

Society and Language: Debates Surrounding the National Language in Belarusian Society at the Beginning of the 1990s

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Společnost a jazyk: debaty o místě národního jazyka v běloruské společnosti začátku 90. let 20. století

Abstract: The dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s sparked a wave of political and national emancipation in its republics that led to the creation of new successor states. This also applied to the former Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), which declared its independence on 27 July 1990. Even before this, however, a project concerning a wholly new and groundbreaking law was introduced in the country for public debate. According to the law, the Belarusian language – as the national language of the majority population – would become the one and only state and official language in the republic.

Keywords: Belarusian society; national language; 1990s; post-socialist transformation; nationalism; national emancipation

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Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union sparked a wave of political and national emancipation that in various degrees affected each of its republics. Emancipation processes subsequently culminated in the declaration of new sovereignties and thus led to the creation of independent post-Soviet successor states. This also included the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), which declared its sovereignty on 27 July 1990 via an approval by the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR of the *Declaration of the BSSR's State Sovereignty* [*Viedamasci Viarchoŭnaha Savieta Respubliki Bielaruś 31 1991: Art. 536*]. In the *Declaration*, it not only announced the supremacy of the Constitution and laws of the republic on its territory and the independent position of the republic in international relations, but also proclaimed the republic's right to its own army, internal troops, and state and internal security authorities subject to the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR. The establishment of the republic's own monetary system was anticipated along with relevant institutions such as the National Bank, which was subordinated to the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR, etc. The *Declaration* was groundbreaking in other respects as well. Divided operation of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of power was declared for the first time in the history of Belarus.

One year later, on 19 September 1991, the name of the country was changed after a decision by the 6th extraordinary session of the BSSR's Supreme Soviet from the existing

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Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) to the Republic of Belarus (or simply abbreviated to Belarus) [*Viedamasci Viarchoŭnaha Savieta Respubliki Bielaruś 30 1991: Art. 490*]. On the same day, the new state symbols of Belarus were adopted – a white-red-white flag and the state coat of arms of *Pahonia* (Pursuit). In accordance with the new Act *On the State Flag of the Republic of Belarus*, the flag was to consist of three even stripes of the same width that would be placed over one another horizontally. A red stripe was to be placed in the middle, and the upper and lower stripes of the flag were to be white [*Viedamasci Viarchoŭnaha Savieta Respubliki Bielaruś 30 1991: Art. 493*].

An indelible and important part of these transformational changes at the beginning of the 1990s was the intense emancipation of the national (Belarusian) language. In this respect, the Act *On Languages in the Belarusian SSR* from 26 January 1990, which was passed by the 11th Supreme Soviet of the BSSR, was a breakthrough [*Zakon Bielaruskaj Savieckaj Sacyjalistyčnaj Respubliki ab movach u Bielaruskaj SSR: pryniaty na čatyrnaccataj sessii Viarchoŭnaha Savieta Bielaruskaj SSR adzinaccataha sklikannia, 26 studzienia 1990 h. 1990*].

The way in which the beginning of the law was worded was highly characteristic of the time. In a wholly Herderesque way, the law gave the national language the main attribute of existence or the essence of the nation. Its first introductory sentence read: “Language is not only a means of communication, but first and foremost the soul of the nation, the basis and the most important part of its culture. If a language lives, so does the nation” [*Zakon Bielaruskaj Savieckaj Sacyjalistyčnaj Respubliki ab movach u Bielaruskaj SSR: pryniaty na čatyrnaccataj sessii Viarchoŭnaha Savieta Bielaruskaj SSR adzinaccataha sklikannia, 26 studzienia 1990 h. 1990: 4*]. It went on to state that the use of Belarusian had become significantly narrower and that “its [the Belarusian language’s] existence is in peril. It necessitates the protection of the Belarusian language on its state and ethnical territory. Creation of a similar system of protection is allowed only via granting Belarusian status as the only language of the Belarusian SSR” [*Zakon Bielaruskaj Savieckaj Sacyjalistyčnaj Respubliki ab movach u Bielaruskaj SSR: pryniaty na čatyrnaccataj sessii Viarchoŭnaha Savieta Bielaruskaj SSR adzinaccataha sklikannia, 26 studzienia 1990 h. 1990*].

Together with the adoption of this law, the BSSR’s Constitution was also amended. A formulation was added to its 68th article that the state language of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was Belarusian. However, the state ensured the free use of Russian as a language of international communication between the nations of the USSR [*NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2011, l. 42*].

In agreement with the Constitution, the Act *On Languages* further declared the Belarusian language as the only state language. This specifically meant that Belarusian had become the language of official documentation at offices of the state administration and government; the language of adopted and published active laws; and the language of inscriptions on the stamps and forms of party, civil, state and other organizations, associations and enterprises. Belarusian became the language of legal proceedings, notarial records and the state and bureaucratic agenda; the language for providing various forms of services and healthcare; the language of international conventions and agreements and of the education system at all levels; and also the language of mass media. The law assumed the implementation of entrance examinations in Belarusian for those applying to study at vocational schools and universities in the republic. In addition, the Belarusian

language was declared the priority language of the cultural and academic spheres [*Zakon Bielaruskaj Savieckaj Sacyjalistyčnej Respubliki ab movach u Bielaruskaj SSR: pryniaty na čatyrnaccataj sessii Viarchoŭnaha Savieta Bielaruskaj SSR adzinaccataha sklikannia, 26 studzienia 1990 h. 1990: 4–13*].

Nonetheless, the law in no way governed the use of Belarusian in private communication or common communication between employees (i.e. so-called “members of work collectives”). In addition, the act did not govern the language used in the USSR’s Armed Forces, e.g. in its border, internal and railway divisions deployed on the territory of Belarus [*Zakon Bielaruskaj Savieckaj Sacyjalistyčnej Respubliki ab movach u Bielaruskaj SSR: pryniaty na čatyrnaccataj sessii Viarchoŭnaha Savieta Bielaruskaj SSR adzinaccataha sklikannia, 26 studzienia 1990 h. 1990: 4–13*].

Some formulations from the language act were incidentally adopted and appeared a half-year later in another key document, the aforementioned *Declaration of the BSSR’s State Sovereignty* from 27 July 1990, in which Belarusian is mentioned as the priority state language of the newly declared republic [*Viedamasci Viarchoŭnaha Savieta Respubliki Bielarús 31 1991: Art. 536*].

The resolution of the BSSR’s Supreme Soviet *On the Method of Putting the Belarusian SSR’s Act on Languages into Effect* was attached to the new language law. In accordance with this resolution, the *Act On Languages* was expected to take effect on 1 September 1990. This was caused by the fact that many officials and state and other employees did not possess sufficient knowledge of the target language, i.e. Belarusian. In addition, the resolution established a gradual timetable for the transition to Belarusian which, in regard to the target group of officials and state employees, was quite frequently seen as highly benevolent and even generously slow.

