

# The Belarusian language in education: a reluctant revival?

On 7 October, Alexander Lukashenka criticised education officials for the lack of Belarusian language instruction in schools. According to him, “because of amateurs in the Ministry of Education, it has come to the point where pupils have six English classes per week, but only two of Belarusian language”.

Such a statement may come as a surprise, given that Lukashenka is largely responsible for Belarus's longstanding policy of Russification. In 1994, when Lukashenka became president, three-quarters of Belarusian school children studied in Belarusian, compared to only 13.7% now. In universities, the number of students who study in Belarusian is a mere 0.1%.

The authorities are currently changing their policy towards the Belarusian language. The appointment of [Alena Anisim](#) of the Belarusian Language Society to the Parliament shows that the Belarusian authorities do favour gradual measures promoting Belarusian. However, these measures may not necessarily lead to a revival of the Belarusian language, but rather simply prevent it from disappearing from the Belarusian education system.

## Lukashenka and Belarusian medium education

In the eyes of many, the person who contributed most to the decline of the Belarusian language over the past twenty years would be Alexander Lukashenka. After coming to power, the new

head of state re-implemented the Russification policy of the late Soviet Union, put in place after World War II.

The Russian language's domination of the Belarusian linguistic landscape would come as a surprise to those living in Belarus in the first half of the 20th century. In 1950, 85% of newspapers were published in Belarusian and in 1955 95% of schools operated in the language. Nevertheless, by 1969 one third of Belarusian pupils were not taught the Belarusian language at all. The role of the Belarusian language declined until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

When Lukashenka became president in 1994, three-quarters of Belarusian students studied in Belarusian. In 1990-1995 Belarus could boast four times as many publications in Belarusian than ever before in the past 400 years combined. However, after his election, the leader of Belarus asserted that "the Belarusian language is an impoverished one" and [returned Belarus to a policy of Russification](#).

## **Lack of Belarusian language in the education system**

Lukashenka's policy resulted in only 10.5% of preschool children, 13.7% of pupils and 0.1% students studying in Belarusian medium schools in the 2015/16 academic year, according to official statistics.

None of the 52 universities in Belarus use Belarusian as the main language of instruction. It seems that the only students whose whole education programme is in Belarusian are those majoring in Belarusian language and literature.

Moreover, some teachers are no longer teaching classes in Belarusian due to the [internationalisation of the Belarusian education system](#). As one professor from the Belarusian State

University told the author, he no longer gives his lectures on Belarusian foreign policy in Belarusian because Turkmen students could not understand him.

The case of school children is also problematic, as it is often difficult to find Belarusian-language teaching materials, calling official figures into question. On 30 August, Radio Liberty published a video in which a journalist attended a huge Education Fair and found few publications in Belarusian on subjects such as geography or computer science. This means that although schools are supposedly holding some classes in Belarusian, they are in fact often conducted in Russian.

Many Belarusian cities, including [Viciebsk](#), a large regional centre with 350 thousand inhabitants, have no Belarusian-language school groups at all. In nearby [Mahiliou](#), another large regional centre, only one pupil is studying in Belarusian.

This is a contrast to Minsk, where several Belarusian medium schools remain, and they enjoy a prestigious reputation. In 2016, citizens of Minsk even took turns waiting in line in the evening to be the first in the morning to submit documents to apply for Belarusian medium School №23.

## **Not letting the Belarusian language die**

After the start of the conflict in Ukraine, the Belarusian authorities have [changed their approach](#) to the Belarusian language, expanding its use in the public space. In July 2014, Lukashenka made his first speech in Belarusian in decades. However, official statements regarding expansion of the Belarusian language in education have so far proved to have

more hype than substance.

Even if the government adds one more Belarusian language class per week to school programmes, it will not change the fact that all other classes will remain in Russian. Moreover, Belarus lacks higher education institutions in Belarusian. Therefore, many people do not see the point of learning exclusively in Belarusian at the school level.

[Analytical Paper: Belarusian Identity - The Impact of Lukashenka's Rule](#) The regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka rejected the ethno-national model of state suggested by his predecessors in the early 1990s. Instead, he restored a soviet style "statist nation" with a centralised bureaucratic machine at its core.

Lukashenka's words recall previous statements from the Minister of Education [Mikhail Zhuraukou](#). After taking office in 2014, Zhuraukou stated that "geography and the history of Belarus should be studied in the Belarusian language." However, so far nothing has changed.

Nevertheless, it is possible that the authorities may be able to slightly increase the role of the Belarusian language in society. This may be the reason why the regime appointed Alena Anisim, vice-head of the Belarusian Language Society, as one of the two [democratic leaning MPs](#) to the Parliament. It seems that she lacks any political agenda other than promoting the Belarusian language.

Moreover, the Belarusian language is no longer a political issue for Lukashenka, as it was in the 1990s when his Russophile policy opposed the Belarus-centric vision of the Belarusian Popular Front. Having marginalised this opposition group, Lukashenka himself can afford to take a more pro-Belarusian stance. Moreover, he lost his chance of becoming president of Russia, so his new aim thus became strengthening Belarus.

The leader of Belarus is unlikely to want more Belarusian medium schools, but one more Belarusian language lesson in Russian medium schools seems possible. It seems that the authorities remain reluctant to revive the Belarusian language, but also want to avoid its disappearance.