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The future of the Belarusian language: is it doomed to extinction? Controversies and challenges in the language maintenance and revitalization

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Abstract

The article analyses the controversial bilingual situation in Belarus. Although Belarusian is an officially recognised mother tongue and the titular language of the state, it is also a minority language viewed as endangered due to the discriminating language policies and general population's indifference. This article reveals the discrepancies between the declared national identity and linguistic behaviour of Belarusians. Furthermore, it investigates the gaps in the language management policies and the obstacles in reversing the language decline. Finally, it attempts to predict the future development of Belarusian and concludes that the language shift requires a change in nation's attitude and groundbreaking political reforms.

1. Introduction

Belarusian is an official language of Belarus, and it is considered as a mother tongue, a symbol of ethnic identity and cultural belonging by the majority of its population. Yet it is running the risk of extinction due to a controversial linguistic situation in the country. On the one hand, it is the titular language of Belarus, an acknowledged Slavic language formed during the medieval times. On the other hand, despite being declared a mother tongue and the co-official state language, it is stigmatised and referred to as a minority or "a back-country language" (Basch, 1998, p. 235) that has been viewed as endangered (Rzetelska-Feleszko, 1997). This article has a threefold aim. First, it intends to provide a brief historical overview of the sociolinguistic situation in Belarus and its impact on the current linguistic and ethnic characteristics of the Belarusian population. Second, it reveals the controversies in the language status and its public perception by evaluating the data of the population censuses. Third, it outlines the obstacles in reverting the minority status of Belarusian. Finally, Crystal's prerequisites for language progress are implemented to make a prognosis for the future of the Belarusian language (Crystal, 2000, pp. 130–141).

Belarus is one of the 15 independent states that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR. Similar to other post-Soviet countries, it formed a sense of statehood in the past and had a rich cultural heritage, which was a promising indication for

building a solid national identity framework as a natural outcome of the collapsed Soviet ideology (Hall, 1995). However, because Belarus was the most Sovietized and conservative of the USSR's republics, it had weaker foundations for building its nationalism. Potocki (2002) notes that despite being one of the most economically advanced republics in the USSR, Belarus was also the most backward in terms of national and civic identity. It remained under a strong influence of Russia for a variety of political, economic, and military reasons, which has reflected in the bilingual situation in the country with the marginalisation of Belarusian and the dominance of Russian. During the post-Soviet transition period, the government has concentrated all efforts on preserving the economic prosperity thereby neglecting cultural and language spheres. Adopting Russian as the primary language and treating Belarusian as a folkloristic attribute has raised concerns about the potential loss of national identity and independence together with the language and culture as their essential elements (Ioffe, 2003). Schöpflin (2000) states that "If there is a language, then its speakers constitute a community; if a community has its own language, it must be a nation; and as a nation, it has the right to constitute its own state and become a subject of history". If a language decline occurs, the country's independence is called into question. Hence, language can be the primary incentive for the national revival.

There have been attempts to explain the complicated linguistic situation in Belarus through the prism of Language Maintenance and Language Shift (LMLS) and thus to contribute to the understanding of how and why language shifts occur. Fishman (1991, 2001) views a language shift as the expansion or retreat of a language in various language use domains in a multilingual society and language maintenance as the preservation of a language in its original domain. Li Wei (2000) mentions that LMLS mainstream research has primarily focused on the factors which accelerate or inhibit language shift and cause maintenance (age, religion, family relations, to name a few) while little attention has been devoted to the process of how individual speakers on the micro-level respond to macro-level societal pressures. Sloboda (2009) attempted to examine the process of LMLS itself and investigated the language shift phenomenon both from the societal and individual perspectives by incorporating the Language Management Theory (LMT) framework (for further details see Sloboda, 2009; Sloboda & Giger, 2008).

In sum, it is important to attend to the questions of language maintenance in Belarus, analyse its linguistic problems, and seek for solutions as it has a direct impact on the future existence of Belarusian.

