

# The Failure of the Language Policy in Belarus

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The Republic of Belarus, which used to be part of the Soviet Union, became an independent state in August of 1991. It was expected that Belarus would follow the same path on the way of its independent nation building as the other former Soviet republics, i.e. it would promote its national identity and the use of the national language in the public and private spheres of life. The tentative attempt of the nationalist-inclined part of the Belarusian intelligentsia to introduce a new language policy that stipulated for a gradual switch to Belarusian as the sole state language first seemed quite successful. The referendum of 1995, however, reintroduced the Russian language as the second state language, which in practice meant squeezing Belarusian out of the public sphere, and going back to Belarus being a predominantly Russian-speaking country.

Based on the available scholarship, official and historical documents, and other secondary data, the essay argues that the new language policy failed because Belarusians had not formed into a nation by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the Russian language being the medium of urban dwellers' communication and a means of upward social mobility since the times of the tsarist empire, the value of being fluent in Belarusian still remains questionable for the majority of the Belarusian population.

## Introduction

Modern Belarus became an independent state on August 25, 1991. Before declaring independence, Belarus was one of the 15 republics of the USSR for over 70 years. Independence was declared in August after the representatives of Belarus, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine had signed Belavezha Accords on December 8, 1991. The Accords were signed to confirm that “the Union of SSR as a subject of international law and geopolitical reality ends its existence” (Shushkevich, 2013, p. 329). The country, however, “was ill-prepared for independence” (Marples, 2003 p. 21). According to Gapova (2004), “the Belarusian people did not particularly ask for independence, [and] seemed at a loss about how to utilize it when it was granted” (p. 1). Over 82.7 percent of the population that same year “supported the

preservation of the USSR as a federation of sovereign states” (Marples, 2003 p. 21).

Eight years after the declaration of independence the census revealed that ethnic Belarusians made up 81.2 percent of the population in Belarus, whereas ethnic

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Russians constituted the largest minority group in the country equaling 11.4 percent (Census, 1999). In spite of the fact, 63 percent of the population declared that they spoke Russian as their language of everyday communication, including at home, and not Belarusian (Census, 1999). The paradoxical language situation in Belarus – when the majority of the population speaks the language of one of the minorities – has been given the same explanation in most of the scholarly literature on Belarus and its linguistic condition. The explanation concerns the unprecedented degree of Russification to which the Belarusian language was subjected as a result of the policy of Russification conducted first by the Russian Empire and later by the Soviet authorities (Silver, 1974; Ioffe, 2003b; Vasilevich, 2012; Rannut, 2012; Bekus 2014b). The term “Russification” is understood in the scholarly literature in two different ways. The general understanding of the term pertains to the “forcible imposition of the Russian language and culture at the expense of the native language” (Rannut, 2012, p. 5034), or “the process whereby non-Russians are transformed objectively and psychologically into Russians” (Aspaturian, 1968, pp. 159-160). The other meaning relates specifically to the Belarusian language and implies making it “structurally closer to Russian” (Kittel et al., 2010, p. 49). The closer to Russian version of the Belarusian language was introduced as a standard in 1933 (the so-called Narkomovka) and has been practiced from that time on.

The given essay offers an answer to the question that seems to have been largely disregarded by researchers who study Belarus. The question is why, out of all other republics comprising the Soviet Union, the policy of Russification conducted by the Soviet authorities was especially successful in Belarus. Why did the National Program, which was introduced in 1990 and which committed “the government to the long-term aim of restoring the Belarusian language in education and public life by the end of the century,” fail (Ulasiuk, 2011, p. 4)? It can be argued that it happened because the Belarusian nation, due to a number of historical reasons, had not been formed by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Belarus gained independence from the Soviet Union, it turned out to be “the most de-nationalized of the non-Russian successor states” (Kuzio, 1998, n.p.), which led to the failure of the “quest for a non-Soviet identity” (Gapova, 2004, p. 6). In addition, if a nation is understood as “a political community shaped ... at the minimum *by a common language, culture, and history*” (Habermas, 1998, p. 399), the lack of a de facto common language that could unite the nation “linguistically” most likely was the reason why society at large opposed the policy of introducing the Belarusian language into the public and private spheres of life. It can also be argued that the new language policy failed precisely because there had been no nation that could recollect its “European past and switch to the Belarusian language” (Gapova, 2004, p. 3). As Gapova (2004) rightly noted, when independent Belarus emerged in 1991:

her intellectual being had nothing ready at hand: neither the idea of great culture (as Russia), nor a church that could speak the national language, nor an uncontested language itself, nor recognized ancient statehood or any universally known national genius (p. 7).

### **A brief history of Belarus**

When did the history of Belarus begin? There are several competing claims that give an answer to the question. The official website of the Republic of Belarus maintains that “the history of Belarus dates to the Stone Age” (Belarus.by). Another claim made by Vadzim Smok (2013) states that “Belarus has a millennium of history” (p. 7). Yet another scholar, Andrew Wilson in his book *Belarus* (2011), argues that at the beginning of the nineteenth century “the Belarusians ... were not yet Belarusians: they were better, if awkwardly, described as northern Uniate Ruthenians” (p. 60).

The most widely accepted conventional view is that in the ninth century the land of future Belarus used to be part of Kievan Rus (Wilson, 2011, p. 3). Later it was absorbed by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), a medieval European state that started to form in the 13<sup>th</sup> century,

became the largest in Europe by the 15<sup>th</sup> century and existed as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth until the Third Partition of Poland in 1795. Some even believe that the GDL was actually the Belarusian state (Ioffe, 2003a; Gapova, 2004). At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the largest part of the former GDL, including the territory of modern Belarus, was attached to the Russian Empire.

