

Belarusian Language Policy in the Context of Linguistic Human Rights.

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The issue of Belarusian language policy can be analyzed in two different dimensions – as an element of nation-building strategy in post-Soviet Belarus, and as a part of linguistic human rights discourse, which refers to legal, moral as well as to emotional aspects of current Belarusian language legislation and practice. These two aspects of the Belarusian language issue became closely interrelated and often perceived as mutually dependent. The article explores the social and political context of the Belarusian national development, which resulted in the establishment of certain linguistic formulae of Belarusian identity. The coexistence of different approaches to the politics of national language in the Belarusian political arena has led to politicization of the language issue. The politics of language in Belarus is considered as a means to control not only the use of language, but also the public discourse and the public fate of the national project based on a certain vision of the linguistic identity of Belarusians. The major paradox of the Belarusian language situation is related to the fact that Belarusian, as an official state language although a minority language in practice, cannot be protected by any international legislation, like the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The linguistic rights of Belarussophones are attributed to the national project which failed to become the basis for the state's nation-building strategy, and appear to be an inseparable victim of this political failure.

Key words: Belarusian language, linguistic human rights, Belarusian identity, post-Soviet development.

The issue of Belarusian language politics can be analyzed in two different dimensions – as an element of nation-building strategy in post-Soviet Belarus, and as a 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 became closely interrelated and mutually dependent. The choice of language of daily use in Belarus is often perceived as a political declaration, with the Russian language viewed as a language of the official culture and politics, and Belarusian understood as the language of the political and cultural opposition. Since the early 1990s, the politics of national language in Belarus has been extremely politicized and polarized. The Belarusian language was viewed as a powerful resource of national and political mobilization by national activists in the 1990s. A language policy aimed at forced Belarusization was considered a crucially important component of the nationalizing strategy of the newly independent state and constituted one of the major values and pillars of the Belarusian national revival. "Belarusian historical memory and the Belarusian language are values which unite our people and ensure our civilizational perspective"¹ – states the program of the Belarusian People's Front, which was the most important political oppositional movement in the 1990s.

In Belarus, like in many other post-Soviet countries, the national revival constituted an indivisible part of the complex processes associated with becoming a sovereign state and trying to

¹ Pragrama Partyi BNF, URL: www.narodny.org

overcome the legacy of totalitarianism and socialist ideology after the fall of the Soviet Union. The introduction of national ideology as a leading principle of political, social and cultural life in a new post-Soviet state was considered a 'natural' reaction to the failure of the Soviet state and ideology. It provided a framework for new identities, which became desperately needed after the loss of old ideological references². Nationalism equipped the societies of new nation-states with an instrument of alienation 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 dismantled³. National issues gained importance partly because they were, as Katherine Verdery points out, the only organizational forms that were already present and had an institutional history.⁴ 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 pre-condition 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"⁵. 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."⁶ 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 19th century acquired a new meaning, centered 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 the society. According to Hroch, language was one such instrument of political mobilization⁷.

All of these social, political and economic aspects of East European nationalism were merged in the Belarusian national movement. At the beginning of society's systemic transformation, national ideology constituted a part of the symbolic capital that became the basis for the formulation of a strategy of change. Nationalism had the appearance of a liberation struggle triggered by dependence on Soviet state 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

² J. Hall, "After the Vacuum: Post-Communism the Light of Tocqueville," in *Markets, States and Democracy*, ed. B. Crawford (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), p. 86–88.

³ Renata Salecl, "National Identity and Socialist Moral Majority," in *Becoming National*, ed. G. Eley and R. G. Suny (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 418.

⁴ Verdery, Katherine. *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 85

⁵ Miroslav Hroch, *From National Movement to the Fully-Formed Nation*, in *Becoming National*, ed. G. Eley and R. G. Suny. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. P. 96.

⁶ Hroch, *From National Movement to the Fully-Formed Nation*, 90.

⁷ Miroslav Hroch, *Yazyk kak instrument grazdanskogo ravernstva*. Am Imperio, N 3, 2005, p. 23.

language policy formulated within this strategy of nationalization was aimed at reducing the effects of Russification and to make Belarusian the main vernacular of Belarusian 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 the law “On languages in the BSSR.” In September 1990 the Belarusian government sanctioned a national program on the development of the Belarusian language and the languages of other nationalities in the BSSR, thereby ratifying a decree that established Belarusian as the state language of the Republic⁸. In 1992, Deputy Minister of Education Vasil Strazhau announced that the language to be used in all pedagogical schools would be Belarusian and 55 percent of first graders would be taught in Belarusian. Notably, he forecast that in ten years the entire Belarusian system of education would shift to the Belarusian language. The Belarusian language appeared in educational institutions, on television and the radio—all this amounted to a common process of “the return to everything Belarusian.” It was a true revival of Belarusian.

However, as Rogers Brubaker writes, ‘the national revival in postcommunist countries was not engendered by nations, but, rather, was produced—or better, it was induced—by political fields of particular kind. And its dynamics are governed by the properties of political fields, not by the properties of collectivities’⁹. This idea about the principal role of the political processes, which pre-define the configuration of national development of postcommunist countries helps to understand the tendencies and changes in the 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”.¹⁰ The political changes within the USSR during *perestroika* brought a possibility to start public discussions on the 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 these problems was the diminishing role of the Belarusian language in Belarusian life. In the middle of the 1980s, approximately 5 percent of journals in circulation were in Belarusian and about one-third of the total population spoke Belarusian in their daily lives, and these were concentrated among rural inhabitants¹¹. No more than a quarter of first-graders in Belarus went to a school with Belarusian primers in 1987. There were no higher educational institutions, technical or vocational colleges which used the Belarusian language. Linguistic Russification was a warning sign of the progressing assimilation and disappearance of Belarusians in the Russian-speaking cultural universe. While in 1970 37.3 percent of all books in

⁸ “Gosudarstvennaia programma razvitiia belorusskogo iazyka i drugikh natsionalnykh iazykov v Belorusskoi SSR” (“The state program of development of the Belarusian language and other national languages in the Belarusian SSR), *Sovetskaia Belorussia*, September 25, 1990.

