

# Soft Belarusisation in Hrodna

On 20 January, the Belarusian jury and TV audiences selected the band Navi to represent Belarus at the Eurovision Song Contest. For the first time in the history of Eurovision, Belarus's performance will be in the Belarusian language.

This is just one of many small steps that Belarus has recently taken to promote tolerance and respect for the Belarusian language. Following the Ukrainian conflict, Belarusian authorities are paying more attention to the role of Belarusian in society.

Today, many Belarusians see Hrodna as a cultural capital of the country, which actively popularises the Belarusian language through the service sector. One can find ample evidence of soft Belarusisation in Hrodna cafes, shops, and the sports sphere. However, use of Belarusian will remain superficial until the language becomes equal to Russian in government, media, and education.

# Soft Belarusisation in Hrodna

In the 1990s, Hrodna was a hotspot for national awakening. The town had suffered from the country's largest wave of russification; authorities closed schools, NGOs, and newspapers. Nevertheless, Hrodna managed to preserve many national traditions and institutions, including famous independent newspapers, national movements, and organisations aimed at promoting Belarusian culture, language, and history.



When Lukashenka came to power, the national reawakening came to a grinding halt. The official language policy led to discrimination of the Belarusian language in favour of Russian.

However, in the aftermath of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, language policy shifted to be [more sympathetic towards Belarusian](#). This was first became evident in 2015, when Lukashenka mentioned the policy of soft Belarusisation in a public statement. Additionally, the position of the state towards history began to move away from Belarus's role as part of the Russian Empire and the USSR, focusing instead on its independence.

As a result of the state's new openness towards Belarusisation, several campaigns and initiatives have emerged which aim to popularise the national language and culture.

Already well-known in Minsk, language courses such as Mova Nanova are now attracting more and more students in Hrodna. The courses have existed for several years and are completely free; a single session regularly attracts 30-40 people. Popular musicians and writers are frequent guests at Mova Nanova, and the courses take a flexible approach to studying Belarusian, involving culture and history.

Another recent campaign, initiated by Hrodna historian Andrej Vaškievič, actively affixes signs with historical names to various buildings in the city centre. The historian created a petition and submitted a proposal to the local toponymical commission, which soon approved the project. He was motivated by the need for preserving historical heritage and the Belarusian language in both Cyrillic and Latin scripts. Soon, in February or March, the historical names of 16 streets in Hrodna will be added to the buildings of Hrodna.

# Does the service sector speak Belarusian?

In June 2016, Euroopt, one of the largest Belarusian supermarket chains, opened its first store with signs in Belarusian. The store in Hrodna is now the first large retailer in the entire country to carry on business in the Belarusian language. However, the staff can barely communicate in Belarusian, except for simple phrases.

Several shops and cafes in Hrodna are trying to promote the language by employing Belarusian-speaking personnel or organising events. For example, the largest shoe store in Hrodna, as well as several underwear and sport brands, organise Belarusian culture days. One shop which particularly stands out and attracts many tourists with its hand-made souvenirs is Etnakrama, where the personnel speaks exclusively Belarusian.

However, some shops and cafes limit their understanding of national identity to aesthetics. For example, the jewelry store 'B'ucik' appeared after 2014 with a Belarusian name and signs. Nevertheless, addressing sellers in Belarusian leads to confusion. One of the oldest restaurants in Hrodna, *Karchma*, has a traditional Belarusian name and offers a variety of national dishes. Despite this fact, the menu is only available in Russian and English, and the staff speaks Russian.



When soft Belarusisation became popular for young people, several popular cafes partly switched to a Belarusian-language policy. Thus, one of the most popular cafes is now *Nasha Kava*; the menu is in Belarusian and staff can speak the language. This trend is also reflected by the appearance of Mova Boxes.

Mova Box (Language box) is a project of the Belarusian mobile operator Velcom. The idea consists of spreading Belarusian-language books by putting them in designated boxes. Although the boxes take up little space, only a few cafes in Hrodna are supporting the campaign. Moreover, cafes which do have such boxes tend to have a generally more Belarusian flavour.

## **Sport teams as language promoters**

2016 has also been a year for soft Belarusisation in the world of sport. In 2016, the Belarusian national football team changed its uniform; it now features the national ornament. Nevertheless, police are still detaining fans sporting non-official symbols, such as the oppositional white-red-white flag. One of the most successful basketball teams, Tsmoki, uploaded promo-video in Belarusian which quickly became popular. It seems that sports teams too are following the trend of soft Belarusisation.

