

Syarhey Zaprudski

LANGUAGE POLICY IN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS IN THE 1990s

The Republic of Belarus, established in July 1990, partly inherited the language policy pursued by the BSSR in the last year of its existence. To a great extent, this policy was determined by "The Law of the BSSR on the Languages in the Belarusian SSR" adopted in January 1990. Article 2 of this law declared the Belarusian language the only official language in Belarus and qualified Russian as the "language of international relations among the peoples of the USSR." However, this law did not regulate the use of languages in unofficial communication. Various articles of the law were going to be gradually introduced during the next three to ten years. The adoption of the law on languages should be considered both as the result of external factors and a significant victory of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF).

The law on languages, adopted in 1990 after the Belarusian language had suffered a long period of decline between the 1930s and 1980s, should be seen as a legislative means aimed at defending a

weaker language. At the same time, the law stipulated a much broader use of the Belarusian language, which was supposed to change from a minority to majority language in the future.

Language legislation and related practical measures that were not secret but brought before the public were a novelty for state institutions of post-Soviet Belarus. No special bodies existed that could design and pursue a language policy, therefore, in the initial stage of implementation, the executive branch had to rely on the intellectual resources of a non-governmental organisation, which had experience in this field, the Belarusian Language Society (BLS) founded in June 1989. Thus, in May 1990, BLS together with the Ministry of Education of the BSSR held a scientific and practical conference entitled "The Official Status of the Belarusian Language: Problems and Ways to Implement the Law." In September 1990, the Council of Ministers adopted "The State Programme for the

Development of the Belarusian Language and Other National Languages in the BSSR" that stipulated a number of measures for implementing the law over the course of the 1990s.

Both in the BSSR and the USSR, the discussion regarding language problems in Belarus was under the control of the party. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, the declaration of independence of the Republic of Belarus and the suspension of the CPSU and CPB, possibilities of free speech increased greatly. The USSR, the regional superpower, was now gone from the world map, an independent Belarusian state emerged and protests arose among the Russian-oriented population, which to a large extent comprised the Belarusian elite. Just yesterday they identified themselves exclusively with the USSR and had no need for contact with the Belarusian language or culture. Finding themselves in this completely new situation, these people argued that the existing legislation is poorly grounded and attempted to discredit both the new linguistic trends and the social and political groups behind them. With Belarus adopting a multiparty system, language issues became an essential element of political discourse. Democratically-oriented figures fiercely competed for the right to speak on behalf of "the true" democrats and the political environment in Belarus saw many ephemeral pro-democratic associations seeking their own niches.

For example, following the establishment of the United Democratic Party of Belarus (UDPB) in November 1990 (the first party in Belarus), one year later the Movement for Democratic Reform (MDF) was founded, the program of which differed from that of UDPB only in respect to cultural issues. Inevitably, MDF used the new cultural policy as the arena for demonstrating its political views. The movement loudly criticised the 1990 language legislation for being undemocratic and accused BPF, the major democratic force in Belarus at the time, of Bolshevism, russophobia, isolationism and of "arousing national instinsts." In March 1992, MDF spoke in favour of granting the official status to both Belarusian and Russian "due to the linguistic situation that has developed and to give the citizens free choice in regard to the language of education" (*Narodnaya Gazeta*, 7 March 1992). With reference to the existing linguistic situation, MDF suggested that the perspective language policy be replaced with a retrospective one corresponding to the previous state of affairs. Proclaiming the antidemocratic and anti-liberal character of the 1990 law on languages and claiming that it "violates an individual's right of self-determination" (*Femida*, no. 21, 24-30 May 1993), MDF members and the publishing house "Eridan" compiled and published a draft law "On Languages in the Republic of Belarus" that provided both Belarusian and Russian with official status.

This activity of the "liberalist" parties forced the United Democratic Party of Belarus to clarify its attitude towards language legislation. In November 1994, UDBP's central council ordered its political commission to prepare a statement regarding the

right to freely choose the language of education and the need to enforce it. The program of the United Civil Party (UCP, a 1995 merger between UDPB and the Civil Party) stated that the citizens must have "the right to choose what language their children are raised and taught in." Granting parents the unconditional right to choose the language in which their children are taught, would probably have resulted in the parents choosing the language that in their eyes had real social advantages. Therefore, in this case the weaker and less prestigious Belarusian language would have become a victim of the emerging democracy in Belarus, should such an approach have been adopted.

