Last week MoveHub.com released an infographic showing the second language spoken in countries across the globe. The infographic revealed many surprises, such as that Polish is the second language in the UK and that Turkish is the second language in Germany. There was a curiosity about Belarus, too: Belarusians’ second language is … Belarusian!

The paradox of Belarus’s linguistic identity is that most Belarusians speak Russian on a daily basis. Not unlike other post-Soviet states that broadly use Russian, Belarus has struggled with elaborating an appropriate language policy. What distinguishes Belarus from other nations, however, is that the very nature of its linguistic identity remains contested.

The language issue in contemporary Belarus is extremely politicised. One’s language identification inevitably entails “political classification.” Russian is typically seen as the official language, while Belarusian has become the language of political and cultural opposition. Paradoxically, on both sides “discrimination” arguments are deployed to justify
preferred visions of language policies.

President Lukashenka, a populist who seeks to stay in power, demonstrates a high degree of “liberalism” in language matters.

At a 2009 press-conference he said that language “does not follow coercion or dictatorship” and promised to abstain from “forced Belarusisation or Russification.”

Lukashenka justifies the recognition of both Belarusian and Russian as state languages by Belarus’s historical closeness to Russia.

Of course, he forgets to mention that Belarus’s linguistic design resulted from two centuries of Russification – imposed first by the Russian empire and then by the Soviet Union.

On the other side of the barricades stand opposition activists who have advocated national revival since the early 1990s. They conceive of Belarus as a mono-lingual community, not unlike other small East European nations. From this perspective, linguistic Belarusisation is Belarus's ticket to Europe and becoming a Belarussophone means becoming European.
Proponents of the monolingualistic model view the lack of legal support for the Belarusian language in the Russian-dominated environment as discrimination. They argue that having two state languages would have fatal consequences for the country’s geopolitical future.

A Third Way: a Nation in Between

Some Belarusian intellectuals have managed to avoid the polarisation of language and bridge the gap between Belarusianness and bilingualism. They define Belarus as “a nation in between” different civilizational universes and argue that the country's identity entails accommodating other cultures.

This conception “opens up” the Belarusian nation to the speakers of other languages. Moreover, it avoids promoting exclusive “closeness” with Russia, in contrast to Belarus's official ideology. The idea of multilingual Belarus places the big eastern neighbour into the context of multiple others. At the same time, this perspective legitimises the growing number of Russophone Belarusians who support neither integration with Russia nor Lukashenka’s rule.

Surveys suggest that many Belarusians indeed have “open” and inclusive identities. According to a survey on the Belarusian identity and language conducted by the Novak laboratory in 2012, when respondents were allowed to define more than one native language, 52.4% named Belarusian, and 78.7% named Russian. It appears, therefore, that 35% of respondents have not one but two native languages. They view Russian not as an agent of foreign influence, but as a part of their legacy and tradition.

Unfortunately, this multilingual concept offers no solutions for averting the disappearance of the Belarusian language from the country’s public life.

Trasianka: a “Hybrid” Linguistic Practice
Hybrid linguistic identity of Belarusians has found its expression in *trasianka*, or the mixture of Russian and Belarusian spoken by a growing share of population.

The origin of *trasianka* goes back to the rapid urbanisation process in Soviet Belarus; this language was often spoken by the first-generation city dwellers. Back then *trasianka* was “a code of rural migrants,” betraying the lack of a proper culture of speech.

Recent studies, however, suggest that the use and perception of *trasianka* have gradually changed. In a 2010 study more than 80% of respondents acknowledged having used a mix of languages on occasion. What is more, sometimes *trasianka* continues to be occasionally spoken in the third generation of urban immigrants, which cannot be explained simply by a lack of knowledge of Russian or Belarusian. Studies also show that roughly two-thirds of Belarusians view *trasianka* as a “mother tongue” or use it regularly alongside another “mother tongue.”

In other words, the stigmatisation of *trasianka* has diminished, and Belarusians are now adapting Russian to their linguistic needs. This linguistic practice in the Belarusian society may create the conditions for the development of a new, Belarusian version of Russian.

**Language as a Post-Colonial Legacy**

The linguistic repertoire of the Belarusian society should be viewed in the post-colonial context, in which the inherent purity and originality of culture is untenable. Against the background of several co-existing concepts of the Belarusian identity, the contemporary linguistic patterns speak to the hybridity of Belarusian culture. They have enabled the majority of Belarusians to avoid alienation and polarisation of language.

Other post-Soviet states have also sought to adjust Russian to their national needs. For example, Ukrainians have attempted
to change the use of prepositions in the expression “to Ukraine” (in Russian “v” instead of “na”). Similarly, Kyrgyz intellectuals have spoken up about their right to alter the rules of Russian grammar in order to use the Kyrgyz name of their nation in Russian. Belarus’ attempt to promote the use of “Belarusian” instead of “Belorussian” should also be seen in this context.

Now each of these former “Russian peripheries” can be viewed as a legitimate owner of Russian as part of their own postcolonial legacy. Only Belarus, however, has articulated the claim to Russian in its national language policy.

With its persistent use of Russian as a language of Belarusian nation- and state-building, Belarus is using its right to Russian as its postcolonial legacy.

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