

Understanding Belarus: Questions of Language

GRIGORY IOFFE

After communists, most of all I hate anti-communists (Sergei Dovlatov)¹

BELARUS IS LOCATED in the geographical centre of Europe, it suffered the highest death toll in World War II relative to its pre-war population, and it was one of the co-founders of the United Nations. Yet Belarus enjoys perhaps the lowest name recognition of all Europe's countries. Belarus is also the home and/or ancestral land of many eminent personalities such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Erwin Berlin, Marc Chagall, Fedor Dostoevsky, Felix Dzierzynski, Tadeusz Kosciuszko, Simon Kuznets, Adam Mickiewicz, Stanislaw Moniuszko, David Sarnow, Igor Stravinsky, Lev Vygotsky and four prime ministers of the state of Israel (Golda Meir, Menachem Begin, Itzhak Shamir and Shimon Peres). Yet none of these people ever identified themselves as a Belarusian, and none of them publicly expressed an opinion about the Belarusian national cause.

Modern Belarus baffles Western observers as no other post-Soviet state. The republic's economy is arguably in poor shape: barter reigns supreme in domestic transactions, and international investment is scarce. Yet the state has a strong manufacturing base, which seems to have largely recovered in the late 1990s. Belarus, which has been politically isolated in Europe, is governed by a man who comes across to many as an autocratic buffoon. However, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the country's leader, was re-elected in a landslide in September 2001;² and neither Western observers nor domestic opposition question his popularity at home. Belarus suffers from a demographic crisis exacerbated by the Chernobyl disaster, which affected one-quarter of the entire land area. Yet Belarus is the only post-Soviet nation that receives more migrants from *every* other post-Soviet country than it loses. Though it is located in the middle of Europe and enjoys advantageous transport and cultural-historical links with both the East and the West, it has the most one-sided orientation of all of Europe's nations. Ethnic Belarusians have a solid majority, and there is no organised Russian community at odds with them. However, most Belarusians have adopted Russian as their primary language and remain unworried about the loss of identity likely to follow. Moreover, the rank and file seem to support enthusiastically some sort of supranational commonwealth with Russia.

These contrasting features (and there are actually more) point to Belarus being a puzzle. Solving it evidently takes time, patience and insider knowledge. Whenever one of these is missing or deficient in one's approach, one risks being overcome by value judgments. Indeed, many post-1994 Western pronouncements on Belarus sound more judgmental than explanatory. Belarus has been portrayed as 'a virtual "black hole" in Europe' and 'an anomaly in the region'.³ Other remarks of the same sort include: 'Belarus is moving closer and closer to Russia and farther and farther from democracy'⁴ and 'The current Belarusian conjecture provides only for a violent overthrowing of the regime'.⁵ Belarus has been referred to as a modern sultanate, and popular attitudes that ensured support for Lukashenka were hailed as 'mass psychological marasmus'.⁶ 'There is no other state in Europe where the majority of the population, together with the head of its executive, consciously wants to rid their state of national symbols'.⁷ Yet the question as to *why these symbols are viewed as alien* has not been posed.

One cannot escape the impression that Belarus' intention to cling to Russia has mesmerised Western Belarus watchers. What is more, this proclivity is seen as the cause of an evil, not as an outcome whose underpinnings warrant careful scrutiny. 'Lukashenka's effort to reunite his country with Russia is ... the basis of his infamy abroad',⁸ candidly declares one author. Another author epitomises the inherent inconsistencies of this attitude. 'Russia is like a curate's egg', he writes in the introduction to his book on Belarus, 'i.e. not everything about it is bad'.⁹ Ironically, the book leads one to conclude that *almost nothing* about Russia's influences on Belarus qualifies as 'bad'. Indeed, the reader soon learns that Russian media available in Belarus are 'a virtual beacon of light in the new period of censored press'.¹⁰ Later we are told that the 'Russified outlook is not in itself to be castigated'.¹¹ Moreover, because 'the most political catalyst of political change in Belarus in the recent past has been Russia—1917, 1922, 1926, 1939, 1991 ... the main impetus for change in Belarus may [once again] come ... from Russia'.¹²

The tenor of declarations by the OSCE and the United States Congress on Belarus is similar to that of academic publications. After the 9 September 2001 presidential election in Belarus, the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE decided that further ostracising Belarus was counterproductive. The decision to engage Belarus was reaffirmed in April 2003: 'The West has eventually recognised its intellectual helplessness vis-à-vis the Minsk riddle', wrote the weekly magazine *Belorusskii rynok*.¹³ Though sarcastic, the remark has so far proven accurate. At the time of this writing the US Congress has not changed its hawkish stance. Moreover, on 7 November 2001 outgoing Senator Helms introduced a bill that proposed, among other things, to block Belarus' assets in the US, to deny US entry to Belarusian officials, to prohibit loans and investment etc.¹⁴ Identical bills were introduced in February–March 2003 in the US House of Representatives¹⁵ and in the US Senate.¹⁶ In November 2002 Lukashenka was denied entrance to Prague, where the meeting of the NATO Partnership for Peace was held, despite Belarus being one of those 'partners'. Soon thereafter, Lukashenka and seven other top Belarus officials were declared *non grata* by the 15 nations of the European Union and the US.¹⁷

The bias of such truly extraordinary decisions is evident in the fact that autocracy and human rights violations in some other post-Soviet nations are at least as grave as

those in Belarus but have not elicited a similar response. Heydar Aliev of Azerbaijan, Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan and Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan attended the Prague meeting in November 2002. One may suspect that the current Belarus regime frustrated certain geopolitical expectations related to that country. Yet it remains unclear whether such expectations were warranted in the first place.

This article, the first of a three-part series, takes issue with the dominant Western approach to Belarus and the preconceptions that it feeds. *Every* preconception underlying the judgments of Belarus watchers ought to be challenged on its overall intellectual merit and not have Cold War clichés and/or an analyst's preferences as its sole *raison d'être*.¹⁸ Scholarly analysis of how and why the present state of affairs evolved in Belarus is overdue.

Name recognition and contemporary scholarship on Belarus

Overall, Belarus does not enjoy as much publicity and/or public curiosity in the West as, say, Ukraine, let alone Russia. One might wonder whether some of the remarks on Belarus quoted above would show up in print if the country's name recognition¹⁹ were higher and the circle of those writing (as well as reading) about it were wider.

Vakar's 1956 book on Belarusian history²⁰ remains by far the most well-researched and revealing source on Belarus. Its analysis is so cogent that most events and processes unfolding in Belarus today, almost half a century later, find more credible and compelling explanation in it than in many subsequent writings. Compared with Vakar's volume, the 1972 book by Lubachko²¹ did little, if anything, to deepen understanding of his native Belarus by Western readers. In 1977 Guthier published a two-part article on the linguistic situation in Belarus, with well-substantiated conclusions that followed the lead of (and went along with) Vakar's pioneering volume. In particular, Guthier referred to the narrow circle of Belarusian-speaking intelligentsia as 'the elite without a constituency',²² a far-reaching formulation.

After the break-up of the Soviet Union emigre authors rushed to fill the information vacuum about the former republics. The 1993 book by Zaprudnik²³ was one of the first in the cohort of books that followed.²⁴ Zaprudnik's is a candid account of the perspective on Belarusian nation building adopted by the narrow circle of nationally conscious Belarusian emigrants. Beginning in the late 1980s, this perspective had been influencing the nationally conscious intellectuals *inside* Belarus. Zaprudnik's exposé of Belarus' problems, however, is easier to analyse than the publications of his like-minded insiders,²⁵ whose mindset he helped to mould during his many years of broadcasting for RL/RFE under yet another pseudonym, Arseny Zagorny.²⁶ For reasons uncovered below, the insiders' writing style is often defensive and emotional—when it comes to the Belarusian national cause—whereas Zaprudnik's is calm and scholarly. The pivotal points of Zaprudnik's volume are that Belarusians are the descendants of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and that Russian colonialism prevents them from rediscovering their true self.

In the 1990s some analytical works on Belarusian national mythology,²⁷ colloquial mixed language,²⁸ foreign trade²⁹ and demographic crisis³⁰ appeared. With his two books Marples has been by far the most prolific Western writer on Belarus. His first book contains a penetrating analysis of the effect of Chernobyl on Belarus. According

to Marples, Belarus' reaction to the Chernobyl disaster has been irrational because of the country's vague national identity,³¹ which is attributed to the Russification of Belarus; the conduit of this process, according to Marples, has been the development pattern adopted by the Soviet regime.

The most recent addition to Belarusian studies has been the 2002 collection of 18 articles resulting from a 1999 Harvard-based conference on Belarus.³² In the introductory article 'the need for a more nuanced view of Belarus'³³ is rightly asserted. While the book's own shot at meeting this need is impressive, two credible sources of such nuances—the linguistic situation in Belarus and Belarusian identity—are not among the book's themes.

Observations, assumptions and conclusions

Current scholarship on Belarus allows some generalisations on the most frequently made observations, assumptions and conclusions. Recurrent observations on the events in Belarus since the break-up of the Soviet Union can be summarised as follows.

- The Belarusian language is rarely used in everyday inter-personal communication, schooling and the news media; Russian dominates all these areas.
- There is no unity on historical national myths nor even on what constitutes the standard Belarusian language or Belarusian of literary norm.
- The Belarusian political regime is autocratic and as such is unique in today's Europe.
- The Belarusian political regime represses independent media.
- Belarusian opposition is marginalised and muzzled, and the 2001 presidential election was rigged.
- Empire-savers among the general public outnumber nationalists; the cult of a strong hand is paramount.
- Soviet and Russian-born symbols (the national flag and emblem, the name of the currency unit and the celebration of a national independence holiday on the day of the liberation of Minsk from the Nazis by the Soviet Army) prevail over genuinely Belarusian symbols.
- Economic reform is in an embryonic stage; central planning and barter reign supreme.
- The role of Russia in external economic and political ties is overwhelming.
- Belarus' economic growth is a hoax.

The tacit assumptions that seem to have affected the interpretation of these and other observations are as follows.

- Membership or belonging in a certain ethnic group is preset and derives from one's genealogy or ancestral roots.
- Ethnic groups are spatially discrete and/or match the respective ethnographic areas; therefore, embracing extra-territorial (or 'somebody else's') national symbols is an anomaly.
- Because Belarus is a sovereign country separate from Russia, to speak Belarusian

would be more natural (and also more dignified and patriotic) than to speak Russian.

- Consequently, it is negative, disapproved and harmful that the ‘native’ language is marginalised in Belarus while a ‘foreign’ one is promoted.
- Democratisation is inseparable from the restoration of both national identity and language; dictatorship is a tool of Russian hegemony.
- Re-unification with Russia is harmful for Belarus.

When Belarusian realities are viewed through the prism of these assumptions, predictable conclusions emerge. Such conclusions may not necessarily be worded the way they are below, yet they appear to be accepted by implication.

- President Lukashenka of Belarus is a political degenerate who should be ostracised and snubbed.
- The nationalist opposition is worthy of support.
- Soviet and pro-Russian indoctrination of the Belarusian populace has to be undone.

This article questions these assumptions and conclusions.³⁴ The tacit assumptions beg questions instead of posing them. Also, deriving conclusions from untested assumptions may prove counterproductive. In any case, it does not contribute to the cause of genuine democratisation in Belarus. Setting potentially unfeasible goals or just goals that do not resonate with rank-and-file Belarusians only aggravates cultural confusion.

Belarus is in many ways unique. Much can be gained from a spatial perspective on Belarus that pays close attention to its neighbours, whose ethnic frontiers have been in flux for a long time and in some ways continue to be indistinct. This spatial perspective on Belarus answers many questions about the country.

The questions that inform my inquiry are as follows.

- 1) Why is Russian the *de facto* language of everyday communication for the majority of ethnic Belarusians?
- 2) Why has the Belarusian language been marginalised?
- 3) Why has Belarus’ rejection of what comes across as its native language and heritage been so profound and pervasive?
- 4) What kind of ethnic identity evolved in Belarus that makes most Belarusians insensitive to ‘their own’ national symbols and attached to those embodying their kinship with neighbouring countries?
- 5) What is the status of the Belarusian national movement when viewed through the prism of the most reputable theories of ethnic nationalism?
- 6) What is Belarus’ standing on major economic and social indicators?
- 7) What is the make-up of the Belarusian political scene?
- 8) Is the fact that people support the Lukashenka regime rooted entirely in their passivity and lack of understanding of their own good? Do nationalists offer a more attractive option? Why, or why not?
- 9) Why does Belarus maintain economic ties predominantly to Russia, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of this situation for Belarus?

This first article in the three-part series is devoted to questions 1–3. The second will take up the issues of ethno-national identity and mythology, and the third will be

devoted to societal issues, including the Lukashenka phenomenon. The articles do not monitor developments aiming at forging a Russia–Belarus union, yet factors having an impact on these developments are carefully analysed. The analysis of the current situation in Belarus which the three articles will present is based on my personal impressions gained during more than 20 visits to Belarus in 1954–2002,³⁵ available scholarship and statistics, current media reports, a pilot survey and interviews conducted in May and June 2002,³⁶ and anecdotal evidence.

The linguistic situation

Belarusian is a Slavic language distinct from Russian and Polish, which are its close relatives³⁷ but are farther apart from each other than each of them is from Belarusian. The codification of the Belarusian language goes back to 1918, when Branislau Tarashkevich published the first textbook of Belarusian grammar.³⁸ Other prominent linguists like Evfimii Karsky and Nikolai Yanchuk contributed to developing standard Belarusian so it could replace many spoken dialects. The latest alteration of standard Belarusian was its state-sponsored reform in 1933 in Soviet (eastern) Belarus. Among the authors who wrote in Belarusian and gained international recognition are Yanka Kupala (1882–1942), a poet and a playwright, and Yakub Kolas (1882–1956), a poet. Vasil Bykau (a prose writer born in 1924) and Rygor Borodulin (a poet born in 1935) are arguably the most prominent Belarusian authors alive. Belarusian has been one of the official languages of Belarus since the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was proclaimed (1919). In 1924–39 Russian, Yiddish and Polish were also given official status in the republic, but since 1939 Belarusian has shared its official status only with Russian. In 1992 (that is, after Belarus became independent) Belarusian was proclaimed the only official language. However, based on the national referendum of 1995, Russian was reintroduced once again as one of the two official languages of Belarus. This reintroduction gained the support of 83.3% of voters.

Transyanka and the riddle of Belarusian language usage

To the chagrin of all the ‘nationally conscious’³⁹ Belarusian intellectuals, the actual frequency of use of standard Belarusian in everyday communication is low. Moreover, it has *never* been used *en masse* in Belarusian cities.⁴⁰ Aleh Trusau, chairman of the Belarusian Language Society (popularly known as TBM⁴¹), pointed out that Belarusians did not ‘own’ their cities for 200 years;⁴² ethnic Belarusians established their numerical majority in cities only in the late 1950s.