During World War I, Belarus became a military camp for four years (Bekus, 2014a). In March of 1918, Belarus was proclaimed the Belarusian People's Republic (BPR), although this new state existed for only ten months until it was seized by the Bolsheviks and turned into the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (Bekus, 2014a). From 1919 until 1991, Belarus was part of the USSR. By 1991 "the push for independence from the Soviet Union" was comparatively weaker in Belarus than in other states (Burant, 1995, p. 1133). In the view of Burant (1995), the Belarusian Supreme Soviet declared the republic's independence on August 25, 1991 "in the aftermath of the failed coup in Moscow" mostly because of the desire of the *nomenklatura* "to protect its privileges in the face of Eltsin's apparent victory over similar interests in Moscow" (Burant, 1995).

The political leadership of Belarus was taken by surprise by the events in Moscow, and in contrast to Ukraine, the question of the republic's independence was not discussed at a national referendum (Marples, 2003, p. 21). The newly acquired independence was not the result of "the victory of the Belarusian own national ideology" (Gapova, 2004, p. 1). Nevertheless, now the authorities of independent Belarus had to start the difficult process of nation building.

### **What's in a name?**

There is as little agreement among scholars about the etymology of the word 'Belarus' as about the precise point in history when Belarus began. The name Belarus or Belaya Rus, which can be translated as "White Russia" or "White Ruthenia," is believed to have originated in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Zaprudnik, 1993). At first, it referred to the parts of northwestern Russia or Ukraine, and only since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it began to be applied to the eastern parts of modern Belarus (Zaprudnik, 1993). Ioffe (2008) states that the words *Weisse Rusen* (White Russia) were actually first used in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by German authors. The part Bela (white) in the word Belarus could mean freedom in the sense of independence from Tatars as well as Lithuanians (Wilson, 2011). In the view of Zaprudnik (1993), besides the romantic reference to freedom and independence, it could also mean simpler things like "the beauty of the land" when it was covered with snow, or "the white complexion of the people" (p. 2). The word could also have a religious connotation emphasizing true Orthodox faith (Zaprudnik, 1993), or represent the first Christian lands in the region in contrast to "Black Rus" that remained pagan for a longer period of time (Wilson, 2011). It could also be "part of the ancient color orientation pattern, according to which 'white' means west" (Ioffe, 2003a, p. 1245).

Some think that Belarus should rather be called Litva (Lithuania) as people in the region used to identify themselves as Litsviny, i.e. residents of Lithuania (Ioffe, 2003a). This name is connected with the legacy of the GDL. In 1569, Ukraine became part of the Polish Kingdom and Belarus remained in the duchy. Allegedly, some of the Lithuanian princes embraced Orthodox Christianity over time and started to use Belarusian as "the official language of the ducal chancellery and courts" (Zaprudnik, 1993, p. 3). Zaprudnik (1993) claims that because Belarusians had lived in the duchy for 500 years before the territory of Belarus became part of the Russian Empire, they used to call themselves licviny or litoucy ("Lithuanians") (p. 4).

In any case, according to Ioffe (2003a), "even the staunchest Belarusian nationalists do not believe that 'Belarus' became a marker of collective identity before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (p. 1245). He argues that the word was embraced by the indigenous population "only in the wake of the formation of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR)" (Ioffe, 2003a, p. 1244), even though

as a formal designation for the territory the name was introduced by the tsarist Russian administration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Smok, 2013).

The confusion with names is one of the difficulties facing Belarus because “a common name is the most basic indicator of belonging to a group” (Ioffe, 2003a, p. 1245). According to Zaprudnik (1993):

It is true that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. But not a nation’s name to its people. The national name is the epitome of the people’s past. It contains the people’s triumphs and tragedies, and their sense of belonging. It also reflects their collective journey through the expanse of time; it guards their historical continuum (p. 1).

### **Nation formation**

In his article, *When is a nation?* Walker Connor (1990) cites the work of Eugen Weber who convincingly proved that most peasants and small-town dwellers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century France “did not conceive of themselves as members of a French nation as recently as 1870 and that many still failed to do so as late as World War I” (p. 92). Weber’s explanation of the phenomenon was that for peasants who at that time comprised most inhabitants of France “the meaningful world and identity seldom extended beyond the village” (Connor, 1990). Thus, Weber’s findings led to the conclusion that although conventional scholarship used to treat the French nation as one of the oldest in Europe, that might have been a misperception (p. 93).

Connor (1990) acknowledged he was unaware of similar studies concerning other countries; however, a database existed to shed light on the question of whether European nations had formed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Connor, 1990). Data was collected on immigrants who came to the United States from Europe between 1840 and 1915. Conrad argues that there were

few intellectuals ... who came from major cities and could identify themselves as part of the groups, which are currently recognized as European nations. Most immigrants during that time were peasants and regularly identified themselves in terms of some other identity or identities (pp. 93-94).

It should be noted that before 1917, when the territory of modern Belarus used to be part of the Russian empire, most of its dwellers, as well as the inhabitants of other territories within the empire, were also peasants. According to Connor (1990), those immigrants who came from what is now the Republic of Belarus, “tended to identify themselves in terms of village or district. To the degree that they identified with a national grouping, it was as Russian or Pole, the principal determinant of choice being religion (Orthodox or Catholic)” (p. 94).