Over the course of three years, consumer information on goods produced in the republic was to be transferred into Belarusian. Personal documents (identification cards, birth and marriage certificates, etc.) were to be issued in Belarusian, as were the results of scientific research activity designated for publication in the academic sphere. Public notices and advertisements were to be written in the Belarusian language, and the entirety of cultural and artistic activities was to be transferred into Belarusian. Mass media outlets were also to begin using the language.

Over the course of three to five years, state officials and employees would be required to learn Belarusian to an extent and at a sufficient level to fulfill their work obligations and carry out immediate communication with the population. This was linked to the new obligation to publish state and official documentation, including legislation, resolutions, public notices, etc. in Belarusian.

Over the course of five years, another step was to be taken – the transition of the state and bureaucratic agenda into Belarusian. Healthcare, transport, business and other common services were to be provided in Belarusian.

Over the course of only ten years, the judicial system along with arbitration and administrative procedures were planned to be transitioned into Belarusian, including the keeping of notarial records in Belarusian. Legal aid was also to be provided to the population in Belarusian. Finally, over the course of the ten-year period, instruction at basic, secondary, vocational, university and other schools was gradually planned to be transitioned into Belarusian [*NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2100, l. 25*].

Questions and Goals

From an analysis of legislation, it is evident that the law after its adoption interfered and to a great degree impacted almost all the areas of the public (and to a certain extent private) life of society and its main channels of social communication. What reactions thus accompanied the introduction of this law in terms of the broader segments of the republic's population? How many people supported these dramatic changes in regard to the newly established language policy and what arguments did they use to justify their opinion? This paper will focus on these central questions and analyze the acceptance of the adoption and implementation of the law on the part of the Belarusian population after the preliminary publication of the law project in the media.

This study will be based on the analysis of a unique corpus of sources, i.e. the individual and collective letters and written statements from citizens containing notes, commentary and proposals for the project of the *Act On Languages*. In addition to factual statements, these sources also frequently contain general thoughts on the role of a national language itself in the life of the state, nation and society; thoughts on contemporary society; the political, social and cultural situation of the time; Belarusian history and so forth. Within the analysis, attention will also be focused on the language of the letters itself and the various types of argumentation (historical, political and other) that the respondents used to justify and back up their proposals and opinions. These written testimonies come from the more preserved and comprehensive collections of the National Archive of Belarus and its funds of the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR/Belarus, namely sections 2511 and 2512 containing letters written by citizens to the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR on discussing the language situation and the law project of the Belarusian SSR *On Languages in the Belarusian SSR* in the period from 1989 up to the beginning of 1990.

The Letters and Their Authors: a Sociological Aspect

Preliminary work on preparing the new language policy concept already began over the course of 1989, when the Commission on Nationality Policy and Inter-Ethnic Relations under the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR was created for this purpose. Later, on July 29 of that year, upon the order of the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR, another professional Commission for the Preparation of Proposals for Legislation on the Status of the Belarusian, Russian and other Languages Used by the Population of the BSSR, which was headed by N. N. Mazaj, was created. The primary goal of this commission was to prepare relevant legislation, i.e. namely the project of the aforementioned *Act On Languages*, according to which Belarusian was to become the new and only state language in the republic. Later, the law project was published in the media, and the common citizens of Belarus at the time whom this change was to closely impact were called upon to voice their opinions.

Letters with statements on the language law project and general comments on the contemporary language situation and the position of the national (Belarusian) language were addressed not only to the aforementioned commissions, but also to other institutions. For instance, the editorial staff of the *Litaratura i mastactva* (Literature and Art) newspaper was a frequent addressee. The language issue was dealt with on its pages since roughly 1987, and discussions were held on the position of the Belarusian language in the society

of the time. Nonetheless, the special Commission on Nationality Policy and Inter-Ethnic Relations under the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR remained the primary institution for handling this written material, and a significant number of letters, including collective ones, were addressed to it.

In total, from 1989 until the beginning of 1990, the Commission received 937 letters (including telegrams), 489 of which were sent to the editorial staff of national and local newspapers, the editorial staff of radio and television broadcasts, to regional executive committees, and to the municipal executive committee of the capital of Minsk. From these 448 letters that were initially sent directly to the Commission on Nationality Policy and Inter-Ethnic Relations, 255 were written by individuals and 193 were written either in the name of a group of people (33 letters) or in the name of organizations, enterprises, offices, associations or other institutions (160 letters). Collective letters contained mass signatures of the individuals and thus presented their opinions. By 25 January 1990, a total of more than 20,000 people had made statements on the law project [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2379, l. 125 ob.; Kasciuk 1995: 467*].

The first letters began to be sent as early as January 1989. Some of them came as a reaction to other current and acute problems concerning the immediate situation of the national (Belarusian) language in the republic. For example, they were written in reaction to ongoing publications in the media, which as a result of their topicality resonated with social sentiment and evoked a broader response among readers. Similarly, parliamentary debates on this national question, which were regularly broadcast on television, also garnered reactions. The activities of the Commission on Nationality Policy and Inter-Ethnic Relations itself and other factors also served as a stimulus for sending letters [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 14-14 ob., 20-20 ob. and others*].

The geographical range of delivered letters is very broad. Not only people from the capital city used the right to express their opinion and to be heard. The Commission of the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR, editorial staff of newspapers, etc. were sent letters from various regions of Belarus at the time; from cities, towns, urban-type and rural settlements. Therefore, based on the analysis of correspondence, the greatest frequency of written letters cannot be attributed only to the country's capital Minsk or any other larger regional city or a certain region in the republic.

In regard to Minsk, however, a certain characteristic peculiarity can be observed, one which is highly symptomatic for the studied period of national emancipation in the 1990s. Authors originally from the capital relatively frequently use the former historical transcription *Mensk* [Bel: Miensk] for the city in the text of their letters instead of the official *Minsk*. The former transcription *Mensk* was used up until the Soviet period and partially during the interwar period. Later, this original title was changed by the BSSR's communist government to the present *Minsk*, which was still valid and officially in use at the time when the letters were being written [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 128, 183, 185 and others*].

The language law did not leave citizens outside Belarus indifferent either. Belarusians who had lived for a longer period outside the republic also felt an obligation to express their own opinions, and thus a score of letters were sent from Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania and other countries. Foreign nationals and representatives of other nations (Russians, Ukrainians and others) also expressed their opinions on the law.

In addition, respondents very frequently saw it necessary to emphasize their nationality in the text of the letters in order to give even greater weight to their arguments and support their opinions, which in this case were usually in favor of adopting the Act *On Languages*. These phrases typically read “I am Russian (Ukrainian, ...) by nationality, but [I support/welcome/ ... etc. the law]”. This is a typical example taken from a letter sent from Minsk: “Allow me, in the name of my family – my wife and I are doctors and my daughter a student of the Medical Faculty – to add our voices to those who promote the statehood of the Belarusian language. We are Russians, but we have always associated our fate with Belarus. We have therefore been so pained over the past decades in observing the decline of the Belarusian language and its displacement by the Russian-Belarusian ‘hodge-podge’ (Bel: *trasianka*). A nation is mute without its own language. Therefore, we now sincerely welcome the rebirth of Belarusian self-awareness. This is the right way, Belarusian brothers! May Belarus more swiftly awaken, may it more easily determine its own path and more decisively set off on it towards freedom and democracy. Long Live Belarus!¹ [Bel: *Žyvjie Bielaruś!*]” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 177].