Regarding modern language usage in Belarus, census estimates seem to be of limited value, if any at all. When completing census forms, 93.2% of all those who identified themselves as Belarusians living in Belarus reported Belarusian as their native language in 1959.⁴³ In 1970 90.1% did so; in 1979 83.5% and in 1989 80.2%.⁴⁴ Even with this high (but declining) level of recognition of Belarusian as their native language, ethnic Belarusians were described as having ‘the lowest level of native language loyalty among the 14 non-Russian Union Republic nationalities, and also [ranking] first in knowledge of Russian as a second language’.⁴⁵ Formal expression of loyalty, however, has little to do with actual standard or literary usage. The use of

Belarusian of literary norm can hardly be high if one takes into account that, for example, in the late 1980s only 0.2% of secondary school students attended schools with Belarusian as the language of instruction in urban areas of the republic.⁴⁶ In the countryside Belarusian-language schooling is more widespread but, according to Stanislau Shushkevich, most of these *de jure* Belarusian schools effectively teach students in Russian.⁴⁷

The 1999 census drew a peculiar distinction between native language and that most frequently spoken at home; 41.3% of all Belarusians indicated that at home they spoke Belarusian, and 58.6% Russian.⁴⁸ Some 41% of ethnic Belarusians means 37% of the entire population, roughly 3.7 million people.⁴⁹ This is still a lot—one cannot hide this many, yet meeting people who converse in standard Belarusian is problematical, as if they are hiding somewhere or perhaps resort to Belarusian only in intimate settings.

No observer who has command of the Russian language—better still, Russian and Polish, as this author does—would consider the above statistics believable. While in Belarus I listened to standard Belarusian on Minsk radio and TV broadcasts, in the Yanka Kupala Drama Theatre, and in the headquarters of the TBM. The sole Belarusian TV channel in Minsk at the time I watched it the most (1970s and 1980s) could be labeled Belarusian only with some qualification. News reports were in Belarusian, while shows and films were in Russian. In May 2002 the situation was roughly the same as in the 1980s.

The way interviews were (and still are) conducted impressed me the most. While an interviewer would speak Belarusian, most interviewees responded in Russian, no matter which social strata they represented.⁵⁰ This ‘bilingual’ interviewing sounds awkward to an outsider, but locals are apparently used to it. In no other Soviet republic (and I visited 13 out of 15) had I heard and/or seen anything like this. To be sure, under the Soviet regime all republics broadcast TV and radio programmes in Russian and in the native language of the titular nationality—but not at the same time, and rarely was the native speech flow in the native-language broadcasts interrupted by Russian.

During many trips inside Belarus in the 1970s and 1980s I tried my best to locate people versed in the same standard language I heard from the speakers on the single local TV channel in Minsk. In other words, I set out to meet people who used Belarusian in everyday life, committed to this cause by sheer curiosity augmented by my interest in languages and a sensitive phonetic ear. With the perseverance of an investigative journalist I toured the country trying to intercept a Belarusian-language conversation in public transport, restaurants, railway stations, urban streets, rural food stores, cinema foyers and inside people’s residences. I succeeded extremely rarely. Where conversational language was most remote from standard Russian, as in Grodno *oblast’* (especially its northern part abutting the Lithuanian border), the vernacular sounded close to standard though accented Polish, in which I was also fluent. However, in most instances all I was exposed to was either standard Russian or *trasyanka*.

Trasyanka (literally a mixture of hay and straw) is a product of what Tat’yana Mikulich calls *mouna interferentsya*⁵¹ (linguistic superposition). It is an ever-present phenomenon in Belarus. More specifically, *trasyanka* is a blend of Russian and

Belarusian, a mixture that is described by nationally oriented intellectuals as a ‘disgusting creature of Soviet assimilation’,⁵² a ‘perversion of the language system’ or a ‘Creolised pseudo-language’.⁵³ Marples calls it ‘a patois of Russian and Belarusian’.⁵⁴ Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the president, uses *trasyanka* routinely. In fact, he can hardly talk otherwise. To the native Russian speaker, it sounds like a local Russian dialect—a statement that typically enrages nationally conscious (*svyadomi*) intellectuals, who deny any spontaneity to its development. Yet this is also how the speech of many ethnic Belarusians is described in a UN document: ‘Nearly 69% of the present population live in urban areas, a considerable number of whom speak a local Russian dialect. Most people with higher education speak the Russian of literary norm. Overwhelmed by a multitude of everyday problems, the majority are unwilling to reject their language of habit to remember the language of their ancestors’.⁵⁵ Because the term ‘dialect’ was often applied to the Belarusian vernaculars in general, using this term in regard to *trasyanka* requires additional clarification.

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ‘the term “dialect” sometimes [indeed] has negative connotation in everyday use. More often than not, in the minds of nonlinguists, it connotes a deviation from the “standard” language, which is commonly thought to be superior. This standard language is, from the linguist’s point of view, just another dialect, but it has more prestige than the others because it is spoken by the highly educated, a social elite, or simply a majority’.⁵⁶ The distinction between a dialect and a language, therefore, is blurred, and negative associations may consequently arise in a politically and/or emotionally charged discourse. Because ‘dialect [is] a variety of a language ... [that] has features of vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation distinguishing it from other varieties of the same language’ (*ibid.*), there is no objective reason to renounce the term ‘dialect’ when it comes to *trasyanka*, at least from the perspective of standard Russian. This is especially true since today’s *trasyanka* is more of a phonetic than a lexical mix. In other words, it is ever-increasingly just an accented Russian speech with a mere two dozen or fewer localisms unknown in standard Russian. Phonetic features that help distinguish Belarusians include enunciation of unstressed vowels, particularly ‘a’ and ‘ya’, and lack of soft consonants, especially but not only ‘ch’ and ‘shch’. For example, when offered a cigarette, a *trasyanka*-speaking person may say ‘*blagodaru, ya ne kuru*’ while a person speaking standard Russian would say ‘*blagodaryu, ya ne kuryu*’ and a standard Belarusian speaker would have to say ‘*dzyakui*’ instead of ‘*blagodaru*’. In rural areas, especially in the countryside of Western Belarus, local lexical infusions into Russian are more numerous than in cities. The nationally conscious accuse Lukashenka of using Belarusian words in his Russian-language pronouncements only in the context of leveling offence or name-calling, which reportedly reinforces the old attitude to Belarusian as a rustic, peasant language.

One has to point out, however, that castigating *trasyanka* is only possible in a politically and/or emotionally charged discourse, where implicit or explicit assumptions as to what constitutes *the best* (the most dignified?) language of communication in Belarus are made *up front*. Without such assumptions (tacit or overt), disparaging comments (e.g. that *trasyanka* is an artificial lingo, *trasyanka* is a product of forced Russification) are just clichés. In Russia proper, colloquial communication in many instances is tinged with lexical and especially phonetic deviations from standard

Russian that are by no means less discernible than those currently used in Belarus. For example, Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev spoke with a distinctive Ukrainian-tinged southern accent, as does Mikhail Gorbachev. From this perspective, mocking *trasyanka* for not being sufficiently Russian is utterly snobbish. At the same time, vilifying it for being insufficiently Belarusian—given the low frequency of standard Belarusian speakers—does not seem to make sense at all.

The actual spread of standard Belarusian in everyday life remains shrouded in mystery, and even Belarus-based researchers profess ignorance in this regard.⁵⁷ The nationally conscious are apparently content with the 1999 census estimate and quote it every time they accuse the authorities of ‘neglecting the language of 41% of Belarusians’. For example, Trusau emphasises that ‘no sociological survey in a totalitarian society can be believed’,⁵⁸ but feels comfortable with the above-mentioned census estimate of the spread of Belarusian. Many Belarusians are reluctant to get involved in an open discussion of language usage. Even Lukashenka, who prides himself on speaking his mind no matter what the audience,⁵⁹ occasionally resorts to indirect phraseology when it comes to the topic of language.⁶⁰ For example, speaking to the Gomel provincial administration in November 2001, he said that in Belarus ‘there is no problem of choice between Russian and Belarusian because the people have decided for themselves which language to use’.⁶¹

Accurate or at least realistically sound statistics on Belarusian language usage in everyday life may be available but are probably not, as even the nationally conscious are not unanimous as to what standard Belarusian is. For some, it is *Tarashkevitsa*, that is, the language canonised by Tarashkevich in his 1918 Belarusian grammar, while for some others it is *Narkomovka*, that is, Belarusian of literary norm as it emerged from the 1933 reform.⁶² For many years there have been an inordinate number of inconsistencies on Belarusian-language posters, plaques and road signs across Minsk and Belarus at large. In May 2002, on the major highway linking Minsk with Warsaw, I recorded road signs that announced a town’s name as Staubtsy and Stoubtsy (in Russian this would be rendered as Stolbtsy). A street in Minsk was for a long time named vulitsa Krasnaya (‘vulitsa’ being an indication that the plaque was in fact in Belarusian, not Russian), whereas now it is vulitsa Chyrvonaya. The US Embassy is called Ambasada Zluchanykh Shtatau Ameryki, whereas the next-door Embassy of Ukraine is called Pasol’stva Ukrainy. What is the Belarusian for ‘embassy’ remains unclear. Shushkevich mentioned to me that, as far as he was concerned, there had been only two authors, Yakub Kolas and Kuz’ma Chorny, who wrote in pure Belarusian.⁶³ When an object in question is hard to pin down, one cannot possibly expect accurate estimates of its recorded frequency!

Predisposition to comparison and measurement is, however, indestructible. Thus, during my pilot survey of secondary school teachers in Minsk, Vitebsk and Grodno, just three out of 60 respondents (0.5%) pointed to Belarusian as the only language in which they communicated at home, 37 pointed to Russian as the only home language, 11 said that they used Russian and Belarusian intermittently, and nine said that they used *trasyanka*.

By and large, available surveys are much more in line with my field observations than census statistics. According to a 1989 survey Belarusian was reported as spoken by 10% of the Belarusian population, including 1.5% of all urban residents.⁶⁴ Eke &

Kuzio, who also refer to that survey, profess no doubt that there is ‘a much higher level of fluency in the language than reflected in this statistic’,⁶⁵ but I am not so sure. A 1999 representative survey of 1,081 Belarusian adults selected randomly throughout the country and polled by a Belarusian research firm contracted by the US Department of State showed similar results: as many as 12% of respondents spoke Belarusian at home and 7% at work.⁶⁶ ‘In Minsk, where four-fifths of the inhabitants are of Belarusian nationality, almost everyone usually speaks Russian at home (86%) and at work (90%)’.⁶⁷ Colton refers to a 1999 national survey of 1,507 Belarusian adults, of whom only 4% indicated that they spoke only Belarusian at home.⁶⁸ Finally, a survey in Grodno and three rural *raiony* in Grodno *oblast* abutting the Belarus–Poland border showed higher proficiency in Belarusian. There, 19.4% of self-identified Belarusians admitted to using Belarusian in contacts with their family, and 38.3% admitted to using a Belarusian vernacular (*govor*),⁶⁹ which is probably *trasyanka*. In contacts with friends and colleagues the corresponding percentage shares were 18.9% and 25.6%.⁷⁰

Jan Maksymiuk, an ethnic Belarusian born and raised in northeastern Poland and educated in Warsaw, undertook the sisyphian task of translating Joyce’s *Ulysses* into Belarusian of literary norm. In Poland he received a state grant to publish 1,000 copies of the book, which he did in 1993, and managed to sell 700 copies across the border in Minsk, while the remaining 300 copies were still kept under his bed in 1998.⁷¹ Asked during a conference in Krakow why so few copies were sold in Minsk, Maksymiuk responded: ‘You see, one has to take a proportional view, that is, to take into account how many people at the moment indeed routinely use Belarusian in Belarus ... Nominally, there are 10 million Belarusians, yes? As for those who speak Belarusian, use this language for the most part and are able to read on the level on which *Ulysses* is written, with all its phraseology and vocabulary, I think that they account for some 0.1% It’s some 10,000 people, yes?’⁷²

It may be that the actual spread of Belarusian-language daily interpersonal communication in Belarus is somewhere between the above-quoted 10–12% and 0.1%, perhaps somewhere in the bracket 3–7%. Indeed, 0.1% may be considered extreme, if only because few people, no matter what language they speak, manage to read Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Ironically, anecdotal evidence suggests that by far the most noticeable group of people with the ability to speak standard Belarusian in an everyday setting is composed of the philology graduates of the Belarusian State University, and that is the same constituency that can, in fact, be suspected of being able (and indeed willing) to read *Ulysses*.

Despite being grossly inflated, census data on the usage of Belarusian circulate from publication to publication and are earnestly analysed by reputable local authors (the above-quoted book by Mikulich is one example) and cited abroad.⁷³

The issue is all the more peculiar since no intentional falsification of census data is apparently involved. For decades, language has been an incredibly confusing and confused issue in Belarus, and in the 1990s it became a politically charged issue as well. Obviously there is no entry for *trasyanka* in census forms, and if it were included it would probably not clarify the situation either, as this lingo is ridiculed by the nationally conscious elite as a mongrel, rustic sort of speech. Alexandra Goujon believes that in the perception of the Soviet/post-Soviet people the ‘notion of “native

language” refers to the language of roots (*rod*) more than the language spoken since childhood’, and that they find it difficult to distinguish between ‘native language’, ‘nationality’ and ‘citizenship’.⁷⁴ A similar idea is expressed by Grigor’yava, who mentioned that ‘many of those who admit to Belarusian being their native language, in actuality are not quite proficient in that language’.⁷⁵

‘Badly outnumbered, though very vocal’

A candid public discussion of the linguistic situation in Belarus is rare because the issue is now politicised to the extreme. A suggestive language argument is contained in an article by Mikhas Puzinovskiy with the title ‘Why do Belarusian parents choose Russian language of instruction in [secondary] schools?’, published in the TBM newspaper. The article describes the case of Ashmiany, a town in the Belarusian–Lithuanian borderland that is actually closer to Vilnius than to Minsk. This is one region in Belarus where (according to my observations) everyday communication in the countryside is not so much between standard Russian and Belarusian (i.e., *trasyanka*) as it is between standard Belarusian and Polish. This is the *only* region of Belarus where *raion* newspapers are still published in Belarusian; other rural *raion* newspapers in Belarus used to be published in Belarusian but now are bilingual. In the early 1990s 12 first-year elementary school classes were open in Ashmiany with the Belarusian language for instruction and only two Russian-language first-year classes. This was the time when a ‘return’ to Belarusian seemed close at hand.