⁹ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the Nationalism Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 17.

¹⁰ Barbara Tornquist-Plewa, "Language and Belarusian Nation-building in the Light of Modern Theories of Nationalism" *Annus Albaruthenicus / God Belaruski* N6/ 2005, also available at: kamunikat.fontel.net/www.czasipisy/annus/2005/08.htm

¹¹ David Marples, 1999 p. 50

circulation in BSSR were in Belarusian, and 36.5 of all newspapers, ten years later in 1980, these figures were 21.4 percent and 34.0 percent respectively. The percentage of art books being published in Russian in Belarus had increased from 89.9 percent in 1981 to 95.3 in 1984. In governmental institutions and workplace, Belarusian was practically nonexistent¹². In the context of the Soviet ideological project, these data did not appear as crucially problematic, as the Soviet people's development was supposed to lead to internalization of Soviet life. From that perspective, the replacement of the Belarusian language by Russian in Belarusian public life proved 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 their identification 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”¹³. In other words, Belarusians were the most advanced in the realization of the Soviet project of creation of the 'Soviet imagined community', but when this project failed, they turned out to be least and worst prepared for switching to the alternative project – the national one.

The first non-communist oppositional movement created in Belarus in 1988 was the Belarusian People's Front (BPF)¹⁴, which formulated the idea of Belarusian national revival in opposition to Soviet ideology. In the Supreme Soviet of Belarus (elected in 1990), the oppositional coalition on the platform of BPF counted up to 40 members (out of 360)¹⁵. With the support of members of the Supreme Soviet elected from various registered non-governmental organizations¹⁶ (like the Belarusian Language Society, the Belarusian Ecological Union, the Workers' Union of Belarus), which represented the Democratic Bloc – the Belarusian People's Front managed to become the leading political force which defined the strategy for the country's development. Nationalization policy became the major doctrine and basis for social, cultural and political transformation. This policy was aimed at the realization of a Belarusian nation-building project which was based on the ethnolinguistic idea of nation and focused on 'collecting Belarusian folklore, restoring historical buildings and reviving “real,” not Soviet, Belarusian culture'¹⁷. Adherents of this Belarusian idea appealed to the pre- and extra-Soviet experience of the Belarusians, and imagined the Belarusian nation as a cultural unity in opposition to both Soviet and Russian (in pre-Soviet period) ‘colonization’. This project was formulated and imagined as a completion of Belarusian nation-formation, which started at the beginning of the

¹² David Marples ... 1999, p.52.

¹³ Viktor Chernov, “Nishcheta ideologii ili ideologii nishchety,” *Filamaty* 3, no. 6 (2003): 47.

¹⁴ It was transformed into a political party in 1993.

¹⁵ A. Feduta, O. Bogutskij, V. Matsinovitch, “Political Parties of Belarus – Essential Part of Civil Society”. Minsk, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2003. P. 14.

¹⁶ By the time when election campaign started to the Supreme Soviet of Belarus in 1990 there were no political parties registered in Belarus. Legal basis for registration of political parties in Belarus was created later, in October 1990. In the opinion of some authors, such legalization was postponed on purpose by governing elite of Belarus no to allow the registration of BPF party before the parliamentary election.

¹⁷ Gapova Elena, *Negotiating Belarusian*

20th century and, in the opinion of BPF ideologists, was interrupted by the October revolution. The Soviet period of Belarusian history was viewed in this context as a period of Belarusians' alienation from their national idea, which led to denationalization of Belarusians, and only the fall of the USSR gave a chance to resume this interrupted development. According to the plans of nation-minded politicians, the completion of Belarusian nation-building in the independent state was supposed to be complete within a decade. In addition to re-writing the national history from the Belarusian perspective, a major objective formulated by this policy was the change of linguistic situation in the country. It was planned to limit the presence of Russian in various spheres of Belarusian's life, gradually transforming Belarusian society into a monolingual community.

The new Language Law passed on January 26, 1990 envisaged a broader use of the Belarusian language, to enable it to become a majority language rather than a minority one as was the case under Soviet rule¹⁸. According to this law, the implementation of changes in the linguistic design of Belarusian society was supposed to be a gradual process over the course of the 1990s. It was anticipated 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 decade¹⁹. On September 1990, the existing Law on Languages was supported by a National Program, which assigned to the Belarusian government the long-term aim of restoring the Belarusian language in education and public life by the end of century. The Law of Culture adopted on June, 4 of 1991 guaranteed cultural rights to 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 the state cultural policy (Article 10(3.1)). Similarly, the Law on Education adopted on October, 29, 1991, guaranteed support to the spread of the Belarusian language in education.

The new constitution adopted in March 1994 affirmed the official state of the Belarusian language, although according to the constitution, Russian was given the status of a language of inter-ethnic communication.²⁰ In fact this 'new' status which 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 new status of Russian, however, had an important symbolic meaning: it signified the legitimate 'return' of Russian to Belarusian life *de jure*. It was not in fact a return, because not many significant changes had taken place in Belarus in terms of de-Russification during the period between 1990 and 1994; the process of switching to new

¹⁸ Iryna Ulasiuk, *Language Policies and Law in Education in Post-Soviet Belarus*, ECMI Working Papers #50, September 2011, p. 4.