Nioman, a local football team in Hrodna, has also recently begun promoting the Belarusian language. For several years now, the team's social media pages have been increasingly favouring Belarusian language. Many football fans are starting to carry Belarusian national symbols to the matches. Recently, the team shared a video in which a Cameroonian player wishes citizens of Hrodna a Happy Christmas in Belarusian, pointing to the team's commitment to Belarusian-language policy.

## **Belarusian language use**

# remains superficial

Even though Belarusian language and culture has made significant gains in recent years in Hrodna, the service sector could still do more to support the language. Cafes and shops have become the most active language promoters in the service sphere. Nevertheless, they mostly take only small steps towards Belarusisation, and their employees often have no more than a tenuous grasp of Belarusian.

In an authoritarian regime, the effect of Belarusisation strongly depends on the position of Lukashenka, who seems to look more [more favourably on the Belarusin cause](#) at the moment. Further logical steps for the Belarusian cause could include introducing Belarusian education on different levels and popularising television and pop culture in Belarusian language. However, until official documents become translated into Belarusian and officials start to speak Belarusian as often as they speak Russian, the language will remain a formality.

Nevertheless, an increase of positive trends in language policy is cause for optimism that the language will not be forgotten [by the nation](#). More and more initiatives are trying to popularise Belarusian in narrow niches, such as language courses or historical projects. Getting involved in such initiatives not only contributes to preserving the language but also engages citizens.

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## Belarusian Official Fined for

# Using Russian instead of Belarusian

On 3 September, Belarus saw an unusual legal precedent set. The court tried Alieh Halaŭko, the director of a branch of a Minsk district housing services, for answering an address written in Belarusian with Russian. According to the Law on Addresses of Citizens and Legal Persons adopted in 2011, responses to written addresses must be in the same language of the address.

Meanwhile, citizens and interest groups within the government recently prevented some Russification measures introduced by indifferent officials. In the Minsk metro, announcements reverted back to Belarusian after a large mass of citizens voiced their concern and the geographical names continue to be written in a Belarusian Latinised script instead of a transliteration from Russian.

While strategically the government does not care about the revival of Belarusian culture and Lukashenka's regime did much to diminish its status during its earlier period, today at the lower levels of administration citizens can advocate for Belarusification quite successfully by simply exercising their legal rights. Moreover, inside the bureaucracy various attitudes to the language question exists and collisions among officials on that matter have become possible in Belarus.

## **Blogger Wins an Unprecedented Trial**

In September 2013, Belarusian blogger and journalist Hlieb Labadzenka decided to sue the director of housing services of his district, Alieh Halaŭko. The conflict started from Labadzenka's neighbour complaint which he sent to the district authorities. He accused Labadzenka of illegally rearranging his flat which apparently disturbed the neighbour, although it

turned out that this was not the case. The housing service issued a warning to Labadzenka without even visiting the flat. Labadzenka wrote a note of protest to the authorities, demanding that the response should be written in Belarusian.



However, in his reply, the service director not only used Russian, but also noted that according to the Constitution of Belarus, citizens can use any of the two official languages. Here, he demonstrated a lack of knowledge of Belarusian law, because according to the 2011 Law on Addresses of Citizen and Legal Persons, the officials must write replies to addresses strictly in the language in which the address was originally written.

Labadzenka decided to exercise his legal rights and support the Belarusian language, so he sued Halaŭko over this violation. The trial took place on 3 September, to which the accused did not show up. Nevertheless the court found him guilty and imposed a charge of BYR 500,000 (\$55).

According to Labadzenka, all of the officials he dealt with during the case behaved very politely. Even the judge herself expressed her support to Labadzenka. However, they also had to admit that they cannot do their paperwork in Belarusian – there are neither the proper documentary forms nor specialists that can record the trial in Belarusian.

Afterwards, in response to journalist's question, the director of housing service admitted that it was his fault indeed and in the future he will stick to the law.

“I am not hungry for Mr Halaŭko’s blood, I would rather he received a warning, but the court simply cannot give a smaller fine according to this article [of the law -ed. BD]. For me the most important thing is creating a precedent: not just shout out that the authorities are endangering the Belarusian language, but to support it with legal means”, Hlieb Labadzenka said.