About the same proportion between Belarusian and Russian classes was maintained for several years. By 2001 the students who entered Belarusian-language classes were in years 5–11 and were used by school district managers as a live confirmation of the freedom of choice between the two official languages of the country, the freedom that, according to Puzinovskiy, does not actually exist. Puzinovskiy states that all (!) those parents whose children entered Belarusian classes chose Russian for their younger children or demanded a switch to Russian for their older children. Puzinovskiy’s explanation of this situation is as follows. First, people lost their belief in the prospect of national revival. Second, the leaders of the country give a wrong example when they communicate with their fellow countrymen in Russian. In the early 1990s this was not the case; the Belarusian leaders Stanislau Shushkevich and Mechyslau Hryb used Belarusian and Russian intermittently. Third, there are no vocational schools and colleges using the Belarusian language for instruction. Fourth, the very introduction of the two official languages—as a result of a 1995 popular referendum—is at fault: ‘Only the status of the sole official language attached to Belarusian in 1990 and corroborated by the 1994 Constitution could rescue and resurrect the language that had been kept down over centuries by the Rzeczpospolita [i.e. Poland], tsarist Russia and under the Soviet [regime]. The official bilingualism helps supplant our language from use ...’.⁷⁶

One may infer from the statement just quoted that freedom of choice is evil; only if there is a state mandate to cut back on this freedom can Belarusian win the tug of war. Note that Belarusian nationalists routinely label themselves democrats. According to Marples, ‘the opposition (usually called “democratic”) forces [are] badly outnumbered, though very vocal’.⁷⁷ Here the quotation marks framing ‘democratic’

are on target. This is not to say that the entire collection of reasons for disloyalty to the Belarusian language does not warrant scrutiny; it does. However, the alternative reasoning has to be considered as well. According to it, the leaders of the country communicate in Russian precisely because this is what most Belarusians do. Further, if the introduction of the official bilingualism is construed as a sort of tacit coercion, then introducing one official language and opening plenty of Belarusian classes without asking parental consent, as was done in 1992–93, was even more coercive to begin with. According to Marcus, ‘by 1994 more than 230 schools in Minsk were to be teaching in Belarusian, which was well above the percentage of students whose parents wanted them to attend such schools. Thus, parents often found that even if they opted for Russian schools, there were no places in them and their children had to go to the Belarusian schools. Such policies were perceived as forced Belarusification and heightened non-Belarusian speakers’ fears’.⁷⁸

Among 60 secondary school teachers whom I surveyed in May 2002, only 13 responded that they would like to send their own children to a school with instruction in the Belarusian language, while 29 said that they would not.

In light of these findings, the position candidly expressed in Puzinovsky’s article about Ashmiany is reminiscent of that taken by a group of Belarusian authors who in 1987 wrote letters to Gorbachev⁷⁹ asking him to influence the Minsk authorities so they would issue new laws based on which the Belarusian language would gain in stature. There is no doubt that top-down, legislative initiative to protect one’s language may be instrumental and even effective in achieving this goal. What strikes one, though, is the inherently Soviet belief in supremacy and primacy of such a measure, which is viewed as all but a universal master key: you just fix the law and the linguistic situation changes. The prior experience of successful changes of this nature, most eloquently summarised by Hroch,⁸⁰ is inconsistent with this belief. It is bottom-up initiatives, specifically, patient everyday work by the national movement, that blaze the trail.

Apparently reflecting the undeniable reality of Russian as the language of choice of the overwhelming majority of Belarus citizens and a growing realisation that pursuing the Belarusian-only campaign could alienate the TBM from the majority of people, the TBM eventually softened its official stance in regard to language. In contrast to its previous declarations and those of the Belarusian Popular Front, the TBM dropped its earlier demand to make Belarusian the only official language of Belarus. In August 2002 Chairman Trusau admitted that the new TBM legislative initiative to change the language law would no longer challenge Russian as one of the official languages of Belarus. Instead, it would call for Belarusian to be made the language of record keeping and other clerical work.⁸¹ As a sign of positive change, the TBM is now advertising its activities in a way that does not alienate the Russian-speaking majority. A leaflet placed in 72 metro carriages in Minsk in September 2002 and devoted to a month-long campaign in favour of Belarusian read: ‘To participate ... there is no need to organise rallies ...; everybody can become an exemplary defender of their native language among family, acquaintances and friends. Just say a greeting in Belarusian, in the morning say ‘*Dobry dzen!*’ to a colleague or neighbour, ... in the evening say ‘*Dabranoch!*’. Read a good poem in Belarusian, write a postcard in Belarusian to your family, and when you fill out utility payment

forms, do it in Belarusian ... When three people talk to each other in Belarusian, the fourth one will join them who is currently too shy to himself begin such a talk. Perhaps we will make it that talking in Belarusian will have become a matter of course. After all, nobody will do this for us ... You have something to take pride in because Frantsishek Skaryna conversed in the language of your grandfathers and he was as smart as anybody. Remember the best, be your own self, be the first'.⁸² Such gentle but persistent dissemination of the nationalist message on language may eventually become successful.

Forcible Russification and 'pomiarkounasts'

How the current linguistic situation came about is explained in different ways. On one hand, a small but vociferous group of activists is involved in an uphill battle to make Belarusian the language of mass communication. On the other hand, a silent majority of ethnic Belarusians are by no means unreceptive to the activists' views but do not seem willing to put their message into practice. The 1999 poll conducted under the contract with the US State Department testifies that Belarusians not only speak Russian but are more attuned to Moscow TV channels and other media than they are to Minsk-based media, including those using Belarusian.⁸³ Today, 12 years after independence, Minsk seems to be as firmly a part of the Russian-language and Moscow-centred information space as under the Soviet regime. Even street names in the Belarusian capital confirm this: one can still come across such admittedly 'fossil' names as Prospekt Gazety Izvestiya and Prospekt Gazety Pravda.

Many people in Belarus do not like sharing their views on the linguistic situation. Among Minsk intellectuals, however, who cannot stay aloof from a politically charged issue and are inclined to take a stand on it, one of the widely held views is that transition to Belarusian is desirable and should have been conducted gradually, beginning from day care centres and elementary schools. In my pilot survey 18% of respondents were in favour of 'vigorous policy' aiming at the spread of Belarusian, while 52%, the largest share of those surveyed, said that this should be done but 'cautiously and gradually' (and 28% said that this should not be done at all).

Haphazard attempts at introducing Belarusian overnight by decree, made in the early 1990s, are now decried as radical and insensitive. Vadim Glinnik confessed that in the late 1980s–early 1990s he used to create artificial conflict situations by intentionally speaking Belarusian with people who disapproved of it because they did not feel comfortable using the language or for any other reason. Now he calls his erstwhile behaviour reckless and admits that he feels more affinity with a Russian-speaking Moscow intellectual than a Belarusian-speaking truck driver.⁸⁴ Irina Khalip refers to her similar behaviour as linguistic Jacobinism.⁸⁵ However, both Khalip and Glinnik and other interviewees claim that, owing to Lukashenka, precious years have been lost for the cause of gradual transition to Belarusian.

Another popular viewpoint is that people's immediate material demands have to be met first, and only then would it make sense to worry about language. In my pilot survey, however, only 18% referred to the current socio-economic situation in Belarus as the prime culprit, while 56.6% believed that the current linguistic situation had resulted from forcible Russification, and as many as 50% said that currently people

themselves were reluctant to speak Belarusian. But why don't people like to speak their native language? Many believe this is due to '*pomiarkounasts*'. Literally, '*pomiarkounasts*' means moderation and self-restraint, but its actual contextual reading also spans patience, resignation, tolerance and susceptibility to outside influences.

Pomiarkounasts is widely and persistently referred to in informal discussions about the language and identity of Belarusians. The following popular joke makes sense of this myth. 'A Russian takes a train, he enters a carriage, walks to his seat, and lands on a nail sticking out from it. With indignation and disgust, he pulls the nail out of his body and throws it out of the window. Now, a Ukrainian takes a train and also lands on a nail. He also pulls it out with disgust and pain but stops short of throwing away the nail because it is imprudent, as the nail may be put to use in the household. Now, it is time for a Belarusian to undergo the same ordeal. When a Belarusian realises he is sitting on a nail, it hurts him just like his counterparts, but what he thinks is; 'Well, who knows, maybe this is what's meant to be'. With this in mind, he continues to sit still ...

During a 2002 competition in wit, the so-called KVN—literally, Club of the Cheerful and Quick-Witted, a college student team from Minsk—put the same meaning in a different nutshell. Referring to the famous peeing boy statue emblematic of Brussels, they suggested that a statue equally representative of Minsk and Belarus in general should be a non-peeing boy; a boy epitomising Belarus is not peeing, he is enduring.

As an element of a Belarusian self-portrait, *pomiarkounasts* does not lend itself easily to rational analysis. Russification, however, does. There is no doubt that Russification took place in the Soviet Union, although it hardly resembled the state-run conspiracy that it was often considered to be in Sovietology writings.⁸⁶ In the Soviet Union there were such powerful overt vehicles of Russification to fall back on that the need also to involve anything covert or hidden from the public eye seems questionable. One such overt tool of Russification was service in the Soviet army, which is primarily why command of the Russian language was always higher among non-Russian men than among women. Another reason to adopt Russian was moving up the ranks, whether in a managerial position (like working for a large, federally controlled enterprise in a position of a supervisor, let alone top manager) or a political position (executive power at the federal level or Communist Party cell). All these required proficiency in Russian. Migration of ethnic Russians was also a *de facto* engine of Russification.

In many Soviet republics, therefore, the mass spread of the Russian language was to be expected with the infusion of ethnic Russians and other Russian-language speakers from without. However, the scale of this infusion into Belarus was more on a par with the least Russified Baltic state, Lithuania, than with, say, Latvia or Estonia, let alone Kazakhstan (see Table 1).

All Belarus watchers agree that there was never a Russian community in Belarus that would in any way detach and position itself against the cultural mainstream. There is none today, when in all the other post-Soviet states ethnic Russians have organised themselves into cultural associations and sometimes separate political parties. And yet the Russian language became nearly the sole communication medium

TABLE 1
ETHNIC RUSSIANS IN SOVIET REPUBLICS IN 1989

	<i>People (000)</i>	<i>Share in total population (%)</i>
Russia	119,866	81.5
Kazakhstan	6,228	37.8
Latvia	906	34.0
Estonia	475	30.3
Ukraine	11,356	22.1
Kyrgyzstan	917	21.5
Belarus	1,342	13.2
Moldova	562	13.0
Turkmenistan	334	9.5
Lithuania	344	9.4
Uzbekistan	1,653	8.3
Tajikistan	388	7.6
Georgia	341	6.3
Azerbaijan	392	5.6
Armenia	52	1.6

*Source: Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniya SSSR. Po dan-
nym vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1989 goda
(Moscow, Finansy i Statistika, 1991), pp. 5–19.*

in Belarus. Only Ukraine showed some semblance of similarity with Belarus in regard to the adoption of the Russian language. The parallel with Ukraine is natural, as only in Ukraine and Belarus are the languages of the titular nationalities very close to Russian. Upon a closer look, however, this parallel loses its edge when one realises how much more the Ukrainian language is embraced in Ukraine than Belarusian is in Belarus. Even in the most Russified eastern Ukraine (e.g. Donetsk, Kharkiv and Lugansk *oblasti*) Ukrainian is the language of everyday communication in small towns and the countryside.

Indeed, nowhere outside Russia proper has the Russian language gained such supremacy as in Belarus. Moreover, there have not been many autonomous republics (the second tier of ethnic autonomy in the USSR) in which Russian is as dominant among the people of the titular nationality as in Belarus, despite the fact that in many of them the titular nationality is not in the majority. Admittedly, there were cases (such as the Udmurt and Mordva republics in Russia), but very few indeed.

According to Zen'kovich, 'the extent of adoption of the Russian language [in Belarus] has no match among all the peoples of the Soviet Union'.⁸⁷ Zen'kovich maintained that 'Probably this is one of the most phenomenal and singular cases in history whereby the language of a non-indigenous minority has become the means of communication of all the population.... Although Russians account for 12% of the population, practically the entire Belarus' speaks their language'.⁸⁸ According to Zen'kovich, 'what the Belarusians demonstrated had no precedent in the entire world: the native population *en masse* solicited the authorities to excuse their children from studying their native language in secondary schools'.⁸⁹ So had Belarus been subjected

to a particularly ‘lethal’ type of Russification that targeted each and every native speaker?

Russification vs. Belarusification

It is believed that the forerunner of modern Belarusian was the official language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the fourteenth–seventeenth centuries. However, according to Karsky, the language that was actually used by the Grand Duchy’s upper strata and in court practice was significantly detached from the popular vernacular and contained many borrowings from other languages.⁹⁰ Anyway, there was at least a 300-year hiatus (beginning in the late 1600s) in the literary tradition that is now being cast as inherently Belarusian. Marples wrote that in Belarus ‘the national past could only be reconstructed through what can best be described as “historical leaps” over centuries of uncertain existence’.⁹¹ If anything, this apt formulation pertains to language above all.

The earliest literary works in Belarusian that appeared after that 300-year pause were the by-product of Polish rebellious nationalism, and the first Belarusian writers (e.g. Vincent Dunin-Marcinkewicz and Syrokomlya) were bilingual. They wrote in standard Polish and in the peasant vernacular of the Kresy, which to them was eastern Poland. These people were genuine populists who wanted to bridge the gap between themselves and their serfs, and for this reason they began to use the Belarusian vernacular of their serfs in their literary works.

Soon after the 1795 partition of Poland, Saint Petersburg academic philologists classed this vernacular as a Polish dialect.⁹² Only after two successive Polish rebellions (1830 and 1863), in which some valiant protectors of the Belarusian peasantry participated, did it dawn upon Russian scholars that the vernacular was in fact a dialect of Russian, not Polish.⁹³ Evidently, political contingencies of the time exerted demands not much different from those of today. The ‘truth’, however, was in the middle: the vernacular in fact formed the bridge between Russian and Polish, it was related and yet peripheral to both, but it retained distinctions of its own.

According to Bulakhov, the premier Belarusian linguist Yaukhim Karsky believed that ‘the Belarusian language had been refined in a more or less satisfactory way so it could be used for literary purposes only in the late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries’.⁹⁴ After the publication of the Belarusian grammar in 1918, it was six more years before attempts to propagate standards of a new literary language were undertaken. This took place in eastern Belarus, after it became a Soviet republic.