2. Historical outline of the sociolinguistic situation in Belarus

In order to understand the current challenges to and controversies over the Belarusian linguistic landscape, it is necessary to examine how it was shaped throughout history. The minority position of Belarusian is the result of a changing circumstantial multilingualism caused by a range of historical events and political upheavals.

The modern vernacular Belarusian has strong ties with medieval vernacular Belarusian; however, modern vernacular and written Belarusian has rather viable ties with (written) Old Belarusian. Decreasing literacy levels and limited education possibilities turned Belarusian into the oral language of peasantry and town dwellers. Polish-, Russian- and Yiddish-speaking communities prevailed in the urban areas while Belarusian population resided in the countryside. Belarusian experienced a further decline when the Russian Empire's russification policies permeated all social, political and legal spheres (Laitin, 1998). Belarusian continued to be viewed as plebeian and carried no ideological value until the advent of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) (Radzik, 2001). During the 1920s, Belarusian developed as a multifunctional state language present in publications, world literature translations, local administration and education. 80% of schools adopted Belarusian as the language of instruction and strived to improve the titular language competence among the illiterate local population and Russian residents (Martin, 2001). Intensive belarusification was part of the Soviet nativization policy (*korenizatsiia*), which supported national cultures and languages in order to create and firmly embed new national territories and ethnicities into the Soviet life (Slezkine, 1994; Hirsch, 2005).

A wave of Stalinist repressions in the 1930s put an end to the flourishing period of the Belarusian language and gave way to the glorification of the Russian language. Although Russian was vigorously propagated, the government did not openly force complete eradication of Belarusian from press, literature, or education (Gorenburg, 2006). However, Belarusian cultural elite was heavily stigmatised, the use of Belarusian was viewed as a national deviationism and competence in Russian as a prerequisite of a true Soviet citizen. Since Russian was an official language of the Soviet Union, it was incorporated into the Belarusian school policy as a mandatory second language in 1938 (Smith, 1998). In 1959, it was allowed to choose the language of instruction, which resulted in the steepest decline of Belarusian language schools in the cities. Within the next decades, the number of Belarusian schools continued to drastically dwindle. By the early 1970s, 51.1% of Belarusian schools were available in the country while not a single one was left in Minsk (Kennedy, 1991, p. 167). Between 1986 and 1987, only 23.1% of Belarusian schools were left. Belarusians supported the Russian language as an expression of their Sovietness and identification with the communist ideology, ultimately developing a negative attitude to their native language. Thus the Belarusian language experienced a sharp decline from the 1930s to 1980s, a period of intensive urbanisation, and a subsequent switch to Russian due to economic reasons and the fear of being labeled a nationalist.

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 gave impetus for the national revival. The Post-soviet countries were actively eliminating the "imperial" language from all public spheres as a sign of protest against the long-term oppression and an expression of pride in their titular languages. Gaining independence resulted in proclaiming Belarusian the country's only official language. A rapid transition from Russian to Belarusian affected all public institutions including schools, where the

Belarusian medium of instruction increased to 75.1% in comparison with 20.8% in 1990. Yet the Belarusian society was not prepared to accept an intensive language shift and weaken the bonds with the former Soviet Union. To alleviate public discontent a new leader, Alexander Lukashenko, organised a referendum in May 1995 where 83% of Belarusian voters agreed to give the Russian and Belarusian languages an equal status. Russian was granted the status of the second official language, which constitutionalised bilingualism in Belarus and strengthened the advancement of Russian and ostracism of Belarusian. Kuzio (1998) believes that making Russian the second national language may seem to be in line with the liberal policy, but the continued dominance of the Russian language means that this would not promote equality.

3. Controversies in the language status and national identity

An official population census was implemented as a research tool to obtain the language data and identify the linguistic trends in Belarus. The population census is a valuable instrument that provides a full picture of the country's population at a particular point in time when data is collected in contrast to other surveys, in which information is collected from only a small part of the residents. According to Yaukey (1985), a modern census has four key elements: 1) it is universal (enumerating everyone in the census area); 2) it is simultaneous (everyone is counted at the same time to minimise the underenumeration or overenumeration); (3) it is periodic (everyone is counted at regular intervals in order to track changes in the population); (4) it is individual (it enumerates different descriptive personal variables: age, sex, race, etc.).

