Congress of Democratic Forces of Belarus adopted a special resolution entitled 'the Discrimination of the Belarusian language in the Republic of Belarus', which concluded that the right of Belarusians to freely develop their native language and culture were being grossly violated. By granting the Belarusian people the right to choose Russian or Belarusian as their language of education, Belarusian legislation deprived the Belarusian language of any legal support. Lukashenka's language policy made Belarus a unique post-Soviet republic where political independence constituted a step towards further "Russification".

During the Soviet period, "Russification" was an instrument for the "Sovietization" of cultural and public life, while after the period 1991-1995 the policy of the Belarusian authorities was directed not so much at "Russification" as at "de-Belarusization", 'fighting against the national self-awareness of Belarusians as a factor that threatens the stability of the Lukashenka regime' (Yekadumaw, 2003: 218). The policy of "Belarusization", with its emphasis on the Belarusian language, became a symbol of the ethno-linguistic national project which remained the major political alternative to the Lukashenka regime. Under Lukashenka's political strategy, language policy was not assigned a specific role; rather, the return to official bilingualism was part of his general strategy to return to the "good old Soviet times".

2. The Soviet history of Belarus in a positive light: the case of state ideology

The positive evaluation of the Soviet period of Belarusian history constituted an important part of Lukashenka's ideology, and this distinguished his understanding of the Belarusian idea from BPF-related politicians with their strong anti-Soviet and anti-Russian orientation. National activists emphasized their appeal to the restoration of the nation that had existed in the pre-Soviet past, and whose existence was suspended by Soviet power. In fact, however, no Belarusian nation state had ever existed prior to Soviet rule. The process of Belarusian nation building, which began at the end of nineteenth century, was continued under the Soviet regime and with the help of its instruments. As Nikolas Vakar writes, ‘Belorussianism has been for years identified with the Soviet authority, and [...] it seems that it has become to the natives just another aspect of Communism’ (Vakar 1956: 219). The formation of a Belarusian people as a community united by a common language, culture, history and origin was consolidated in the years of Soviet power and supported by its institutions.

The first decade of Bolshevik rule was accompanied by the “nativization” policy (*korenizatsiia*), which aimed at forceful “Belarusization” of public life in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). The BSSR reported to the USSR Soviet of Nationalities in 1925 that, in the central agencies of the republic, only 26.9% of the employees spoke Belarusian. In 1926 that number had risen to 54%, and by 1928 it was as high as 80%. Moreover, at the beginning of 1928, “Belarusization” was considered entirely complete in central, provincial and district institutions. The press became almost exclusively Belarusian. By 1929 there was only one exclusively Russian-language newspaper and no Russian-language journals. In 1924-1925, 28.4% of schools were Belarusian-language schools, rising to 93.8% in 1929-1930 (Martin, 2001: 264). Also, the systematic studies ‘of national geography, natural resources, history, and literature, albeit in Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist terms, and the existence of normal attributes of statehood, have strengthened the feeling of separate Byelorussian identity’ (Vakar, 1956: 219). It was no accident, as Jan Zaprudnik writes, that Belarusian nationalists in the 1990s dreamed about ‘the repetition of Belarusization, a cultural phenomenon of the 1920s’ (Zaprudnik 1993: 77). By the end of the 1920s, intensive nationalization had been replaced by the policy of “Friendship of the Peoples”.

One of the major features of this period was the rehabilitation of traditional Russian culture and Russian nationalism as a source of Soviet unity. After Stalin’s

denunciation of national deviationism in the national republics, the terror started in the 1930s. Zaprudnik describes the extent of the devastation by giving a picture of the losses suffered by the Belarusian cultural scene: the Institute of Belarusian Culture, later the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, lost nearly ‘ninety percent of its members; the vast majority of them were shot’ (Zaprudnik, 1993: 87). Those events had a catastrophic impact on Belarusian culture but, at the same time, Soviet rulers never questioned the “nation-ness” of Belarusians, although they tended to influence the way it was understood. In Vakar’s words, ‘the Soviets had been up against men, and not against symbols of Belorussianism’ (Vakar, 1956: 150). ‘Stalinization of nationalism’, Vakar writes, meant that ‘the national framework of the Republic had been wisely left intact [...] It had only to be furnished with new personnel, and Belorussian life and culture oriented in a new direction. The direction was given by Stalin’s own words: “Nationalist in form, Socialist in content”’ (Vakar, 1956: 146).