¹⁹ 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'".

²⁰ More on this see: Iryna Ulasiuk, *Language Policies and Law in Education in Post-Soviet Belarus*, ECMI Working Papers #50, September 2011,

linguistic formulae had just started. Major progress was achieved in the system of education, which appeared to be 'the most receptive to implementing the law on languages, and during 1990-1994 the situation in secondary schools radically changed to the benefit of the Belarusian language'²¹. However, most other spheres of political, social and cultural life in the country were not seriously affected by the policy of Belarusization. From this perspective, the re-appearance of Russian as a language of inter-ethnic communication in the Constitution just provided a legitimate space for Russian, which *de facto* had already been there.

The new status of Russian in the text of Belarusian Constitution, 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 country's development were representatives of the national movement, which imagined a new Belarusian nation as a monoethnic and monolingual 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 fascinated by the idea of building a Belarusian nation-state on a basis of ethno-linguistic core. They viewed the future of Belarusians exclusively in the context of Europe and followed the pattern of national development represented by other small East European nations (Czechs, Slovaks, Baltic nations, etc.) in their policies. During the period 1990-1994, however, essential changes took place on the political scene of Belarus. A number of political parties which entered the political arena when Belarus adopted the multiparty system, heavily criticized the 1990 language law. The Movement for Democratic Reform (MDF), founded in 1991, described this law as 'undemocratic', accusing BPF, which remained the major democratic force in Belarus at that time, of Russophobia, isolationism, and of 'arousing nationalist instincts'²². 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 1990²³) 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 monolingual Belarusian nation with the idea of two-language state model, which was an unconditional demand in the programs 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'.²⁴

²¹ Zaprudski Siargiei, "Language Policy in the Republic of Belarus in the 1990s". In *Belarus – the Third Sector People, Culture, Language*. P. Kazanecki and M. Pejda (Eds). Warsaw and Minsk: East European Democratic Center. Pp. 33-40, available at:

http://www.belarusguide.com/culture1/literature/Belarusian_Language_Prosecution_in_Belarus.html

²² Quoted after Zaprudski Siargiei, "Language Policy in the Republic of Belarus in the 1990s".

²³ UDPB merged with the Civic Party in 1995 establishing in this way the United Civic Party.

²⁴ Quoted after Zaprudski Siargiei, "Language Policy in the Republic of Belarus in the 1990s".

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 the inconsistency of this law with democratic ideas: a forceful transition to Belarusian language was viewed as a loss of the democratic freedom of choice. At this moment of the 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. Starting from the 19th 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’²⁵. The Belarusian nationalizing language policy and its perception as “non-democratic” by the society, which just had 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 educate their children in this language were considered as potential victims of a non-democratic policy of state. In the meantime, while politicians discussed the matter of language politics and linguistic design of the Belarusian nation (one- or two language model), society had been experiencing the heavy deterioration of living standards, which had a negative impact on the popular perception 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 to demonstrate 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 the lack of freedom of choice they faced. 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 Belarusization²⁶. The fate of the Belarusization policy was preordained by the outcome of the 1994 presidential election, when the extremely populist politician A. 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 forceful replacement of Russian with Belarusian was brought to the 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

²⁵ Zdeněk Suda, “Liberalism in central Europe after 1989”, in *The meaning of Liberalism: East and West*, ed. Zdeněk Suda and Juri Musil, Budapest-New York: CEU Press, 2000, p. 202.

²⁶ Zaprudski Siargiei, “Language Policy in the Republic of Belarus in the 1990s”.

and Belarusian introduced by the 1995 referendum led to a predictable shift back to Russian-language 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 unfavorable for Belarusian: the number of first-grade students in Russian changed from 25 % in 1994 to 62 % in 1995. The number of those who studied in Belarusian decreased from 75% to 38% correspondingly. The issues of 'discrimination' appeared on the battlefield over the language 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' concluding that the Belarusian people's rights for the free development of their native language and culture were being grossly violated'. By granting the Belarusian people the right to choose Russian or Belarusian as a 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 led to a step toward further Russification.

The notion of 'Russification' had different meanings at different times. During the Soviet period, Russification was an instrument for the Sovietization of cultural and public life, while after 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.²⁷ The policy of Belarusization, with its emphasis on the Belarusian language, became a symbol of the ethnolinguistic national project which remained the major political alternative to the Lukashenka regime. In Lukashenka's political strategy, the language policy was not assigned a specific role, rather the return to official bilingualism was part of his general strategy of return to the 'good old Soviet times'.

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. Although, in fact, no Belarusian nation state had ever existed prior to Soviet rule. The process of Belarusian nation-building, which started at the end of 19th 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')²⁸. The formation of a Belarusian people as a community united by common language, culture, history and origins was consolidated in the years of Soviet power and

²⁷ Yekadumau, "The Russian Factor in the Development of Belarusian Culture," 218.

²⁸ Nicholas P. Vakar, *Belorussia. The Making of a Nation. A Case Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956, p. 219.

supported by its institutions²⁹. The first decade of the 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 the number had risen to 54%, and to 80% by 1928. Moreover, by the beginning of 1928, Belarusization was considered to have been entirely completed 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 the education system 28.4% of schools were Belarusian language schools in 1924–1925, rising to 93.8% in 1929–1930³⁰. 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.³¹ 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'³². By the end of the 1920s, intensive nationalization had been replaced by 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 for 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 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”³³. Those events had a catastrophic impact on Belarusian culture, but, at the same time, the Soviet rulers never questioned the nationness 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”³⁴. “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’³⁵. The new policy of Russification and promotion of bilingualism gradually led to the change of the cultural status and public image of the Belarusian language. In fact, the Soviet ideology related 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

²⁹ More on this N. Bekus “Phase “D” in Belarusian Nation-Building *Nationalities papers*
³⁰ Martin, Terry. *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalisms in the Soviet Union 1923–1939*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 264.

