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# Language Policies and Law in Education in Post-Soviet Belarus

*The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought to the fore claims of linguistic minorities which had been ignored far too long. In almost all of the former Soviet republics language became an impetus to national revival and an important instrument in consolidating the newly independent states.*

*At times excessively accentuated and overly politicized, the language issue demanded immediate reaction.*

*It was not, therefore, surprising, that almost all of the former Soviet republics rejected to various degrees the legal dogmas which had been created in the Soviet Union and moved towards the weakening of the bonds within the former USSR, the lowering of the status of the Russian language as a symbol of long-term oppression and, as a consequence, the strengthening of the position of the titular language. Belarus has somewhat stood aloof in the process.*

*“The most de-nationalised of the non-Russian successor states”<sup>i</sup>, with its “language subjected to the greatest degree of russification”<sup>ii</sup> Belarus was reluctant to draw away from the Soviet Union and so far it has been “the least successful in shifting towards the titular language”<sup>iii</sup>. This is despite the fact that Belarusians in the Republic of Belarus make up 81.2% of the population. <sup>iv</sup> The main minority groups, as recorded in the 1999 census, include Russians 1,142,000 (11.4%), Poles 396,000 (3.9%), Ukrainians 237,000 (2.4%) and Jews 28,000 (0.2%). Statistics also reveal that Russian, and not Belarusian, is the dominant language in Belarus, spoken normally at home by 63% of the population. Among other languages in Belarus, the most important are the neighboring ones - Polish, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian.*

*With Russian being the de facto main language, and Belarusian playing largely a symbolic function, the position of other languages spoken by minority groups residing within the territory of Belarus seems indeed precarious.*

*The present paper seeks to identify the main tendencies in the development of language legislation in the area of education, which has traditionally been considered as determinant for the survival of the language, in Belarus. It investigates the place the Belarusian legislation in the field of education reserves for the language rights of the titular nation and those of national minorities.*

**Iryna Ulasiuk, September 2011**

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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE POLICIES AND LAW IN EDUCATION IN BELARUS SINCE 1990

In order to understand the current debates surrounding the language issue in education in Belarus, it is instructive to consider the most important changes that occurred in Belarusian state language policies and law following 1990 and see how these policies and law have been applied in the field of education since then.

It should be recalled that the parliament of the republic declared the sovereignty of Belarus on 27 July 1990, and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus proclaimed independence on 25 August 1991.

Prior to that, on 26 January 1990, when Belarus was still part of the Soviet Union, a language law<sup>5</sup> was passed according to which the Belarusian language was proclaimed to be the only state language in Belarus. The law was a reaction to the situation that emerged in Belarus in the 1980s when less than a quarter of all Belarusian schoolchildren studied in the native language and none at the higher educational level. Even in kindergartens it was very rare to find children being given any instruction in Belarusian or languages other than Russian.<sup>6</sup> More than 95% of all literary publications were in Russian, there were no Belarusian films or television stations and only three of the Republic's fifteen theaters performed in Belarusian.<sup>7</sup> Through Article 2 of the newly adopted language law, Russian and Belarusian were expected to switch the roles prescribed to them during the Soviet times. The law envisaged a much broader use of the Belarusian language to enable it to become a majority language rather than a minority one as was the case under the Soviet rule. Foreseeing that the change could not come overnight, the Supreme Soviet of the Republic adopted an accommodative approach towards language acquisition in its Resolution of 26 January 1990.<sup>8</sup> It reasonably determined that the implementation of the law shall be a gradual process over the course of the 1990s. It was

anticipated that Belarusian would become the language of science, culture, and the media within three years; the language of congresses, conferences, and state decrees within three to five years; of business within five years, and for legal matters within a decade.

On 20 September 1990 the Law on Languages was strengthened by a detailed National Programme, committing the government to the long-term aim of restoring the Belarusian language in education and public life by the end of the century.<sup>9</sup> The Law on Culture adopted on 4 June of 1991<sup>10</sup> among other things guaranteed in Article 10(1) cultural rights to all ethnic groups on Belarusian territory while stressing that “the preservation, development and spread of the Belarusian culture and language” shall constitute one of the priority objectives of the state cultural policy (Article 10 (3.1)). On 29 October, the government adopted the Law on Education (discussed in detail below),<sup>11</sup> which also guaranteed support to the spread of the Belarusian language in education. The new constitution adopted in March 1994 affirmed the official status of the Belarusian language; however, Russian acquired the status of a language of inter-ethnic communication. The text was basically copied from the 1990 Law on Languages, with the difference that, in the 1990 law, Russian did not have the status of a communication medium between different ethnic groups in Belarus.