A similar degree of diversity and variability mentioned above is also characteristic for the social background and professional status of the respondents, which can at times be determined from the letters. The broadest possible range of professions among respondents is typical. Teachers of nursery and secondary schools often voiced their opinions of the law project, as did university teachers, manual laborers, soldiers, doctors, highly and lowly qualified officials, housewives, retirees, students of schools and universities, etc. from throughout the republic. However, representatives of the same professional and social group could share completely differing opinions on the position of Russian/Belarusian in the republic and on promoting the law.

Individuals from various age categories can also be found among respondents. At the same time, the assumption that a possible separation of opinions would appear according to age group and, theoretically, that more conservative retirees and members of the older generation in general would lobby for preserving the *status quo* for Russian as the existing state language dominant in the Soviet Union proved to be invalid. In this sense, the abovementioned pluralism of opinions throughout social, professional and age groups is highly remarkable.

Cultural, cultural-historic and civil associations from various towns and cities of the republic often expressed their opinions on the law project, thus expressing the collective opinions of their members. For instance, this included the associations *Ahmień* (Hearth), *Pachodnia* (Torch), *Vytoki* (Springs) from Vawkavysk [Bel: Vaŭkavysk], the *Uzhorje* (Hill) club from Vitebsk, a number of regional branches of the *Francišak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society* from various cities, and others. In addition, collective letters were sent by respondents associated by certain occupational, professional or similar groups (e.g. teachers, university students, etc.). This also included letters that unified groups of signatories (e.g. neighbors, families, etc.) that were of a similar opinion (e.g. supporters of laws, etc.).

In commentaries on the project, the voices of prominent representatives of Belarusian Soviet dissent also appeared. Several letters expressing support for the law were penned

¹ Long Live Belarus! [Bel: *Žyvjie Bielaruś!*] is a traditional patriotic national motto that is widely used to express support for Belarus.

by professor of medicine Ivan Mirončyk, who had become the victim of persecution and punitive psychiatry for his ideological convictions regarding the Soviet Union's policy on Afghanistan [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 1-1ob.].

It often occurred that the Belarusian language itself used in the letters was of an insufficient quality and the texts contained a number of grammatical mistakes and Russianisms. This usually concerned the use of Russian words in Belarusian sentences as a result of an insufficient knowledge of Belarusian. It is interesting to note that the authors often intentionally apologize for this fact but nonetheless continue to write in Belarusian. Sometimes these letters begin in Russian, but the author then spontaneously shifts to Belarusian, especially when he/she is emotionally describing the present situation of the Belarusian language or Belarusian culture in society. Many letters in support of the Belarusian language as the only state language are written in Russian, but more than half are nonetheless written in Belarusian. For example, one female respondent, a researcher at the Institute of Experimental Botany at the BSSR Academy of Sciences in Minsk, S. Buško, begins her letter with an apology: "Forgive me for writing in Russian. I, like the majority of my fellow citizens, have almost completely forgotten my mother tongue and have had to use Russian for a number of years ..." [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 138]. "I am writing in Russian, as I belong to the generation of Belarusians that has been deprived of its roots, national culture and history (i.e. the true history)," [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 187 ob.] can be seen in another typical example.

Language and a Social Critique of the Existing Situation

Letters fairly often cite the fact that any type of national distinctiveness is lacking in contemporary Belarus due to the almost complete absence of Belarusian in public discourse (in street names, shops, the environment of institutions, etc.), and it is thus possible to feel as if one is located in one of the many regions of Russia [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 5, 27 ob., and others]. "All labels on foodstuffs and consumer goods, advertising boards at markets and sporting grounds are all in Russian throughout Belarus. Does a nation of ten million not have its own language?" typically asked one of many respondents. He continued on in the same letter: "The republic is represented in many high-level international organizations as an independent state, and the native language as the state language is lacking here" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 5-5 ob.].

In their letters, respondents often pointed to the existing chasm between the use of the language in the countryside, where Belarusian is still sometimes used, and the city, where Belarusian has been allotted a wholly marginal space as a result of the language's undesirability and social non-prestige. "It interests me whether there is a situation anywhere else in the world where the inhabitants of the countryside speak in one language while using another one in the city," a Belarusian from the Lithuanian town of Grigiškės began his letter. "A village boy completes 8th grade [of basic school] and arrives in a provincial city to continue on in his studies. And what does he hear first from his urban classmates? 'You're quite the bumpkin!'" he wrote in his letter to the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 3 ob.].

These and similar comments and arguments served as additional reasons for the unambiguous adoption of the Belarusian language as the only state language in the republic.

Sometimes letters were used as a platform to criticize the existing political, economic and social situation. This critique was often highly specific and directed at negotiations in parliament, etc. Targets of criticism were those such as individual deputies and members of parliament, who intentionally hesitated to speak Belarusian in debates despite obviously knowing Belarusian and even having a strong Belarusian accent [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 28; d. 2512, l. 14 and others*]. As one respondent therefore concluded, such behavior on the part of the parliamentary deputies “has shown the whole nation that they despise their native language. What kind of people are they – they are not people from our native land, they are miscreant deputies” [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 28*]. “I ask you,” the same author continued, “is such a session of parliament in England or France conducted in Italian or Spanish? ... Every language is dear and beloved to every nation, even a small one, and therefore it is incomprehensible why our leadership, beginning with the Gen. [eral] Sec.[retary] of the [Communist] Party Sokolov himself, wants to forget the language (which they seem to have managed anyway) and incite others to do the same” [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 28-29*].

Another author originally from Moscow noted in this context that, during a session of the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR broadcast on television, “over the course of three days, none [underlined by the author] of the deputies (including the highest representatives of the republic), perhaps with the exception of the chairman and two or three other individuals, spoke in Belarusian. They probably do not know their mother tongue and thus the language of their constituents. Now I understand why Belarusian is neglected in this republic like nowhere else. Now I understand why the highest leadership of the BSSR’s Communist Party did not need it (i.e. Belarusian). It [this leadership] was installed by the Central Committee and Politburo and they are their agents. But why do state, union and public representatives of the working class and peasants, who have been elected by the people, despise speaking in the language of their forefathers and prefer instead – even despite their terrible accent – to speak Russian?” “I repeat once again that it was highly painful to watch these appearances ... Is the BSSR a part of Russia? Or does Belarus not have its own language?” the same author continued on with a rhetorical question [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 63-64*].

“It is a disgrace – I repeat, a disgrace – when the president of Belarus does not know how to speak in the language of the country which he leads!” [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 44*] said another author from Grodno (Bel: Hrodna).