The population censuses of 1989, 1999, and 2009 conducted in Belarus highlight an ambiguous position of the Belarusian language. The data reveals that although the proportion of those who identify themselves as Belarusian is increasing, the Belarusian language use is dramatically declining. As Figure 1 shows, the number of people who consider themselves Belarusians has increased from 77.9% to 83.7% while the size of the minority groups has been decreasing since 1989 (National Statistical Committee 2010).

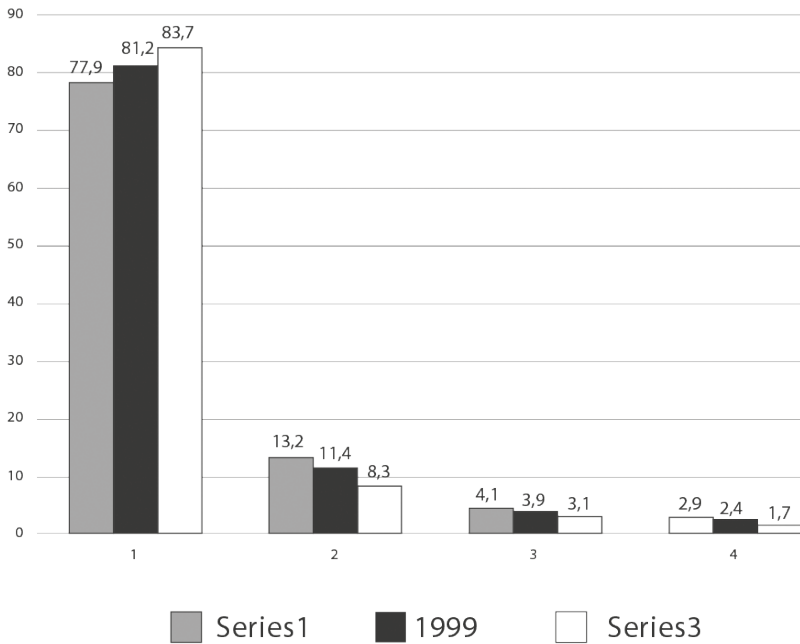


Figure 1. Population of Belarus according to ethnic group (1989–1999–2009)

There is a possible twofold explanation for this trend: it is either the result of assimilation and identity change of the minority groups with the emergence of the Belarusian independent state or vice versa the growing national consciousness of Belarusians who previously identified themselves with another ethnic group. The biggest controversy lies in the discrepancy between the population's identity and their linguistic behaviour. While the overwhelming majority view themselves as Belarusians, they show a strong emotional and cultural connection to Russia and its language as seen in the results of the 2009 census (Figure 2). The decline of the Belarusian language is often linked to Lukashenko's rise to power when the choice of language in daily life started to be associated with one's political affiliation. Since Russian is regarded as the official language of culture and politics and Belarusian as the language of the opposition to Lukashenko's pro-Russian regime, Belarusian speakers have often been persecuted and excluded from politics and public institutions.