The implementation of the language law, however, “proved to be dependent greatly on the political situation in Belarus”.<sup>12</sup> Initially, this situation appeared to be favourable towards the Belarusian and languages other than Russian. Thus, at the beginning of the 1990s, “the educational system was the most receptive to implementing the law on languages, and during 1990-1994 the situation in secondary schools radically changed to the benefit of the Belarusian language”.<sup>13</sup> More than 3,500 schools (66.7 percent) were using Belarusian as the language of instruction. There were 140 schools with intensive study of Belarusian. In 1,600 schools the teaching was done in Russian, and 140 schools (mostly in the Grodno region) introduced Polish into their curricula.<sup>14</sup> Teachers



of Belarusian enjoyed a 10% salary bonus. Higher educational establishments also started to introduce Belarusian as a medium of instruction. In the period of 1991-94, as Konushkevich reports, it was not unusual to come across often unrealistic resolutions requiring, for example, the transition of all higher educational institutions to Belarusian language medium instruction already in the 1993-94 school year.<sup>15</sup> Gradually, as Avlasevich writes, “the process of “belarusification” acquired a political character, provoked a flow of complaints of parents and created an unhealthy atmosphere in the society”.<sup>16</sup> Very quickly, the linguistic and cultural issues became superseded by the ambitions of Belarusian politicians, and in the period of 1992-1994 the language issue, primarily the position of the Belarusian language *vis-a-vis* Russian, once again became at the heart of the political debate.

The climax came on 14 May 1995 when the question *Do you agree to give the Russian and Belarusian languages equal status?* was posed before Belarusian citizens in the national referendum. The majority of the respondents answered in the positive. What practical implications could the results of the referendum have? As one author has written, the acknowledgment of Russian as an official language in Belarus “largely meant “squeezing” Belarusian out of the public sphere”,<sup>17</sup> and leaving Belarusians “little opportunity to identify with their mother tongue in a conflict-free process”.<sup>18</sup> Kuzio summarizes the potential effect of the referendum in the following words:

*“To make Russian the second ‘state language’, together with the titular, may seem to be in line with liberal policy. But the continued dominance of the Russian language in many non-Russian successor states means that this would not promote equality. In Belarus although Russian was elevated to the status of a second state language in the May 1995 referendum this has not made Belarusian and Russian equal languages.”*<sup>19</sup>

In fact, the obvious change in the political discourse with regard to language

issues led to “a distinct redistribution of the use of the different languages in Belarus, with Belarusian receding and Russian advancing”.<sup>20</sup>

The results of the referendum found their reflection in the subsequent development of the language legislation which will be analyzed in the rest of the paper.

First and foremost, the 1994 Constitution was amended in 1996. In June 1998, a revision of the language legislature took place. In the amended constitution and the new language law, two languages, Belarusian and Russian, were declared to be the state languages of the republic.

In general terms, the constitutional text provided for very few rather broad entitlements for persons belonging to national minorities to be applied in all circumstances. By national minorities the legislation means “persons permanently residing on the territory of the Republic of Belarus and having citizenship of the Republic of Belarus whose origin, language, culture or traditions are different from those of titular population of the republic”.<sup>21</sup>

The Constitution guaranteed in Article 22 the equality of all citizens, presumably also those belonging to national minorities, before law; Article 15 required that the State “shall bear responsibility for preserving the ... cultural ... heritage, and the free development of the cultures of all the ethnic communities that live in the Republic of Belarus”, which presupposes *inter alia* the linguistic heritage; finally, Article 21 proclaimed that safeguarding the rights and liberties of the citizens of the Republic of Belarus enshrined in the Constitution and the laws, and specified in the state's international obligations, shall be the supreme goal of the State.

More specifically, the reference to educational rights of Belarusian citizens, including those belonging to national minorities, is made in Articles 49 and 50.

Article 49 guarantees every Belarusian citizen, including minority representatives, the right to a free general secondary education and vocational training. Secondary specialized and higher education can also be obtained without prejudice to one's linguistic and ethnic affiliation free of



charge in state educational institutions, however, on a competitive basis.