The new policy of “Russification” and promotion of bilingualism gradually led to a change in the cultural status and public image of the Belarusian language. In fact, Soviet ideology relating to the national issue did not leave space for the specific Belarusian national development, which would advocate Belarusian language and culture in opposition to the Soviet people. In the context of Soviet progressive development, reference to the exclusively Belarusian national culture and language was often perceived as “backwards” and anti-progressive. The Belarusian language was supposed to preserve its importance as a traditional value, tied to folk culture and history. In this way, Russian became not only the language of Soviet peoples’ communication, but also the language of social promotion in the national republic.

The Belarusian vision of Soviet history contained images of Stalinist repression and “Russification”, which led to marginalization of the Belarusian language and “de-nationalization” of Belarusians. Moreover, during the Soviet period Belarusians experienced remarkable improvement in their standards of living. Economic progress in the BSSR in the 1960s and 1970s made Belarus one of the most prosperous Soviet republics. From this perspective, the Soviet era can also be considered a specific part of the Belarusian nation-formation process, during which certain aspects of Soviet ideology, as well pro-Russian cultural and political stances, were engraved into the concept of the Belarusian idea. David Marples believes that the ‘golden age’ of Belarusian history is connected to the post-war reconstruction period. The republic then not only restored its losses, but occupied a leading place

among other Soviet republics with regard to its level of industrial development and standards of living (Marples, 2003: 24, 25). As Grigory Ioffe writes, the outcome of the Soviet period of Belarusian history was perceived by many Belarusians as unconditionally positive: ‘a country of dismal workshops and unproductive wetlands in the beginning of the twentieth century, Belarus seventy years later was dominated by large-scale industry and vastly modernized agriculture’ (Ioffe, 2008: 109).

During the first years of independence, national activists faced the extremely difficult task of conducting a “de-identification” of the Belarusian idea from Soviet ideology, simultaneously striving to fill it with alternative content. However, they preferred to formulate a new idea in opposition to “Soviet-ness”, which had to move the geopolitical framework of Belarusian identity westwards to Europe. The Belarusian language was assigned the role of a major marker for this new national identity project. By contrast, the official policy of Belarusian bilingualism which was introduced in 1995 indicated a return to the Soviet model of Belarusian community. In this rigid divide the majority of Belarusian people preferred to support the version of the Belarusian idea with which they were most familiar.

3. Competing meta-narratives of Belarusian identity: the quest for a supra-national framework

The official and oppositional approaches to language policy in the Belarusian context have been articulated within the corresponding political and cultural paradigms. Each of these paradigms implies a particular understanding of the status of the national languages, of Belarusian bilingualism and the position of Russian. As will be shown, all of these aspects of linguistic identity in the Belarusian context are part of a more general dilemma concerning the civilizational and cultural framing of Belarus. As Mark Bassin noted, paradoxically, all nationalist ideologies frame their visions of nationhood in terms of a model of “supra-nations”: ‘ideologized visions of multi-national agglomerations [...] bound together into a single cohesive supra-national “community” by a set of shared cultural, religious, moral, and social values, as well as a sense of common historical origins and experience’ (Bassin, 2012: 554). In Belarus, belonging to a larger supra-national community appears to be a contested issue. Belarusian linguistic identity is defined differently, depending on the civilizational and cultural frameworks chosen for the Belarusian idea. Belarus is either an integral part of the Russian civilizational universe (in the official discourse) or a part of

Europe (in the alternative discourse); both versions imply a corresponding logic of national development and, accordingly, language policy.

Under the conditions of the Belarusian authoritarian state there is no fair competition between the different Belarusian linguistic identity projects. One of them is supported by the state (involving institutional resources, ideological propaganda via the state-owned media and the education system while others are linked to the political opposition and locked into the counter-public sphere.