Belarusian peasants were, however, not the only ones who in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were not “cognizant of membership in the nations to which nationalist writers and outsiders assigned them” (Connor, 1990, p. 95). Connor (1990), for instance also cites the data about Lithuanians who had “little or no consciousness of being Lithuanian prior to the twentieth century,” and whose “identity was highly localized” (p. 94). Earliest Ukrainian migrants, for instance, “called themselves Rusyns or Ruthenians,” and “had no clear idea what Ukraine and Ukrainian meant. [They] often considered themselves to be Russian or Polish” (Connor, 1990, p. 95).

Smith (1989), defined nation as “a named community of history and culture, possessing a common territory, economy, mass education system and common legal rights” (p. 340). He believed that nation defined in such a way was a relatively new phenomenon created by nationalists and other elites and engendered by such developments as, for instance, industrialism (Smith, 1989, pp. 340,

344). Although Smith did not include a common language in his definition of a nation, he still considered that a language group was a basic network of a nation (p. 343).

If a concept of a nation defined by Smith is a relatively new phenomenon, how did modern European nations come into existence? In the opinion of Habermas (1998), Northern and Western European states “evolved within the boundaries of existing territorial states” (p. 397). Central and Eastern European nations followed a different path in their formation, namely “the trail blazed by an anticipatory national consciousness disseminated by propaganda” (Habermas, 1998). Habermas (1998) argues that European nation-states developed either from state to nation – the Northern and Western European states, or from nation to state – the Central and Eastern European ones. The former were created by such actors as lawyers or diplomats, the latter – by “writers and historians, and scholars and intellectuals in general, who laid the groundwork for ... unification of the state by propagating the more or less imaginary unity of the “cultural nation” (Habermas, 1998).

In the opinion of Connor (1990), however, “the presence of even substantial numbers of intellectuals proclaiming the existence of a new nation is not sufficient” (p. 99). On the other hand, intellectuals could inspire the transformation towards national consciousness first among the urban educated middle class and later in the masses (Habermas, 1998, p. 402). Real national consciousness has to be a mass phenomenon, and not exclusively the one of the elites (Connor, 1990, p. 92). Until quite recently, though, the masses were almost completely illiterate, and not much concerned with their group identity, whereas nationalistic elites tended not to consider them as part of their nations at all (Connor, 1990, pp. 92, 98). Thus the task of the intelligentsia was “the rediscovery and realization of the community” (Smith, 1998, p. 355). They had to turn “a passive and subordinate minority” into “a politically active nation” by means of “moral and political revolution” (Smith, 1998).

Formation of a nation is a process, and not an occurrence or an event (Connor, 1990, p. 99). This process is ongoing with slower and faster stages intertwined (Smith, 1998, p. 342). In the opinion of Schulze (1994), modern nations arose at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and within the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and were “conceived by a small number of scholars, publicists, and poets” (as cited in Habermas, 1998, p. 402). They were *Volksnationen* only in concept, which was quite far from reality (Habermas, 1998), as “very often the elites’ conception of the nation did not even extend to the masses” (Connor, 1990, p. 100).

In Belarus, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the situation with nation formation was the same as in many other European countries. Even the Soviet government later considered that if Belarus did “have a pre-Soviet past, it was a peasant, illiterate, [and] stateless one” (Gapova, 2004, p. 10). Belarusian intelligentsia of the turn of the century was mostly educated in Petersburg and Warsaw. They believed the Belarusian land had been torn between Poland and Russia, and had been affected by their political, national, religious, and cultural struggles for centuries (Gapova, 2004, p. 5). Their national cultural idea was focused on

social mobilization, ... recognition of the language, [which the famous Russian ethnographer and lexicographer Vladimir Dal still considered a dialect in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dictionary, 1955, p. 74)], eradicating backwardness, illiteracy, poverty, and joining, as an independent nation, the European project of modernity. (Gapova, 2004, p. 5).

Belarusian intellectuals of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century continued to make public mostly the same claims. History and language were once again placed in the center of the patriotic discourse, and allegations were made that “the people did not know their true history, were living with a false consciousness and taking it for their own, [and] had forgotten their language” (Gapova, 2004, p. 7).

Smith (1989) defined two patterns of how educator-intellectuals could engage the masses in the national moral and political revolution (p. 356). The first pattern was connected with “the uses of landscape” or the so-called “poetic spaces” (Smith, 1989). By this Smith meant that intellectuals would try to create a sense of homeland for people with respect to a particular geographic terrain by means of endowing it “with poetic and historical connotations, or rather with a historical poetry” (pp. 356-357). Thus contemporary Belarusian intellectual discourse is focused “on the belief that the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a Belarusian state” (Gapova, 2004, p. 1). At various times of its history, however, the GDL comprised the lands of modern Lithuania, Belarus, parts of Ukraine, Poland, and Russia. Even now historians are still debating whether the GDL was primarily a Lithuanian state, a Lithuanian-Rus’ polity, or a Rus’-Lithuanian one (Plokhy, 2006, p. 87). In spite of the fact, the present day Belarusian national historiography tends to claim most of the historical legacy of the Grand Duchy for the Belarusian nation (Plokhy, 2006). Moreover:

[a]fter the disintegration of the USSR, [it] claimed for Belarus not only the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius (in Belarusian, Vılınia) but also the current coat of arms of Lithuania, which shows a mounted equestrian with a raised sword – a symbol deeply rooted in the history of the Grand Duchy (Plokhy, 2006).