Article 50 further specifies in which language this right can be exercised. It generally provides that everyone shall have the right to preserve one's ethnic affiliation', and as part of it "to use one's native language", 'to choose the language of communication' and *to choose the language of education and teaching*.

The choice of the language of education is, however, conditioned by Article 17 of the Constitution which following the referendum constitutionalized bilingualism in Belarus by designating both the Belarusian and Russian languages as the state languages of the Republic of Belarus.

More detailed principles and functions of education, including with respect to linguistic aspirations of national minorities are defined in the following laws: "On Education in the Republic of Belarus", "On Languages", "On National Minorities", "On Child's Rights", as well as a number of regulations.

The Law on Child's Rights<sup>22</sup> stipulated a general principle of equality in receiving education for all children regardless among other things of their ethnic belonging and linguistic affiliation (Article 6(1)). It then went further and envisaged two important guarantees, namely the right of a child to receive free education in his or her mother tongue and the right to choose an educational institution in which to study (Article 23(1)). The 2008 amendments to the law resulted in the omission of these important guarantees and modestly and vaguely mentioned in part 3 that "the state encourages the development of talent and improvement of education".<sup>23</sup>

Several legal principles that bear on language policies in education are outlined in the Law "On Education in the Republic of Belarus". Thus, in accordance with Article 1 the 'national-cultural basis' is the principle upon which the state educational policy is grounded. This means, as Article 3 reads, that the right of citizens to education can be fulfilled by 'the creation of conditions for receiving education taking into consideration national traditions'. Article 4 of the Law on National Minorities specifies that any direct or indirect limitations of

the right to education of citizens of the Republic of Belarus because of their belonging to national minority as well as attempts of assimilation against their will are prohibited.

Under the heading "Languages of Education and Upbringing" Article 5 of the Law on Education envisages that the main languages of education and upbringing in educational institutions of the Republic of Belarus are Belarusian and Russian, the acquisition of the knowledge of which by the schoolchildren is among the primary aims of general secondary education (Article 22). This is in line with Article 2 of the Law on Languages which guarantees "comprehensive development and functioning of the Belarusian and Russian languages in all spheres of public life", including in education. However, both the Law on Education and the Law on Languages make an important reservation that education in the state languages should be carried out without prejudice to linguistic rights of the minorities to whom the state guarantees the right to choose the language of education and upbringing;<sup>24</sup> the state "takes care of the free development and use of all national languages, which are used by the population of the republic"<sup>25</sup> and guarantees to the persons of other nationalities living in the republic the right to upbringing and education in mother tongue.<sup>26</sup>

The state further undertakes in Article 5 of the Law on Education to create appropriate conditions for the realization of the forenamed rights. In accordance with the wishes of the students and their parents there may be created groups in pre-school institutions, classes in general educational institutions or pre-school general educational institutions in which the teaching and upbringing is carried out in the language of a national minority or the language of a national minority is studied as a subject. The creation of such schools or groups within a school is subject to the decision of local authorities who in their turn have to obtain the appropriate authorisation of the Ministry of education of the Republic of Belarus. The right to create educational institutions and form classes with instruction in a minority language is also formulated in Articles 22-23 of the Law on Languages.



Furthermore, Article 8 of the Law on National Minorities stipulates that the state undertakes “in order established by the legislation of the Republic of Belarus” to assist in “creating the conditions for development of education and cultures of national minorities by giving necessary money assets from republican and local budgets”.

Special mention is given by the legislator to the Belarusian language on several occasions. Article 5 of the Law on Education proclaims that education in Belarusian, publication of literature, school books and teaching materials in Belarusian are supported by the state. Article 24(2) of the Law on Languages provides that the Belarusian language in all educational institutions of the Republic of Belarus shall be studied.

This being the legal basis of language policies in education in Belarus the focus will now be shifted to how the described theoretical foundations have been implemented in practice and what practical problems persons belonging to both the titular, Belarusian nation and national minorities encounter in the realization of their constitutionally guaranteed language rights.