The left was also active in the first half of the 1990s. Although in the late 1980s the Communist Party of Belarus (CPB) was forced to support (through the BSSR Supreme Soviet) the law that made Belarusian the only official language, in the 1990s, following some internal changes, it reverted to its original position. In the early 1990s newspapers supporting left-wing parties launched a campaign of discrediting existing language legislation and its practices. Two-language state model was a non-compromise demand in the programs of the Movement for Democracy, Social Progress and Justice (MDSPJ), founded in November 1991, and the Popular Movement of Belarus founded in December 1992. In September 1993, left-wing movements held a congress of the people of Belarus that adopted a resolution demanding to "remove violence and discrimination from language policy, adopt official bilingualism (Belarusian and Russian), legitimise the right of parents to choose the language of education for their children."

The media started a heated debate on whether the adopted language policy was justified and correctly implemented. The discussion showed that for Belarusian to be more widely used, more purposeful and focused efforts should be made in comparison with those employed by state authorities at the time. For example, the introduction of Belarusian in higher education and science encountered specific difficulties due to a shortage of teaching aids and scientific literature in Belarusian. The discussion also revealed that there were people in Belarus who categorically did not accept the existence of an independent Belarusian language, nor approved of any practical steps taken towards its development. It was primarily those people who saw the Belarusian language as inferior that became the foundation for establishing the pro-Russian party "The Slavic Union — White Rus" in August 1992. In its program, which the party adopted in December 1993, the Belarusian language was classified as merely a "regional" language and a dialect of the Russian language.

The Belarusian parliament regularly discussed Belarusian and other languages in the first half of the 1990s. It is worth noting that the 12th Supreme Soviet (that convened in May 1990 and which was domi-

nated by Communists with 86% of the seats) was not particularly interested in becoming actively involved in the use of Belarusian on a broader basis. Nevertheless, due to the declaration of Belarus' sovereignty, gradual de-monopolisation of the party's power and the suspension of communist parties in the USSR and BSSR (CPSU and CPB, respectively), communist MPs were forced to succumb to the efforts of the few national democrats. Consequently, laws on culture and education were passed in June and October 1991 that either directly referred to the law on languages (in the former case) or even slightly supported it (in the latter).

However, as the situation in countries neighbouring Belarus changed (former communists won elections in Lithuania, growing resistance to Yeltsin's reform appeared in Russia), BPF lost its influence in the parliament, CPB was resurrected in the summer of 1992 and the Supreme Soviet lifted its ban on the party in February 1993, the situation inside the country also began to change. In the first half of 1992, the former nomenclature set up the "Belarus" faction in the Supreme Soviet and began to oppose BPF's democratic and independence-oriented initiatives, primarily on the grounds of the weak position of the national democrats in language issues. For instance, when Supreme Soviet Chairman Stanislaw Shushkevich refused to sign a Belarusian-Russian collective security treaty in May 1992, the "Belarus" faction immediately "blackmailed" him by holding a referendum about the official status of the Russian language. The proposal to make Russian the other official language in Belarus, first voiced by deputies of veterans' organisations, became an increasingly more frequent issue in the Supreme Soviet.

Language issues were also debated in parliament in 1993 while preparing a new constitution. The parliamentary working group attempted to preserve the previous version of the article on language; however, neither that version, nor any amended one, was passed in May 1993. During the parliament's fall session, the version stipulating Belarusian as the only official language received even less support than in the spring. As all hope for passing the language article was virtually lost, the parliamentary constitutional commission attempted to leave it out altogether. However, this was strongly opposed by the commission for culture and historical heritage.

The practical implementation of the law on language encountered great difficulties, as the new language policy was being pursued simultaneously with economic reform that lowered living standards and was not always welcomed by the people. Some people, including the ideologically orthodox workers, associated (probably unconsciously) the ideologically "adverse" reconstruction of economic life with the new language policy aimed at creating advantages for the Belarusian language. This inspired their exceptionally aggressive attitude to the new trends in the linguistic situation in Belarus.

