

Selling Russian to the Russians

This week the Belarusian Association of Advertisers announced a competition for the best poster in popularising the Belarusian language. They want to draw public attention to "one of the most painful social problems" – the low usage of Belarusian in everyday life in Belarus.

Belarusians have the weakest national self-identification in the former Soviet Union and authoritarian ruler Alexander Lukashenka is happy to pursue pro-Moscow cultural policy in exchange for cheap Russian gas and oil. The most recent manifestation of such a policy was a letter from the presidential administration urging local authorities "not to allow artificial reduction of the use of the Russian language".

While the authorities are trying to suppress the use of Belarusian, Belarusian civil society is trying to revive it. And for good reason.

Russification Before Independence

The Belarusian language was the only official language of the Grand Duchy of Litva (Lithuania) – once the largest state in Central Europe. But in the last two centuries went through very difficult times.

Since the late 18th century, Russia tried to assimilate Belarusians into the Russian Empire. Mikhail Muravyov who led Russia's administration in the Belarusian territory in the 19th century, famously said: "What Russian rifles did not succeed in doing, will be finished off by Russian schools".

The modern Belarusian national movement developed relatively

late and in less favourable conditions compared to Baltic states or Ukraine.

The modern Belarusian national movement developed relatively late – in the 19th century and in less favourable conditions compared to Baltic states or Ukraine. In 1920 there was a brief period of "Belarusification" in the Soviet Union. Repressive [Stalinist totalitarianism](#) ended this short-lived policy and damaged Belarus more than other Soviet republic.

Post-Stalin Soviet leaders continued this policy. Nikita Khrushchev during his visit to Minsk in 1959 stated: "The sooner we all speak in Russian, the faster we build communism". Belarus occupied the last place among all Soviet republics according to the use of its native language. And still it was higher then than today. In 1950, the majority of Minsk residents spoke Belarusian.

In 1970, almost 40 per cent of books and newspapers in Belarus were published in Belarusian. Already in 1984, only 5 per cent of newspapers in Soviet Belarus circulated in the Belarusian language.

Russification After Independence

After the declaration of independence in 1990, the Belarusian Parliament proclaimed the sole official language of the country. But the first Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka was unable to speak either proper Russian, or Belarusian. He spoke a mixture of the two languages with a heavy Belarusian accent.

Since the 1990s, the myth of "Belarusian nationalists" has been helping Lukashenka gain political and economic support from Moscow.

However, he decided to position himself as the defender of the Russian language from Belarusian nationalists. Lukashenka also portrayed the Belarusian language as a real threat to Russians

in Belarus. Since the 1990s, the myth of "Belarusian nationalists" has been helping him gain political and economic support from Moscow.

Following a questionable referendum in 1995, Lukashenka made Russian the second official language in Belarus. Russian president Boris Yeltsin was thankful and surprised with the result: "Just think of it! They have even made Russian official!".

Lukashenka rarely speaks Belarusian. When he does so, his main goal is usually to ridicule his political opponents. There was no place for the Belarusian language in the newly created state ideology based on the glorification of the Soviet past.

Under the 18 years of Lukashenka's rule, education and schooling in the Belarusian language had been marginalised. In 1994, 75 per cent of Belarusian children went to schools with Belarusian as the language of instruction. Today, it's less than 20 per cent. This figure is based primarily on rural schools which are gradually dying out. For comparison, only 2 per cent of pupils study in Belarusian-speaking classes and schools in Minsk, and only several children do so in the town of Mahilou with a population 360,000.

Many Belarusian parents refuse to send their children to the Belarusian-language classes simply because they do not think it would be useful for them in the future. In spite of the appeals from civil society, the authorities did not allow the establishment of even one college or university with Belarusian as the principal language of instruction.

Belarusian-speaking people used to be the primary target of police and KGB during the opposition street protests.

Belarusian is almost never used in official communication and office administration. Most of the state-owned mass media broadcast in Russian. Moreover, often people are just afraid

to speak Belarusian publicly. The reason is Belarusian-speaking people used to be the primary target of police and KGB during the opposition street protests.

That is why statistics demonstrate decreasing use of the Belarusian language. If in 1999 there were 36.7 per cent who claimed they spoke Belarusian every day, in 2009 it had dropped to 23.4 per cent.

Selling Russian to the Russians

Official Minsk has been trading its pro-Russian cultural policy for oil and gas loans for years. These tactics were slightly modified during the cooling down period with Russia and a thaw with Brussels in 2007-2010. In 2008, Lukashenka appointed "the first Belarusian speaking minister". Pavel Latushka, Belarus' Minister of Culture, is the first high-ranking Lukashenka's official who predominantly uses Belarusian even in official communication.

However, the state policy to reinforce Belarusian national identity remains poorly articulated and very inconsistent. The Belarusian media recently published a letter from Alexander Radzkou, a senior official in the presidential administration. The letter instructs regional and local authorities "to take concrete measures to prevent the policy of forced Belarusification by heads of state bodies and other organisations and the artificial limitation of the use of the Russian language in their activities."

The vast majority of the population has no problem with understanding Belarusian even if they struggle to speak it fluently.

The vast majority of the population has no problem with understanding Belarusian even if they struggle to speak it fluently. Today Belarusian is the language of the intelligentsia, creative elites and young city dwellers. Many

world famous brands have staged a range of successful advertising campaigns in Belarusian. It has proven that the Belarusian language has huge potential to affect people. But its prestige and wider use need to be supported.