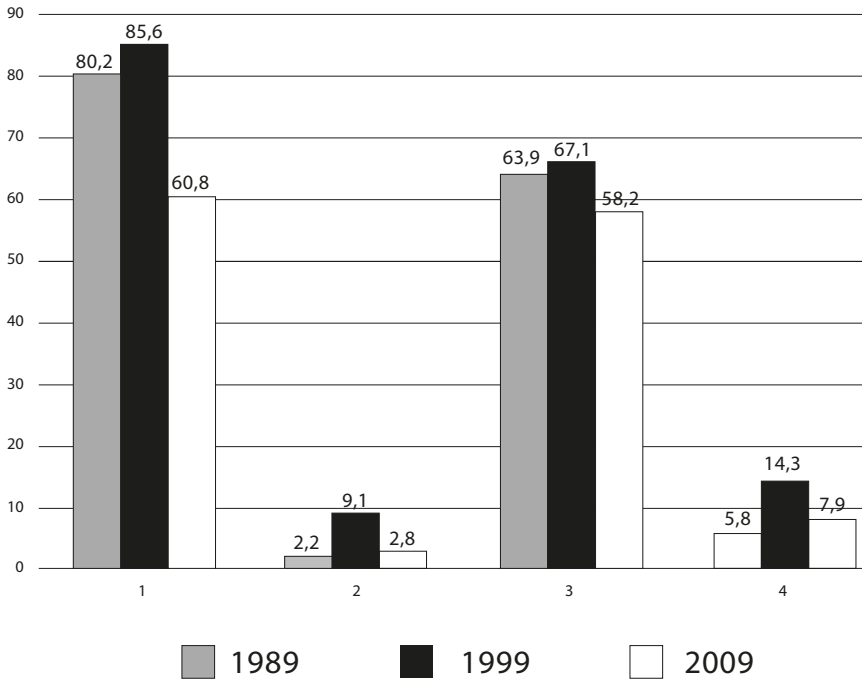


Figure 2. Ethnic groups declaring Belarusian as their mother tongue

The percentage is even lower in terms of using Belarusian in home settings, which indicates the actual viability of the language (Figure 3).

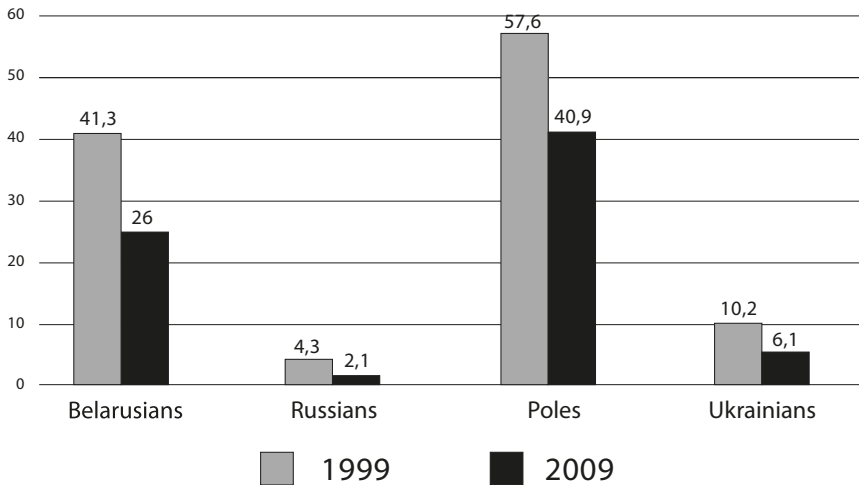


Figure 3. Ethnic groups speaking Belarusian at home

The Polish ethnic group (295 000 people) demonstrates a striking result when it comes to the Belarusian language. In relation to the total group size, 40.9% of ethnic Poles speak Belarusian at home, while the share of Belarusians comprises only 26% (out of 9.5 million people). Polish, rather than Belarusian, ethnic communities actively preserve Belarusian culture.

Another indicator of the Belarusian language endangerment is an alarmingly low rate of the urban population using Belarusian at home. Out of 75%, slightly over 10% of Belarusian city dwellers speak Belarusian at home, and this figure is lower in large cities (Figure 4).

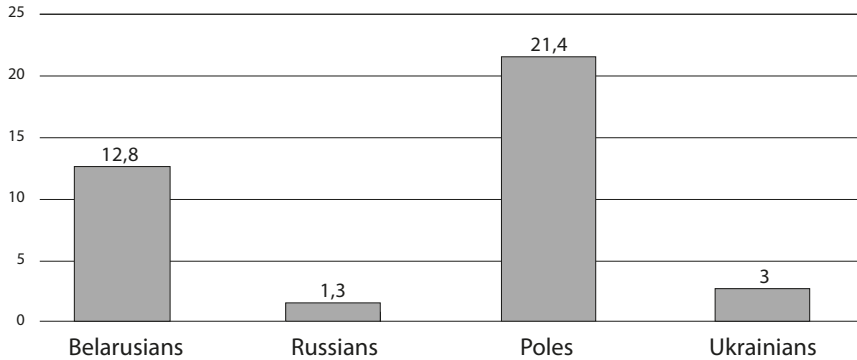


Figure 4. Urban population speaking Belarusian at home, 2009 Census

Hence, Belarusian dominates among the dwindling rural population. Meanwhile, the urban centres have formed independent Russian-speaking communities, which does not inspire hope for a prosperous future for the Belarusian language.