In regard to the language issue, the political position of the elites of the republic was also frequently commented upon: “There are forces in the leadership of the republic in whom the phrase ‘sovereignty for Belarus’ evokes rage, as they have led the republic for practically their whole lives to lose its sovereignty and become a region of Russia,” said another respondent from Vitebsk. “It is therefore my assumption that the project of the law *On Languages in the BSSR* contains concessions to these powers” [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 167 ob.*]. Here in this final sentence, the mentioned author is specifically referring to the fact that the existing law has not been sufficiently defined with regard to Russian as a potential language of so-called “international” or “inter-ethnic” [*mižnacyjanal’naja*] communication and the language of the Russian national minority and the Russian-speaking population of the republic.

Was this truly the case?

Russian's Place in the Law: the Grey Zone

All letters cited above were alluding to the fact that, if the law *On Languages* was potentially adopted to the full extent of its wording, Russian would *de facto* be given a significant space as the second primary or substitute language of the republic. The wording of a whole score of paragraphs definitely indicated this. For example, it was assumed that citizens would have the right to address state and party authorities, enterprises, institutions and civil organizations in Belarusian, Russian or another acceptable language for the parties involved. State institutions, governing bodies, offices and organizations then had the obligation to accept and handle documents and materials both in Belarusian and Russian. Potential replies to citizens' requests, questions etc. should be made to them in Belarusian or, upon their request, translated into Russian. The same applied to investigative and judicial documents and other documentation for the persons involved in judicial or other proceedings. In other words, this documentation was to be provided to them "in the native language or other language that they speak" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2100, l. 30 ob.]. The refusal on the part of a public official to accept and handle requests in both Russian (i.e. in the language of existing "inter-ethnic communication") and the state language (i.e. Belarusian) was punishable according to existing legislation.

In addition, according to the law project, public officials, the employees of party, civic and other associations and other workers had a legal obligation to know both languages, Belarusian and Russian, in the extent necessary to carry out their work. The laws, regulations, records and other documents of the higher authorities of the republic's state power were to be approved in Belarusian, but were then to be published in both – Russian and Belarusian – languages. Inscriptions on the stamps, seals and forms of the state administration and other organizations were to be created in Belarusian and, if necessary, in Russian.

The matter, however, did not end here. While the language of the bureaucratic agenda and mutual official communication between state and party offices, institutions and civic organizations in the republic was primarily Belarusian, the language of the bureaucratic agenda and documentation in companies (Bel: *pradpryjemstva*) was again either Belarusian or, "if necessary", Russian. Technology and project documentation was also to be prepared in either Belarusian or in Russian, even without the vague condition of "if necessary".

According to the draft of the law project, personal documents (passports, diplomas, marriage certificates, etc.) were to be printed in a combination of Belarusian and Russian. In the area of services (commercial, transport, healthcare and others), Belarusian was to be used, "or, if necessary, another acceptable language for the parties involved", which in the vast majority of cases was Russian. An individual who went to a notary office and did not speak the language of the state bureaucratic or other agenda still had the right to be provided with the texts of the requested documents in Russian. Similarly, legal services could be provided in Belarusian "or another acceptable language for the parties involved".

In addition, one of the most important articles of the law, Article 22, *The Right to Education in the National Language*, also stated that "the Belarusian SSR provides each citizen of the republic with the right to training and education [*prava na vychavannie i atrymannie adukacyji*] in the Belarusian or Russian language" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2100, l. 31]. Finally, instruction of Russian (together with the instruction of Belarusian) was mandatory for

all basic and secondary schools in the republic. As is evident, the law project was thus very loyal in terms of the use of Russian as the second most widespread language in the state.

The formulation of “Belarusian *or Russian if necessary*” mentioned above and common for the law evoked distinct uncertainty (i.e. in its de facto vagueness of the concept of what is *necessary* or *needed* and primarily when this *necessity* arises or will arise) and was often considered to be a sign of the inconsistency and ambiguity of the whole law and the efforts to establish Belarusian as the only state language connected to it. Therefore, these formulations often caused perplexity and evoked harsh critiques from respondents: “The highly frequent use of explanations such as ‘*or Russian*’ will most likely make this law functionless,” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 77 ob.] claimed one of the respondents to the members of parliament in December 1989. “The vagueness of the expressions and wording and the extremely drawn-out deadlines for implementing the law will provide the opportunity to prolong the process of its validation forever. It is possible that the creators of the law wanted to preserve the existing situation in order to prevent any significant changes from taking place. The deadlines to an extent of 10 and 5 years place today’s enforcers [of the law] outside the framework of their responsibility for the results of their actions in enforcing the law. The position of the language’s statehood is so unsteady because it is always confronted with the alternative ‘*or*’. For the whole time, it has shyly groveled before Russian, which has allegedly come under true danger due to the establishment of Belarusian’s ‘statehood,’” friends and members of the historical-cultural and political club *Pachodnia* (Torch) wrote from the regional city of Grodno in another letter [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 203].

“If it is passed, it will be the worst [language] law in comparison to [language] laws in other countries,” said Josif Bychaviec from Vitebsk Region as one of the many critical voices. “It will change practically nothing, as the law is confused and its sections mutually contradict one another. They are written in an unspecific way, i.e. it is not the language of laws, but the language of our previous regulations and resolutions, which used to be unanimously passed with no one responsible for their enforcement.” He went on: “It is evident that true experts worked on the project, who understated the sharp points of conflict and managed to make too big a commotion” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2100, l. 223].

As is evident from the letters, one of the most common targets of criticism in this sense was Article 8 of the project, *The Language of Agenda and Documentation*, which primarily regulated the language of the bureaucratic and state agenda. According to this article, “The language of the agenda and documentation in institutions (including those that are under Soviet subordination²) is Belarusian and Russian if necessary” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2100, l. 29 ob.]. This drafted formulation elicited numerous indignant reactions and questions [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 225 and others]. “Disagreement is arising with the [8th] Article concerning the bureaucratic agenda, which states that this agenda can be conducted in Russian. I guess this is a loophole for the enemies of Belarusian, allowing them to avoid shifting this bureaucratic agenda into Belarusian” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 168] one letter pertinently states. “According to the wording of Article 8, Russian can be used

² At the time, the BSSR was still a part of broader Soviet industry and had close industrial, business and other contacts with Russia and other republics of the USSR. For example, there were numerous companies on the territory of the BSSR that provided components for factories and companies in Russia. Such a company was “under Soviet subordination” (in other words, the main company was located in the USSR or its republics and a branch of it in the BSSR).

'if necessary' in the bureaucratic agenda. Is it not possible to include just about anything into this 'necessity'? This term 'if necessary' needs to be specified; it should not be used to create loopholes for bureaucrats" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 225], one of many letters criticizing the vagueness of the project's formulations noted. "What does this 'necessity' actually entail? The cases in which such a 'necessity' arises needs to be specifically stated" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 39], said one author from the town of Masty.

The workers of a Minsk metro construction project as well as the members of the *Association for the Belarusian Language* in Novopolock (Bel: Navapolack) made almost exactly the same request in their collective letters: "The words '... and if necessary Russian' need to be omitted from Article 8" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 140, 231]. In other cases, the author strictly declared that "Belarusian should become the only state language throughout the whole territory of the republic, and it should do so without any excuses like 'or' [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 187] and so on".