The second pattern of engaging masses in national revolutions by intellectuals identified by Smith (1989) is the use of history, the cult of “golden ages,” which “must be taught as a series of foundation and liberation myths and as a cult of heroes” (p. 357). Modern Belarusian intellectuals find most of the necessary myths and heroes again in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. They claim that the language of state communication and legal documents in the Duchy was old Belarusian, although there is evidence that besides Lithuanian, the inhabitants of the GDL spoke Ruthenian (also called Chancery Slavonic), and which was used to write laws *alongside* (and not exclusively, as is often claimed) Polish, Latin, and German (Languages of the GDL, n.d.). They also claim that Francysk Skaryna, who was born at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the family of a wealthy merchant in the city of Polatsk (which is now a city in Belarus) and who was educated at the Universities of Poland and Italy, translated the Bible into the Belarusian language. The title page of Skaryna’s Bible, however, reads “The Russian Bible” (Title Page, n.d.). Most likely, Skaryna translated the Bible into the Ruthenian language, which later began to be considered old Belarusian and/or old Ukrainian and which was a variety of Eastern Slavonic languages spoken in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and later in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Ruthenian language, n.d.). It is also doubtful that Skaryna would identify himself as a Belarusian, as although in its modern meaning the word “Belarus” was first used by Poles in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it did not get “a more exact geographical localization” until the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Wilson, 2011, p. 135).

When Belarus unexpectedly gained its independence in 1991, Belarusian intellectuals truly believed that Belarus simply needed to remember its European past to become a modern European nation. The seeds of that belief yielded their fruit in the form of national mythology, which was presented “as a nostalgic myth in the Belarusian memory of identity” (Gapova, 2004, p. 1). According to Gapova (2004), the new heroic past of Belarus made

the nation a European gatekeeper against Russia: the printing of books began earlier here; these lands had a renaissance, a reformation and a Baroque period. The Belarusian language is the most ancient of all Slavic languages and preserves the most ancient words; the bogs of Belarusian Palessie (in the Southwest) are the ancient place of origin of the Slavs (p. 7).

What Belarusian intellectuals seemed not to take into consideration was the fact that by 1991, 69 percent of Belarusians defined their social identity as “Soviet citizens”, and only 24 percent as citizens of Belarus (Titarenko, 2007, pp. 85-86). In comparison, only 3 percent of Estonians said they identified themselves as Soviet citizens, in the first place, rather than citizens of their national republic (Titarenko, 2007, p. 86). In the words of Connor (1990), however, “a history of national consciousness should not, like a history of philosophy, simply describe the thought of a limited number of eminent men without regard to the extent of their following” (p. 97). It is also important to know how masses react to those ideas. Belarusian people apparently did not agree with the intellectuals on the importance of recollection of the nation’s European past and switching to the Belarusian language (Gapova, 2004, p. 3).

According to Habermas (1998), subjects can be turned into citizens of a political community only if there is national consciousness, which has “crystallized around the notion of a common ancestry, language, and history” (p. 404). At the same time, it is difficult to identify the precise moment “at which a sufficient portion of a people has internalized the national identity in order to cause nationalism to become an effective force for mobilizing the masses” (Connor, 1990, p. 100). It seems that in Belarus at the moment the critical mass of those who “have internalized the national identity in order to cause nationalism” has not been reached yet.

### **The problem of national identity**

The historical position of Belarus as “a land in between” (White et al., 2010, p. 347) could not but impact the way its inhabitants identified themselves. Until 1918, when the creation of the Belarusian People’s Republic was declared, Belarus had always been part of other much larger and stronger polities. First, it was Kievan Rus, then the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which later merged with the Polish Kingdom, then the Russian Empire, and finally the Soviet Union. For the first time in their history Belarusians were officially recognized “as a distinct ethnocultural unit with its own ethnic core and language” only in 1919 when the Bolsheviks granted Belarusians their own national Republic (Bekus, 2014a, p. 45). Before that, the scientific study of the Belarusian lands, started by the Russian Academy of Science in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and which “postulated the existence of distinctive Ukrainian and Belarusian tribes with their own specific dialects,” still used as its ideological background the idea that Belarusians had to be brought “back home” to their “Russian roots” and saved from “the Polish cultural and political influence” (Bekus, 2014a, p. 44).

In the opinion of Smok (2013), the formation of a distinct Belarusian identity was hindered not only by polonisation of its nobility and the subsequent policy of assimilation conducted by the Russian Empire (p. 7). Other factors that contributed to the difficulties in the development of the national identity were the small percentage of urban dwellers (that is why, in the view of Vakar (1956), the Belarusian people whose national revival started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century “was almost entirely represented by the social stratum of the ‘oppressed,’ living in rural areas” (as cited in Bekus, 2014a, p. 44), economic backwardness of the territory, low level of literacy among the population, and the absence of universities (Smok, 2013, p. 7). It should be mentioned, however, that the attempts of the founding fathers of the Belarusian People’s Republic to create a Belarusian nation-state were not much supported by the masses (Smok, 2013, pp. 7-8).

On the other hand, after the establishment of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, for about a decade between 1920 and 1930, Belarus enjoyed “intense nationalization of Belarusian life” (Bekus, 2014a, p. 46). It included giving the Belarusian language the status of “the language of the official public life” (Bekus, 2014a). However, there is a caveat. In 1920, three other languages, besides Belarusian, had an equal status in Belarus. The three other languages were Russian, Polish and Yiddish. Russian and Polish were spoken in Belarus as the legacy of its being part of respectively Russian, and before that Polish, states. Yiddish was used due to the large numbers of ethnic Jews

who were forced to live on the outskirts of the Russian Empire, like Belarus, following the Pale of Settlement policy that prohibited their permanent residency beyond certain territories in the country. Nevertheless, the Soviet government regarded the Belarusians as the indigenous nation, and attempted to promote their native language in public institutions of the BSSR (Bekus, 2014a). By the end of the 1920s and in the 1930s, nationalization was replaced by the policy of “Friendship of the Peoples,” which presupposed “rehabilitation of Russian culture and Russian nationalism as the foundation of the Soviet unity” (Bekus, 2014a, p. 46). It also coincided with the period of Stalin’s repressions, which severely afflicted the new Belarusian-speaking elites by means of physical elimination of a considerable part of the Belarusian intelligentsia as well as ordinary people, and by marginalizing Belarusian historical and linguistic sciences (Giger & Sloboda, 2008; Kittel et al., 2010; Smok, 2013).