Despite presenting a clear picture of the population language treatment, the census data is not devoid of limitations. The first one is related to the categories “native tongue” and “language usually spoken at home”. The high percentage of Belarusian as a declared mother tongue accounts for the habitual public perception and enforcement in mainstream discourses that it is still the nation’s native tongue regardless of the Russian usage on a daily basis. The category “language usually spoken at home” is problematic since the Census disregards the fact that a significant part of the population speak mixed Belarusian-Russian varieties, known as *trasianka* (meaning a mixture of hay and straw, low quality cattle food), particularly widespread in towns and rural areas. “Mixed Belarusian-Russian” option was not included in the survey. Rural population confirm that their language is a “simple/plain” Belarusian-Russian mixture and standard Belarusian, the language in its pure form, is attributed to professors, language professionals, writers, TV and radio presenters (Sloboda, 2006; Woolhiser, 2003). The use of standard Belarusian is also associated with the “nationally conscious” minority group, who view it as a “core value” of the Belarusian national and their own personal identities (Smolicz, 2002). The “nationally conscious” are often young people opposed to President Lukashenko’s

regime, thus speaking standard Belarusian classifies them as “oppositionists” who are not particularly welcomed in Belarusian society. On the other hand, speaking a Russian-Belarusian dialect is perceived as shameful in urban settings, especially if used by young people. These speakers are called “villagers”, who are usually looked down on and are believed to belong to a lower social class and to be poorly educated. For this reason, some speakers of dialectal Belarusian develop a sense of inferiority and turn to Russian (Bieder, 2001, p. 465). Kittel (2010) measured the usage of Belarusian, Russian, and mixed speech and concluded that the Belarusian-Russian hybrid is not only widespread in both urban and rural settings among speakers of all educational levels but also has a higher probability of survival than either Russian or Belarusian. It is hard to predict how long this regional sub-variety will last considering its declining usage among younger population, but it remains to be an element of Belarusian identity. Finally, it should be noted that despite the high prestige of Russian, all ethnic Belarusians know Belarusian passively. Viewed in this light, Belarusian as a mother tongue carries a rather symbolic, mythical function that demonstrates cultural bonds with the native land but bears no relation to actual everyday speech.

4. Current language policy and language management challenges

According to the national statistics, the Belarusian language is losing its ground to Russian and is facing major challenges for survival. Despite the stipulations in the language legislation regarding the parallel bilingualism in the country, there is no equality in the language distribution. Article 50 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus (1994) stipulates that:

Everyone shall have the right to use one’s native language and to choose the language of communication. In accordance with the law, the State shall guarantee the freedom to choose the language of education and teaching.

The Law on Languages (No. 187-3/1998, <http://www.pravo.by>) also stipulates that the state should guarantee the development and functioning of Belarusian and Russian in all spheres of life and create the conditions for all the inhabitants of Belarus to acquire and fully command these two languages (Article 2). The law grants citizens the right to address any state authority in these two languages. The body of the state administration shall attend to the matter in question in Belarusian or Russian (Article 3).

The primary language management challenge is related to the violation of language legislation and employment of the linguistic policy that implicitly promotes Russian and marginalises Belarusian. Although Belarusian is the titular language used to an insignificant degree in official documentation, it is Russian which remains omnipresent in all communicative spheres: higher education, science, business, legislature, and others.