### **Another Public Transportation Victory**

In August 2013, Minsk dwellers heard some new announcements about the Minsk underground transportation system, which explained the rules of conduct in the tube. The new announcements were in Russian, although the stations themselves are always announced in Belarusian. One of the metro officials explained that in addition to Belarusians other people (meaning Russian-speaking foreigners) are using the metro and might not understand.

Immediately a civil campaign started which demanded that the announcements should be made in Belarusian. The campaign very closely resembled the [Minsk transport tickets case](#), when the transportation service decided to change the language of their tickets to Russian. Concerned citizens demonstrated a fast reaction to the change and eventually won the battle: the following month, new tickets came out in Belarusian.

This time the situation followed a similar pattern. The director of the Minsk metropolitan shortly after the campaign publicly said that soon all announcements will be made in Belarusian. “We missed this point, it is our fault. Tomorrow we will change it”, he explained to journalists, speaking in Belarusian.





Meanwhile, metro managers continue to rewrite the topographical city names in a Belarusian Latinised alphabet, which [caused much discussion](#) when introduced in the metro in November 2012.

Some people in the city administration, and in particular chief executive deputy Ihar Karpenka, demanded that the geographical names should be transliterated from Russian using the English alphabet. The opposite side presented by Toponymical Commission at the Council of Ministers supported the use of the Belarusian Latinised script, which has a centuries worth of tradition in Belarus.

As the metro director said in October, they continue to rewrite the geographical names in the established Belarusian Latin script. In other words, experts from the Toponymical Commission defeated the bureaucrats from the city administration in this small battle for identity.

The head of Belarusian Language Society Alieh Trusaŭ optimistically says that “the situation is getting better little by little. We just need to watch thoroughly the language policies and actively express our concerns. It is thanks to active citizens that numerous recent cases were successful”.

## **Understanding Language Policy in Belarus**

These cases shed more light on the language situation in Belarus and positions of various interest groups within the government, as well as citizens and civil society. First, it

is clear that the government has no strategic goal of reviving the Belarusian language. As the [censuses of the last two decades](#) show, after a short revival in 1990s Belarusian language sharply decreased in use.

After the 1996 Referendum initiated by Lukashenka, the Russian language became the second official language in Belarus and soon almost fully displaced Belarusian language in public life. In Minsk, only a few Belarusian language schools exist and in regional centres not even a single such school exists at all. All TV channels broadcast in Russian, public administration runs all its paperwork in Russian, and Russian dominates everywhere except for a few small spheres. So, the Belarusian language became, in fact, an endangered language due to state policies and the weak support of the population, a result of decades of a Russification policy throughout the Soviet period.

However, as the political environment is changing, Lukashenka is less concerned with the “opposition” language. The government lets lower level bureaucrats deal with it. These bureaucrats, for their part, deal with it rather voluntarily and in a reactionary manner. It is precisely here that citizens can influence the situation by advocating for the Belarusification of the public administration.

Second, the bureaucracy has no unified approach to the Belarusian language, and attitudes to it varies from person to person and from institution to institution. Therefore, such collisions, as in the case of Latin script in the metro, become possible, and their outcome is never clear.

Third, citizens can indeed influence the situation without making holding massive protests in the streets. They can simply exercise their legal rights and officials have to consider them and implement their demands. Belarusians just need less indifference and more assertiveness as the situation is actually as not as bad as it might seem.

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# Two Christmases in One Country

Belarus is a unique country when it comes to Christmas: it has one Christmas at the end of December and the other one in early January. Both are official days off.

The Belarusian state officially recognises two confessions – the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches – as the most legitimate and important. Orthodox believers celebrate Christmas on 7 January by the Julian calendar, whereas Catholics celebrate Christmas on 25 December by the Gregorian calendar.

Through centuries of coexistence of many confessions, Belarusians have developed a distinct tolerance towards various religions. However, today these two main confessions have different positions and political backgrounds in relations with the Belarusian authorities. They also pursue different policies towards the use of the Belarusian language in church.

## **The Land of Many Religions**

Orthodoxy was the first Christian confession that came to the territory of contemporary Belarus in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The Catholic Church appeared here in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when Belarus' territories constituted the core of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Grand Duchy presented a very interesting country religion-wise. Here, various Christian churches coexisted with each other and with Islam and Judaism, as well as with elements of paganism.

Throughout the country's history, no major conflict has happened between the two biggest churches of Belarus, despite the dominance of one or the other during various historical periods. One or another church's prevalence depended on the domination of either Russia or Poland in local affairs.