The official idea of Belarus propagated by the state ideology “locates” the country in the territory of the Eastern Slavic Orthodox civilization, centred in Russia. This Eastern version of the Belarusian idea combines certain elements of Belarusian culture and tradition with Russia, while Russo-Belarusian cultural unity and “eternal friendship” is presented as a major distinguishing quality of Belarusians. According to this concept of Belarus, Russian is not a foreign language for Belarusians but, along with Belarusian, constitutes a part of Belarusian cultural tradition. As Valiantsin Akudovich described, ‘Russia is not to the east of the Belarusian lands, Russia is the east of Belarus. It means that Russia by means of its certain contour (just like Europe) is naturally situated inside our own selfness’ (Akudovich, 2006: 31). This Eastward-oriented Belarusian idea is supported by two facets of Belarusian development: belonging to Orthodox Christianity and the experience of Soviet modernization. The official stance of the Orthodox Church, shared by a majority of the Orthodox clergy in Belarus, declares support for an unconditionally pro-Russian idea of Belarusian nationhood. The idea that the Orthodox religious tradition is a genuine Belarusian faith common with Russia implies a specific configuration of the linguistic identity of Belarusians. The official language policy of the Russian Orthodox Church is unconditionally pro-Russian simply by acknowledging Belarus as an integral part of the Russian Orthodox tradition. The Orthodox Church uses Church Slavonic in liturgy and Russian in all other communications. The negative attitude of the Moscow Patriarchate to the introduction of national languages to religious services can be explained by two factors. Firstly, the special emphasis that the Moscow Patriarchate has put on the use of this language in church services is explained by Borowik as a double sense of unity, which the Orthodox Church creates by using Church Slavonic in the Orthodox Church to preserve a link to a common past, that is, the tradition that traces the beginnings of Eastern Christianity to the brothers Cyril and Methodius, who used the old Slavonic language. Secondly, it expresses a strict and visible opposition

to Western Christianity, which uses national languages and has lost the unity of a common liturgical language. ‘This practice therefore reflects the high importance that the R[ussian] O[rthodox] C[hurch] attributes to its claim of a strong separation between Western and Eastern Orthodox Christianity’ (Borowik, 2006: 273). The opposition to Western civilization, culture and religious traditions on the territory of Belarus, however, has been transformed into an opposition to some aspects of the Belarusian tradition itself, to those periods of history when the ancestors of Belarusians adhered to Calvinism, to the Uniate (Greek Catholic) Church and, in large numbers, to Roman Catholicism, not to mention the historically significant presence of Jews and Muslim Tatars in the country. There is also a nationally-oriented Orthodox community in Belarus. The Orthodox Brotherhood of the Three Vilnya Martyrs was founded in 1992, with the aim of unifying believers and promoting the idea of Orthodox religion as a genuine Belarusian tradition, with the Russian roots of this tradition having no particular meaning in contemporary Belarusian religious life. The community publishes an Orthodox periodical entitled *Pravaslaue* in Belarusian. Among other aspects of the nationalizing religious life of Orthodox Christians this community also promotes the idea of using Belarusian in liturgy. The activity of this community, however, does not alter the dominant status of the Orthodox Church and its official policy; it remains a kind of national sub-community within Russian Orthodoxy.

The situation in the Catholic Church, the second largest religious denomination in Belarus today,⁶ appears in stark contrast. The official language policy of the Catholic Church, once viewed as an agent of expansion of “Polishness”, is now unconditionally focused on promoting Belarusian. This policy was first formulated in the late 1980s. Previously, the presence of Catholicism served as a reminder of Polish domination over the territory of Belarus: it was the religion of the Poles, and the Polish language was almost unconditionally accepted as natural to Catholicism. Meanwhile, the Vatican had already declared its pro-Belarusian stance in 1950, when Radio Vatican started to broadcast in the Belarusian language. Pope John Paul II had used Belarusian and demonstrated his support for Belarusian national Catholicism. In Belarus, however, the Belarusian language was only accepted as a working language in the Catholic Church in 1991. Kazimir Świątek⁷ favoured the introduction of Belarusian into liturgy and prohibited the display of Polish national symbols in Belarus’ Catholic churches. From the perspective of the “Belarusization”