³¹ Vakar, *Belorussia*, 219.

³² Zaprudnik, *Belarus at a Crossroads in History*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993, p. 77.

³³ □ Zaprudnik, Jan. *Belarus at a Crossroads in History*, p. 87.

³⁴ Vakar, *Belorussia*, p. 150.

³⁵ Vakar, 146.

Belarusian national culture and language was often perceived as “backward” 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 people’s communication, but also the language of social promotion in the national republic.

The Belarusian vision of Soviet history contained not only images of Stalinist repressions and Russification, which led to a marginalization of the Belarusian language and 'de-nationalization' of Belarusians. During the Soviet period Belarusians experienced remarkable improvement of the standards of living. Economic progress in 1960s and 1970s in BSSR made Belarus one of the most prosperous Soviet republics. From this perspective, the Soviet era can also be considered as a specific part of the Belarusian nation-formation process, during which certain aspects of Soviet ideology as well pro-Russian cultural and political stance were engraved into the concept of 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 the leading place among other Soviet republics as to the level of its industrial development and the standard of living³⁶. 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’³⁷.

During the first years of independence, the national activists faced an extremely difficult task of conducting a de-identification of the Belarusian idea from Soviet ideology, simultaneously striving to fill it alternative content. They, however, preferred to formulate a new idea in opposition to Sovietness, 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. The official policy of Belarusian bilingualism, which was introduced in 1995, on the contrary, indicated the return to a Soviet model of Belarusian community. In this rigid opposition the majority of Belarusian people preferred to support the version of the Belarusian idea which they were used to.

In opposition to the polarized approach to language politics in 1990s, the current Belarusian linguistic situation and its understanding by politicians proves to be much more nuanced. Today on the Belarusian political scene, only BPF unconditionally supports the idea of a one-language state model, while many other oppositional leaders consider a two-language state model as more relevant to the current Belarusian situation as well as to the Belarusian tradition. In

³⁶ David Marples, “History and Politics in Post-Soviet Belarus: The Foundations.” In *Contemporary Belarus. Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, ed. E.A. Korosteleva, C.W. Lawson, and R.J. Marsh, 21–35. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp. 24, 25.

³⁷ Grigory Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus and how Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2008, p. 109.

the presidential elections 2010, among ten candidates only three of them – Ryhor Kastusioŭ (Belarusian People’s Front), Uladzimier Niakliajeŭ (“Tell the Truth” movement) and Mikola Statkievič (Belarusian Social Democratic Party) advocated a one- language (Belarusian) policy during the election campaign. Other candidates, while recognizing the value of the Belarusian language as a national legacy and the need for state support to ensure its return to public life, rather avoided formulation of a one -language policy in their program. Finally, only the incumbent president ever mentioned any concern in relation to the actual language policy of the Belarusian state as wrong or inconsistent³⁸.

Comparison of the official and the oppositional approaches to language policy in the Belarusian context has been complicated by the fact that the authoritarian regime prevents the oppositional politicians from participation in open public discussions and decision-making processes. Language policy in Belarus is considered to be a means to control not only linguistic practice, but also the public discourse and the public fate of the national project based on a certain vision of the linguistic identity of Belarusians. Belarusian linguistic identity is being interpreted in the wider context of the Belarusian idea and its civilizational development, both past and future. Language or languages appear to be an essential component of the identity construction. As a result of the Soviet era of development in Belarus, the Russian language was inscribed into the logic of national development, alongside Belarusian. The major difference between the official and oppositional concepts of language politics is related to the understanding of the status of Belarusian and Russian in the nation’s development, and to the role played by these languages in the national imagination. In the conditions of the Belarusian authoritarian state, however, there is no fair competitiveness between the different projects of Belarusian linguistic identity. One of them is supported by the state (involving institutional resources, ideological propaganda via state-owned media and education) while others are linked to the political opposition and locked into the counter-public-sphere. In this way, the linguistic component of national identity becomes an argument in the political struggle between an authoritarian regime and the democratic opposition.

According to the official idea of Belarus, the country belongs to the Eastern Slavic Orthodox civilization, centred in Russia. This 'Eastern version of the Belarusian idea' combines certain elements of Belarusian culture and tradition with Russian ones, while the Russo-Belarusian civilizational and cultural unity is interpreted as a characteristic feature of Belarusians. This concept of Belarus implies that Russian is not a foreign language for Belarusians, not the language of 'Other', but along with Belarusian constitutes a part of the Belarusian cultural legacy and an instrument of its development. 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

³⁸ Volha Prudnikava, Dzmitry Kopal’. Paraleli. Shto budzie z belaruskai mowai? www.naviny.by 23.11.2010.

certain contour (just like Europe) is naturally situated inside our own selfness.³⁹