Naturally, there are isolated incidences of more radical reactions in letters supporting the law, calling for the law to "omit Point [i.e. Article] 3, *The Right of Citizens to Use Their National Language*, as this point [article] provides the opportunity to the inhabitants of the republic, even Belarusians, to avoid the native Belarusian language in their everyday lives," which came from the historical-cultural association *Vytoki* from Vawkavysk [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 215]. Nonetheless, even such exaggerated reactions in defense of the language can be explained by previous and long-term Russification, the contemporary absence of Belarusian in the education system and public discourse of society at the time, and the general upheaval and national emancipation sentiments at the beginning of the 1990s.

Neighboring States: a Role Model and an Anti-Model

Nonetheless, despite the law's evident loyalty towards Russian described above, concerns were voiced regarding the creation of grounds for possible national and interethnic (*nacyjanal'nyja i mižnacyjanal'nyja*) conflicts that the law would provide via its very existence. This primarily concerned references to the Baltic states and other post-Soviet countries, which were frequently used strictly as anti-models.

These opinions and contexts in which these states are mentioned are highly diverse and often contradicting. The Baltic states are referred to in two cases – as a positive example of the accentuation, preservation, promotion, and even glorification of the national language and, on the contrary, an anti-model of the "locals' fanatical adherence" to the national language, which eventually results in discrimination according to linguistic and national attributes and grows into unmasked chauvinism, especially against Russian-speaking individuals. It is highly symptomatic that this very argumentation, i.e. the promotion of the national language, is almost automatically likened to the slogan "Down with Russians!" and continues to radicalize in this manner. In this context, the warning examples of conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and other states are also frequently cited.

In connection to the future adoption of the law on a single state language, some respondents predicted an almost tragic chain of events with consideration to the developments in the Baltic states. "Passing laws on citizenship in the Baltic republics has led to the suppression of the rights of other nationalities, the strengthening of interethnic conflicts, and even

political strikes in Estonia. If these laws on citizenship and a national language in the Baltic republics are not directly amended, this can lead to a highly dangerous interethnic confrontation in the future,” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 25] one respondent noted. “If you introduce a status only for Belarusian, it will lead to an interethnic confrontation between Russians and Belarusians! It will be the same as in Nagorno-Karabakh! Do you want that?” other respondents stated in a collective letter and continued: “The opinion of the majority may not be ignored, and ethnic conflicts must not be artificially incited ...” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 104-104 ob.]. Fortunately, today with the benefit of hindsight, we can claim that these pessimistic scenarios of development concerning the national language issue have not materialized.

In addition, the roles of the neighboring states as were mentioned above have been indefinite. The same examples, states and the arguments linked to them were used on the contrary as positive examples of “love and respect for one’s own language” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 14 ob.] as a result of the adoption of similarly conceived language laws, which had already frequently been in long-term operation.

Save the Language – Save the Nation

Letters usually began with a statement on the disconsolate situation in which the Belarusian language presently found itself. In this context, respondents often used expressions such as “spiritual Chernobyl” (*duchoŭny Čarnobyl*) for their description in order to emphasize its graveness and urgency [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 66].

The nation itself and its existence are often associated with the persistence of a full-fledged national language and, on the other hand, the national language is an unconditional and primary attribute of national existence. This attitude can be summarized via a phrase from one of many similar letters: “Language, as it is known, is the primary attribute of a nation, which underlies all its other attributes” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 6]. It is for this reason that the rescue of the national language within the law being discussed and promoted is understood as the rescue of Belarusians themselves, the Belarusian nation and also often as the reinstating of historical justice. “Granting Belarusian the status as the state language of the Belarusian SSR is supremely crucial; it is likely and truly one of the last opportunities to salvage the Belarusian language and thus also the Belarusian nation, and this decision will be historically justified,” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 191] one letter begins. “A person differs from another in appearance, face and clothing, while a nation differs from another – in language. Therefore, language is the holiest sanctuary of nations. Losing language equals death. Therefore, this sanctuary should be protected like the apple of one’s eye,” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 217] another respondent from Vitebsk Region began his letter in support for the law project.

“This law,” written at the beginning of another multiple-page letter from Vitebsk, “is to avert one of the terrible tragedies of the Belarusian people, that is the destruction of the Belarusian language and thus the destruction of the Belarusian nation that follows it. ... For many years, the Belarusian language and the history of the Belarusian people has been persecuted, and it must be noted that remarkable results have been achieved in this respect: a huge blow has been dealt to the practical use of Belarusian, i.e. the use of the native Belarusian language has been destroyed in social establishments, schools, universities, companies

and institutions. The bureaucratic agenda has been transferred to Russian, all on the backdrop of constant discredit and denigration to Belarusian and, contrarily, the promotion of everything Russian. All of this has evoked a negative attitude towards the mother tongue in a part of the Belarusian population" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 166-166 ob.].

Another collective letter from the cultural-educational association *Ahmień* (Hearth) from the town of Byelaazyorsk (Bel: Bielaaziorsk) signed by 56 people even considered it (i.e. the language law) to be a "Law designated to confirm the decisive intent of the government to save the Belarusian language, and this means saving the Belarusian nation with its unique culture from complete self-destruction" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 156]. At the same time, opinions were voiced that "when a language dies, after a certain time the nation itself will die out as well" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 128] etc. [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 1, 14, 24, 128 and others].

The overall attitudes that a number of respondents have towards the law can be summarized in the following: "During *perestroika*, a serious step has been taken towards the revival, preservation and expansion of the use of the native language on the state and ethnic territory of the Belarusians. As is known, the language of the Belarusians is unused now in both public and political discourse, but also in the family environment and everyday life. History is giving us Belarusians one more chance to reverse this injustice and revive our own mother tongue, culture, rich traditions and customs and survive into the future as an independent nation. Granting the Belarusian language status as the only state language will help our long-suffering nation preserve its national individuality [*nacyjanalnaja samabytnasć*], cultivate a feeling of [national] self-awareness, national dignity and pride to be called a Belarusian. This acknowledgment shall prevent the nation from dissolving and disappearing from the face of the earth together with its rich culture and history," wrote a retired "veteran of labor" (*veteran pracy*) Mikalaj Nasko from the capital city in support of the law [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 110]. This author openly calls the law "a great event in the history of the Belarusian nation" and a law that will "ensure the constitutional protection of Belarusians' native language and stop the violent process of its further eradication" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 110].

A number of letters written by various respondents in a similar tone share this opinion. Thus, one can read from other letters that "the language's statehood is a star that will illuminate the path to the revival of the nation, the Belarusian people, our sovereignty and culture" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 5], "If there is no language, there is no nation" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 24], "Language is like an invisible thread that links each person to the country of his forefathers and his native land" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 278], "The Belarusian language is the soul of our nation, it is the voice of our mother earth [*matka-ziamlia*]" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 141], etc. [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 114, 166, 128 and others].