Education in Belarus is offered nowadays in the two state languages, Belarusian and Russian, and two minority languages, Lithuanian and Polish. However, the dominance of the Russian-language medium education is apparent. While the years immediately following the proclamation of independence were characterized by the process of “belarusification” of the educational sphere with the result that in the 1993/94 academic year around 75% of first-graders started their schooling in Belarusian,<sup>27</sup> the results of the 1995 referendum granting the equal status to Russian and Belarusian led to a quite predictable shift towards Russian-language medium education. On May 30, 1995 the Ministry of Education ordered<sup>28</sup> the Russian language and literature to be added to the list of entrance exams of higher and special secondary educational establishments, which basically freed the students from an obligation to take the Belarusian language and literature examination.<sup>29</sup> This measure was followed by

the guidelines issued by the same Ministry concerning the enrollment of first graders. This was now to be conducted extensively on the basis of the parental decision. School administrations were instructed to hold parental meetings, during which parents were to submit applications in which they specified the desired language of their children’s education. As Zaprudski reports, aware of the new trend, many parents began to choose Russian as the language of instruction for their children. In 1995, 62% of first grade pupils studied in Russian, compared to 25% during the previous year. As a consequence, the percentage of those studying in Belarusian fell from 75% to 38%. In 1996, this tendency continued with 68% of first-graders opting for Russian language instruction and only 32% of first graders choosing Belarusian as a medium of instruction. Interestingly, the number of pupils studying in the Belarusian language also decreased in the upper grades.<sup>30</sup> In the school year 2005-2006, approximately 76% of children going to pre-school educational institutions, attended Russian-language establishments, 13% Belarusian-language ones and 11% establishments with Russian- and Belarusian-language (or other-language) groups. About 77% of children attending secondary school received instruction in Russian and 23% in Belarusian.<sup>31</sup>

As regards Polish, there are two Polish language medium schools. In Grodno there is a Polish school providing general education. This institution receives financial support for the provision of special technical equipment (including computers) from local regional authorities. In 1999 a Polish gymnasium was established in Vilkovissk.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, subsequent requests for Polish language schools have been denied.<sup>33</sup> No permission have been given by local authorities to construct schools in Grodno and Novogrudok. The reasons behind these decisions are indeed unclear especially with a view to the fact that the money for the construction of the two schools was to be provided by the Polish diaspora.<sup>34</sup> With regard to Lithuanian, in the western part of Belarus, in the Ostrovets and Voronovo districts where most of the Belarusian Lithuanians live,



two secondary schools with Lithuanian language teaching were built by the Lithuanian Government in the villages of Pelyasa and Rimdyuny,<sup>35</sup> in which 76 students studied in 2005-2006.<sup>36</sup>

Requests have also been voiced by the Roma community in Belarus to open a school with the Roma language as a medium of instruction. While the authorities have explicitly claimed that they are not going to discriminate against the Roma community and encouraged them to apply in the order established by the legislation, they have also been quite clear that no positive discrimination could be expected either.<sup>37</sup> In view of the vulnerable position of the Roma community in Belarus<sup>38</sup> such a *laissez-faire* approach adopted by the authorities and a passive position of the Roma community itself<sup>39</sup> have yielded a predictable result - no school has been opened so far.

With regard to teaching languages as subjects, Russian and Belarusian are obligatory for all schools. Until 2006 such subjects as Belarusian language and literature, Belarusian history and geography had been taught exclusively in Belarusian even in Russian language medium schools. The situation changed in 2006 following the instructions of the Ministry of Education which allowed the teaching of the mentioned subjects in Russian language schools in Russian. The decision was viewed as an act of discrimination against Belarusian speaking students and provoked heated debates in the media.<sup>40</sup> The Ministry justified this step using the “parents’ requests” argument, as well as the argument that the teaching of these subjects exclusively in Belarusian contradicts the 1996 revision of the Constitution.<sup>41</sup> After several appeals to the Ministry of Education it issued an instructive letter in which it underlined that the language of the teaching of Belarusian history and geography is a matter of choice of the students.<sup>42</sup>

Several minority languages are also taught as subjects in mainstream schools but most of them are taught as extra-curriculum courses not integrated into the main curriculum, mostly in Sunday schools. Thus, Polish classes are open in secondary schools in Minsk, Brest