There are two main pillars on which this Eastward oriented Belarusian idea is based – Orthodox faith and Sovietness. The official stance of the Orthodox Church, shared by a majority of 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 language policy of the Church is unconditionally pro-Russian. The Orthodox Church uses Church Slavonic in liturgy and Russian in all other communications. The use of Church Slavonic, the liturgical language of many of the Orthodox Churches, is not simply a result of the Orthodox Church's conservatism as some researchers imply.⁴⁰ This language, in fact, is also a tool for preserving Orthodox identity, and a way of manifesting the institutional, canonical and liturgical primacy of the Russian Orthodox Church. The special emphasis that the Moscow Patriarchate has put on the use of this language in church services is explained by the fact that 'Church Slavonic plays a role similar to that of Latin in the pre-Vatican II Catholic world. It is a unifying tool composed of a powerful set of liturgical symbols and sacred formulae'⁴¹. Borowik writes about the double sense of unity which the Orthodox Church creates by using Church Slavonic: firstly, it preserves 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 ROC attributes to its claim of a strong separation between Western and Eastern Orthodox Christianity⁴². 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 – among them to the Belarusian language. However next to the official stance of Orthodox Church in Belarus, there is also a nationally-minded Orthodox community, represented by The Three Martyrs of Vilna Brotherhood, led by protopope Georgij Latushko. According to their ideas, the Orthodox religion is a genuine Belarusian tradition, and the Russian roots of this tradition have no particular meaning in contemporary Belarusian religious life. The Orthodox periodical entitled '*Pravaslaue*' is published by this community in Belarusian. This community also insists on the use of Belarusian in liturgy. They, however, have no influence on the Orthodox Church's official policy in this matter and represent a kind of national sub-community within Belarusian Orthodoxy.

As the results of an opinion poll conducted by the Novak laboratory show, the geopolitical preferences of Belarusian people and the perception of Russia as an ally is

³⁹ Valiantsin Akudovich, 'My i Rasieia,' in *Dialogi z Bogam*. Minsk: Izd. I.P. Logvinov, 2006, p. 31.

⁴⁰ Pospilowski, D.V. 1995. *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov' w XX veke* [Russian Orthodox Church in XX century]. Moscow: Respublika.

⁴¹ Borowik, Irena. 2006. *Orthodoxy Confronting the Collapse of Communism in Post-Soviet Countries*. *Social Compass* 53 (2), 2006, p. 273.

⁴² Borowik, *Ibid.*, 273.

significantly affected by their religious affiliation. There are significantly fewer supporters of union with Russia among Belarusian Catholics (11%) as compared to 32.2% in the Orthodox group. 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”⁴³.

The second pillar of the Russian-oriented concept of Belarus is the Soviet experience of common modernization with Russia. The official concept of the Belarusian idea is to a large extent based on the continuation of the Soviet Belarusian development, considering the Soviet period of Belarusian history as a nation-formative one. Many researchers studying Soviet history from the constructivist perspective find that during this period the tasks of cultural enlightenment, education, and formation of national consciousness tied to the socialist ideology were being effectively carried out with the help of the Soviet state. George Schöpflin characterized the transformation of societies in the socialist epoch as a 'one-sided modernization revolution'⁴⁴. Although it was a reduced form of modernization, it was nevertheless related to those spheres of public life that directly affected the nation as a form of community. The first sphere is connected to changes in the social structure of society, where a large section of the backward population was subjected to the initial impact of modernization, whether through the market or the state. The second area is associated with the transformation of communicative facilities in social space: the communist revolution very effectively constructed a modern communications network that allowed the state to reach virtually the whole population. In Soviet Belarus, language policy fitted into the Soviet nationalities policy, which revealed the complex interaction between different forms of identity and language affiliation⁴⁵. 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 'equal status' of Belarusian and Russian, which was re-invented in Belarus after the referendum in 1995, refers directly to the question of bilingualism, which constituted one of the principles of Soviet language policy. Additionally, in 1998 the Law was amended to introduce Russian in all articles that had previously been limited to Belarusian. The definitions concerning the use of Russian were added by two conjunctions: "and" and "or." In the new version of Article

⁴³ Biss Study, SA#01, 2010, p.26.

⁴⁴ Schöpflin, George. “Nationalism and Ethnicity in Europe, East and West.” In *Nationalism and Nationalities in the New Europe*, ed. Charles A. Kupchan, 37–56. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 54.

⁴⁵ Glyn E. Lewis, *Multilingualism in the Soviet Union: Aspects of Language Policy and Its Implementation*. Paris: La Hague-Mouton, 1973.

7 was declared, 'Acts from the higher organs of State power and administration are adopted and published in Belarusian and (or) in Russian.'⁴⁶ Such a formulation stops promoting the equal status of languages because it does not require the official documents to be published in two languages and reserves the right of politicians to choose one of them. Most often the language preferred by Belarusian officials is Russian. In practice, a language policy based on the lack of any special effort to protect and promote Belarusian resulted in the preservation of the status quo and tendencies inherited from Soviet Union, i.e. a continuing domination of Russian and further shrinking 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 defined Belarusian as their mother tongue, while 24.1% defined Russian. At the same time, fewer than two fifths of ethnic Belarusians spoke Belarusian in their daily life, 36,7 %, while 62.8% use Russian. The results of the 2009 census show that the numbers of those considering Belarusian to be their mother tongue, as well as those using Belarusian on a daily basis, decreased - to 50,1 % and 21 % accordingly⁴⁷. 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", and this restriction in itself at least partially caused the decline of number of people considering 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 percent named Belarusian, and 78.7 percent named Russian. It appears, therefore, that 35 percent of Belarusians indicate that they have two native languages⁴⁸. This relative high number of Belarusians considering Belarusian as their native language can be interpreted as a 'forward looking idea, which projects one's language preference in the future'⁴⁹ 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. As V. Kulik pointed out, 'People's understandings of native language differ, but most can identify one such language that they value and want to be used and promoted widely – often more so than the language of their everyday practice, if the two do not coincide'⁵⁰. According to the results of the aforementioned Novak survey, only 23 percent of Belarusians are fluent in the Belarusian language. Meanwhile, only 3.9 percent of Belarusians use Belarusian all the time. Almost half of all respondents (46.5 percent) explained not using Belarusian by the fact that the Belarusian language milieu is non-existent, whereas almost one-third explained it by their own ignorance of Belarusian. More than

⁴⁶ '0 vnesenit izmenemi i dopolnenii v zakon Respubliki Belarus'; '0 iazykakh v Respublike Belarus,' 13 July 1998.