The pro-Russian orientation is not overtly expressed in any official manner, but a range of individual cases exemplify this tendency. The Belarusian language journal *Narodnaia Vola* (NV) published multiple reports highlighting the discrimination of Belarusian in a variety of discourses. For example, in September 2001 the Central Electoral Commission refused to accept ballots written in Belarusian (Smolicz and Radzik, 2004, p. 524). There were incidents in courts where judges refused to hear cases in Belarusian due to their alleged Belarusian language incompetence. This violates the stipulation that the Belarusian judicial system is bilingual and its representatives are obliged to be proficient in both languages. Other cases were recorded at post offices rejecting the telegrams written in Belarusian, at hotels refusing to accept check-in forms in Belarusian because of the inability to register them in computers, in public transportation where the passengers speaking Belarusian were accused of “fascist” sympathies and forced to get off. The police avoid communicating in Belarusian and a random encounter of a standard Belarusian speaker often results in checking their identity and detaining them for questioning on suspicion of belonging to the political opposition (Smolicz and Radzik, 2004, p. 524). Undeniably, these individual accounts do not represent the public attitude as a whole, which is rather apathetic than openly hostile to literary Belarusian speakers.

Among other domains, Russian also dominates in entertainment and business. The use of Belarusian in the media is extremely limited. Belarusian children are deprived of Belarusian-language children’s programmes and cartoons. Films and music are almost non-existing in Belarusian. Russian mass media industry occupied 97% of TV broadcasting leaving no space for Belarusian or any other minority language. The native language is gradually disappearing from the visual space (shop signboards, billboards, product labels and other items) (Kruchkou, 2002).

Aside from the discriminating linguistic policy, another language management obstacle is related to the linguistic affinity of Russian and Belarusian. It is common practice that the interlocutors use different languages (Belarusian and Russian) in conversation and easily understand each other. Mutual comprehension and effortless accommodation to each other’s language is characteristic of all adult Belarusians with the exception of some ethnic Russians who frequently understand but cannot speak Belarusian or its regional variety. The linguistic situation in Belarus is an example of receptive bilingualism, which presupposes understanding of both languages but using only one of them in conversation (Bilaniuk and Melnyk, 2008). As a result of this mutual intelligibility, Belarusian speakers lack any incentive to use Belarusian routinely. Considering the pervading presence of Russian in Belarusian society and the general public indifference to the native language, one can also speak of the emergence of replacive bilingualism occurring when the dominant language supersedes and eventually replaces the mother tongue (Kloss 1969, p.71; Zaprudski 2007). The presence of the receptive and replacive bilingualisms contradicts the proclaimed idea of a harmonious bilingualism involving an equal language use and distribution. There is a need to establish another type of bilingualism which can allow another language to co-exist with the mother tongue without threatening it.

5. Prognosis for the future of Belarusian

If no measures are taken to promote the spread of Belarusian, the language will remain on the brink of extinction. An overview of the current linguistic situation in Belarus shows that the language is in jeopardy and should be placed on the endangered list. In order to preserve the Belarusian language, certain conditions should be fulfilled. David Crystal (2000, pp. 127–144) enlists six factors that can trigger language revitalisation. He postulates that an endangered language progresses if its speakers:

1. Increase the language's prestige within the dominant community
2. Increase their wealth relative to the dominant community
3. Increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community
4. Have a strong presence in the education system
5. Can write down the language
6. Can use electronic technology.