That attempt, however, was hindered by the fact that urban areas of Belarus had long been linguistically alien to their environs: Yiddish, Polish and Russian were spoken in those cities and towns. According to the 1897 census, the percentage of ethnic Belarusians in all towns with populations in excess of 2,000 residents was 16.1%, while in towns exceeding 50,000 residents it was only 7.3%.⁹⁵ At the time, Mogilev was the only sizable city in Belarus in which Belarusian was spoken by more than 20% of the population. In Vilna, which educated Belarusians considered the major centre of Belarusian culture prior to its incorporation into Poland in 1921, only 4.2% spoke Belarusian in 1897. In Minsk, which became the Belarusian capital, only 9.0% did. In all these and other ‘Belarusian’ cities Yiddish was the most widespread

language, in most cases followed by Russian and Polish. In Vilna, however, the order was different: Yiddish was spoken by 40%, Polish by 30.9% and Russian by 20.0%.⁹⁶ On the basis of the 1897 census, Guthier identified 'the extreme weakness of Belorussians in the free professions and middle class. At the turn of the century, Belorussians lacked the educated and articulate personnel as well as the financial resources to sustain an effective national propaganda effort.'⁹⁷

The situation began to change when Belarusians obtained their own republic. According to Zen'kovich, Soviet Belarus experienced three Belarusification campaigns, that is, organised attempts to implant the Belarusian language into public life and mass media: in the 1920s, in the early 1950s and in 1988–94.⁹⁸ To be sure, Belarusian has never ceased to be an officially recognised language of Belarus since 1918, mass publishing in Belarusian began soon after the 1917 revolution, and, as was shown above, most ethnic Belarusians considered it to be their native language when filling out census forms. Those three campaigns were the crusades to make Belarusian the *de facto* language of communication in Belarus. However, none of them made significant headway.

The first of the campaigns has been glorified in the annals of the Belarusian national movement as the golden age of Belarusian nationalism. Indeed, from 1921 to 1929 the entire Belarusian national elite gathered in Minsk. In large part composed of people with Catholic backgrounds, they were lured from Western Belarus, which in 1921–39 was part of Poland. The enthusiasm for Belarusification was genuine among liberal arts professionals and local party leaders. Belarusian was declared the language of official gatherings and all sorts of official paperwork. However, the starting point of Belarusification was exceedingly low in all the major cities, and newcomers to these cities continued to be linguistically assimilated into the majority. With the removal of restrictions imposed on Jews in terms of settlement, occupation and education, younger Jews abandoned Yiddish *en masse* and switched—to Russian.⁹⁹ Thus the Russian-language component of the urban population became overwhelming. At the same time, the popular image of Belarusian as a peasant vernacular lingered.

By 1926, owing to accelerated migration from the countryside, the share of ethnic Belarusians in the urban population had grown to 39.3%. At the same time, Jews accounted for 40.1% and Russians for 15.6%. Yet only 20% of the urban residents listed Belarusian as their native language in 1926, whereas in the countryside 76.9% did.¹⁰⁰ Note that 20% of Belarusian speakers versus 39% of ethnic Belarusian urban dwellers is a clear indication that the linguistic assimilation of Belarusians in cities occurred rapidly even during the heyday of the Belarusian national movement. Guthier stresses that 'the decline of the Belorussian language reflects language switches among Belorussians, not a large influx of non-Belorussians'.¹⁰¹ He also indicates a 'pattern of denationalisation for Belorussians in districts contiguous to Russian ethnic areas'¹⁰²—a clear sign of contagious diffusion.¹⁰³ In Vitebsk only 4.7% of the population spoke Belarusian in 1926, and in Gomel (Homel) only 0.6% did. At the same time, Minsk, the newly designated Belarusian national centre, led with an impressive 22.9%.¹⁰⁴ In Minsk all the multi-layered administration was required to use Belarusian, and the Communist Party itself led the Belarusification campaign.

Although in 1913 no Belarusian-language newspapers existed in eastern Belarus, in 1928 there were 30.¹⁰⁵

Two events deserve additional attention in conjunction with the first Belarusification campaign. These are the resistance to Belarusification staged in Vitebsk and Gomel, and the 1933 Belarusian language reform. If what Vakar referred to as ‘forcible Belorussification’¹⁰⁶ could be expected to face resistance anywhere, it was in the easternmost part of the republic and in the south. Not only did extremely few people in Gomel and Vitebsk name Belarusian as their native language, but rural villagers themselves spoke dialects that were close to Russian and occasionally (in Gomel province) Ukrainian. At the same time, the standard Belarusian that was implanted into schooling and official life had been based on the Polonised west-Belarusian dialects.¹⁰⁷

The 1933 reform then came as a natural backlash. Of course, it was a typical Soviet campaign; it resorted to heavy-handed ideological ammunition and drumbeat irrelevant to the actual purpose of reform.¹⁰⁸ However, applying the curate’s egg principle introduced into Belarusian studies by Marples, not every Soviet campaign was ill-advised or irrelevant in its entirety. One has to look beyond the façade to uncover its true emphasis and goals. It is noteworthy that the language reform in question was conducted under the aegis of ‘weeding out Polonisms’, which *Pravda* made clear in its 1934 article devoted to the Belarusian language reform.¹⁰⁹ When modern Belarusian nationalists claim that the 1933 reform pursued the goal of making Belarusian closer to Russian, they are on target. However, they usually fail to mention that the mainstream vernaculars of eastern Belarus themselves were naturally closer to Russian than the west Belarusian dialects that had once inspired Tarashkevich and a few other Vilna-based promoters of the Belarusian national cause. The reform thus pursued the goal of making standard Belarusian more acceptable to the actual speakers. According to Shushkevich, the reform was justifiable and produced the language norm which was subsequently used by many talented authors, including Vasil Bykau.¹¹⁰ Note that at the time of the reform West Belarus belonged to a hostile foreign country. Of course, reforming a language that had been codified only recently and was still used by a small minority of urban residents did not boost respect for that language. For decades thereafter, a joke made the rounds in Minsk that ‘*Praletaryi usekh stran zluchaitseysya!*’ gave way to ‘*Praletaryi usekh stran ednaitseysya!*’,¹¹¹ because ‘*zluchaitseysya*’ sounded too close to ‘*sluchka*’ (coupling). In fact it was a switch from a more Polonised version (close to Polish ‘*łączyć się*’) to a more Russified one (close to Russian ‘*soedinyaites’*’).

In the meantime, in western Belarus the official stance of the Polish authorities in regard to Belarusian was mixed, and it worsened since communist propaganda from across the border incited insurgence. Described in great detail by Vakar¹¹² and Lubachko,¹¹³ the situation was grim, and the Belarusian national cause did not have good prospects under the exceedingly unitarian and assimilatory policies of the Polish administrations.

Comparing Polish and Soviet attitudes toward Belarusian national aspirations in the 1930s, Vakar observed that whereas repressive Polish authorities were for the most part after symbols of Belarusian cultural separateness, repressive Soviet authorities were more after the people who promoted those symbols. Indeed, beginning in 1929,

the Minsk-based Belarusian cultural elite were dealt a severe blow when many found themselves behind bars and many lost their lives for alleged bourgeois nationalism and espionage for Poland. The Belarusian intellectual elite for the most part previously lived in Vilna under Polish rule, and so leveling this charge against them was handy for the bloodthirsty Cheka-NKVD. Vicious purges were undertaken at the time in all the other Soviet republics, not excluding Stalin's native Georgia. Arlou believes that these purges were especially devastating in Belarus and Ukraine. Out of approximately 2,000 Soviet authors purged, as many as 400 represented Belarus—a disproportionately high number.¹¹⁴

Characteristically, the intellectuals from every former Soviet republic invariably argue that their respective losses were most devastating. As the scale of earthquake damage depends not only on the quake's force (as measured on the Richter scale) but also on the construction design and material subjected to destruction, so nascent nationalism was to suffer more damage than old and seasoned nationalism. The Belarusian national movement thus entered the war in much weakened shape. Yet the Belarusification campaign did not cease. 'Even after a purge began of the Belorussian nationalist elite in 1929, the Soviet authorities replaced the old leadership with younger Belorussians. Such trappings of cultural nationalism as Belorussian language in the schools, administration, and literature continued to receive official support'.¹¹⁵ Whereas in 1928 there were 30 Belarusian-language newspapers, in 1938, that is, after much of the national elite was purged, there were 149.¹¹⁶

After the devastating war¹¹⁷ ethnic Belarusians quickly became the majority in all the cities of Belarus, initially because of the drastic reduction in the number of Jews and later also because of the greatly accelerated rural migration. Guthier, who followed the language-related statistics down to the 1970 census, writes that 'the tendency of mobilised Belorussians to adopt the Russian language was reversed'.¹¹⁸ Yet this conclusion was based on the census data of 1959 and 1970, which bear no comparison to the 1897 and 1926 censuses in terms of detail and quality of data. Also, as was shown above, all the post-war Belarus censuses offer statistics of language use that cannot be corroborated by field observations.

My own observations from the 1960s on have led me to believe that mass adoption of the Russian language by urban residents in Belarus (and later by rural dwellers as well) was never reversed: rural migrants in cities preferred to send their children to Russian-language schools and adopted Russian themselves as their language of everyday communication. In the streets of Minsk of the 1970s and much of the 1980s it was practically impossible to encounter a conversation conducted in standard Belarusian. The prestige of the language remained low.

Despite using patently flawed post-war census data on language. Guthier was able to draw the conclusion that 'If the pattern of assimilation continues, then the ultimate result will be a national elite without a constituency'¹¹⁹—a terse formula encapsulating the situation in the Belarusian national movement for an extended period of time.

However, long before this grave prediction was made, one more attempt to implant the Belarusian language was undertaken through the Communist Party apparatus. In 1953 Mikhail Zimyanin, an ethnic Belarusian and an appointee of Beria, was supposed to replace a Russian, Patolichev. A survey with a critical assessment of the linguistic situation in Belarus was prepared, and Zimyanin was dispatched from

Moscow. He delivered a Belarusian-language speech at the June 1953 Belarusian Central Committee meeting, something that had not been done since the mid-1930s. Also, a detailed appraisal highly critical of local and Minsk-based party authorities' attitude to the Belarusian language was issued. However, the fall of Beria thwarted Zimyanin's appointment, and he was recalled to Moscow.¹²⁰ Under no subsequent Belarusian leader—Kirill Mazurov, Tikhon Kiselev, Petr Masherov or Efrem Sokolov—did Belarusian become the working language of the Belarusian authorities, although some modest attempts were undertaken, notably under Mazurov.

With the passage of time, however, Belarusification was becoming more and more problematic, as urban populations not versed in standard Belarusian firmly held on to Russian. The urban population of Belarus, however, grew, for the most part because of rural migration. Minsk experienced such explosive growth that the 'Minsk phenomenon' became a set phrase in Soviet social science writing. From 1959 to 1973 Minsk grew by 107%.¹²¹ Yet the pre-revolutionary trend wherein ethnic Belarusians embraced Russian upon entering a city continued, despite the fact that, in stark contrast to pre-revolutionary times, after World War II ethnic Belarusians formed the majority of urban residents. That Russian was embraced by people of all walks of life and without any major inflow of ethnic Russians to the republic indicates that the process was spontaneous. A similar process of Belarusian being replaced by Polish in northeastern Poland is described by Sadowski.¹²²

The above may help explain why the major urban cores never emerged as genuine innovative centres with respect to the Belarusian language, and why hierarchical diffusion¹²³ of standard Belarusian never gained momentum. Technically speaking, it proceeded, as Belarusian-language textbooks continued to be published and disseminated and rural elementary school teachers received appropriate guidelines and instructions at teachers' conferences. Yet this was a peculiar situation, since Belarusification was not in concert with the general flow of the modernisation of Belarusian life. Whereas the source of the former was Minsk, the source of the latter was Moscow, and it bore a distinctive Russian stamp. As Zaprudnik stated in the mid-1970s, in Belarus 'urbanisation also means Russification.... Thus slowness to modernise may help preserve national identity'.¹²⁴ The same link between modernisation and Russification in Belarus was later considered by Clem.¹²⁵

Modernisation dramatically accelerated after the war, and in its wake ethnic Belarusians for the first time emerged as the ethnic majority among urban residents. However, Minsk persistently exposed itself to the Belarusian countryside as more of an intermediary in transmitting Moscow-style innovations than as a wellspring of Belarusian nationalism. As Arlou pointed out, even recipes for Belarusian cakes had to be approved in Moscow.¹²⁶ A Russified image of Minsk evolved, ill-suited to sustaining and developing standard Belarusian not only among urban but among rural dwellers as well. The absence of a mature national core has been among the inherent weaknesses of the Belarusian national movement. Ironically, the unprecedented demographic and industrial ascendancy of Minsk after the war only exacerbated this weakness.

An additional yet indirect argument in favour of spontaneous Russification is reported by Zen'kovich. Under Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko, ethnic Russians were appointed as second secretaries of the republics' party

central committees. The second secretary was a kind of a watchdog responsible for preventing excessive influences of ethnic nationalism on local party policies. Belarus was the only republic that avoided this after Khrushchev. Only one 'newcomer' was dispatched to Belarus in this capacity, V. Brovnikov, but he was an ethnic Belarusian. Ironically, only under Gorbachev was an ethnic Russian second secretary assigned to Minsk.¹²⁷ However, by that time the linguistic situation in Belarus had long assumed its current shape.

Zen'kovich also shows that in the 1980s all Belarusian-language publications were subsidised by the state and yet could not sell. The only exception to the rule was the magazine *Rabotnitsa i selyanka*, which used to sell one million copies because of its free-of-charge appendix devoted to home dressmaking. The following excerpts from Zen'kovich are revealing:

The remaining periodicals in Belarusian barely reached circulations of 40,000–50,000 copies and were primarily spread through the system of state-paid subscription, so they ended up in state libraries, rural 'palaces of culture', offices of political education and 'red corners' of livestock farms. Even such a newspaper as *Zvyazda*, an organ of the Communist Party of Belarus ..., the newspaper founded before the 1917 revolution, printed barely 60,000–70,000 copies during its heyday. And this despite the indefatigable control of the Central Committee over its spread! The Russian-language counterpart of *Zvyazda*, the newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, also an organ of the Central Committee, had a circulation of 200,000 copies in the 1980s.

An even more significant gap existed in circulation of youth-oriented print media. Whereas [the Belarusian language] *Chyrvonaya zmena* sold barely 40,000 copies and *Pianer Belarusi* 50,000–60,000, the Russian-language *Znamya yunosti* sold 800,000 copies and *Zor'ka* almost 1,500,000 copies.

The same was typical for literary periodicals for adults. The principal magazine of the Belarusian writers' union, *Polymya*, published in Belarusian, had a circulation of 6,000–8,000 copies. However, its Russian-language counterpart, *Neman* [also an organ of the same union], sold 200,000 copies.... The situation in book publishing was even more paradoxical. Bookstores were unable to sell even a small number of copies of the highly talented novels by Vasil Bykov published in Belarusian. But no sooner had the same novels been translated into Russian than even 200,000 copies were instantaneously grabbed by avid buyers.