of the Catholic Church, there remained a problem with some clergymen of Polish origin who did not separate the concepts "Catholicism" and "Polishness". They opposed the Belarusian language, seeing it as a way of "Belarusizing" Poles living in Belarus. The Catholic Church also carries out a wide range of educational and publishing activities in Belarusian. All Catholic magazines and books are published in Belarusian (*Nasha Vera (Our Faith)*, *Ave Maria*), and basic religious texts are translated into Belarusian, as are prayers and songs. The Catholic clergy usually use Belarusian in their communications with parishioners.

As the results of an opinion poll conducted by the Novak laboratory show, the geopolitical preferences of Belarusians and the perception of Russia as an ally is significantly affected by their religious affiliation. There are significantly fewer supporters of union with Russia among Belarusian Catholics (11%) as compared to the Orthodox community (32.2%). At the same time, the group of Catholics includes markedly more opponents of any union whatsoever than the average for the sample (36.6% against 18.8% in the group of Orthodox believers and the average for all respondents of 20.4%). Given that the "pro-Russian" and "autarchic" voters are clearly the electorate of the authorities, one can be certain that for Belarusian Catholics who support the current authorities "non-alignment" replaces the pro-Russian choice, which can be regarded as the mainstream option for Orthodox supporters of the authorities ('Belarus and the World', 2010: 26).

The second key factor in the development of the Eastward concept of Belarusian identity is related to socialist modernization, which resulted in cultural enlightenment, education and the formation of national consciousness tied to the socialist ideology, which was effectively carried out with the help of the Soviet state. Although it was a reduced form of modernization, it was nevertheless related to those spheres of public life that directly affected the formation of a Belarusian nation. In the first place, socialist transformation changed the social structure of society. The second aspect of transformation was associated with the communicative facilities in social space and the construction of a modern communications network. All these changes empowered the Soviet-made community of Belarusians, making them resistant to nationalist appeals concerning pre-Soviet Belarusian national glory. The linguistic design of contemporary Belarusian society is also a product of the Soviet epoch. The language policy of the Belarusian authorities introduced after the referendum of 1995 was one of the elements of a general strategy of continuing Soviet practices.

The second option of the supra-national framework articulated and promoted by the oppositional cultural elites is Europe. "European" analogies of cultural nation building serve as a justification for policies aimed at the achievement of a one-state-one-language condition in Belarus. One of the goals of the Belarusian People's Front is the 'renewal of the Belarusian cultural tradition on the basis of European moral values', while the "European-ness" and the general civilizational perspective of Belarus are provided by the Belarusian historical memory.⁸ According to this European vision of Belarus, Europe had always been a true home for Belarusians: 'from the moment of emergence of statehood on Belarusian lands in the ninth century and until the end of the eighteenth century Belarus had belonged to the Western or, rather, to European civilization' (Rouda, 2004). The Western format of the Belarusian national idea is testified by the Belarusian past, and practically all the features of the Western civilizational scale can be applied to Belarus or, more precisely, to its past. Examples of "European-ness" abound in Belarusian history: the impact of the classical cultural legacy that penetrated Belarusian territory from the Byzantine and Roman empires; the development of Catholicism and Calvinism; and the separation of church and state, which was the standard in Belarus until its incorporation into the Russian empire.

The project of Belarus built on the foundation of European history implies that that Belarusians are a nation just like Poles, Slovaks and Czechs. Following this analogy, it is logical to assume that at a certain stage of their development Belarusians should arrive at the point where they become a linguistically homogenous nation-state, similar to Poland, Slovakia, etc. In this context, Belarussianness appears to be one of the major attributes and markers of a small European nation. In this way, becoming Belarussophone came to be tied to the idea of being (or becoming) a European Belarusian and vice versa.