⁴⁷ Nacionalnyi sostav Respubliki Belarus'. Nacionalnyi statisticheskii komitet Respubliki Belarus'. URL: <http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/indicators/pressrel/census.php>

⁴⁸ Source: <http://budzma.org/news/belaruskaya-mova-mova-elity-i-apazicyi.html>

⁴⁹ Arel, Dominique, 'Language categories in censuses: backward- or forward-looking?', in D. I. Kertzer and D. Arel (eds.), *Census and Identity: the Politics of Race, Ethnicity and Language in National Censuses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002, p.115.

⁵⁰ Volodymir Kulik, Language Identity, Linguistic Diversity and Political Cleavages: Evidence from Ukraine. *Nations and Nationalism* 17 (3), 2011, p. 628

half of Belarusians (52.4 percent) are against broadening the use of the Belarusian language in business, whereas only 33 percent are in favor of that. About half of Belarusians (43,3% percent) are against more active use of Belarusian in education, while 47,1% percent would welcome such a policy⁵¹. According to V. Kulik, this phenomenon of discrepancy between language practice and language identity (or willingness to identify with language) originated in the Soviet era, when the notion of ethno-cultural identity lost its direct association with national language. 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 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 attributes⁵².

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 on the language as a matter of linguistic human rights on the individual level. Any reference to the language issue in the media, education or other spheres of life is interpreted as a political declaration either against or in favor 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'.⁵³ 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 on the opposite side of 'the barrier'.

Paradoxically, both the official and oppositional language discourses in Belarus tend use human rights argumentation to provide ground for their vision of linguistic identity of Belarusians and corresponding language politics. In doing so, the authorities apply an instrumental approach, putting an emphasis on the communicative function of the language. Official language policy is based on the strategy of not intervening into existing language practice, letting 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 mass-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'⁵⁴. In Lukashenka's view, the

⁵¹ <http://budzma.org/news/belaruskaya-mova-mova-elity-i-apazicyi.html>

⁵² Kulik V. Language Identity, Linguistic Diversity and Political Cleavages: Evidence from Ukraine. *Nations and Nationalism* 17 (3), 2011, 644.

⁵³ Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove, Phillipson, Robert, Rannut, Mart. *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson (ed). Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter 1995, p. 2

⁵⁴ Lukashenka, A. Press-conference of the President: start of the election campaign, 2009, URL: http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2009/12/30/ic_news_112_323614/.

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 at least stupid'⁵⁵. The official discourse stresses the naturalness of the presence of the Russian language in Belarusian life, without mentioning that the actual linguistic design of Belarusian society is a result of a long-term language and national policy which started to be implemented in the Russian empire in the 19th century and continued under Soviet ideological auspices in the 20th century. At the same time, since the Belarusian language began to be associated as an instrument for resisting a regime, the control and repression over the Belarusian-language public sphere became an important element of the struggle against the opposition. And, vice versa, promoting the Russian language in Belarus came to be perceived as ideologically advantageous, since it weakened the role of the national opposition.

At the same time, the language politics of the opposition politicians is entirely focused on the symbolic function of language as a cultural and historical value crucially important for the nation's development. The project of national revival formulated by national activists implies a re-animation of the 'European past' of Belarusians, the creation of the alternative historical narrative of the Belarusian development as opposed both to Russian influence and Soviet experience. For the proponents of the mono-linguistic project of the Belarusian nation, the symbolic value of Belarusian appears to be crucial. 'Nasha Niva'⁵⁶, an independent Belarusian weekly published by nation-minded intellectuals, represents a rigid opposition to Russian, rejecting it even if proves to be counterproductive in political terms. In May 2001 the author of an article entitled "The Motivations of a Self-Murderer" expressed his serious concerns about the "Russification" of the Belarusian political struggle. According to him, the appearance of Russian language posters, stickers, labels with political messages, indicates the political self-deprivation among those who struggle against the regime in Russian⁵⁷. The fact that Russian is the language in which the majority of Belarusian society speaks, and to whom the message on posters and stickers is addressed, does not seem to be of any importance for the author. 'Language is the not a category of political practice. Its stretch is not measured by months or years. It is a representative of the eternal world, much wiser than wisest among us, living, and it, as a principle, will always carry you out, will save you in any of your miscalculations and lacks, in any changes of external situation, if not today, then tomorrow. The only thing it requires – is trueness. Belarusian

⁵⁵ Lukashenka, A. Poslanie Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus Aleksandra Lukashenka beloruskomu narodu i nacionalnomu sobranui. 2010. URL: <http://www.president.gov.by/press10256.html>.

⁵⁶ The newspaper had become the voice of the "Belarusian national cause" at the turn of the 20th century and was recreated in 1991 as a symbolic "continuation" of the first "Nasha niva,".

⁵⁷ Siarhiej Paulouski, Matywatsyia samahubtsy. Nasha Niva N21 (230) 2001
<http://nn.by/index.html>

democracy will only exist without the Belarusian language until time X, when hit or miss. Democracy joint with language has a chance for long life and victory'⁵⁸. Language remains to be a value in itself, and its symbolic weight exceeds the communicative functionality as well as the mobilization potential of Russian in the political struggle against totalitarian power.