In order to fill the auditorium of the Yanka Kupala Belarusian Drama Theatre, whose plays are in Belarusian, the authorities recruited soldiers, cadets and college students [who were assigned to attend certain plays]. Even the names of reputable playwrights did not help.... The tickets for the same plays in Russian [staged in the Russian Drama Theatre] were sold out for every performance, and people stood in long queues to buy them.¹²⁸

Contrary to many nationalists' pronouncements, an earnest effort was undertaken by the Soviet Belarusian authorities to sustain the Belarusian language in the public domain. The effort was far above and beyond actual and spontaneous demand for the language as the means of daily communication. Zen'kovich attributes this inadequate demand to the fact that Belarusian has been traditionally viewed as a peasant, rustic language. It is interesting to note that exactly the same attitude once applied to Lithuanian, Czech and Slovak,¹²⁹ to name just a few, and yet the respective national movements overcame this hurdle.

Language prestige and changes in the 1990s

In 1988 Adam Maldis, Doctor of Philology, who in the 1990s became one of the spiritual leaders of the Belarusian opposition, offered a suggestive account of the situation:

A lot has been written about our national nihilism.... Our national woes began as early as the second half of the sixteenth century (while prior to that everything had been more or less fine ...) when in pursuit of privileges the feudal aristocracy betrayed the people and began to adopt the Polish language and Polish culture. By the end of the seventeenth century the ancient Belarusian language, which had been the official language in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, had been supplanted from officialdom and confined to home usage. Later, when Belarusian lands were incorporated into tsarist Russia, the upper strata switched to Russian with equal ease and in pursuit of the same privileges. As a result, by the beginning of the twentieth century Belarusians had not evolved as a nation.... Prompted by prestige considerations, our ancestors renounced the Belarusian language just as we ourselves later did.¹³⁰

Admittedly, the above confession does not entirely undermine the Russification thesis. Yet it weakens it quite a bit. At the very least Russification sheds the aura of compulsion and begins to look like an all but consensual act. After all, many ethnic groups of the Russian Empire effectively retained their respective languages despite the fact that similar prestige considerations applied to them.

Until people resume speaking in Belarusian in their homes, in their families, until speaking the language becomes effortless and fluent, until then neither day care nor secondary school nor a university nor, eventually, the man-in-the-street will adopt the language. However, families will begin to talk Belarusian only when it is viewed as prestigious and necessary—for conversing at work or school or for making a speech at a Supreme Soviet session or a party conference.¹³¹

As it appears from Maldis' article, everything hinges on prestige. It once nudged people to renounce their language, and it may now nudge them to readopt it. In the meantime, the situation looks grim:

Urban schools lack teachers of Belarusian, while 'many of those who teach Belarusian in the countryside do not know the language well enough themselves and are not fluent in colloquial Belarusian'.¹³²

Note that this statement is about the countryside, the depository of folk culture in every old-world country.

The Council of Ministers decided to promote the teaching of the Belarusian language. The minutes of this decision described the situation as unsatisfactory, and [the ministers] set out to conduct very thoughtful changes. Yet even this very document was written and accepted in Russian.... While issuing appeals to rectify the language situation and to adopt bilingualism, we remain unilingual. This reminds me of a physician who is taking the trouble to persuade his patient to throw away cigarettes while at the same time inhaling and enjoying tantalising tobacco smoke.... When, however, the Belarusian language is heard once in a while, as at writers' meetings, the audience all but hoots at every language mistake by the orator.¹³³

The latter confession sounds awkward: it appears that the language had retreated to the recesses of memory to such an extent that even purists question each other's command of it. Maldis concludes that one ought to 'muster one's own will and cross the psychological barrier.... This is not going to be easy at first, and a certain discomfort may even emerge'.¹³⁴ If, however, Belarusians do not overcome this discomfort, then in the twenty-first century they 'will be short of geniuses. These will emerge but will belong to different cultures, as it was with Mickiewicz and Moniuszko'.¹³⁵

In the late 1980s fresh winds from Moscow stirred nationally conscious people in Belarus to action. As at other crucial junctures in the region's history, the stimulus for change came from outside. Moreover, Belarus' Communist Party leadership was one of the most resistant to democratic change in the entire Soviet Union. Ales Adamovich, a prominent Belarusian writer who in the 1980s relocated to Moscow, labeled his homeland the Vendee of *perestroika*. As Motyl wrote in his characteristically titled 1987 book *Will the non-Russians rebel?*, 'The Belorussian contribution to dissent has been virtually nonexistent'.¹³⁶

However, change emanating from Moscow was irresistible, and several local initiatives developed in response to it. Thus the TBM emerged in 1989 and soon began to publish the weekly *Nasha slova*. After the Soviet Union's break-up and the emergence of Belarus as an independent country, Belarusian was proclaimed the only official language of the republic of Belarus (1992). Following this, a significant increase in the number of Belarusian language classes was recorded. The TBM and the Belarusian Popular Front kept the issue of the dismal situation of Belarusian in public focus. Several schools with Belarusian as the only language of instruction were opened; the city of Lida in northwestern Belarus played the pioneering role. In the early 1990s it was still rare but not entirely uncommon to come across Minsk intellectuals conversing in Belarusian in public.

However, after Lukashenka's resounding electoral victory in 1994, a 1995 referendum helped reintroduce Russian as a second official language of Belarus. As already mentioned, the idea was backed by a staggering 83.3% of voters. An associate of the Belarusian broadcasting service of Radio Liberty, Yuri Drakokhrust, who could hardly be suspected of supporting the official status of the Russian language in Belarus, stated that 'in the 1995 referendum, the question of the national status of Russian was a kind of locomotive [the contextual meaning of this word is between a tie-breaker and a sure bet] that pulled through positive responses to all the other questions as well'.¹³⁷ (Other questions, of course, addressed changes in the state flag and seal, economic integration with Russia, and changes in the constitution that would allow the president to suspend the parliament.) Although the popular vote of 1995 legitimised the actual linguistic situation, the referendum marked the beginning of the officially sponsored reversal of 1991–95 achievements in the language sphere. In the entire country, the number of first-year elementary school pupils who studied Belarusian (as a language course, not as the language of instruction in other courses) dropped from 75% in 1993–94 to 28% in 1997–98, and from 58% to 4.7% in the city of Minsk.¹³⁸ No discontent was recorded, so it is debatable whether cutting back on Belarusian in schools was initiated from above despite parents' wishes or whether they had been upset by the enforced introduction of Belarusian in the first place,

so that the reversal was actually more in line with their wishes. No clear evidence exists, although the above-cited events in Ashmiany, where parents actually demanded that their children be switched to Russian classes, imply that posing the question is legitimate.

The number of books published in Belarusian has been declining since the 1995 referendum. In 1999 alone it declined by 19.7% compared with the previous year. Altogether, 647 titles were printed in Belarusian in 1999, which account for 10.6% of the total number of books and 8% of the total print order. In comparison, 5,161 titles were printed in Russian. On a sobering note, the Belarusian government subsidised 75% of the cost of the Belarusian-language books, while Russian titles were financially self-supporting—a clear indication of low demand for books in Belarusian.¹³⁹

Some nationally conscious Belarusians experimented with speaking Belarusian in public settings, notably in the local militia (police) headquarters upon being apprehended for their participation in political rallies or for ‘politically neutral’ violations. (Militiamen are in most cases fresh recruits from the countryside or first generation urban residents, that is, people who may be expected to have been more exposed to Belarusian than most life-long residents of Minsk.) Such experiments, largely unsuccessful, were then publicised to attract attention to the extinction of the Belarusian language. Typically, local police urged the detainees to speak ‘the normal language’, that is, Russian. Arlou related such an episode. His friend and colleague, a Belarusian historian from Poland named Yauhen Miranovich, came to Minsk and addressed a local militiaman in Belarusian, asking for directions. The militiaman immediately called for help, and then both militiamen demanded that Miranovich show his internal passport. Realising that he was a foreigner, both were disappointed: ‘Oh, you are a Pole’, exclaimed one of them, ‘And we thought you were from the BPF’.¹⁴⁰ The BPF (Belarusian Popular Front) is believed to be the most radical wing of Belarusian opposition. The episode clearly shows that speaking Belarusian—in the capital of Belarus—is a political statement.

The nationally conscious capitalise on this knee-jerk reaction of the authorities to the Belarusian language: as long as a ‘*beenefovets*’ (a member of the BPF) is a bad guy in the eyes of Lukashenka henchmen, he is a good guy for the opposition-minded. As a result, speaking Belarusian has become chic among some Minsk intellectuals. Arlou put it this way. ‘I remember when I was a college student, speaking Belarusian was perceived as a hallmark of provincialism at best and of being an uneducated bumpkin at worst. However, with the passage of time, such a perception changed: today, speaking Belarusian is perceived as a hallmark of being educated, of access to the elite and, no doubt, in the current political situation, also as a stamp of belonging to the opposition’.¹⁴¹ Ironically, it is the Lukashenka-led policy that deserves credit for such a change.

The likelihood that this new trend will affect the linguistic situation requires additional research, but my feeling is that it has not yet generated many converts outside the Minsk-based liberal arts elite. What is more, once a peasant language, Belarusian is no longer known by the rank and file, peasants and factory workers alike, who mostly speak *trasyanka*. Belarusian nationalist pronouncements on lan-

guage have actually become angrier, more high-pitched and acrimonious. Here is one example from Nil Gilevich, a Belarusian poet and former leader of the TBM:

It approaches unheard of impudence and public insult of the entire people: in the newspapers that are published in the sovereign nation of Belarus, materials appear that are overtly directed against the Belarusian national idea and the Belarusian state. These materials not only appeal to do away with our state and to incorporate it in the Russian Federation but overtly proclaim that there has not been any separate Belarusian ethnicity, Belarusian people, and that a distinct Belarusian language neither did nor does exist. What are these scandalous pronouncements about! A brazen statement that ‘you don’t exist’ is thrown in the face of a ten million strong Slavic people, accompanied with public insult and ignominy, and there is nobody around to defend this people: the state does not feel or see, the state does not want to call the outrageous enemies of Belarusianness to order and to take them to court. Where would you find a government that would tolerate something like this? Nowhere but in one single country called Belarus. Allow me to ask then what is the matter with such a country? And what statesmen rule it?¹⁴²

On 25 May 2001 the TBM adopted the ‘Declaration on the Belarusian Language’. It includes some articles that would hardly be put forward on behalf of any other existing language in Europe because they would be construed as statements of the obvious. The following are examples:

Article 3: The Belarusian language has never been part or a dialect of any other language. It was developed by the Belarusian ethnicity, within it and in accordance with its needs.

Article 9: The Belarusian language exists in written and oral, literary and dialect forms. Written Belarusian has its unique grammar—the set of norms and rules ensuring the closest fit between written and oral communication.

Article 10: The vocabulary of the Belarusian language ensures the possibility for high quality transfer of any information from any other language.¹⁴³

On reading such avowedly defensive statements, someone with no prejudice whatsoever against Belarusian may become prejudiced, and someone who had been biased from the outset may become even more biased. Also hindering the cause of Belarusification is the ongoing debate between the proponents of undoing the language reform of 1933 and its defenders.¹⁴⁴ It is hard to concur with Irina Khalip, who maintains that the presence of debate serves further development of the Belarusian language while the absence of debate spells stagnation.¹⁴⁵ Given the small number of Belarusian speakers, this debate may actually do more harm than good for the cause of gaining new converts to the Belarusian national movement.

Once in a while, a voice of dissent is heard from within the circle of Belarusian language promoters. *Nasha slova* published a critical article by Siarhei Zaprudsky about the dominance of a romantic–utopian approach to the cause over a pragmatic–realist approach. According to the latter, the goal of romantics—to ensure dominance of the Belarusian language in Belarus—is unlikely ever to be achieved; therefore, it is better to set more moderate but achievable goals, such as, for example, promoting Belarusian to the status of Welsh in Wales. Because Welsh is arguably more alive and well in Wales than Belarusian in Belarus, the latter goal may seem to be worth pursuing. However, the indignant riposte by Gilevich accused Zaprudsky of succumb-

ing to the treacherous and defeatist mood. The postscript to this riposte reads: 'Some readers may say to me: you were offended that Welsh is presented to us Belarusians as an example. May it be known to you then that both the Welsh people and their language will endure, if only as a form of cultural autonomy, because they live under England, while we Belarusians and our language will perish because we will be living under Russia. Russia is not England'.¹⁴⁶

Two themes show up in this statement. One is the traditional Belarusian nationalists' allusion that Belarusian was and is somehow sidelined by force and/or some virulent conspiracy. The other motif contains the images of Russia and the West that Belarusian nationalists fail to instil in the minds of fellow countrymen, and the attendant belief (which I find particularly naïve) that the English language environment is any less aggressive than the Russian.

The most important change that has taken place, however, and one that the nationally conscious must be given credit for, is vastly enhanced public awareness of the linguistic situation. The nationally conscious have succeeded in instilling the feeling of guilt in the minds of intellectuals, and encouraging their personal responsibility for changing this situation. However, when asked whether they believed that spreading Belarusian was their moral obligation, only 28% of the respondents in my pilot survey answered in the affirmative, while 46.6% rejected the idea and 25% had no definite answer. Note that the respondents are secondary school teachers! This result leads me to the idea that, successful or not, instilling guilt has an ambiguous outcome at best. It creates a psychological predicament of a crossroads type, out of which there are normally two ways, not just one.

The first way would indeed be to 'muster one's will and cross a psychological barrier', as Maldis urged in 1988. The alternative way of easing the sense of guilt is to 'kill the messenger'. In Belarus there seem to be many people for whom the psychological discomfort of switching to Belarusian is too high a price to pay for disposing of their alleged moral guilt. These people feel just as angry as the nationalists themselves. For them, switching to the language they simply do not know well is not worth a try. Their deep-seated misgiving is that sending their children to a Belarusian-language school would render them functionally illiterate in both Russian and Belarusian. This misgiving would be easy to dispel if the two languages were not as close to each other as Russian and Belarusian are. Indeed, mastering English in no way inhibits one's command of Russian and vice versa. However, when it comes to languages where the entire grammar structures and a large part of the vocabularies are very much alike, confusion becomes a real problem. Also, many of those silently protesting against a switch to Belarusian consider themselves to be part of a broader information space and do not want to narrow it down for their offspring either. This information space is aggressive; it employs Russian and asserts itself not only through conventional media but also (and to an ever increasing extent) through the worldwide web. For example, all the Moscow-based newspapers have their free-access sites, so one no longer needs to be a conventional subscriber. The less than successful showing of Belarusian nationalist causes in the polls¹⁴⁷ may attest to the fact that 'killing the messenger' continues to be a popular reaction.