4. Human rights argumentation in linguistic debates

One of the characteristic features of the current linguistic situation in Belarus is an extreme politicization of the language issue, which prevents any effective discussion of language as a linguistic human rights issue at the individual level. Any reference to language in the media, education or other spheres of life is interpreted as a political declaration either against or in favour of the official political stance. The observance of linguistic human rights implies 'at an individual level that everyone can identify

positively with their mother tongue, and have that identification respected by others' (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson, 1995: 2). In Belarus, however, language identification at the individual level immediately entails the "political classification" of that individual. This, in turn, creates corresponding ideological connotations which, as a rule, are viewed negatively from the other side of "the barrier".

Paradoxically, both the official and oppositional language discourses in Belarus tend to use human rights arguments as grounds for their vision of the linguistic identity of Belarusians and their corresponding language politics. In doing so, the authorities apply an instrumental approach, placing emphasis on the communicative function of the language. Official language policy is based on a strategy of not intervening in existing language practice, of allowing the linguistic design of Belarusian society to develop randomly. Being a populist and pragmatic politician whose major aspiration is to stay in power, the Belarusian president demonstrates a high degree of "liberalism" in language matters. At a meeting with representatives of the Belarusian media in December 2009, Lukashenka explained his understanding of language politics: 'Language is a sphere of life which does not abide coercion and dictatorship, therefore there will be no forced Belarusization or Russification in the country' (Lukashenka, 2009). In Lukashenka's view, the recognition of Belarusian and Russian as state languages corresponds to the historical tradition of Belarusians and to the contemporary language situation in the country. In another speech, the Belarusian president said: 'Bilingualism is one of our greatest assets and achievements. We will never allow discrimination in this sphere of life, there will be no forced Belarusization at the expense of Russian. In Belarus, where the majority speaks this language as their mother tongue, artificially removing it from use would be stupid, at least' (Lukashenka, 2010). The official discourse stresses the natural presence of the Russian language in Belarusian life, without mentioning that the linguistic design of Belarusian society is the result of a long-term language and national policy which was initially implemented in the Russian empire in the nineteenth century and continued under Soviet ideological auspices in the twentieth century. At the same time, as Belarusian began to be perceived as an instrument for resisting a regime, control and repression over the Belarusian-language public sphere became an important element of the struggle against the opposition; conversely, promoting Russian in Belarus came to be perceived as ideologically advantageous, since it weakened the role of the national opposition.

At the same time, some opposition politicians focus entirely on the symbolic function of language as a cultural and historical value, of crucial importance for the nation’s development. The project of national revival formulated by national activists implies a re-animation of Belarusians’ “European past”, the creation of an alternative historical narrative of Belarusian development in opposition to both Russian influence and the Soviet experience. For proponents of a mono-linguistic Belarusian nation, the symbolic value of Belarusian is crucial. *Nasha Niva*,⁹ an independent Belarusian weekly published by nation-minded intellectuals, is rigidly opposed to use of Russian in Belarus, rejecting it even if this proves politically counter-productive. In May 2001 the author of an article entitled ‘The Motivations of a Self-Murderer’ expressed his serious concerns about the use of Russian in the Belarusian political struggle. According to him, the appearance of Russian-language posters, stickers and labels with political messages, was an indication of the political self-deprivation of those who struggled against the regime in Russian (Paulouski, 2001). The fact that posters and stickers are addressed to the majority of Belarusian society that speaks Russian, does not seem to be of any importance. Language remains a value in and of itself, and its symbolic weight exceeds its communicative function as well as the mobilization potential of Russian in the political struggle against totalitarian power.

The romantic image of Belarusian as a sole language of protest against authoritarianism makes it even more attractive and helps to recruit new young Belarussophones. According to Andrei Dyn’ko, ‘as long as Belarusian is “the language of the square” [a language of political protest], it will have a chance to become a “language of the street” in a longer perspective’ (Dyn’ko, 2006). In this way, however, the solution to the problem of linguistic rights becomes dependent on developments in the political battlefield. The right to choose the language of communication has been assessed from the perspective of the political ideology behind the language choice. From this perspective, paradoxically, the linguistic rights of Belarussophones appear to be attributed to the national project which failed to become the basis for the state’s nation-building strategy. In this way, these rights become an inseparable victim of political failure.