In towns and villages, Catholic and Orthodox churches often stood side by side. A family could celebrate Catholic Christmas on 25 December, and two weeks later join the celebration at their Orthodox friends or neighbours. In independent Belarus, the authorities decided to preserve this good tradition of religious coexistence and set both dates as official holidays.

According to official figures, around 60 per cent of Belarusians today claim to be believers. However, [Orthodox Christians appear less religious](#) than Catholics or Protestants. 18 per cent of Orthodox Christians report to be attending church regularly, while 50 per cent of Catholics do so. Most Catholics reside in the western part of Belarus, especially on the borders with Lithuania and Poland. They have a [particular identity](#), more west-oriented, and often call themselves "Poles", though hardly any of them can speak Polish.

### **A Chance for THE National Church**

In Belarus, a national church like Catholicism in Poland or Orthodox Christianity in Russia never appeared. It has always been a land of many confessions. Perhaps this fact created unfavourable conditions for the development of national consciousness, as the church could not form solid ground for unification of the nation. Because of many periods of change in the country's religious situation, Belarusians remain generally unreligious people. However, Belarus had a chance to form a national religion, which was the Greek Catholic Church.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Orthodox hierarchy of the Grand Duchy

of Lithuania created the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church, which combined elements of both Churches. The church kept the Orthodox rites but was a part of the Catholic Church.

Subsequently, the Uniate Church started to dominate and had the potential to become a real national church at the time when modern nations were being formed. However, external factors impacted that process negatively, and Belarusian territory was annexed to Russia during the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The Russians pursued a policy of transition from the Uniate to Orthodox Church, and soon the Russian Orthodox Church merged with the Uniate Church. In independent Belarus, enthusiasts attempted to restore the Greek-Catholic church, but the number of parishes remains insignificant today.

### **Politics of Religion in Belarus**

When Belarus gained independence, the churches had to rethink the new conditions and form strategies in their relations with the state. While the Catholic Church took a more pro-independence position, the Belarusian Orthodox Church remains closely tied to the Russian Orthodox Church, which serves as a close friend of the Russian state. Unlike Ukrainians, Belarusians do not have an autocephaly and have to report to Moscow.

After Alexander Lukashenka came to power, the Catholic Church strived to remain as apolitical as possible. It chose not to interfere in politics rather than confront the regime and thus hinder its development.

The Orthodox Church appeared more politically active and supported the newly elected pro-Russian leader. Soon, it established very close relations with him. In exchange for loyalty, the Orthodox Church received various benefits, including a notorious licence to trade alcohol and tobacco.

Lukashenka himself has always tried to use religious organisations in his political games. Being persona non grata among the secular powers of Europe, he decided to make friends with the Holy See and thus raise his image in the West. In 2009, he surprised the world by visiting the Pope together with his younger son Mikalai.

Inspired by this diplomatic success, the authorities started to make further plans. Soon, unofficial information appeared stating that Lukashenka was trying to arrange a meeting between the Pope and the Moscow Patriarch. Such a meeting would definitely raise the wretched profile of the Belarusian leader, but unfortunately for him, this meeting is yet to happen.

Still, relations with the Holy See [remain on the agenda of the Belarusian authorities](#). For example, Apostolic Nuncio Claudio Gugerotti, who visited Belarus in autumn 2012, was the only person whom authorities allowed to meet political prisoners. The regime tries to maintain good relations with Rome simply because it does not put forward any political terms or conditions.

### **Church and Language Policy**

During the independence period, the Catholic Church pursued a firm policy of Belarusianisation. All church services, including worship and books, were translated into Belarusian. Today, the Belarusian language is gradually replacing Polish across Belarus. It already dominates in all parts of Belarus except the Hrodna region, where the number of Poles is significant. Heads of the Catholic Church always address the public in Belarusian during major holidays, which are broadcast on TV and radio.

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In the Belarusian Orthodox Church, the situation developed differently. Structurally, the Belarusian Orthodox Church constitutes a part of the Russian Orthodox Church. Close ties with Moscow prevented the Belarusian Church from separating and creating an independent Orthodox Church, as did the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate.

Clearly, in such conditions the Orthodox Church has no desire to formulate any special policies concerning the Belarusian language. In Orthodox churches, Old Slavonic remains the most widespread language. The head of the Belarusian Orthodox church never uses Belarusian in his speeches. Although some priests are enthusiastic about the wider introduction of Belarusian into church services, the leadership remains silent on that issue – Russia is too close.

*Vadzim Smok*