The Belarusian Language Today

Some western policymakers elaborating strategies to democratise Belarus neglect the importance of the Belarusian language. They forget that Belarusian had been the basis for the original Belarusian national movement and statehood based on democratic ideas. It brought together people of different faiths and ethnic origins.

As David Marples noted in 1999, “For Belarus, national development without the native language, especially under the shadow of a much larger Slavic neighbour with a lengthy historical tradition as an empire, was virtually impossible”.

And it is still not possible today. Being the cornerstone of Belarusian identity, Belarusian language protects the nation from Russian expansion and Russification. On the other hand, Belarusian makes Belarusians feel European. It is a very important tool for democratisation.

That is why, if the West does not want to “lose” Belarus to Russia completely, it should help Belarusians strengthen their national self-identification and to feel themselves to be a part of a greater European heritage. The Belarusian language as the cornerstone of the nation should definitely be supported alongside democratic values and human rights, as Kenneth Yalowitz, the US ambassador to Belarus, [noted recently](#).

Kanstantsin Lashkevich

Kanstantsin is a contributing author. He is a Belarusian journalist currently doing an MA in International Politics at City University in London.

Money and Brotherhood: What Belarus Means to Moscow?

Every time facing confrontation with Moscow, Belarusian president speaks about immaterial and spiritual – common Slav roots, history and kinship of Belarusians and Russians. Emotions and sentiments can matter a lot in international politics and are an effective tool in national foreign policy of some countries. Reiterating his declarations on Belarusians' and Russians' unity, Lukashenka is undoubtedly targeting Russian sentimental bonds to his country, not his Belarusian compatriots.



Russians are mostly longing for their imperial and Soviet history to be appreciated and positively articulated abroad. Lukashenka perfectly realized it a very long time ago. He understood that huge potential of Russian frustration and anger at losing former imperial greatness had harbored immense opportunities for political projects in Russia. One did not need to be even a Russian politician to conquer neighboring country's hearts and minds by playing old imperial motives!

After coming to power in mid-1990s, Lukashenka shrewdly posed himself as a warrior for restoring Soviet Union and his version of pan-Slavism. It fared quite well for a while and he got very popular in Russia whose residents ever more were seeing him as a fine alternative to hard-drinking Boris Yeltsin in 1990s. Belarusian president was firmly on his way into Kremlin. But then Colonel Putin unexpectedly put an end

to it at millenium turn. Lukashenka could not compete with dynamic new Russian leader.

Belarusian regime's Russian policy contracted to more humble limits. It began to implement a new, however, pretty familiar paradigm – while playing on emotional, spiritual and mythological bonds to Belarus in Russian mentality, Belarus should have become the very best Russia's ally to be cared of and defended at any cost by Moscow support and money. Actually, one can guess that Lukashenka wanted to be for Russia what Israel is for United States, i.e. a strategic ally which significance is not limited to solely economic or military issues.

In this context many of his words do not appear so irrational. Thus, these days, after new gas complications with Kremlin, he said:

It is unacceptable to treat Belarus this way [as Russian leadership now] It doesn't matter that we had difference in cost [for gas]. After all, for Russia itself there is a big difference between Belarus and other nations... Belarus for Russia has quite another value We will survive. However, I believe, it is unacceptable to treat so an allied people [Belarusians] with which you [Russians] together were dying in the trenches [during the World War II]. And these are no emotional speeches, though emotions for us, Slavs are also important.

In 2009, Lukashenka himself indirectly admitted using 'Israel model' in his Russian policy an interview an extreme right-wing Russian newspaper "Zavtra":

Americans are funding Israel and give it as many credits as they [Israelis] can spend and then cancel their [Israelis'] debts. They [Americans] are completely financing Israel's defence. Let's not literally but conceptually use their model. After all, we are more for you than Israel for

America. We are part of your defense, part of your security.

Of course, Russians feel themselves more emotionally attached to Belarusians than to most other post-Soviet nations. Yet, Minsk despite all efforts did not manage to implement the 'Israel model'. Perhaps, since it could not organize effective pro-Belarus lobby in Moscow. Or the reason for this failure can be found in another more tragic case of imperial sentiments for lost Slavic lands that led to a political catastrophe. Probably, Belarus seems to Russian politicians more like Kosovo for Serbs. They want it merely back.

They are not ready to tolerate its distinctiveness and freedom, nothing to say about supporting its independence and prosperity. On the contrary, America consider Israel a partner and ally. Russian political elites view Belarus as some remnant of their great empire and treat it as they treat.

SB

**RFE/RL: Former Belarusian
Leader Marks 75th Birthday In
United States**



Stanislaŭ Šuškievič, the first leader of independent Belarus between 1991 and 1994, one of the men who gave Belarus its independence renewed after over 70 years of Soviet occupation, is now not even getting a decent pension paid from the Belarusian state

because of being in opposition to president Aliaksandr Lukašenka.

This largely relates to the whole period of early 1990s in Belarus: the [state symbols of that time](#) are de-facto forbidden for public usage, national leaders of that time are either ignored, like Šuškievič, or exiled, like the leader of the Belarusian Popular Front [Zianon Paźniak](#), or humbly demonstrating their loyalty to the President, like former PM [Viačaslaŭ Kiebič](#).

The former leader of Belarus, Stanislau Shushkevich marked his 75th birthday today, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reports. Along with Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk, Shushkevich signed the [Belavezha – bielar.us] Accords that dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991. Shushkevich was the chairman of the Belarusian Supreme Soviet from 1991 to 1994 and played a key role in creating the Commonwealth of Independent States. [Read full story](#)