In this context, some respondents turn to the classics of Belarusian literature (Pimen Pančanka, Alieš Harun, Francišak Bahuševič and others) and cite relevant excerpts from their work [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 109, 125, 183 and others].

In this sense, only few respondents remain wholly neutral and impassive, as the language is dealt with explicitly as the highest national value that connects many generations and whose existence is now quite unclear. Therefore, it is no surprise to encounter the opinion, especially in collective letters, that "We are Belarusians, and we must acknowledge

our national pride and stand up in the defense of our mother tongue” [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 109 ob.*], or “providing Belarusian with the status of national language is the only path to saving it from definitive demise” [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 97*] etc.

As is evident from the analysis of correspondence, the law often elicited strong emotions, which were shared by a number of respondents, such as this author typically claimed: “In my lifetime, I would very much like to see my native Belarus be Belarusian, hear the native language everywhere and feel like a full-fledged person. The means and energy spent on this can never be too great. In conclusion, I would like to express my feelings during the reading of the law project. The law project on the Belarusian language, despite its deficiencies [here the author is referring to the inconsistency of some formulations regarding the use of Russian and its broad use secured by the law in general – A.M.], has aroused a feeling of heartfelt love for our long-suffering country. It has sown the hope that not all is lost for the Belarusian people, and the indifference and apathy to everything happening will disappear. It is like a second wind” [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 169-169 ob.*].

Letters very frequently called for the publication of the individuals who took part in creating the law *On Languages* [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 1 ob.; d. 2512, l. 1-4 and others*]. This usually concerned thanking or informing the general public of the figures behind it.

Shortening the Transition Deadline and Concerns About Bureaucrats from the State Administration

Special attention should be given to proposals that appear frequently. They concern shortening the deadlines for transitioning to the Belarusian language in the state administration and education. These specific suggestions and commentaries follow the general support for adopting the Act *On Languages*. The target of criticism is usually the 10-year period for transitioning to teaching in Belarusian at basic, secondary, vocational, tertiary and other schools and universities [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 16 ob., 17, 18 ob., 22, 25, 50-52, 75-75 ob., 90-90 ob., 99 ob., 109, 111, 112, 114, 116, 121, 137, 144, 170, 185, 187, 191 ob., 194 and others*]. “In all respect to the *Project*, I can in no way reconcile with the fact that still one more generation of Belarusians will be deprived of education in Belarusian. ... It is an extremely lengthy deadline. It was most likely created so that bureaucrats could easily retire without having to bother with studying Belarusian,” Jaühien Laürel from Minsk noted in his letter entitled *Ten Years in Vain* [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 8*].

“My dear people – another whole generation will grow up without the knowledge of their native language!” another author declared, “We must realize this!” [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 193*]. The following author, Alieš Jaževič, noted in this regard: “The Soviet of Ministers of the BSSR [Saviet Ministraŭ BSSR] is suggesting to me – a Belarusian – to learn my native language in some cases for up to ten years, and all of this with cases and grammar that are nearly identical to Russian. This must be a bad, insulting joke, not the state negotiations of grown men. Who do they [in the government] think I am?!” [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 233 ob.*]. “The ten-year deadline is a clear insult to the population,” manual laborer Viktor Sciepanovič from Minsk concluded his letter, and such comments were not rare [NARB, *f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 124*].

“It is very sad that the deadline for realization [in Article 6 of the *Project*, which made the knowledge of Belarusian mandatory for state officials] allows for three to five years,” noted a secondary school teacher of the Belarusian language and literature from the Kletsk district. “Have the senior officials and other such staff been living in Africa and have never heard Belarusian words? I am sure that a foreign language can be learned over the course of five years. I guess that an adequate period would be one to two years. ... If a superior begins to speak in the native language, then the subordinates will also stop being Russified [*perastanuć rusicca*]” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 211].

In addition to the drawn-out transition deadline, the realization of the law itself as conceived by state bureaucrats also frequently raised concerns. “The most disconcerting of all is that ... party functionaries and bureaucrats will do anything to save their positions, which means that no transformations will take place in our long-suffering country,” were common thoughts frequently voiced by respondents [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 135 ob.].

Other authors often noted that it depended on high-ranking officials in senior positions whether “the people will speak in their native tongue. Therefore, they must first learn the [Belarusian] language, and without delay” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 122].

“The population of towns and villages strives to speak in the same manner as the state offices and institutions that they are to rely upon. In addition, each local administration must use the language used by the staff of its superior institution. Which means,” Aliaksandr Babič from the town of Hlybokaye [Bel: Hlybokaje] stated in his letter, “that if our government, all the central governing authorities, offices and universities of the republic use Belarusian in both conversation and the written agenda, the necessity to create such a complicated law on languages would probably not arise. Then the population of the republic would not abandon its language, but on the contrary would request the opening of Belarusian schools. Everything in the republic would be in its place. Once the republic’s leadership begins to speak Belarusian, the whole matter concerning the revival of the Belarusian language will proceed much quicker than the law on languages anticipates” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 207].

More constructive and pragmatic proposals usually included the establishment of a specific institution responsible for enforcing the law and also instating punishments for its improper implementation (e.g. violation of the transition deadline, etc.). “In order for the whole effort of the revival of Belarusian not to remain merely on paper, every article [in the text of the law] must be linked to a responsible organization, e.g. the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Justice,” respondents from Polock proposed in a collective letter. “It is necessary to instate accountability for those who fail to adhere to the law in agreement with the set deadline” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 137 ob.] etc.

Numerous proposals were made to introduce language examinations for officials and provide material and financial benefits for more quickly learning the language and so forth [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 150]. Letters suggested devoting greater attention to the promotion of the language via civic institutions, public advertisements in Belarusian, shifting announcements in urban and nation-wide transport to Belarusian, and so forth [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 7-7 ob.; 2512, l. 213]. There was also discussion of the necessity to organize short-term preparatory language courses for the study of Belarusian [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 227].

A very frequent reason cited for shortening the deadlines proposed by the law was the proximity or relatedness of both the Slavic languages – Russian and Belarusian, which in the respondents' opinion would significantly speed up the study of Belarusian for those who did not know the language hitherto, those who were to begin learning it, or those who had forgotten it due to the lack of active use and thus subsequently ease the following shift to this language at the state level [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 120, 122, 145, 228 and others]. Respondents typically speculated that “the Belarusian language, which is a kindred language and easily comprehensible to Russians, Ukrainians, Poles and all those who know Russian well, could be in several months learned by the population, the vast majority of which moreover consists of Slavs” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 145], or that “our language is not so complicated, and it is easily understandable for those who have a fluent grasp of Russian and speak it, regardless of whether the individual is hearing Belarusian for the first time or not” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 229], etc.