secondary and some Grodno oblast schools. The Polish language and culture are studied in over 20 Sunday schools and clubs managed by the Union of Poles in Lida, Grodno and Minsk.<sup>43</sup> There are 12 weekend and Sunday schools and open classrooms for those wishing to study the Lithuanian language, culture and history in the cities of Lida and Grodno.<sup>44</sup> The Latvian association Daugava has a Sunday school in Vitebsk, which teaches the Latvian language, history and culture to children under 16.<sup>45</sup> Minsk, Bobruisk and Mogilev have opened Sunday schools for Armenian children to learn the Armenian language, history and culture.<sup>46</sup> Sunday schools are also available in Minsk and Mogilev for those interested in studying the Georgian language, history, culture and traditions.<sup>47</sup> The Ukrainian language is studied as a subject in several secondary schools in Brest and Gomel and at Sunday schools in the Vitebsk region and in Minsk.<sup>48</sup> The Jewish language (Hebrew), culture and traditions are studied in one secondary school in Minsk and at the pre-school level in the state owned kindergartens in Gomel and in Bitebsk, in two groups of one Minsk kindergarten, and in Pinsk private boarding school Beis Aragon as well as in 17 Sunday schools all over the country.<sup>49</sup>

With regard to higher educational institutions, in the school year 2005-2006, 54% out of approximately 325,000 students studied in Russian, 2% in Belarusian, and 44% in both languages. Notably, there is not a single higher education institution in Belarus where instruction is carried out exclusively in the Belarusian language. These accounts, among other reasons, for the decrease in the number of Belarusian language medium schools and a rather small number of schools with a language of instruction other than Russian. It becomes just impracticable to instruct children, especially in upper grades, in a language other than Russian because as one parent put it: “How will my child be able to take exams in physics or chemistry in Russian if he has studied all the terminology in Belarusian for seven years?”<sup>50</sup>

Time and again the need for such an institution with Belarusian as a language of instruction is voiced.<sup>51</sup> Thus, attempts have been





made by the students of the faculty of history and culture of Grodno State University to introduce Belarusian as a medium of instruction. However, they failed, and, the initiators were, reportedly, punished by the administration on the grounds of nationalism.<sup>52</sup> There also have been efforts to develop the idea of the creation of Belarusian National University where the teaching would be carried out exclusively in Belarusian. However, the idea has not been supported so far by the Ministry of Education,<sup>53</sup> which instead advocates the organisation of the so-called streams within universities: Russian language and Belarusian language streams which provide education in the two languages.<sup>54</sup> Notwithstanding that, as one report states, the administration of higher educational institutions makes little effort to accommodate students wishing to study in Belarusian-language classes.<sup>55</sup>

Concerning languages other than Russian and Belarusian, their use at a higher educational level is scarce and is limited to subject teaching. Thus, the Ukrainian language is studied at the Belarusian State University and Brest State Pedagogical University<sup>56</sup>, Grodno State University, as well as the pedagogical institutes of Grodno and Vilkovisk, train teachers in Polish language and literature.<sup>57</sup> In Minsk State Pedagogical University a division of Lithuanian language was created within the framework of the Program of Cooperation signed by the two states in 2005.<sup>58</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

As this discussion has shown, education and the language of instruction has been a highly politicized issue in the country since it became independent - education was used by Belarusian leaders to form group identity as well as to support the regime. Consequently, the first two years of independence in Belarus were characterized by a policy aimed at revitalizing the Belarusian language and culture. Education became one of the fields where the “belarusification” campaign was most evident.

Very quickly, however, the linguistic and cultural issues became superseded by the changes in the political course of Belarus and we witnessed a distinct redistribution of the use of languages in education with Belarusian receding, Russian advancing and other languages being in the shadow and primarily ignored.

The described situation evidences several issues of concern. First and foremost, there seems to be a problem receiving education in the language of the titular nation, the Belarusian language. No continuity between educational institutions of different educational levels is insured for the Belarusian language in Belarus. And while there exist although rather scarce opportunities of instruction in Belarusian at the undergraduate level, there is practically no opportunity to receive a higher education in the Belarusian language in an absolute majority of fields of study. Second, there are not enough schools for minorities in Belarus so that they have an opportunity to study their languages along with Russian and Belarusian. While theoretically, the decision of administrative organs, as well as the request of citizens, can initiate the establishment of programs with full or partial instruction in the language of a national minority, the practical implementation is jeopardized by a burdensome bureaucracy, according to which representatives of a national minority would have to seek authorization of the Ministry of Education, as local executive authorities won't be able to adopt a corresponding decision without such an approval. Finally, while the Belarusian legislation envisages the protection of educational rights of linguistic minorities, it lacks concrete mechanisms of the implementation of these rights. The declaratory nature of officially formulated language policy, the dependence of the implementation of various adjustments on the willingness of people in power in many cases nullify the object and the purpose of the guarantee.



## Footnotes

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