Belarusian language: declining in state education, strengthening in civil society

Only 13% of pupils in Belarus study in the Belarusian language. The authorities therefore roused great public interest with a recent promise to establish Belarusian-language groups in kindergartens in each district in Minsk.

At present, the near impossibility of receiving pre-school education in the Belarusian language concerns some parents. Others cling on to even the slightest possibility of ensuring their children’s education in the Belarusian language. Yet others wonder why the question arises at all – thinking that it would be better to teach students English or Chinese.

The rapid disappearance of the Belarusian language from the education sector (from 19% in the 2010/2011 academic year to 13% in 2017/2018) paradoxically coincided with the increasing popularity of various kinds of Belarusian cultural initiatives and projects.

Russian language dominates the education system

The reduction in the number of pupils studying in Belarusian stands in tension with the growing interest in Belarusian language and culture in society. Founded several years ago, Belarusian language courses under the “Mova Nanova” initiative gather hundreds of people in Minsk and other Belarusian cities. Crowdfunding enables the publication of Belarusian-language books and the translation of movies
into Belarusian. Inscriptions on the jerseys of Belarusian football players increasingly appear in Belarusian. The education system in Belarus, however, still shows signs of Russification rather than Belarusisation.

Fewer and fewer children today study in Belarusian. Of the six regional centres, Belarusian-language schools exist only in Minsk. In some of the regional cities schools do have small Belarusian-language forms. However, most of the Belarusian-language schools are located in villages. Totally only 13.3% of all pupils study in Belarusian according to the National Statistical Committee of Belarus.

The situation looks more problematic in pre-school and higher education. Belarusian-language kindergartens represent a minority among the preschools. In the biggest cities there exist only small groups with the Belarusian language. Until now, Belarus has no university providing a Belarusian-language education.

The problem of access to the Belarusian-language education grew in importance for Belarusian society. On 21 February, International Mother Language Day, a group of parents in Minsk visited the Ministry of Education to discuss pre-school education in the Belarusian language. During the meeting, parents proposed the introduction of more Belarusian-language groups in kindergartens and schools. Later, the Ministry of Education promised to open a Belarusian group in
Parents struggle for more education in Belarusian

To date parents have to fight for the education of their children in the Belarusian language. Increasingly, parents collect signatures for the creation of Belarusian-language groups in kindergartens and schools. On 21 February, public activists of the Young Front collected 2,000 signatures in Minsk for creating a Belarusian-language university.

Occasionally, local authorities meet with parents to discuss the status of the Belarusian language in education, as happened on 21 February. One of the participants of the meeting, Volha Kavalchuk, told to Radyjo Svaboda that her child can not get into a group with Belarusian as the language of instruction. “Due to the shortage of Belarusian speakers, kindergartens take in Russian-speakers, who become a majority later,” and the group becomes a Russian-speaking one.

Parents at the meeting with the education ministry. Photo: svaboda.org
Belarusian-language parents worry that their children gradually shift into the Russian language from studying in a Russian-language system. At the meeting of pro-Belarusian parents with the Ministry of Education on 21 February, parents noted that groups exist only in certain areas of the city and that this is logistically inconvenient for many parents. Often, as is the case in the Pershamajsky district of Minsk, different age groups emerge. These factors influence the quality of teaching; many parents have to send their children to Russian-language kindergartens.

How has the status of the Belarusian language in education changed?

Since Alexander Lukashenka came to power, the Belarusian language began a gradual decline in the education system. In 1994-1995 more than 75% of pupils studied in Belarusian. After the referendum in 1995, when the Russian language received the same status as Belarusian, the latter started to disappear from education. From that moment on, many Belarusian schools and kindergartens began to teach partially in Russian.

In the years after the collapse of the USSR Belarus’s neighbours, Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine, actively worked on the transition of schools into teaching in the national language. In contrast, from 1995 the Belarusian authorities embraced a Russification of education system. The titular language of Belarus appeared as a threat to the authorities. Lukashenka saw the main threat to his power in the Belarusian-speaking opposition and methodically narrowed the space for studying the language and culture. Whereas 22% of pupils studied in Belarusian in 1988, the comparable figure for 2017 was 13.3%.

In recent years, after events surrounding Ukraine’s Maidan,
the Belarusian language situation within the education system started to improve in small steps. Observing Russian aggression in Ukraine, the authorities began to demonstrate more support to the Belarusian language and national history at different levels, so-called “soft Belarusisation”. However, until now, soft Belarusisation hardly affected schools, kindergartens and universities.

The fate of Belarusian language: in citizens’ hands

Social activists continue to do the most work promoting the Belarusian language. For example, recently created initiative, Perakladaton, has translated the civil code into Belarusian with the help of volunteers and plans to translate other laws (only 3% of legislative acts in the country are written in Belarusian).

Social activist Ihar Sluchak has long communicated with the Belarusian government and commercial organisations, trying to force them to speak Belarusian. Recently an online catalogue of Belarusian businesses and services, SVAJE, appeared. Regular updates include new businesses and places where the staff speak Belarusian.

This work of social activists partly compensates for the poor condition of the Belarusian language in the education system. However, some positive signals appear from the government. For the first time the authorities have allowed the holding of a celebratory concert on Alternative Independence Day in the centre of Minsk. If the concert does not bring police detentions, then it might give some hope that the “soft Belarusisation” will extend into Belarusian schools, kindergartens and universities.