Yet some trends of the opposite nature make themselves felt as well. According to Trusau, the TBM has 10,500 members and works hard to spread the language. In

Trusau's view, 90% of Belarus' entire population understands the language, and should the country's leaders use it publicly, the people would follow suit. In the meantime, the society tries to take advantage of what little the current leadership has done for the cause of the language. For example, in 1995 Lukashenka signed a decree that Belarusian-language classes were to be opened in each institution of higher learning, so the TBM now writes letters to each institution asking how it complies with the government ruling. 'The Belarusian', says Trusau, 'doesn't speak Belarusian, he keeps silence the Belarusian way, but when a proper leader comes along, the Belarusian will start talking'.¹⁴⁸

Vadim Glinnik said that whereas in the late 1980s he knew personally each and every resident of Minsk who spoke Belarusian in his or her everyday setting, today they are in the tens of thousands.¹⁴⁹ Uladzimir Arlou, a native of Polatsk (better known as Polotsk), has two sons born in 1977 and 1982. Arlou's family had long switched to Belarusian, and his first son was exposed to it from his early childhood. When he was about 6 years old, he asked his father why his family and their closest friends spoke a language that was different from that spoken everywhere else in their town. However, when the boy was 11 he once gladly announced upon coming home from school: 'Daddy, I have just run into some people talking in Belarusian, and they are not our friends!' Arlou was unable to give his first son education in Belarusian, but his younger son attended only Belarusian-language classes from the very beginning—a clear sign of progress. Arlou professes no quick solution to the problem even if Belarusian-speakers come to power. However, he believes that a kind of beachhead is already there with many intelligent people doing their work quietly and shaping up the 'Belarus archipelago', the phrase used by the historian Valentyn Akudinovich. According to Arlou, the national existence of an independent Belarus will sooner or later generate the need for the Belarusian language.¹⁵⁰

Irina Khalip, an ardent defender of the Belarusian national cause who said that she would love her yet to be born children to be Belarusian speakers, told me that whereas in the past salespeople in urban food stores would either frown if you addressed them in Belarusian or respond in Russian, now they are more likely to switch to Belarusian themselves.¹⁵¹

Whether cautious optimism is warranted remains to be seen. It follows from the annals of successful national movements that an impressive grassroots following ought to predate legislative initiatives. The mistake of the Belarusian national movement has been its attempt to reverse this order. Because of abrupt, forceful and top-down introduction of Belarusian in 1992, the backlash of 1995, which occurred under Lukashenka when Russian was reintroduced as another official language, was hardly avoidable. Ironically, this reaction would have been even more imminent had a genuinely democratic (that is, responding to people's needs) regime been in place in Minsk.

Spatial continuity hypothesis

What is the taproot of the current linguistic situation? According to Maldis' candid pronouncements, forcible Russification does not sound likely. Maybe the docility of high social strata lured by prestige is at fault? Perhaps it is. However, the upper strata

in nearby Lithuania were once totally Polonised, while the educated Czechs were equally perfectly Germanised, and Norwegians in higher social strata once switched entirely to Danish, which is said to be as close to Norwegian as Belarusian is to Russian. And yet Czech, Lithuanian and Norwegian staged a spectacular return. Slovaks succeeded in opposing both Czech and Hungarian influences, as West Ukrainians did with Polish and Russian.

Indeed, in large measure the issue of the native language is closely linked to (although not inseparable from) that of evolving national identity. The second article of this series will touch on national identity. However, the linguistic situation is not always the effect, while national awakening is not invariably the cause. Their relationship is reciprocal, if only to some extent, and the linguistic situation may have its own inherent dynamics. These dynamics have a vivid spatial dimension.

Just as a suburb cannot be conceptualised without a sizable city nearby, of which the suburb is an outgrowth, likewise linguistic assimilation cannot be contemplated without careful prior consideration of the allegedly pristine and homogeneous linguistic picture of the past, the picture that underwent change resented by the nationalist thinkers. The forcible Russification thesis is vulnerable also (in addition to the reasoning provided above) because there are justifiable doubts whether the past matches the image shaped by the politically agitated mind.

Any attempt to address the issue of linguistic change encounters a psychological hurdle. Languages are often thought of as applying to spatially discrete entities or environments with clear-cut borders of respective 'ethnographic territories'. For example, my interviewees (Trusau and Arlou most emphatically) stated that there had been no mass migrations of ethnic Poles to Belarus. These assertions were meant to make the point that residents of Belarus who claim to be Poles are 'in reality' Belarusians.¹⁵² Such reasoning is a cross between a spatially discrete image of neighbouring nations (even though the time that has elapsed since the current dividing line was established between them is less than the current life expectancy of the average Belarusian) and a genealogical approach to ethnicity, according to which ethnicity is present once and for all. That one can become a Pole without having migrated across *today's* border—by simply embracing the Polish national symbols and language as one's own—is not considered to be a fair assumption. Moreover, such 'conversion' is construed as a kind of artifice, attributed to the proselytising activity of the Catholic Church. This accusation may in fact be appropriate, but so is the observation that ethnic allegiances *always* result from somebody's agitation. The notion of one's clear-cut ethnographic territory is a mythological construct, if only because the peripheral parts of this territory are invariably contested. That said, however, what can be made of the undeniable fact that today's Germany overwhelmingly speaks German, Poland speaks Polish and Russia Russian? If these accomplished facts are a universal norm, Belarus must speak Belarusian by default; and if it does not, something anomalous (like 'mass psychological marasmus') is suspected, which ought to be undone.

Sharp linguistic discontinuities do not immediately result from the imposition of national borders, but rather from a long experience of ethno-national consolidation. The history of initially multilingual France is perhaps the best researched case.¹⁵³ Sharp linguistic gradients also result from ethnic intrusions of the past. For example,

the national language of Hungary has little in common with the languages of all the surrounding ethnic groups—Slovaks, Ukrainians, Romanians, Austrians and Serbs—which became titular groups of respective neighbouring nations. Sharper gradients are also quite real at the junction between the autochthonous sub-families of a single language family, as between Slavic and Germanic or between Germanic and Romance sub-families. But even here there are transitional areas such as Alsace, Silesia or South Tyrol.

Within the domains of a linguistic sub-family, clear-cut borders that set individual languages apart are secondary and derivative. They develop only in the wake of language codification (and the ensuing standardisation) that has been directed by the national states through their public education systems. Such standardisation is usually traceable and well documented. When standard languages are promoted by national systems of public education, the initially minor language dissimilarity between adjacent communities is gradually transformed into a sharp division if and when a national border appears to set these communities apart.

The would-be domain of standard Belarusian is located within a plain devoid of formidable topographical barriers. The locus of this domain is between the innovative centres or core areas of the two related Slavic languages, Russian and Polish, whose literary traditions have long dominated well-established urban cores of the respective countries. The physical distance between Minsk and Warsaw is just 500 km, and between Minsk and Moscow 700 km. All three, Moscow, Minsk and Warsaw, lie along one of the major communication axes of Europe, long the axis of invasions (French, German, Polish and Russian) and currently the locus of an important rail and road connection. Shushkevich referred to this area as a *prokhodnoi dvor*,¹⁵⁴ a Russian phrase for excessively porous social space (literally, a yard with a through passage.)

Both Russians and Poles tried their best to expand their domains at the expense of each other, including early seventeenth century Polish forays deep into the interior of Russia and the partitions of Poland with Russia accruing much of Poland, including Warsaw. This was for a long time an interaction of mutually hostile linguistic cousins. Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century the only population group in the indistinct Polish–Russian borderland that claimed separate identity from both Russians and Poles was composed of Yiddish-speaking Jews.

Polish of literary norm managed to survive the period of Poland's partitions, apparently because Poles had developed an advanced and sophisticated literary tradition and a strong sense of ethnic bonds nurtured and maintained by the Catholic Church.

Belarusian, on the other hand, existed only in dialect forms up until the early twentieth century. It was spoken in rural communities between Russia and Poland proper, within the area stretching from Bialystok in the west to Smolensk in the east, as portrayed by Karsky's 1903 map of Belarusian vernaculars.¹⁵⁵ Karsky's map is very informative: alongside the common Slavic sub-stratum, the eastern Belarusian dialects used more Russicisms, while western Belarusian dialects used a fair number of Polonisms.¹⁵⁶ In the 1963 *Atlas of the Belarusian Dialects* one can find dozens of maps effectively proving this point. Each map portrays the geographical spread of a frequently used word (such as the equivalents for *a floor, a wedding, a handkerchief, a smith, a cloud, a duck, manure, potato, a harvested field, to sing* etc.) or phrase. To

anybody versed in Russian and Polish, the northeast–southwest alignment of the Belarusian vernaculars would show up as the most salient feature of the regional linguistic geography. To be sure, this alignment is not the only component of the Belarusian vernacular space, as southern dialects spoken in Polesie are transitional to Ukrainian.

The Belarusian vernaculars, peripheral to both Russian and Polish, did not dominate any sizable urban community, and no attempt to introduce a standard language on the basis of these vernaculars was undertaken until the beginning of the twentieth century. Given this situation and the indistinct linguistic frontiers as well, it is understandable why the domain of Belarusian shown by Karsky as the Belarusian ‘ethnographic territory’ was encroached on as Russian and Polish expanded their domains around Smolensk and Bialystok respectively.

Historically, the introduction and propagation of any standard language is accelerated by urbanisation and both vertical and horizontal mobility *within* nations. Modernisation thus assists language standardisation. When only a tiny proportion of people lived in cities, while rural communities were relatively immobile and engaged in contact only with their immediate neighbours, linguistic homogenisation proceeded slowly even when national authorities tried to enforce it within their respective domains. If, in addition, national borders changed repeatedly, this process could be extended in time even more, and transitional dialects preserved. In this case Belarus is a model case: it experienced frequent changes of borders, and until recently it was overwhelmingly rural.¹⁵⁷ In the northwestern part of the republic it would not be uncommon for a surviving elderly villager to have been a citizen of five different states during his/her lifetime: the Russian Empire, Poland, Lithuania, the Soviet Union and the republic of Belarus. This created blurred allegiances, conflicting identities and transitional dialects whose formal assignment to one of the adjacent and allegedly homogeneous linguistic domains becomes a matter of political expediency to the respective groups.

The effect of urbanisation on language norms is a change in the pattern of their dissemination. Before mass urbanisation the pattern was contagious diffusion whereby personal contact was all that mattered. Hierarchical diffusion was added to the equation through schooling, because the textbooks and teachers are supposed to promote national standards from the capital city down the settlement hierarchy. Mass urbanisation makes hierarchical diffusion dominant, which is why linguistic gradients associated with national borders become steep in the first place.

Therefore, spatial continuity or, in other words, a smooth linguistic gradient between standard Polish and standard Russian—with Belarusian vernaculars being transitional between the two—could exist only in the exceedingly rural space where contagious diffusion reigned supreme. Under this condition, proceeding from west to east, the languages spoken around Torun (where standard Polish evolved¹⁵⁸) and around Warsaw were not quite identical either but yet mutually intelligible. The same was true of the environs of Warsaw and Bialystok, and the same applied to the differences between Bialystok and Grodno, which are now located on different sides of the national border. One can further extend this succession to the environs of Minsk, Vitebsk and Smolensk, and ultimately to the space between Tula and Ryazan’, the space that, according to Oleg Trubachev, became home to standard Russian.¹⁵⁹ Needless to say, the languages once spoken in far-flung areas—near the poles of this

entire spatial continuum, that is around Tula and Ryazan' on the one hand and Torun on the other—were not mutually intelligible because of the gradual accumulation of lexical and phonetic differences along the path described. This is what geographers call a spatial trend.

This example pertains to the period when most people lived in the countryside. In western Belarus the 50% urbanisation threshold was passed only in the 1980s. Most *raiony* abutting the Polish border remain exceedingly rural. As for the Polish side of the border, the urban populations of the *powiaty* (counties) with Belarusian-speaking population range from 35% to 49%, and the entire Podlaskie *województwo*, which includes these *powiaty*, was only 58.5% urban in 2000.¹⁶⁰

Trusau mentioned that the percentage of Belarusian-language secondary schools happened to be highest in Voronovsky *raion* of Grodno *oblast'*, where the share of ethnic Poles in the population is about 83%. To Trusau, this proves that the Belarus Poles are somehow not 'real' Poles, but to me this just validates the hypothesis of spatial continuity described above as well as the fact that a linguistic transition belt, one of the very last in Europe, is still alive. Indeed, if in eastern Poland itself people do not speak exactly like they do in Warsaw, Torun and Krakow (although an ever-increasing proportion of them does), why should this be the case around Voronovo (Werenów in Polish), which is further east?

That the linguistic transition belt in question is still alive is in large measure due to the rural character of the area. As urbanisation progresses, the spatially gradual transition gives way to a clear division.

Fuzzy circumstances and clear-cut definitions

The words we use are able to impose a meaning that later becomes a quasi-reality of its own and others engage in discussion of that meaning. When we say 'Polish', 'Russian' or 'Belarusian' we involuntarily frame these notions as clear-cut and spatially discrete, whereas in actuality they have fuzzy borders. At the very least, these borders are not primordial.

The same pertains to ways in which we refer to linguistic (dis)similarities. When Jan Maksymiuk wanted to emphasise that he grew up in a Belarusian village in northeastern Poland, he had this to say: 'Frankly speaking, before I reached six years of age I did not realise that I lived in Poland because I spoke only and exclusively Belarusian. Only when someone brought an ABC from the local school did I learn that most people in this country used a language *completely different* [emphasis added] from mine and that there were many more of those people than those living in my village'.¹⁶¹ Similarly, Vakar, himself an ethnic Belarusian, states that in western Belarus under Polish rule 'all the natives of the Roman Catholic faith were registered as Polish ..., although many of those *could not even speak the language*' (emphasis added).¹⁶² Observations worded in this way become confusing when replicated by well-meaning people not versed in local languages and embracing a spatially discrete perception of ethnic identity if only for the sake of simplicity. As Marples put it, 'all Belarusian Catholics were listed as Poles, *even if they were not of Polish background and had no knowledge of the Polish language*' (emphasis added).¹⁶³ So, did they

actually not speak the language, or did they not have any knowledge of it? The difference is not as subtle as it may seem.