The lack of support in Belarusian society for the one-language national project became the main reason for the reformulation of the strategy of national development by cultural and political elites. An idea appeared of the Belarusian nation as “the meeting point of civilizations”, which defines Belarus as “a nation in between” different civilizational universes and therefore is predestined to accommodate others, accepting them as a part of its own identity. P. 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 neighbors 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’⁵⁹. 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 one⁶⁰. Later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Ihnat Abdzirlovich considered the essence of Belarusian idea 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’⁶¹. The return to this idea of an ‘in-between’ nation in post-Soviet Belarus was predetermined by the unfavorable 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 a great willingness to revive Soviet traditions. Political and cultural elites have becoming aware that ‘Russian speakers who have such “symbolic capital” as the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Pavel Loika, “Prablemy gistorycznai adukatsyi u Belarusi. Gistorycznaia adukatsyia—asnova ideologii belaruskaga dziazhaunaga patryatyizmu,” *Gistryczny almanach* no. 4 (2001), http://kamunikat.fontel.net/www/czasopisy/almanach/04/04prab_lojka.htm.

⁶⁰ Smalianchuk, Ales’. *Prablema suchasnaha historyiapisan’nia i la;ektyunaia identychnasc’ In wiertan’nie u Europu: minulae i buduchynia Belarusi*. Ed. Siabdhan Doucette, Andrej Dynko, Ales pashkevich. Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Uczelni Lazarskiego, 2011, p. 100.

⁶¹ Abdzirlovich, Ihnat. *Advechnym shliacham, dasledziny belaruskaha svetahliadu*. Minsk: Navuka i tekhnika, 1993, <http://pawet.narod.ru/book.philosophy/1.html>.

Russian language at their disposal are not inclined to relinquish it⁶². At the same time, a large part of Russophone Belarusians do not support political integration with Russian or authoritarian rule. Political players in the Belarusian opposition had to come up with a political project of Belarusian community as an alternative both to pro-Russian authoritarian ruler and to the nationalist movement.

The ‘Belarus as a frontier’ concept promotes the vision of the Belarusian nation as a multi-cultural and multi-lingual community. Unlike the mono-linguistic and mono-ethnic idea of Belarus, it allow the accommodation of linguistic minorities within the Belarusian nation without the threat of forced Belarusization. In this way, Russophone Belarusians become a rightful part of the Belarusian nation and join the political opposition on a legitimate basis to struggle for a common democratic homeland. On the one hand, the thesis about the multicultural nature of Belarusian nation provides historical justification for the current linguistic situation in the country. It goes along with the acknowledgement that the concept of a Belarusian-speaking Belarusian nation failed, and that the weakness of Belarusians’ identification with their national language cannot be overcome under the current political and cultural conditions. The formulation of this project in the Belarusian context led to a split between the Russophone and Belarusian-speaking opposition. At the same time, this idea tends to provide a historical explanation and justification for Belarusians’ reluctance to live in a Belarusian-speaking environment. Belarusians, as Ioffe writes, both personally and as a group are used to achieving success as part of a larger and multiethnic polity, ... they developed what is called *uniinost'*, that is, a proclivity to enter into alliances with outsiders to achieve their own goals without getting diluted by those alliances...⁶³

A major deficiency of this conception in current conditions is its failure to create a basis for an explicit language policy preventing further Russification. Moreover, in the official context the idea of ‘multiculturalism’ serves to justify existing “bilingualism” and appears as a populist solution for the troublesome question about the fate of the Belarusian national language.

There are three scenarios for the future development of Belarusian language policy and practice, which can be formulated on the basis of other countries’ experience. The “Ukrainian” scenario, or the politics of positive discrimination, is sometimes presented as the most optimistic scenario ensuring the revival of the Belarusian language⁶⁴. It is, however, also viewed as less realistic scenario given the current situation in Belarus. In accordance with a language law adopted in 1991, Ukrainian became the only official state language in Ukraine⁶⁵. The state

⁶² Zaprudski, Siarhiey. In the Grip of Replacive Bilingualism:the Belarusian Language in Contact with Russian. *International Journal for Sociology of Language*. 183 (2007), pp. 97–118 p. 112.

⁶³ Grigory Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark*, p.162.

⁶⁴ Andrej Dynko, *Mova vulicau i mova ploschy*. Arche № 10 (50) 2006, URL: <http://arche.bymedia.net/2006-10/dynko610.htm>. [Access 01.10.2012]

⁶⁵ The usage of the languages in Ukraine is regulated not only by Laws of Ukraine “On Languages

administration was obliged to implement government policies to broaden the use of Ukrainian. Over the first decade of independence the Ukrainization of the educational system was completed. The government also mandated a progressively increased role for Ukrainian in the media and commerce. However, when in 2005 Ukraine signed the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, a large public debate began on the lack of correspondence between the “positive discrimination strategy” applied to Russian and the country’s obligation to provide the freedom of choice of the language of communication for the linguistic minorities. From the perspective of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, the obligation of Ukraine to support the Russian language as the language of the biggest national minority collides with the policy of the revival of national language, which implies positive discrimination against Russian⁶⁶. In 2012, the Ukrainian president signed new legislation allowing minority languages to be official languages. This law is considered as a regression to policy more favorable to Russian.

At the same time, the experience of the Ukrainian language policy of 1991-2012 proves that even sustained state language legislation may not assure the expected changes in the linguistic identity of the nation. As Jan Blommaert argues, such expectations are based on an idealization of the effectiveness of political decisions on social change, that ‘change appears to be triggered by expert-backed (and expert institution-mediated) government decision. Too little space is left for cultural and social resistance against such decisions, and the change-inducing effect of language is strongly overrated’⁶⁷.