Until the 1980s the Belarusian nation was developing as a socialist republic within the Soviet Union, with its nascent national identity of the 1920s gradually dissolving in the Russian culture. Perestroika of the 1980s once again raised “the issue of the ethnic origin of Belarusians” to the surface (Ioffe, 2003a, p. 1264). In a newly independent Belarus, society faced the problem of reconstructing (and in the case of Belarus, perhaps, even just constructing) their new collective identity (Titarenko, 2007, p. 79). As many researchers noted, by the time of the Soviet Union disintegration, the level of national identity and mass support for nationalistic ideas in Belarus were low (Burant, 1995; Korosteleva & Hutcheson, 2006; Kittel et al., 2010).

However, according to White et al. (2010), “in any state there may be several competing national identity complexes articulating different preferences for economic and political development, or patterns of international integration” (p. 346). This is exactly what happened in Belarus where “the neo-Soviet and the opposition memorial cults [were] in bitter conflict” (Lindner, 1999, p. 643). The first national identity model was promoted in Belarus “by the official pro-regime ideologists” (Titarenko, 2007, p. 89). According to this model, the national identity of Belarusians was based exclusively on the Soviet history, and mainly on the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War. The creators of the model posited that before 1944 when Belarus was liberated from the German invaders, Belarusians as a nation had not actually been free and thus “all the talks about other kinds of freedom and liberation are ‘empty’ and non-appropriate” (Titarenko, 2007).

The opposition was trying to promote its own model of constructing national identity based on the “myth of Belarusianness consisting of language, culture, and independence from Russia” (Titarenko, 2007, p. 89). In the referendum of 1995, however, the majority of voters (83.3 percent) rejected the white-red-white banner and the Grand Duchy-based coat of arms proposed by the opposition, and instead supported the slightly modified national symbols of the former BSSR as their new state flag and national emblem (Ioffe, 2003a, p. 1262). Although the opposition claimed that the outcomes of the referendum had been rigged, it seems more likely that the people in Belarus simply had not accepted the symbols of the medieval polity as their own.

Thus by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries another set of impediments hampered the promotion of “the idea of Belarusians as a self-sustaining cultural and ethnolinguistic community” (Bekus, 2014a, p. 48). This time the impediments included the inertia and conservatism of the old *nomenklatura*, public discontent due to a catastrophic decrease in the standards of living, and social disorientation (Bekus, 2014a).

In the view of Ioffe (2003a), “ethnic allegiances and/or shared identity can exist *only* in popular mentality, which is their sole possible agent or substratum” (p. 1249). During the period of post-communist transition, Belarusian popular mentality demonstrated the so-called “paradoxes” of Belarusian identity (Titarenko, 2007, p. 80). One of them was surprisingly “positive experience of life in the Soviet Union, which many Belarusians remembered fondly” (Bekus, 2014a, p. 48). Others were as follows:

instead of fighting for liberal freedom, the Belarusians prefer[ed] social and economic stability in the country, instead of developing nationalism the Belarusians [were] almost indifferent to ethnic-national discourse, at last, they identified themselves as the Belarusians while mostly speaking Russian (Titarenko, 2007, p. 80).

Consequently, even today it is impossible to talk about a single Belarusian national identity. Belarusian society is split into Westernisers, i.e. those who consider Belarusians heirs to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and the pro-Moscow oriented ones (Ioffe, 2003a, p. 1266). The ideas of these two groups are backed by two different sets of national symbols and two different mythologies (Ioffe, 2003a). The first sees Belarus as a state that has been separated from Russia since time immemorial, the second – believes that Russians and Belarusians are two fraternal peoples with common roots in the antiquity and very close cultural and linguistic ties.

### **The policy of Russification**

Phillipson (1992) called Russification a form of linguistic imperialism. The term refers to “both official and covert ethnic and language policies which were implemented by the Russian authorities during the tsarist empire and the Soviet Union, and continue to be implemented by the contemporary Russian Federation” (Rannut, 2012, p. 5034).

The concept of Russification dates back to 1833 when the then Russian Minister of Education, Sergei Uvarov, formulated the idea of Panslavism, which included the Orthodox faith, imperial self-governance, and nationalism (Rannut, 2012, pp. 5034-5035). Thus, Russification meant subordination to the Russian state, its government and the Orthodox Church (Rannut, 2012, p. 5035).

Weeks (2010), following Edward C. Thaden, talked about three separate types of Russification in the Russian Empire: unplanned, administrative, and cultural (p. 1). Unplanned Russification meant the process of adoption of the Russian language and culture by non-Russians. It occurred by means of, to some extent, voluntary cultural assimilation. Administrative Russification in the Russian Empire referred to “the increasing centralization of the Russian imperial bureaucracy that was an on-going process from at least the reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855)” (Weeks, 2010). Finally, cultural Russification denoted “the deliberate policy of attempting to assimilate non-Russians culturally, that is, to make Russians out of Poles, Uzbeks, or other non-Russians” (p. 2).