Proposals on shortening the deadline for transitioning teaching into Belarusian often came from the target groups of secondary school teachers, students and university teachers whom the law was to affect. “More than 800 students took part in the discussion on the *Act*. The primary conclusions are as follows,” wrote the docent of the Department of Philosophy of the Belarusian State Polytechnic Institute [now the Belarusian National Technical University] Anatóľ Šastakovič in December 1989. “The deadline for transitioning instruction of all disciplines [areas of study] at the university into the Belarusian language, which is supposed to take a decade, is completely unsuitable; it is unnecessary to do things in such a way. ... At universities, just like other schools, the teachers are primarily Belarusians and so are the students. They know the language, and are only lacking practice [the last sentence was underlined by the author in the text]. Over the course of three, at most five years, each higher education institution will completely transition to instruction in the Belarusian language without any complication, but only under the condition that practice will be adopted by the law” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 112].

The next respondent expressed typical resentment: “The 10-year deadline is absurd; it is a continuation of the process of unteaching Belarusians their mother tongue! Over the course of 2 to 3 years, one can perhaps even learn Chinese ...” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 75 ob.]. “I think that the program of language revival should be carried out over the course of 3 to 5 years, as an individual can learn to walk and talk over the course of two,” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 185] claimed another letter.

Criticisms also arose concerning the length of other deadlines. For example, a common proposal was to shorten the deadline for transition into Belarusian in the provision of various services (transport, commercial and others) from five years to three and so on [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 16 ob., 77 ob., 99 ob., 114, 116-117, 118-118 ob., 120, 127-128, 185 and others].

As an argument for setting an earlier deadline for transition to Belarusian in the educational system, a group of students from the Polytechnic Institute of Novopolotsk [now Polotsk State University] (Bel: Navapolack and Polack) mentioned the example of the interwar nationality policy of *Belarusization*³ in the 1920s, when non-Belarusian senior

³ *Belarusization* was a Soviet nationality policy to intensely promote the Belarusian language into all areas of public discourse of that period and also to promote and support the development of Belarusian national

officials [*kiraŭniki*] and teachers arriving in Belarus managed to learn Belarusian in a very short time [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 18-19]. Many other respondents also refer to the experience of interwar Belarusization in the BSSR in support of the proposition to speed up the transition to Belarusian and shorten its existing deadlines [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 7; d. 2512, l. 25, 114 and others].

Historical Argumentation and the Belarusian Orthography Reform of 1933

In other letters, authors often rely on a different historical argumentation and use it to support their opinions, and this argumentation deserves special attention. For example, some respondents traditionally point to the significance of the Belarusian language over the course of Belarus's more distant history. This primarily concerns the legacy of the medieval statehood of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which incorporated ethnically Belarusian lands and the role of (Old) Belarusian (Bel: *starabelaruskaja mova*) associated with it. At the time, (Old) Belarusian was used in the Duchy as the official language of state documents, legislative acts, the judicial system, etc. In addition, references are made to the legacy of Belarusian scholar, intellectual and pioneer of Eastern European book printing Francišak Skaryna, who translated biblical and other religious texts into (Old) Belarusian in the first half of the 16th century [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 219].

The question of reinstating historical justice as a reaction to the past wrong-doings of Soviet and even earlier Tsarist Russification often surfaces in connection with the issue of the Belarusian language [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 24]. In this regard, mention is made of the massive Russification that accompanied the annexation of ethnically Belarusian territories by the Russian Empire and the subsequent and definitive demise of the Rzeczpospolita at the end of the 18th century, of which the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a part [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 219].

Most frequently, critique of Russification was focused especially on the Soviet period [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 219 and others].

“The people's language, which was once taken from them, must be returned,” said an author from Grodno. “I am referring to the closing of Belarusian schools and decreasing the use of Belarusian, which has almost completely disappeared. All of this has happened due to [communist] party leadership, as schools were closed (i.e. transitioned to instruction in the Russian language) without the people being asked about it. The same has been done with culture, art and ideology. Now they are imposing so-called bilingualism on the people ...” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 46 ob.].

In his letter, correspondent from the regional newspaper *Hrodzenskaja praŭda* [Grodno's Truth] Liavon Vaško noted that “genocide against Belarusians, the destruction of our culture, the profanation of our sacraments and Russification were all a part of the policy of the TsK KPSS [the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union] and the TsK KPB [the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus]. ... As a result of Russification during the Soviet period, Belarusians lost much in terms of accumulated

culture and Belarusian studies. Belarusization took place on the territory of the BSSR from 1924 to 1929. For more details, see Marková, Alena [2021]. *The Path to a Soviet Nation. The Policy of Belarusization*. Paderborn: Brill Schöningh.

language culture. Huge losses took place during Stalin's period. The treacherous Belarusian [orthography] reform was one of the first steps taken against our Belarusian word" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 37]. This concerned the well-known reform of Belarusian orthography from 1933, the primary goal of which was to bring the Belarusian language closer to Russian and artificially eliminate potential grammatical and other differences that were seen as "artificial barriers" between the two "fraternal" languages. A number of originally Belarusian words and terms were therefore replaced with Russian equivalents, and phonetic and formative elements characteristic of Russian were incorporated into Belarusian grammar. Belarusian was put in danger of losing its existing individuality and lost its line of defense against assimilation with Russian.

In this context, a whole score of letters propose to abolish the orthography reform of 1933 and renew or return to the original Belarusian grammar elaborated by linguist Branislaŭ Taraškievič, author of the first manual of Belarusian grammar from 1918 (or so-called *taraškievica*, which was in effect during the period of Belarusization in the 1920s and was later amended in 1933) [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 99, 102 ob.-103 ob., 124, 128, 134 ob., 136, 187, 190, 194 and others]. One of the primary reasons for the return to Branislaŭ Taraškievič's original grammar, besides undoing previous Russification interferences by Soviet authorities, was the return to and greater emphasis on the individuality of Belarusian as the national language.

According to one of the authors, it was this communist reform from 1933 that "intentionally mutilated Belarusian and transformed it into a 'croaking' language, ridding it of its original charm and softness" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 103]. Therefore, it is necessary to "begin work on cleansing the Belarusian language of Russianisms and perfecting [its] grammar (i.e. returning the softness and euphony to the language)" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 145 ob.] as other letters propose.

The collective letter from the cultural-educational association *Ahmień* (Hearth) was addressed directly to the Commission on National Education and Culture of the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR, calling on the Commission to "carry out a language reform and restore Belarusian's grammar, which was persecuted in the 1930s, as it provided the language its visual and national uniqueness" [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 158]. The same appeal was formulated by the members of the historical-cultural association *Vytoki* (Springs) [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 215]. Some respondents went even further, proposing a discussion on returning to the Latin alphabet, i.e. to Belarusian transliteration in the Latin alphabet instead of Cyrillic, which was also related to Taraškievič's original grammar [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 190]. One can even find a direct attempt to write in the so-called "Belarusian Latin alphabet" (*bielaruskaja lacinka*) made by some respondents in their letters [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 233 and others].