5. In search of linguistic identity formulae: “the third way”

In order to avoid strict political polarization of language, some Belarusian intellectuals have found a way to bridge the gap between Belarusian identity and the

existing bilingualism. According to this logic, the Belarusian nation is “the meeting point of civilizations”, defining Belarus as “a nation in between” different civilizational universes, which is predestined to accommodate others and accept them as a part of its own identity. Pavel Loika considered this multicultural way of being as the historical destiny of Belarus:

While taking into account the dramatic character of Belarusian history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, associated with our Fatherland being torn between Warsaw and St. Petersburg, between Catholicism and the Orthodox faith, we should not abjure our ancestors’ achievements. There is no sense in considering only texts written in Belarusian to be “national”. There are no grounds for granting our neighbours or anyone else the Belarusian cultural values created in Polish, Russian, and Latin. In general, Belarus both today and in the remote past has had a multiethnic and multilingual character. (2001)

The idea of Belarus as a space located in between two significant “others” and experiencing pressure from both sides was first articulated in the 1880s in the works of Belarusian *narodniki*, who formulated a thesis about two troubles in Belarusian history: the Russian and the Polish (Smalančuk, 2011: 100). Later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Ihnat Abdziralovich considered the essence of the Belarusian idea to lie in the rejection of two “extreme” messianic projects, of Eastern Byzantism and Western individualism. He wrote in 1921: ‘Up until the present time, the Belarusian people have not supported either the eastern or western waves, letting them roll over their heads instead [...] Fluctuation between the west and the east and a lack of genuine inclination to either side is the main attribute of the Belarusian peoples’ history’ (Abdziralovich, 1993). The return to this idea of an “in-between” nation in post-Soviet Belarus was pre-determined by the unfavourable reaction of a large part of Belarusian society to the nationalization policy introduced in 1990. This reaction resulted in the coming to power of a populist politician with no articulated vision of Belarus as a nation but with great willingness to revive Soviet traditions. Political and cultural elites have become aware that ‘Russian speakers who have such “symbolic capital” as the Russian language at their disposal are not inclined to relinquish it’ (Zaprudski, 2007: 112).

On the one hand, this “third way” is evoked to bypass post-colonial thinking which labels Russophones as agents of Russian colonialism. Such argumentation is characteristic of the narrative of “European Belarus”, which imagines the country as a mono-lingual Belarusian-speaking community. The idea of multi-lingual Belarus “opens up” the Belarusian nation to those who speak languages other than Belarusian,

making them legitimate Belarusians. On the other hand, such a definition of Belarus also avoids speaking about Russia and the Russians in terms of exclusive “closeness”, as is typical of the official ideology. At the conceptual level, the idea of a multi-lingual and multi-cultural Belarus makes it possible to achieve distance from Russia, putting the big Eastern neighbour into the context of multiple others influencing Belarusian development.

At the same time, the significant proportion of Russophone Belarusians who do not support political integration with Russia or Lukashenka’s authoritarian rule, get a rightful opportunity to join the political opposition and struggle for a common democratic homeland. The problem, however, is that at the level of linguistic practice, this concept of Belarus does not provide any sustainable solution for the further weakening of Belarusian in the country’s public and cultural life.