A second scenario of language policy and practice development is the Irish one. According to this scenario, national revival and independence is accompanied with failure to revive the national language. In the case of Ireland, as Liebkind pointed out, people ‘use a language (English) for the socioeconomic and other advantages it offers even though they hold intrinsically unfavorable attitudes towards that language that contrasts with the favorable attitudes maintained toward their ethnic language’⁶⁸. This scenario proves that language ‘can be an important component of ethnic identity, but that this identity can and does survive the loss of the original group language’.⁶⁹ The Irish scenario is often mentioned as most probable for Belarus, where the discrepancy between ethnic language identity and language proficiency had been formed a long time ago. The current formula of Belarusian bilingualism is effectively a product of Soviet language policy, but the ‘linguistic flexibility’ of the people who later formed the Belarusian nation, as Timothy Snyder writes, was noticeable in early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was a valuable feature in the past, but it

in Ukrainian SSR”, but also by a number of other legislative acts, namely, “On Citizenship of Ukraine”, “On Association of Citizens”, “On Education”, “On Printed Mass Media (Press) in Ukraine”, “On Culture”.

⁶⁶ Second periodical report presented to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe in accordance with Article 15 of the Charter. Ukraine, 2012. URL:

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/Report/PeriodicalReports/UkrainePR%202_en.pdf

⁶⁷ Jan Blommaert, *State Ideology and Language in Tanzania*. Cologne: Köppe.1999, p. 30

⁶⁸ Liebkind, K. "Social Psychology", in J. A. Fishman (ed.), *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1999, p. 144

⁶⁹ Liebkind, K., p. 144.

became a burden upon anyone who might have wished to advance a modern Belarusian [linguistic] nationalism.⁷⁰

The Catalanian scenario, meanwhile, implies that the national language which constitutes the language of a linguistic minority does not dominate in the public sphere, but it co-exists with the majority language, being protected and promoted by the state in order to create the possibility to learn the language for those who wish to do so⁷¹.

The example of Catalanian linguistic identity development represents one of the positive solutions for countries, whose national self-determination was irreversibly affected by the language of a larger cultural and linguistic community. This scenario, however, can only be realized in a state in which the language policy in relation to the linguistic minority is defended by legislation at both the national and international levels. Spain, unlike Belarus, has signed the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages⁷². At the same time Ireland, where the current linguistic situation is closest to that in Belarus, was not able to sign the Charter in respect of the Irish language (although a minority language) as this language is defined as the first official language of the state. Current Belarusian legislation, similar to the Irish one, defines Belarusian as the official state language, not as a minority language which it is in practice. This means that the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages would not be able to protect Belarusian even if Belarus decided to sign it. In fact, the Belarusian legislation in its current version though does not promote nor protects Belarusian, but it does not create any obstacles for its development either. The privileged position which Russian enjoys is to a large extent predetermined by the good will of majority to use this language. As Dominique Arel pointed out, 'Nationalists portray ...linguistic assimilation as forced, unnatural, and fundamentally illegitimate, the result of destructive policies by the "imperialist" state. Yet, from a comparative standpoint, linguistic assimilation is a "normal" occurrence: not in a sense that most people assimilate, but in that, in most national groups whose language is socially less prestigious, and therefore less useful for social advancement, there are individuals who choose to assimilate. And the less other markers of identity, such as religion or race, act as a barrier to assimilation, the more language becomes central to nationalist demands. This is because "nationally conscious" and active individuals, perceiving an actual or potential "loss" to the socially dominant nation, feel vulnerable in their very existence'⁷³. As the Belarusian language situation proves, by granting the

⁷⁰ Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations, Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 41.

⁷¹ The statutes of Catalonia (1979) and of the Balearic Islands (1983) recognized Catalan as the native language of these territories and declared it an official language together with Castilian, as well as making it that of the Comunitat Valenciana (1982), with the legal name of Valencian. In the same way, the Constitution of Andorra (1993) established Catalan as the official language of the State.

⁷² The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) is a European treaty, (CETS 148) adopted in 1992 under the auspices of the Council of Europe to protect and promote historical regional and minority languages in Europe.

⁷³ Arel, Dominique, 'Language categories in censuses: backward- or forward-looking?', in D. I. Kertzer and D. Arel (eds.), *Census and Identity: the Politics of Race, Ethnicity and Language in*

national language a status of “state language”, national legislation does not protect the constitutional rights for cultural and national identification by Belarusian-speaking individuals. Moreover, it prevents any further steps aimed at protecting and securing the rights which the linguistic minority (when defined also in legal terms) might have had due to the international obligations of country.

Meanwhile, there is no consensus among Belarusian intellectuals on the political instrumentalization of language and its impact on the linguistic component of national identity. Some consider it to be an obstacle on the way to a more relevant formula of coexistence of Belarusian and Russian speakers. As Aleksei Bratochnkin writes, ‘Belarusian speakers should stop demanding the immediate and forced shift to Belarusian from Russophones, while Russophones should let Belarusian speaking citizens be guided by the protection of their constitutional right and to ensure the possibility to use Belarusian in the public and private domains’⁷⁵. According to him, framing linguistic human rights in terms of the general democratic discourse of equality of all citizens of the country may provide the solution. The demand to respect linguistic rights can be considered, similarly to other human rights, as a part of a democratization strategy from which both Russian and Belarusian speakers would benefit. According to Andrej Dynko, on the contrary, the role of Belarusian as an instrument of political resistance makes it more attractive for youth and helps in recruiting new young members of Belarusian-speaking world: as long as it will be “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 perspective⁷⁶. In this way, however, the solution to the problem of linguistic rights is made 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 fact that the linguistic rights of Belarussophones are attributed to the national project which failed to become the basis for state nation-building strategy means that it is precisely those rights which appear to be an inseparable victim of this political failure.

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⁷⁶ Andrej Dynko, *Mova vulicau i mova ploschy*. Arche № 10 (50) 2006, URL: <http://arche.bymedia.net/2006-10/dynko610.htm>. [Access 01.10.2012]

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