The first target of "Russification" for the tsarist authorities, however, became the ethnic Russians themselves, the reason for it being that they “failed to identify with modern concepts of the nation and defined themselves primarily, or exclusively, as Orthodox Christians” (Weeks, 2010, p. 2). According to Weeks (2010), the Russian Empire, although it was a multinational state, tended to completely ignore non-Russians, and acknowledged their existence only at times of crisis (Weeks, 2010). It was the Polish uprising of 1863, also called Polish-Lithuanian Insurrection, which additionally embraced the territory of modern Belarus and some of Ukraine, that made Russification of Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Poles an urgent priority for the tsarist empire (Weeks, 2010).

At that time the Belarusian language speakers (mostly peasants) were already being discriminated against by the tsarist authorities, and the Polish language was banned from the official use after the uprising (Zaprudnik, 1993, pp. 57-58). Kastus Kalinouski, who is considered the leader of the uprising on the territory of Belarus, and who tried to promote the emerged Belarusian vernacular “as a mobilizing medium” (Zaprudnik, 1993, p. 57) once complained that

In our country, Fellows, they teach you in the schools only to read the Muscovite language for the purpose of turning you completely into Muscovites. ... You'll never hear a word in

Polish, Lithuanian, or Byelorussian as the people want (Zaprudnik & Bird, 1980, pp. 54, 65).

The Russian Empire was not a nation-state. In spite of the fact, “the largest national group frequently overlooked the other ethnic groups and viewed the state as its state” (Weeks, 2010, p. 9). Considering the Slav peoples of Belarus and Ukraine as Russians, “the Russian Empire was able to claim that nearly two-thirds of its population was Russian” (Weeks, 2010). The Soviet Union later did the same thing creating the Slav triangle or the Slav core out of the three nations.

In the Soviet Union, the national republics were dominated by autochthonous nations; however, the republics were still considered multilingual with the Russian language being the language of interethnic communication (Rannut, 2012, p. 5035). There has never existed an explicit Soviet language policy; rather it was a dimension of Soviet Communist ideology (Rannut, 2012). Although officially assimilation was not recognized, in reality, it was taking place. Instead of the term “assimilation” the term “convergence” was used, which denoted the shift to Russian by non-Russians and a subsequent decrease in the number of spoken languages. The Soviet authorities saw it as “a positive sign of development in the direction of a Communist future” (Rannut, 2012). The process of convergence was divided into two stages. In the first stage, the Russian language would become the language of interethnic communication in those areas, which were non-Russian; and then it would become the language the dominated ethnic group spoke as their first (Rannut, 2012, p. 5036). As a policy, Russification was only stopped during Gorbachev’s perestroika, i.e. between 1985-1991, and it happened, in the first place, because the central power was losing its strength to continue implementing the policy (Rannut, 2012, p. 5037). In general, Russification turned out to be a quite successful policy, even if success in this respect had a negative connotation. During the existence of the USSR, about one fifth of the local languages became extinct “with 50 languages currently moribund or on the verge of it” (Rannut, 2012, p. 5037).

Silver (1974), argues that in Vernon Aspaturian’s terms, the Soviet regime was promoting “Sovietization” of the nationalities that comprised the Soviet Union rather than Russification (p. 46). By spreading the Russian culture and language the regime was trying to “Russianize” the non-Russians, not “Russify” them if by the latter term one understands “the psychological transference of persons from a non-Russian to a Russian identity” (Silver, 1974). However, the transference did happen as a by-product of the two processes: Sovietization and Russification (Silver, 1974).

Silver (1974), noted that there was likely to be some variation among nationalities in the level of Russification (p. 50). Also, a variety was to be expected between rural and urban dwellers (p. 51). The latter would likely be more susceptible to Russification due to the prospects of upward social mobility and career aspirations (Silver, 1974). Already the census of 1959 conducted in the Soviet Union revealed that among the non-Russian groups that inhabited their official national areas, the level of linguistic Russification was the highest among Belarusians: 1.4 percent among the rural population, 22.4 percent among the urban, and 6.8 percent of the total population (p. 55). Gorenburg (2006), too, mentions that the level of the Russification policy impact after the 1950s could be measured by “the increase in the percentage of minority members claiming Russian as their native language from 1959 to 1989” (p. 15). It should come already as no surprise that “among the union republic nationalities, Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Moldavians had relatively high increases in the rate of Russification” (Gorenburg, 2006).

The Belarusians, in particular, were undergoing “progressive assimilation and disappearance ... in the Russian-speaking cultural universe” (Bekus, 2014b, p. 29). That was a sign that “Sovietization” of Belarusians was very successful (Bekus, 2014b). Urbanization and exposure to Russians, who in large numbers moved to Belarus after World War II to help restore the completely destroyed economy of the republic and compensate for the unprecedented human losses, exerted additional impact on Russification of Belarusians. In the opinion of Silver (1974), Russification of

urban dwellers is also a function “of the weakening of traditional village ties and the exposure to modern technology, mass communications, and an urban life-style” (p. 64). In Belarus, for instance, the urban proportion of the population grew from about one-fifth in 1940 to more than two-thirds by the mid-1990s, and the number of cities and towns more than doubled within that period of time (Belarus, n.d.). At the beginning of the new century, “more than three-fourths of the population resided in urban areas, with about one-fifth of the people concentrated in the capital, Minsk” (Belarus, n.d.).

In Belarus the successfully conducted policy of Russification eventually led to yet another problem, which became salient when the Soviet Union collapsed and other post-Soviet states tried “with varying degrees of success, to expand the use of indigenous national languages” (Woolheiser, 2011, p. 11). Belarus remained the only state “where the dominant position of Russian in virtually all social domains has been maintained” (Woolheiser, 2011), thus revealing the fact that besides national identity the Belarusians also had a problem with linguistic identity.