Meanwhile, statistical data on the role and place of Belarusian in people’s linguistic practice over the last decade reveal the troublesome state in which Belarusian now finds itself. A language policy which does not make any special effort to defend and advance Belarusian has resulted in the continuation of tendencies inherited from the Soviet Union, i.e. the lingering supremacy of Russian and the decreasing presence of Belarusian in public life. Data from population censuses in 1999 and 2009 demonstrate the outcome of this policy. In 1999 73.3% of Belarusian citizens identified Belarusian as their mother tongue, while 24.1% identified Russian. At the same time, fewer than two fifths (36.7%) of ethnic Belarusians spoke Belarusian in their daily life, while 62.8% used Russian. The results of the 2009 census showed that the numbers of those that considered Belarusian to be their mother tongue, as well as those who used Belarusian on a daily basis, decreased to 50.1% and 21% respectively.¹⁰ However it should be noted that in the 2009 census, the term “native language” was defined as a “the language learned first in early childhood”, which at least partially reduced the number of people who considered Belarusian to be their native language. Moreover, according to a survey on Belarusian identity and language conducted by the Novak laboratory in 2012, when respondents were allowed to define more than one native language, 52.4% named Belarusian, and 78.7% named Russian. It appears, therefore, that 35% of Belarusians have two native languages (*Belaruskaya mova - mova elity i apazytsyi*, 2012). This relative high number of Belarusians who consider Belarusian to be their native language can be interpreted as a ‘forward looking idea, which projects one’s language preference in the future’ (Arel,

2002: 115) and can be understood as an expression of their support for its use in society and promotion by the state, even if they do not back this preference in their own language use.

According to the results of a 2012 Novak survey devoted to the use of Belarusian, only 23% of Belarusians claimed to be fluent; moreover, only 3.9% of Belarusians used Belarusian all the time. Almost half of all respondents (46.5%) said that they did not use Belarusian because the Belarusian language milieu was non-existent, while almost one third said it was due to their own ignorance of Belarusian. More than half of Belarusians (52.4%) were against expanding the use of Belarusian in business, while only 33% were in favour. Slightly less than half (43.3%) were against the more active use of Belarusian in education, while 47.1% would welcome such a policy.

According to V. Kulyk, this phenomenon of discrepancy between language practice and language identity (or willingness to identify with language) originated in the Soviet era. As a result of Soviet nationality policy, the notion of ethno-cultural identity lost its direct association with national language, as in some other post-Soviet republics, like Ukraine, Kazakhstan, etc. One of the paradoxes of Soviet national policy was in the common retention of ethno-linguistic identity, which remained an essential aspect of collective identity of individuals despite an obvious shift in communicative competence and the use of national languages. Soviet public discourse and practices supported the existence of separate nations, distinguishable primarily by their eponymous languages, and of these languages as the nations’ most natural and valuable attributes (Kulyk, 2011: 644).

6. “Hybrid” linguistic identity of Belarusians

One more linguistic phenomenon shared particularly by Belarus and Ukraine is a mixed vernacular: the mixture of Russian and Belarusian is called “*trasianka*”, the mixture of Russian with Ukrainian “*surzhyk*”. These two Slavic inter-languages came to be the result of social and cultural processes related to rapid urbanization during Soviet times, when mass migration from rural areas to cities took place and many Russian-speaking specialists and officials moved to the periphery republics from Russia proper. In the process of their social adaptation, the new town-dwellers had to linguistically adapt to Russian, i.e. to use Russian in public, although they had previously only spoken Belarusian or Ukrainian. Historically, the perception of

trasianka was loaded with negative connotations: it reflected a lack of ability to speak “pure” Russian, i.e. a lack of proper education and culture of speech. This perception was supported by past experiences: *trasianka* speakers were likely to be less educated and mixed speech became stigmatized as an attribute of “backwards” people. In this way, the image of *trasianka* as “a code of rural migrants” was formed. In the opinion of some researchers, standard Belarusian in its oral form is practically absent for the majority of Minsk residents, i.e. it ‘does not truly exist in the everyday language practice of the majority of Minsk residents, although it is used in mass media and is formally taught within the system of education’ (Liskovets, 2009: 397).

Furthermore, contemporary studies of this mixed language reveal that its use and perception in society has been gradually changing. According to data collected in a study on the role of *trasianka* in linguistic practice, conducted by B. Kittel *et al.*, a striking number of respondents—more than 80%—acknowledged using some sort of mix of languages.¹¹ Such wide usage of mixed language cannot be explained simply by a lack of knowledge of Russian or Belarusian or rapid urbanization in the past. As B. Kittel *et al.* noted in their study, ‘there can be no doubt that many Belarusians, especially those with higher education, speak fluent Russian, although this Russian often contains phonetic interferences and maybe some Belarusian words, often for Belarusian realia’ (Kittel *et al.*, 2010: 64). Moreover, according to the results of this study, when asked to give anonymous responses, ‘roughly two-thirds of the respondents declared the mixed language either as their “mother tongue” or used it regularly alongside another “mother tongue”’ (Kittel *et al.*, 2010: 65).