In the case of Belarusian and the dominating Russian speaking community, increasing the language prestige seems to be an urgent measure on the way to revitalisation. It is vital to change the population's attitude towards their mother tongue and abandon the image of a "villager" associated with the use of Belarusian. The government should launch campaigns to change the national consciousness and encourage taking pride in their native language and culture. Increasing wealth relative to the dominant community seems to be an irrelevant and unachievable step in the context of Belarus due to the poor economic conditions and limited resources. In terms of legitimate power, both languages are officially acknowledged and presuppose parallel use in public domains. However, as described in section 4, this is usually not the case. Pro-Russian political regime is an unavoidable hindrance to increasing legitimate power, which is unlikely to change unless the government takes the initiative. Having a strong presence in the education system is an arguable point. On the one hand, both state languages are obligatory in all general secondary schools (Law on Education, 95-3/2002: Article 5). Belarusian language and literature and the subject of "My country Belarus" are taught in Belarusian. Final examinations at secondary schools include an obligatory exam in one of the official languages based on the student's choice. The university entrance examinations are offered in Russian and Belarusian language versions. Thus the minority language is present in the education system; however the interest in Belarusian language instruction is continuously declining. Russian-language education has dominated since the 1995 Referendum, which resulted in the closure of Belarusian-language classes in bilingual schools. Reluctance to promote Belarusian language education is motivated by the lack of interest from school administration who, in addition to their negative attitude to Belarusian, finds it expensive and inefficient to teach in two languages (Bulavatski, 1998). Another important reason is the limited use of Belarusian at universities, which makes it less attractive to the youth. The statistics show that in 2005–2006, 54% out of approximately 325,000 students studied in Russian, 2% in Belarusian, and 44% in both languages (Ministry of Education, 2005). The final two conditions for language revitalization, i.e. writing down the

language and using electronic technology, are satisfied since Belarusian language and literature are included in the curriculum and the majority of ethnic Belarusians know the language passively regardless of their unwillingness to use it. Crystal's prerequisites pinpoint the complicated and weak position of the Belarusian language and emphasise the meager chances of shifting it away from the minority status.

While the further fate of Belarusian language is uncertain and insecure, Marti (1998, pp. 354–361) predicts the following scenarios for the Belarusian language development:

- 1) It might be officially recognized as a minority language and protected by the government. Preserving Belarusian would require the implementation of an effective protective policy against the stronger Russian language. However, with this scenario Belarusian is highly unlikely to be the language of daily communication.
- 2) Despite being recognized as a minority language Belarusians would collectively strive to restore its status of the majority language. In this case, a change in the nation's perception and in the political situation is a necessary prerequisite. Undoubtedly such development would be most favourable, but the chances for its realisation are small.

When there is a strong favourisation of the dominant language and no preventive measures are taken, the following language policies may be implemented:

- 1) A strengthening language policy aiming to actively promote the stronger language;
- 2) A conservative language policy in order to maintain the status quo;
- 3) A compensatory language policy to eliminate or reduce the existing imbalance (Marti, 1998, pp. 354–356).

In the present Belarusian language situation, the first two approaches dominate (Marti 1998, pp. 355, 361). Realistically assessing the current course events, the nation's passivity and conformity to the political regime, Belarusian is likely to preserve its minority status.

6. Conclusions

Through the course of history, Belarus has undergone periods of linguistic and cultural repressions. With the exception of a few brief revivals in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Belarusian language has almost always been in a subordinate position, which led to its weakening. History has shown that politics has been the most influential factor in shaping the status of Belarusian. Politics may be a major culprit in language decline, yet it may be the most effective instrument in reverting the language status. To sustain and revitalize the Belarusian language, policy makers alongside with linguists and language activists need to be actively engaged in devising and disseminating the most viable mechanisms for language promotion. Unfortunately, at the moment Belarusian politics does not show much interest in the country's native language. One can keep speculating about the fate of the Belarusian language, however it is evident that its future depends on the political development of Belarusian society.

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Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest próba analizy kontrowersyjnej dwujęzycznej sytuacji na Białorusi. Mimo że białoruski jest oficjalnie uznanym językiem ojczystym niepodległego państwa, jest on również językiem mniejszościowym, uważanym za potencjalnie zagrożony, ze względu na dyskryminującą politykę językową i indyferencję społeczności. Artykuł przedstawia socjolingwistyczną sytuację na Białorusi i uwidacznia rozbieżności pomiędzy tożsamością narodową a zachowaniem językowym. Ponadto omówiono luki w polityce zarządzania językiem i trudności w odwróceniu tendencji obniżania poziomu językowego. Co więcej – w opracowaniu podjęto próbę określenia kierunku rozwoju języka białoruskiego. Wnioski z przeprowadzonej analizy pozwalają stwierdzić, że odrodzenie języka białoruskiego wymaga zmiany nastawienia narodowego i przełomowych reform politycznych.