### **The problem of linguistic identity**

From the point of view of linguistic identity, Belarus presents quite an unusual case. According to the Census of 2009, there were 9,503,807 inhabitants in Belarus (Census, 2009). Out of these people, 7,957,252 identified themselves as ethnic Belarusians, which was about 84 percent. In spite of the fact, those who named Belarusian as their mother tongue, made up only 50.1 percent (in the Census of 1999 there were 73.3 percent of such people), and the share of those who claimed they used Belarusian in their everyday communication equaled 21 percent (in 1999 – 36.7 percent. Although Ioffe (2003b) believed that with regard to the language usage the census estimates might be of limited or no value (p. 1014), it is clear that the majority of the population in Belarus, while identifying themselves as ethnic Belarusians, prefer to speak Russian instead of their native language.

Another problem with the Belarusian language is to actually define what this language is. Still in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Belarus was incorporated in the Russian Empire, its urban population was mostly speaking Russian and Yiddish, whereas Belarusian was considered a “peasant” language spoken by the countryside inhabitants (Giger & Sloboda, 2008, p. 315). In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the language (or rather languages) of instruction in Belarusian schools were Polish, Russian or even Latin, and liturgy at churches was conducted in Latin or Church Slavonic (Bekus, 2014a, p. 45). Until 1905, printing in the Belarusian language was prohibited, and no consensus existed on the question which alphabet was proper for the language: Latin or Cyrillic (Bekus, 2014a). In the view of Bekus (2014a), this uncertainty, to some extent, was a replica of the self-identification problem of Belarusians as living in between two powerful nations they were politically and culturally tied with the East (Russia) as well as the West (Poland) (Bekus, 2014a). When the ban was lifted, it became necessary to create a standard version of the language that could be taught at schools and universities, and used in printing. National activists created such a standard based on the peasant version of the language used in rural areas: the so-called Tarashkevitsa established as a standard by Tarashkevich in the 1918 Belarusian grammar. Later this version was replaced by a different literary norm (Narkomovka), which was introduced by the reform of 1933 (Ioffe, 2003b, p. 1017). When the Soviet Union collapsed, the nationally conscious intelligentsia claimed that Narkomovka (standard Belarusian) was an artificial creation of the Soviet regime, which had been Russified by making it significantly resemble the Russian language in terms of grammar, syntax and word use, and that it was necessary to return to Tarashkevitsa. Those claims did contain a grain of truth, as according to Ioffe (2003b), “the actual spread of standard Belarusian in everyday life remains shrouded in mystery, and even Belarus-based researchers profess ignorance in this regard” (p. 1017).

What is widely spread in Belarus, is *trasyanka*. This word literally means a mixture of hay and straw, i.e. “cattle feed of low quality” (Kittel et al., 2010, p. 49). It is a blend of Russian and

Belarusian, described by Belarusian and foreign intellectuals as a “disgusting creature of Soviet assimilation,” a “perversion of the language system,” a “Creolized pseudo-language” or “a patois of Russian and Belarusian” (Ioffe, 2003b, p. 1016). It is often claimed that trasyanka speakers tend to be less educated, thus stigmatizing this type of speech as the language of uneducated people (Kittel et al., 2010, p. 50). This, however, may just be an insinuation, as no research has ever thoroughly investigated the allegation (Kittel et al., 2010). What has been investigated, though, is how many people declare using trasyanka on a daily basis. According to the research conducted by Kittel and colleagues (2010), on average three out of four respondents claimed practicing trasyanka in some way (p. 54).

According to Woolhiser (2011), at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of peasantry in Belarus mostly identified themselves as part of the local community and traditional religion rather than as ethnic Belarusians (p. 13). While for a brief period of time the Soviet authorities were making efforts to promote Belarusian national identity by, among other things, codifying standard Belarusian language, they were not quite successful. Apparently, the population of Belarus did not see the situation with the language use in the republic as an issue. Inhabitants of the rural areas kept speaking their language, whether it was called Belarusian, or trasyanka, or a local dialect. If they migrated to cities for the sake of pursuing education and later a professional career, they would “as a rule assimilate linguistically to the closely-related Russian language” (Woolhiser, 2011, p. 13), which had been the language of the Belarusian urban dwellers since at least the tsarist times anyway.

Consequently, by the time when the Soviet Union collapsed, the majority of the Belarusian population was speaking Russian or the mixed version of the Belarusian language, and considered themselves “most Soviet of the Soviet” (Chernov, 2003, p. 47). Due to the fact some researchers even argue that although Belarus used to be “one of the most economically advanced republics, it was also the most backward in terms of national and civic identity” (Vasilevich, 2012, p. 4). The Belarusian language remained mostly “as a colorful folkloristic attribute” (Vasilevich & Kaścian, 2010, p. 240), with the Belarusian “mother tongue” gradually obtaining “a mythical status that is not necessarily connected to actual speech” (Kittel, et al., 2010, p. 54). Therefore, it came as no surprise that the most Soviet and the most Russified of all the republics of the Soviet Union, Belarus, did not publicly support the dissolution of the Soviet state (Vasilevich, 2012, p. 5). This was the background against which a language law was passed on January 26, 1990 which proclaimed the Belarusian language to be the only state language in Belarus (Ulasiuk, 2011, p. 4).