In addition to these thoughts on the language reform, a number of letters contain other relevant proposals for better implementation of the law. These typically dealt with the creation of a state institution (commissions, etc.) to defend the language in the media. This institution would have to "supervise the use of words characteristic for the Belarusian language instead of loan words [from other languages] in printed media and television broadcasting. These measures are crucial for preserving the language, as one today can encounter numerous words borrowed from Russian in every newspaper or book despite the existence of relevant Belarusian equivalents. Similar institutions have already long existed in other

republics,” argued a group of respondents from Polotsk (Bel: Polack) [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 136]. It is characteristic that these tendencies are highly similar to the revivalist attempts at so-called “linguistic purism” that were so typical of the period of national emancipation in the 19th century [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 145 ob. and others].

In addition, many respondents utilized the debate on the law to propose the reevaluation of Soviet toponyms that appeared during the Soviet period and did not correspond to original Belarusian names and the rules of Belarusian word formation [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 232 and others]. In this context, the author of one letter suggested “returning all Belarusian toponyms in Belarus that have been stolen [ukradzenyja] from the city of Minsk” and so on [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 194 ob.].

Voices of Protest

How can the arguments used by individuals in opposition of Belarusian as the only state language be summarized and classified? The majority of cases involved arguments on the unnecessary material and financial expenses that the campaign would cause after shifting the bureaucratic, state and other agenda including the education system, changes to street names, etc. into Belarusian [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 112-113, 149 and others]. In the respondents’ opinion, this was a valid reason in the current economic, social and generally transitional crisis to stop the campaign to promote Belarusian as the only state language and defend the existing bilingualism or preserve Russian as the primary state language, as was the case in earlier Soviet times. For example, a collective of teachers from a secondary school in the Minsk district thought that “instating the single state language over the course of ten years will require great expenditures, but it will not provide more bread or goods” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 129]. “Is there no other place to direct our resources? Have all the social and cultural-educational questions except for the promotion of Belarusian been solved?” asked an anonymous author in a letter [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 149]. Finally, another respondent from the Korma (Bel: Karma) district of Gomel Oblast noted that “this *Act on Languages* will not bring a single extra gram of meat, milk or pair of shoes” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 107 ob.].

These arguments were clearly and intimately known to the supporters of the *Act On Languages* on the other side of the ideological field of discussion, and the polemic was thus shifted from personal and media debates to letters. Correspondence in support of the law therefore often contains immediate rebukes and counterarguments aimed at these imaginary opponents and adversaries of passing the law for economic reasons. “I do not see especially great economic costs here [in the transition],” stated for example one of the other many respondents, “with all things considered, the personnel and the machines will remain, and only the language will change” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 234]. “These activities [putting the law into effect and promoting the language] cannot be measured with money. The native language is not an economic category, but something much greater” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2512, l. 190], came the argument in another letter, etc.

In some cases, opponents of the language law used other arguments, which included mentioning the inability and undeveloped nature of Belarusian as an independent language for the linguistically autonomous or self-sufficient development of science, research and other branches of the society’s full-fledged existence [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 2 ob.].

In wholly isolated cases, individuals cited the outrage that, in their opinion, would accompany the enforcement of a single state language as a result of adopting the language law [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 20].

Some authors expressed themselves in a broader manner and focused on the Belarusian intelligentsia in general, pointing to the insurmountable difference in the approach to linguistic and cultural problems caused by almost abysmal social and class differences: “And all of these authors, cultural actors, reporters and many pedagogues [...] loudly exclaim: the nation ‘is dying,’ culture – ‘the same’. And what is it to them? All the problems of their everyday livelihood have already been solved; they now want the respect and esteem that they are momentarily lacking and naturally want dearly. ... I don’t think the simple folk like me, the laborers and peasants, will understand you” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 76-76 ob.] the author expressed his opinion, which we would today label as typical hate speech due to the references to the language, social position and nationality of the individuals involved.

Another author from the village of Chlyaby [Bel: Chliaby] in the Pinsk district in Polesie proclaimed in a similar spirit that he was highly “shocked at the hysteria which has lately arisen in questions concerning the Belarusian language”. “I think,” he continued, “... you’ve been spoiled by your idle life in your [capital city of] Minsk! I wish they’d drag you here to our swamps!” [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 156].

Some respondents also saw conspiracies and snares behind the promotion of the law on the part of the American CIA and personally by its director John Foster Dulles, who predicted the fall of the USSR as a result of each of its nations speaking its own (national) language, etc. [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2511, l. 57 ob.].

Final Statistics: Conclusion

Based on the overall analysis of existing correspondence, we can conclude that from the total of 448 letters (193 collective and 255 individual) containing the opinions of 16,185 individuals that were delivered as of 25 January 1990 directly to the address of the Commission on Nationality Policy and Inter-Ethnic Relations under the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR, 13,833 people (i.e. the signatures of 151 collective and 155 individual letters) expressed their support of Belarusian as the only state language. According to the analysis of correspondence, 2,352 people (42 collective and 100 individual letters) were against adopting the law. In percentages, this was 86% and 14.5% respectively for and against the adoption of Belarusian as the state language [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2379, l. 125 ob.].

In addition, 489 letters were also originally addressed to radio and television broadcasts, newspaper editorial staff, regional executive committees and the municipal executive committee of the capital city. These statements were then forwarded to the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR and its Commission on Nationality Policy and Inter-Ethnic Relations and thus added to the overall amount of similar correspondence in reaction to the publication of the law project *On Languages in the Belarusian SSR*. In this correspondence, a total of 475 people expressed their favor for passing the law, while only 14 individuals lobbied against it (97.2% and 2.8% respectively) [NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2379, l. 125 ob.].

According to the final comprehensive data of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR, a total of 937 letters containing the statements of more than 16,674 individuals were

obtained. The total number of citizens who supported the law was thus 14,308 (85.8%), while 2,366 individuals (14.2%) were against it. Aside from this, 2,147 citizens from this total number proposed giving state status to both languages (i.e. Russian and Belarusian), and 235 additionally called for a nation-wide referendum to be held on the future wording of the law [*NARB, f. 968, op. 1, d. 2379, l. 125 ob.*]. Overall, more than 20,000 inhabitants of the country made statements in some form or other on the language issue according to data from the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR.

In conclusion, it can thus be said that the discussion on adopting this wholly fundamental language law, which took place from 1989 until the beginning of 1990 and was to decide the fate of the Belarusian language as the only state and official language in the republic, truly involved the participation of a great number of people of all possible age groups and social categories and from all various parts of the country, from both larger cities and smaller villages, and from abroad.

The urgency of this issue and the great acceptance of the law in society at the time is attested by the arguments applied in this discussion and the arguments that respondents frequently referred to. These arguments most often focused on the need to save the national language as the soul and heart of the nation, as without them the nation would be doomed to perish and lose its national individuality; the need to undo previous injustices committed against the Belarusian nation and the national language by Tsarist and primarily Soviet Russification; and also the need to support the national language as the primary basis of the national identity. On the other hand, the infrequent arguments against Belarusian as the state language usually focused on the economic aspect of promoting the law, specifically financing the transition of the state administration's agenda into Belarusian and the resources expended on it in the unfavorable economic situation of post-socialist transformation.

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