Along with this evidence of the prevalence of *trasianka* in the linguistic practice of many Belarusians, an interesting observation has been made about the phenomenon of the inter-generational transmission of *trasianka*. The widespread use of the mixed language does not automatically disappear with the rise of education levels or by moving up the social hierarchy. As B. Kittel *et al.* write, ‘the fact that Trasianka is most obviously already spoken in the third generation and has not been replaced (along with Belarusian) by the speakers with the Russian language in all communicative spheres can be considered as external, social evidence for the possibility of the development of a new mixed system’ (Kittel *et al.*, 2010: 52).

On the one hand, these facts imply that the symbolic status of *trasianka* has been changing and its traditional stigmatization diminishing. On the other hand, one can interpret these data as an indicator that *trasianka* may eventually develop into a

new mixed system. The specificity of linguistic practice in Belarusian society, combined with state independence of Belarus, may create the conditions for justification of the development of a new Belarusian version of Russian (‘Curt Woolhizer: *Belarusy maiuts’ prava...*’, 2013).

Concluding remarks

The linguistic repertoire of Belarusian society should be analysed, not in terms of vacillation between two languages (Russian and Belarusian), but as a component of general post-colonial reality. Starting with *trasianka* as a “borderland” between Russian and Belarusian, the whole complexity of linguistic practice of Belarusians represents a variation of what Homi Bhabha called a ‘third space of enunciation’. In his piece entitled ‘Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences’, Bhabha stresses the interdependence of colonizer and colonized in all spheres of their further development. Bhabha argues that claims to the inherent purity and originality of cultures in post-colonial reality are ‘untenable’ (Bhabha, 2006: 155-157). When viewed against the background of several co-existing concepts of Belarusian identity, the linguistic practice of Belarusians can be understood as a manifestation of Belarusian culture’s hybridity, which has enabled the majority of Belarusians to avoid alienation and polarity in their perception of others and their language.

Notes

1. The term was used by Ray Taras after the famous Russian “dolls within dolls” (Bremmer and Taras, 1993: 513).
2. It changed its status to a political party in 1993.
3. When the election campaign for the Supreme Soviet of Belarus began in 1990, there were no political parties registered in Belarus. A legal basis for the registration of political parties in Belarus was created later, in October 1990.
4. Resolution of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus of 26.01.1990 No. 3095-XI ‘On the Order of the Implementation of the Law of the Republic of Belarus “On Languages in the Republic of Belarus”’.
5. UDPB merged with the Civic Party in 1995 establishing the United Civic Party.
6. According to statistics data, about 70% of Belarusians belong to the Orthodox Church, while about 20% of Belarusians declare themselves to be members of the Catholic Church; there are also a considerable number of Protestants (about 2% of the population) and members of other religious groups such as Islam and Judaism.
7. Kazimir Świątek (1914-2011) was the Metropolitan Archbishop of Minsk-Mohilev, and Apostolic Administrator of Pinsk.
8. *Pragrama Gramadskaga ab’adnann’ia BNF “Adradzhen’nie”*. Available at <http://narodny.org/bnf/partyja/statut/50.shtml>. Retrieved: September 15, 2014.

9. The newspaper had become the voice of the “Belarusian national cause” at the turn of the twentieth century and was recreated in 1991 as a symbolic “continuation” of the first *Nasha Niva*.
10. National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Available at <http://belstat.gov.by>. Retrieved: September 15, 2014.
11. A survey conducted in November 2008, it included 1,400 questionnaires from seven Belarusian cities. In each city, 200 inhabitants were interviewed. The sample is not representative of Belarus as a whole, but reflects tendencies in Belarusian cities (Kittel *et al.*, 2010: 64).

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