### **The language law**

Belarus passed a new language law in 1990 when it was still incorporated in the Soviet Union. The adoption of the law was advocated by the Democratic Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) that tried “to stimulate the reactivation of Belarusian as the official language” (Kittel et al., 2010, p. 49). The law envisaged that the Belarusian language would be the only official one and would replace the use of the Russian language in all the spheres of life. According to the new law, Belarusian was to cease being the language of the minority, as it was the case under the Soviet regime, and turn into the language of the majority. Creators of the law understood that the linguistic situation in Belarus would not change overnight, and “adopted an accommodative approach towards language acquisition” (Ulasiuk, 2011, p. 4). The approach stipulated 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 for legal matters within a decade” (Ulasiuk, 2011). Between 1990 and 1994, the law was quite successfully enforced only in the field of education. About 67 percent of schools were using Belarusian as the

language of instruction; teachers of Belarusian received a 10 percent salary bonus; higher education establishments started introducing the language as the medium of instruction (Ulasiuk, 2011, pp. 4-5).

In general, however, implementation of the new law did not go smoothly. Some political parties, like the Movement for Democratic Reform, strongly criticized it, arguing that it was anti-democratic as the law limited people's freedom to choose the language they wished to speak (Law, 2014, p. 3). With time "the process of 'belarusification' acquired a political character" (Ulasiuk, 2011, p. 5). The BPF was accused of nationalism and "russophobia" (Law, 2014, p. 3), with some even labeling the Belarusian language "*benefatŭskaja mova*" meaning the language that the members of the BPF used or spoke (Vasilevich, 2012, p. 10).

The referendum of 1995 reintroduced Russian as the second state language alongside Belarusian, with 83.3 percent of voters saying "yes" to the question of whether they agreed to it (Ioffe, 2003b, p. 1014). In practice it meant "squeezing" Belarusian out of the public sphere (Ulasiuk, 2011, p. 5), and undermining the language "in multiple ways, further reducing the chances of Belarusian regaining the status of a major language" (Law, 2014, p. 3).

Although implementation of the new law was relatively successful almost exclusively in the sphere of education, by 2011 it has become a problem in Belarus to receive education in the language of the titular nation (Ulasiuk, 2011, p. 9). Already in 1995, the percentage of first graders schooled in Belarusian fell from 75 percent to 38 percent in comparison with the previous year, and the percentage of those studying in Russian grew from 25 percent to 62 percent (Ulasiuk, 2011, p. 7). By the school year of 2005-2006 about 77 percent of all secondary school students received instruction in Russian. While at secondary schools Belarusian was still taught as a mandatory subject, in 2011 "there [was] practically no opportunity to receive a higher education in the Belarusian language in an absolute majority of fields of study" (Ulasiuk, 2011, p. 9).

It can be concluded that in the mid-1990s the question of the national language became the most contested and most highly politicized issue in the country. The forces that were trying to reestablish the Belarusian language as the sole official language in Belarus did not acquire enough support from the mostly Russian-speaking population. If in the sphere of education there was at least some advancement, sciences, media, or the legal system never switched to Belarusian at all. Thus, although the opposition once again claimed that the outcomes of the 1995 referendum were rigged, it seems that reintroduction of the Russian language as a state one might have simply been the legitimization of the actual linguistic situation in Belarus (Vasilevich, 2012, p. 9).

## **Conclusion**

Due to its geographic location, the territory of modern Belarus used to be part of other polities for most of its history. Moreover, it was torn between the western civilization with its individualism, separation of church and state, and the rule of law, and the eastern "Slavic Orthodox" civilization (White et al., 2010, p. 345). As a result, by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Belarusian nation had not been formed. Some people in rural areas of Belarus defined themselves as "tuteishiya," which means "local," rather than Belarusians, as late as in the 1950s (Ioffe, 2003a, p. 1245).

Although there is some controversial evidence that the Belarusian language might once have been the state language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, until 1918 when the first grammar book codified a literary norm of the language, Belarusian had mostly been the language of peasants. For a very brief period between 1920 and 1930, the language enjoyed a phase of rapid development. It was introduced as a medium of instruction at secondary schools, at the newly founded Belarusian State University, and became the language of communication of the Belarusian intellectual elite. Stalin's

repressions that physically eliminated many representatives of the Belarusian intelligentsia, and the change of policy from nationalism to peoples' friendship undermined the development of the Belarusian language.

It seems, however, that in general inhabitants of Belarus did not perceive the linguistic identity issue as a real problem. By the time Belarus became part of the Soviet Union, urban dwellers were already mostly Russian-speaking as a result of the Russification policy conducted by the tsarist authorities. Before that, when Belarus was still part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the use of the Polish language was advanced in the country. Also, a considerable Jewish population in Belarus used to speak Yiddish. This means that Belarus was a multilingual and multiethnic country most of its history, and neither uniform linguistic nor national identity have ever existed there.

The policy of Russification continued by the Soviet authorities did not encounter resistance on the part of the Belarusians, as speaking Russian for the sake of upward social mobility had been part of their reality since the time of the tsarist empire. Their identity as Orthodox Christians, or Catholics in case of the western parts of Belarus, was gradually replaced by the Soviet identity, as the Soviet regime was fiercely fighting against religion considering it "the opiate of the masses."

Against such a background, introduction of a new language policy that envisaged a gradual shift to the Belarusian language in the public and private spheres was destined to fail. Belarusians apparently did not feel the need for a national idea that would unite them into a new independent nation by means of recollecting their historic past and switching to their native language. Speaking Russian never prevented the majority of the population from identifying themselves as ethnic Belarusians; however, the value of the ability to speak fluent Belarusian in the mostly Russian-speaking society was highly questionable.

A quarter of a century into independence showed that the Belarusian society was split along the line of its national and linguistic identity, with the majority of the population more concerned with the deteriorating economic condition of the country rather than the language of everyday communication. As of now, it seems highly unlikely that the purely nationalist ideas, or the demands of the opposition to grant the white-red-white banner the status of a cultural and historical treasure, could by themselves patch up the split in society

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