Indeed, where the Polish ‘background’ ends and the Belarusian one begins is largely in the eye of the beholder (the same goes for Belarusian and Russian) and is a matter of fluid self-identification typical for fuzzy borderlands. Was the famous priest Popiełuszko Polish or was he Belarusian? He has gone down in history as a devout Polish patriot. But there is a poem by Wiktor Woroszyński that refers to the ‘simple language’ (*mówił po prostu*) which Popiełuszko spoke when he was a child.¹⁶⁴ This is exactly the way in which ethnic Poles refer to Belarusian spoken in what to them is *Polskie Kresy Wschodnie*. By the same token, who were Kościuszko and Mickiewicz? In their own opinion, they were Litwini, which to them sounded like people from northeastern Poland. But did their mothers not speak Belarusian vernaculars?

Today, many more young people in northeastern Poland speak standard Polish than was the case 36–37 years ago when Maksymiuk was a 6-year-old child.¹⁶⁵ Likewise, on the eastern side of the border the language that many more people speak today is standard Russian.

So, was the language spoken in Maksymiuk’s native village as different from standard Polish as Chinese or German or was it ‘only’ as different as Russian? The answer, in my judgment, is ‘no’ in all three cases: in fact, the language spoken in the villages of northeastern Poland and standard Polish are mutually intelligible, even though a 6-year-old boy might not be aware of this. Incidentally, when comparing the language spoken across the border in Belarus proper with that spoken in his native village, the same Maksymiuk said that the former was ‘z *grubsza ten samy*’,¹⁶⁶ which means ‘roughly speaking, the same’ as the latter. ‘Roughly speaking’ is what appears to be important in this context: this means that although the language is not quite the same, it is close—which is yet another confirmation of spatial continuity.

Maintaining this continuity would be in the interest of the Belarusian language. More specifically, this would help keep the linguistic Belarusification of Belarus within the realm of possibility. Yet as the changes of the last decades show, continuity has been eroded. The ensuing division has been shaped between the areas where Russian and Polish are being used for the most part, with Belarusian literally falling through the cracks.

Conclusion

Belarus is a country with low name recognition and a cliché-ridden image. These clichés ought to be rectified through conventional scholarly analysis, which should include testing habitual assumptions as they apply to the region. This article sets this work in motion in regard to the linguistic situation in Belarus.

Belarus remains part of the Russian-language information space, and the overwhelming majority of its people use Russian as their preferred language of everyday communication. Estimates of Belarusian usage were grossly inflated by the Soviet-era censuses; the 1999 Belarusian census continues this tradition, albeit in a more moderate form. Surveyed secondary school teachers, a critical contingent as far as

language is concerned, speak Russian in their homes, and few feel any moral obligation to promote Belarusian. The exact frequency of standard Belarusian usage in everyday life is hard to assess, but in percentage terms it is most probably in single digits.

The issue of language is currently politicised, with most educated Belarusian speakers positioning themselves as 'democrats'. This self-image is unwarranted in cases where these self-proclaimed democrats oppose freedom of choice, e.g. the choice of language of instruction. The assertions that the current linguistic situation is due to the Lukashenka regime and that its more profound cause is forcible Russification are not warranted.

Lukashenka is an easy target to blame, but doing so is irresponsible. While Lukashenka is an autocrat, a genuinely democratic leader would have been obliged to respond to the linguistic preference of his fellow countrymen just as Lukashenka did in 1995 when he reintroduced Russian as one of the official languages of Belarus.

Blaming Russification is a trickier issue. Russification did indeed take place all over the Soviet Union. However, because nowhere has it succeeded as much as in Belarus, local peculiarities have to be considered foremost.

Belarusian is a Slavic language closely related to Russian and Polish. For centuries it existed only in dialect form within a transitional space between the domains of these languages, with western dialects being close to Polish and eastern ones being close to Russian. Once evolved at the beginning of the twentieth century, Belarusian of literary norm was exposed to stiff competition with two older and 'aggressive' language environments, Polish and Russian, which had long dominated urban areas of Belarus. That both Russian and Polish linguistic expansionism was at times state-sponsored is beyond doubt. Yet elements of spontaneity in language change in Belarus have been equally apparent.

Moreover, it appears that Belarusification (a mass switch to Belarusian) was also persistently promoted by the state but did not yield significant results. Unlike other countries long under linguistically alien influences, no critical mass of Belarusian speakers emerged that would sway the rest of the public. Blaming the 'overwhelming odds', that is, resistance of Russian and Polish-speakers, may make sense. However, overcoming alien influences, wherever it took place (e.g. in the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Norway), had *always* looked like an uphill battle. That the crucial breakthrough never occurred in Belarus suggests that Russian in much of Belarus, and Polish in the extreme west of the Belarusian 'ethnographic territory', have not been perceived by locals as 'alien'. So the process of switching to these languages in the course of urban socialisation has been effortless, smooth and by and large spontaneous and voluntary. The lingering reliance of the promoters of Belarusian linguistic revival on top-down, administrative means has not helped the cause of linguistic Belarusification either.

Some cautious optimism in regard to the prospects of eventually breaking this pattern of linguistic assimilation derives from the slowly growing number of educated Belarusian speakers and from the very prospects of Belarusian independence. Should the latter be sustained, the demand for Belarusian may sooner or later achieve the requisite critical mass. However, this is not preordained, and hard everyday work by

the national movement is required, as is a tactful and careful way in which to conduct it.

Radford University

This article is the first in a three-part series. The author wishes to acknowledge the support of the Radford University: International Research and Exchange Board through a short-term travel grant (summer 2002) as well as invaluable advice and help from Andrei Ekadumau and Isaak Khazdan (Minsk), Marek Jerczynski and Mariusz Kowalski (Warsaw), Zhanna Zaenchkovskaya (Moscow), Ilya Prizel (Pittsburgh, PA) and Robert J. Kaiser (Madison, WI).

¹ Sergei Dovlatov, *Sobranie Prozy v Trekh Tomakh* (Saint Petersburg, Limbus-Press, 1993), Vol. 3, p. 293; see also <http://lib.ru/DOWLATOW/dowlatow.txt>.

² The extent to which the election results were rigged will be discussed in the third article in this series. Available evidence does not support the idea that Lukashenka would have lost the election without the electoral fraud.

³ Margarita M. Balmaceda, 'Myth and Reality in the Belarusian–Russian Relationship', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 46, 3, 1999, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4. In a popular Russian joke, a sergeant says to a draftee: You will be digging a trench from the fence to lunch. Just as 'fence' and 'lunch' are construed as the poles of one continuum, so are 'democracy' and 'Russia' in the statement quoted. And this is despite the widely shared idea that in Russia democratisation of public life has in fact progressed much further than in Belarus.

⁵ Steven M. Eke & Taras Kuzio, 'Sultanism in Eastern Europe: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 52, 3, 2000, p. 532.

⁶ Eke & Kuzio's statement that 'Belarus' mass psychological marasmus ... was ideal for the reinforcement of authoritarian sultanism' (p. 536) is particularly revealing of the perspective on Belarus I take issue with in this series of articles.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Balmaceda, 'Myth and Reality in the Belarusian–Russian Relationship', p. 4.

⁹ David R. Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* (Amsterdam, Harwood, 1999), p. xiii. According to *Collins English Dictionary* (London, Collins, 1979), p. 365, a curate's egg is 'something that is bad but may be euphemistically described as being only partly so [simile derived from a cartoon in *Punch* ... in which a timid curate who has been served a bad egg while dining with his bishop, says that parts of the egg are excellent]'. Here is a similar formula—from an article about Islam: 'European colonialism was not entirely a bad thing. It created nations where there were none before, in America and Africa' (*The Economist*, 20 September 2001, p. 20). In both cases, it is assumed up front that the reader is possessed by certain persistent clichés.

¹⁰ Marples, *Belarus-A Denationalized Nation*, p. xiii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹³ www.br.minsk.by/archive/2001-47/ale5525.stm.

¹⁴ Belarus Democracy Act 2001: S.1645, Thomas Legislative Information on the Internet: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?c107:1/temp/~c1076gqUX4:e824>.

¹⁵ Belarus Democracy Act 2003 (introduced in the House), Thomas Legislative Information on the Internet: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?c108:2/temp/~c108laq9zt>.

¹⁶ Belarus Democracy Act 2003 (introduced in the Senate), Thomas Legislative Information on the Internet: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?c108:1/temp/~c108laq9zt>.

¹⁷ These qualifications were repealed in April 2003 by both the EU and USA.

¹⁸ 'The temptation is great', writes Hans-Georg Wieck, 'to address these issues in a way that is guided by the spirit of the Cold War—a temptation reinforced by the backward-looking orientation of the regime. Such an approach, however, would end up in a dead end, even more for the West than for Lukashenka' (Margarita M. Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 369). Wieck's remark is instructive. From 1997 to 2001 he was the head of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring group in Belarus and his relationships with the Belarusian authorities were acrimonious.

¹⁹ In 2000 publicists across the world drew much attention to a would-be president of the sole remaining superpower confusing Slovenia with Slovakia. Shortly thereafter *The Economist* published a brief on the latter under the title 'Slo-where? Slo-what?' However, *to be confused* does in fact attest to a certain level of name recognition and that of Belarus is patently below that level.

²⁰ Nickolas Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1956).

²¹ Ivan Lubachko, *Belorussia under Soviet Rule, 1917–1957* (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1972).

²² Steven L. Guthier, 'The Belorussians: National Identification and Assimilation, 1897–1970', *Soviet Studies*, 29, 1 and 2, 1977, pp. 37–61 and 270–283, at p. 283.

²³ A pen name of Siarhei Mikalaeovich Vil'chitsky, who left his native country for Germany in 1944 ('Doktaru Yanke Zaprudniku—75 gadou', *Nasha slova*, 519, 2001, <http://tbm.org.by/ns/no519/zaprud.html>).

²⁴ Jan Zaprudnik, *Belarus at a Crossroads of History* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1993).

²⁵ For example see various issues of *Nasha slovo* at <http://tbm.org.by/ns/>.

²⁶ 'Doktaru Yanke Zaprudniku—75 gadou'.

²⁷ Rainer Lindner, 'Besieged Past: National and Court Historians in Lukashenka's Belarus', *Nationalities Papers*, 27, 4, 1999, pp. 631–647.

²⁸ Alexandra Goujon, 'Language, Nationalism, and Populism in Belarus', *Nationalities Papers*, 27, 4, 1999, pp. 661–677.

²⁹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, 'Defining State Interests after Empire: National Identity, Domestic Structures and Foreign Trade Policies of Latvia and Belarus', *Review of International Political Economy*, 7, 1, Spring 2000, pp. 101–137.

³⁰ David R. Marples, 'The Demographic Crisis in Belarus', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 47, 1, 2000, pp. 16–27.

³¹ David R. Marples, *Belarus: from Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1996).

³² Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), *Independent Belarus*.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁴ In doing so I take guidance from Timothy Colton's scathing criticism of two, as he put it, 'wrongheaded assumptions' that the discussion of Belarus in the West commonly takes for granted, namely that: '(1) giant imperialistic Russia [is] dictating to a helpless Belarus, and (2) inasmuch as Belarus has a voice, it embodies the aspirations of no one but the government of Aliaksandr Lukashenka'. 'These twin premises are in their usual guise so overstated as to cloud sober judgment... The Lukashenka phenomenon did not arise in a social vacuum', remarks Colton (in *ibid.*, pp. 21–22).

³⁵ I made my first trip to Belarus in 1954; the last three visits took place in 1995, 2000 and 2002; most other visits took place in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time it was not unusual for me to go to Belarus twice a year to visit my late grandparents. Although I spent most of the time in Minsk, I also visited Grodno (Hrodna), Brest, Gomel (Homel), Mozyr (Mazyr), Polotsk and Vitebsk, and I kayaked down the West Dvina River in eastern Belarus and down the tributaries of the Viliya and the Viliya itself in the west. These latter trips gave me some exposure to the Belarusian countryside.

³⁶ Sixty secondary school teachers responded to the questionnaire (21 questions) devoted to the issues of language and identity; 40 respondents work for two schools in Minsk, 10 work for one school in Grodno, and the remaining 10 for one school in Vitebsk. Additionally, I interviewed seven people who either played an important role in the Belarusian national movement or did advanced research on issues related to it. These included Stanislau Shushkevich, the first leader of independent Belarus; Uladzimir Arlou, one of the most prolific authors writing in Belarusian; Aleh Trusau, the Chairman of the Belarusian Language Society named after Frantsyshek Skaryna and a former member of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus; Vadim Glinnik, architect; Andrei Ekadumov, philosopher at Belarusian State University; Emmanuil Ioffe (Belarusian Pedagogical University); and Irina Khalip, journalist and deputy editor-in-chief of *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*. These people were interviewed through a separate questionnaire, which aimed at more sophisticated reflection on the issues of Belarusian language and identity than did the above-mentioned pilot survey.

³⁷ In Yanka Kupala's tragicomedy 'Tuteishiya' a Russian-speaking Eastern Scientist defines Belarusian as 'by and large Russian, remarkably refined, but with quite a dash of incomprehensible words', whereas a Polish-speaking Western Scientist refers to Belarusian as 'by and large Polish' with the rest of this qualification exactly mirroring that of the Eastern Scientist (Ianka Kupala, *Tutejsziya* (Munich, Vy-va Batskaushchyny, 1953), p. 30). These excerpts suggest that Belarus is more than just geographically between Russia and Poland; linguistically it is between them as well.

³⁸ Branislau Taraškevič, *Belaruskaia Hramatyka*, 6th Edition (Minsk, 1943).

³⁹ This is a calque from 'svyadomi', a code word literally meaning 'aware of'.

⁴⁰ The forerunner of modern Belarusian was used in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania until the end of the sixteenth century.

⁴¹ TBM stands for *Tavarystva Belaruskai Movy* and bears the name of Frantsyshek Skaryna.

⁴² Personal interview, 23 May 2002.

- ⁴³ Guthier, 'The Belorussians', p. 274.
- ⁴⁴ Tatyana M. Mikulich, *Mova i Etnichnaya Samasvyadomasts* (Minsk, Navuka i Tekhnika, 1996), pp. 147–148.
- ⁴⁵ Ralph S. Clem, 'Belorussians', in Graham Smith (ed.), *The Nationalities Question in the Soviet Union* (London, Longman, 1990), p. 115.
- ⁴⁶ Mikulich, *Mova i Etnichnaya Samasvyadomasts*, p. 150.
- ⁴⁷ Personal interview, 27 May 2002.
- ⁴⁸ *Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniya respubliki Belarus i rasprostranennost' yazykov* (Minsk, Ministerstvo Statistiki i Analiza, 2001), pp. 214–215.
- ⁴⁹ *Naselenie respubliki Belarus* (Minsk, Ministerstvo Statistiki i Analiza, 2000), p. 13.
- ⁵⁰ On 26 May 2002 on Minsk's Channel 1 I watched an interview with Leontii Byadulya, chairman of a famous collective farm in Grodno oblast. Byadulya, a rural resident from western Belarus, replied exclusively in Russian to the questions posed in Belarusian.
- ⁵¹ Mikulich, *Mova i Etnichnaya Samasvyadomasts*, p. 41.
- ⁵² Personal interview, 28 May, 2002.
- ⁵³ Goujon, 'Language, Nationalism, and Populism in Belarus', p. 668.
- ⁵⁴ Marples, *Belarus from Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe*, p. 31; *trasyanka* is spelled in this source as *trasnyaka*—apparently a misprint.
- ⁵⁵ Belarusian Language and Culture, UNDP, Human Development Report 1996, Chapter 1.2, www.un.minsk.by/hdr/hdr96, accessed 30 June 2001.
- ⁵⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1997, Vol. 4, p. 63.
- ⁵⁷ See for example Andrei Ekadumau, 'Kul'tyrnyya Realiya Belaruska–Rasiiskai Integratsii', *Belaruska–Rasiiskaya Integratsiya* (Minsk; Entsylapedyks, 2002), p. 219.
- ⁵⁸ Personal interview, 23 May 2002.
- ⁵⁹ The official website of the Belarus President: <http://www.president.gov.by/rus/president/profile.shtml>.
- ⁶⁰ To be sure, on several occasions Lukashenka went on record with disparaging comments in regard to Belarusian and was later lampooned by the opposition media.
- ⁶¹ 'Kuropatskie sideniya', *Belaruski rynok*, 2000, 45, p. 25.
- ⁶² Veronika Cherkasova, 'Belorusskii yazyk na skam'e podsudimyykh', *Belorusskaya delovaya Gazeta*, http://bdg.press.net.by/1998/98_08_10.491/30-niva.htm.
- ⁶³ Personal interview, 27 May 2002.
- ⁶⁴ L.V. Tereshkovich, 'Obshchestvennye dvizheniya v sovremennoi Belorussii: kratkii kommentarii k dokumentam', *Grazhdanskie dvizheniya v Belorussii: dokumenty i materialy 1989–1991* (Moscow, TSIMO, 1991), p. 20.
- ⁶⁵ Eke & Kuzio, 'Sultanism in Eastern Europe', p. 525.
- ⁶⁶ R.B. Dobson, *Belarusians Gravitare Toward Russia: A Pull of Russian Language, Media Remains Strong* (Washington, DC, Office of Research, Department of State, 11 October 2000), pp. 2–3.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁸ Timothy Colton, 'Belarusian Public Opinion and Union with Russia', in Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), *Independent Belarus*, p. 30.
- ⁶⁹ Andrzej Sadowski, *Pogranicze Polsko-Bialoruskie: Tozsamosc Mieszkancow* (Bialystok, Trans Humana, 1995), p. 165.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- ⁷¹ *Wokół Jamesa Joyce'a: Szkice Monograficzne* (Krakow, Universitas, 1999), p. 187.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 190.
- ⁷³ See for example Marples, *Belarus: from Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe*, p. 29; Robert J. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 273; and many others.
- ⁷⁴ Goujon, 'Language, Nationalism, and Populism in Belarus', p. 672.
- ⁷⁵ R. A. Grigor'eva, 'Kratkii ocherk etnicheskoi istorii', *Materialy k Serii 'Narody i Kul'tury'*, *Vypusk 26, Belorusy, Kniga I* (Moscow, Institut Ethnologii i Antropologii, 1992), p. 24.
- ⁷⁶ Mikhas' Puzinovskiy, 'Chamu Batski-Belarusy u Shkolakh Vybirayuts' Ruskuyu Movu?', *Nasha slova*, 520, 2001, <http://tbm.org.by/ns/no520-523/20-21/vibar.html>.
- ⁷⁷ Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*, p. 60.
- ⁷⁸ Ustina Marcus, 'The Bilingualism Question in Belarus and Ukraine', *Transition*, 29 November 1996, p. 18.
- ⁷⁹ This author failed to access this source via the American inter-library system and the British Library refused the request. However, the letters are described in detail by Zaprudnik, *Belarus at a Crossroads of History* pp. 127–128; Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*, p. 52; and Goujon, 'Language, Nationalism and Populism in Belarus', p. 662.

⁸⁰ Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, 2nd edition (New York, Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁸¹ Dmitrii Drigailo, 'Zakon o yazykakh po-TBM-ovskii', *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 27 August 2002, <http://bdg.press.net.by>.

⁸² 'TBM predlagaet grazhdanam govorit' po-Beloruskii', <http://www.bdg.by/newnews/news>, 27 August 2002.

⁸³ Dobson, *Belarusians Gravitate Toward Russia*, p. 3.

⁸⁴ Personal interview, 21 May 2002.

⁸⁵ Personal interview, 27 May 2002.

⁸⁶ World regional geography textbooks particularly promote this idea in their chapters devoted to the NIS of Eurasia. One example of this alleged conspiracy in action and its ideologically charged explanation from more serious literature on the subject is Alexander Motyl, *Will the Non-Russians Rebel?* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1987). Referring to Ukraine, Motyl asks rhetorically: 'Why is it that Ukrainians use Russian as the language of social intercourse? Why does a nation of close to 40 million, with its own state structure, capital, and the United Nations seat, in possession of a developed economy, and enjoying extensive historical, cultural, and linguistic traditions, use a foreign language in its everyday dealings? The most obvious answer to this question, the answer that for some reason does not occur to Motyl, would of course be that many Ukrainians simply do not consider that language foreign.

⁸⁷ Nikolai Zen'kovich, *Tainy ukhodyashchego veka* (Moscow, Olma Press, 2000), p. 327.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

⁹⁰ Mikhail Bulakhov, *Evfimii Fedorovich Karskii, 1861–1931* (Minsk, BGU, 1981), p. 181.

⁹¹ Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*, p. 4.

⁹² Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, p. 69.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁹⁴ Bulakhov, *Evfimii Fedorovich Karskii*, p. 195.

⁹⁵ Guthier, 'The Belorussians', p. 43.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Zen'kovich, *Tainy ukhodyashchego veka*, pp. 287–333.

⁹⁹ My great-grandparents, who were born and lived in Belarus all their lives with the exception of 1941–44 and died in the late 1950s, spoke Yiddish with each other. Their children, including my grandparents, spoke Russian with each other but still had some limited proficiency in Yiddish. All three children of my grandparents, my mother included, who were growing up in the 1930s, late 1940s and 1950s in a medium-size town in southern Belarus, know only a few words in Yiddish and have been entirely immersed in Russian of literary norm. This situation has been representative of the overwhelming majority of Belarussian Jews.

¹⁰⁰ Guthier, 'The Belorussians', pp. 54–55.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁰³ 'A form of spatial diffusion, ... occurring where spread is in a centrifugal manner outward from a source region ... It is well demonstrated by the spread of contagious diseases and the diffusion of those other phenomena that rely on touch or direct contact for their transmission. The process is strongly influenced by distance ...' (John Small & Michael Witherick, *A Modern Dictionary of Geography*, 3rd Edition (London, Arnold, 1995), p. 50). Contagious diffusion is often contrasted to hierarchical diffusion.

¹⁰⁴ Guthier, 'The Belorussians' p. 53.

¹⁰⁵ Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 139–140; Vakar carefully documents widespread and occasionally violent resistance to Belarussification, particularly in Gomel province, whose Communist leader was removed for conniving at that resistance.

¹⁰⁷ This point was recently corroborated in the document called 'The Concept of *Roon*', a newspaper of Lithuania's Belarussians. *Roon* is published in Vilnius, has a circulation of 1,000 copies and is subsidised by the Lithuanian government. Among other things, 'The Concept ...' states that 'about 70% of Lithuania's Poles (or about 140,000 people), especially in regions adjacent to Belarus, communicate with each other in the so-called simple language, which is a pure Belarussian dialect, as close to Belarussian of literary norm as it can be. This dialect is closer to it than, say, dialects spoken around Mogilev and Gomel. The reason for this perfect coincidence derives from the fact that in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century the Belarussian literary language evolved

on the basis of Belarusian vernaculars spoken in the environs of Vilna, Minsk and Grodno, vernaculars that are close to each other and belong in the northwestern group of Belarusian vernaculars' (<http://www.runbel.lt/paper.htm>, accessed on 18 January 2002).

¹⁰⁸ In the decree of the Belarusian Council of People's Commissars of 26 August 1933 the alleged Belarusian National Democrats were accused of 'intending to tear away the Belarusian literary language from the language of the Belarusian working masses and of thus creating an artificial barrier between the Belarusian and Russian languages'; see Lubachko, *Belorussia under Soviet Rule*, p. 115.

¹⁰⁹ Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, p. 153.

¹¹⁰ Personal interview, 27 May, 2002.

¹¹¹ The Belarusian versions of 'Proletarians of all countries unite!'—a motto from the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. This motto adorned the front page of every Soviet newspaper.

¹¹² Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, pp. 119–136.

¹¹³ Lubachko, *Belorussia under Soviet Rule*, pp. 127–138.

¹¹⁴ Personal interview, 24 May 2002.

¹¹⁵ Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, p. 59.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Belarus did not regain its 1939 population (8.9 million people in current borders) until 1969. 'Owing to the effects of the war, Belorussia lost a greater percentage of its population than any other region of the USSR; between 1939 and 1951, the population of Belorussia declined by 12.7%'; see Clem, 'Belorussians', p. 113.

¹¹⁸ Guthier, 'The Belorussians', p. 273.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

¹²⁰ Zen'kovich, *Tainy ukhodyashchego veka*, pp. 300–309.

¹²¹ Guthier, 'The Belorussians', p. 275.

¹²² Sadowski, *Pogranicze Polsko-Bialoruskie*, pp. 13–25 and 97–100.

¹²³ A variety of spatial diffusion, 'characterised by "leapfrogging"', whereby the diffusive phenomenon tends to leap over many intervening people and places. In this instance, simple geographic distance is not always the strongest influence on the diffusion process. Instead, hierarchal diffusion recognises that large places or important people tend to get the news first, subsequently transmitting it to others lower down the hierarchy. It occurs because in the diffusion of many things space is relative, depending on the nature of the communication network. Big cities, for example, linked by very strong information flows, are actually "closer" than they are in a simple geographic space' (Small & Witherick, *A Modern Dictionary of Geography*, p. 113). The spread of language of literary norm definitely follows the above pattern. Hierarchical diffusion is often contrasted to contagious diffusion.

¹²⁴ Jan Zaprudnik, 'Belorussia and the Belorussians', in Zev Katz, Rosemarie Rogers & Frederic Harned (eds), *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities* (New York, The Free Press, 1975), p. 64.

¹²⁵ Clem, 'Belorussians', pp. 114–115.

¹²⁶ Personal interview, 24 May 2002.

¹²⁷ Zen'kovich, *Tainy ukhodyashchego veka*, p. 301.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 191–192.

¹²⁹ This is abundantly documented by Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*.

¹³⁰ Adam Maldis, 'Davaite, nakonets, zagovorim', *Kommunist Belorussii*, 1989, 3, pp. 74–75.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹³⁶ Motyl, *Will the Non-Russians Rebel?*, p. 152.

¹³⁷ 'Retsidiv' (interviews with experts), *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 18 February 2003, <http://bdg.press.net.by/2003>.

¹³⁸ *Nasha slova*, 29 September 1999.

¹³⁹ BelaPAN No. 66: www.belarus-misc.org/ling-ms.htm, posted 15 February 2000.

¹⁴⁰ 'Tsi patrebna Belarusan Belaruskaya mova?', *Nasha slova*, 523, 2001, accessed at <http://tbm.org.by/ns/no520-523/20-21/belmova.htm> on 23 October 2001 (this site is now inaccessible).

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Quoted in Ivan Lepeshau, 'Suchasny gvalt nad movai', *Nasha slova*, 3, 39 (424), 29 September 1999.

¹⁴³ tbm.org.by/ns/no511/7zdeklar.html.

¹⁴⁴ Goujon, 'Language, Nationalism, and Populism in Belarus', p. 669.

¹⁴⁵ Personal interview, 24 May 2002.

¹⁴⁶ ibm.org.by/ns/no516/valijci.html.

¹⁴⁷ The above-quoted 1999 survey showed that only 11% of respondents believed that learning and studying in the Belarusian language were 'very important'. Together with 'fairly important', the respondents total 32%. At the same time, learning and studying in Belarusian are not important for 62% of the respondents (Dobson, *Belarusians Gravitate Toward Russia*, p. 4).

¹⁴⁸ Personal interview, 23 May 2002.

¹⁴⁹ Personal interview, 22 May 2002.

¹⁵⁰ Personal interview, 23 May 2002.

¹⁵¹ Personal interview, 27 May 2002.

¹⁵² An identical statement is available in L.P. Shakhotko & D.N. Kudelka, 'Etnoyazykovoi sostav naseleniya Belorussii', *Voprosy statistiki*, 2002, 11, p. 30.

¹⁵³ See for example Terry Jordan-Bychkov & Bella Bychkova, *The European Culture Area* (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 197–200.

¹⁵⁴ Personal interview, 30 May 2002.

¹⁵⁵ Reprinted at the beginning of *Dyyalektologichyi atlas Belaruskai movy* (Minsk, Vydavestva Akademii Navuk, 1963).

¹⁵⁶ Karsky, who studied western Belarusian vernaculars in depth during his linguistic expedition of 1903, described them as containing quite a few Polonisms; Karsky believed Belarusian–Polish bilingualism in the area had been around since the fifteenth century (see Bulakhov, *Evfimii Fedorovich Karskii*, p. 26).

¹⁵⁷ *Itogi vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1970 goda* (Moscow, Statistika, 1971), p. 20.

¹⁵⁸ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1997, Vol. 9, p. 561.

¹⁵⁹ Oleg Trubachev, 'Iz istorii i lingvisticcheskoi geografii vostochnoslavianskogo osvoeniya', *Voprosy yazykoznaniiya*, 2000, 5, pp. 4–25.

¹⁶⁰ *Rocznik Statystyczny Wojewodztwa Podlaskiego* (Białystok, Urząd Statystyczny, 2001).

¹⁶¹ *Wokół Jamesa Joyce'a: Szkice Monograficzne*, p. 185.

¹⁶² Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, p. 121.

¹⁶³ Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*, p. 7.

¹⁶⁴ Bazyly Bialokozowicz, *Miedzy Wschodem a Zachodem* (Białystok, Białowieża, 1998), pp. 82–83.

¹⁶⁵ This is documented by Sadowski, *Pogranicze Polsko-Białoruskie*. My own personal impressions from two visits to Białystok and its environs in 1976 and 2000 confirm this as well.

¹⁶⁶ *Wokół Jamesa Joyce'a: Szkice Monograficzne*: p. 186.