At the time, the educational system was the most receptive to implementing the law on languages, and

during 1990–1994 the situation in secondary schools radically changed to the benefit of the Belarusian language. Teachers of Belarusian enjoyed a 10% salary bonus. Higher educational establishments also began to experiment with teaching in Belarusian, and some pedagogical institutions taught solely in Belarusian. Meanwhile, loud protests from the people to revise the language law, the vague and unstable political situation during the first years of independence, the lack of will from the government to implement linguistic reform (and as a result mistrust of the people in regard to the state's intentions in this respect) as well as the general atmosphere of transition characteristic for early 1990s, resulted in the development of a strong state and legal nihilism and hampered the implementation of the 1990 law on language. With no faith in the



newly-acquired independence and having no idea which way the political wind will blow, many state functionaries found it better not to take any noticeable steps to implement the law on languages, as this would allow them to stay in the mainstream should for some reason state independence be lost and the Soviet political system restored. Top level officials remained indifferent in regard to the need to implement the language law; most of them used only Russian in public speeches anyway.

Another factor that made it complicated to implement the language law in Belarus was the fact that the 1990 law did not really set legal principles

but presented “a manifesto of national and linguistic self-identification,” as Ms. N. Myachkowskaya stated. In particular, the law did not provide any guidelines should it be violated. Due to its concern regarding the poor implementation of the law, the Minsk City Council petitioned the Supreme Soviet at the beginning of 1993, requesting the right to de-

in Belarus to deal specifically with language issues. In March 1993, the 3rd Congress of the Belarusian Language Society suggested that the Supreme Soviet set up a commission to pursue an integral language policy in the Republic of Belarus. This suggestion was, however, ignored.

Nevertheless, the new constitution adopted in March 1994 contained an article that affirmed the official status of the Belarusian language; however, the same article maintained the right “to the free use of the Russian language as a language of international communication.” The text was copied almost in full from the 1990 law, however, in the 1990 law, Russian did not have the status of a communication medium between different ethnic groups inside Belarus. The affirmation of Russian as the language of international communication unintentionally devalued Belarusian as the only official language. Under those circumstances, it seemed natural to ask whether Belarusian could truly become the only official language in a situation where it was not considered as a means of communication between different ethnic groups.

Whereas the use of the Russian language as a means of inter-ethnic communications undermined Belarusian rather in a symbolic manner, a more serious problem appeared in Article 50 of the constitution that guaranteed “the freedom to choose the language of raising and educating children.” This article was also a response to the continuing debate on this issue. Later, alluded to this article, parents categorically claimed their unconditional right to choose the language of instruction for their children.

In January 1995, the constitutional court generally supported such requests from parents. In its statement directed to the president and Supreme Soviet, the court criticised Article 24 of the law on languages that allegedly obliged secondary schools to use “exclusively the Belarusian language.” However, the constitutional court praised other articles of the constitution that guaranteed “the freedom to choose the language of raising and educating children” (*Zvyazda*, February 2, 1995).

In July 1994, supporters of official bilingualism gained strong support from the first president of Belarus, Alaksandar Lukashenka. Even while an MP, Lukashenka suggested granting the Russian language “a status equal to the official status.” His program prepared for the presidential elections contained a paragraph on “providing a real opportunity for every citizen of the Republic of Belarus to think and speak the language he was raised in.” After his election as president, Lukashenka addressed language issues for the first time when speaking at the Belarusian Pedagogical University on 1 September 1994. The president defended teachers of the social sciences and the Russian language who, as he said, had nearly become pariahs in some higher educational establishments. Alaksandar Lukashenka expressed his criticism of the educational policy (aimed at increasing the use of Belarusian) pur-



*Oppositional action against the election to Parliament,
Minsk, Oct. 14th, 2001.
Photo: IREX/ProMedia*

mand administrative punishment for not observing the language law; the permission to do so was not granted. Despite the fact that the law contained a special article that obliged officials to “speak both Belarusian and Russian languages,” it did not contain any specific principles to enforce this article in practice. In fact, state functionaries were never assessed in regard to their command of the Belarusian language. After the law had been adopted in 1990, no institutions were established



sued during the previous years and said that the language of teaching should not be determined in an administrative way.

Lukashenka's speech at the Pedagogical University was a signal to begin a campaign of support for the Russian language. Just five days following the president's speech, an "Appeal of an Initiative Group" was distributed in the Vitsebsk Pedagogical Institute whose authors, including teachers, demanded that students and teachers themselves choose the language of instruction, "supporting the intentions of the President of the Republic to begin healing the social situation." In September and October 1994 parents in some schools went on strike against the "forced" teaching in Belarusian and, strangely enough, these events were covered by some of the most popular state-owned newspapers.

An interesting episode in the struggle for granting the Russian language official status occurred in the fall of 1994 when a group of members from the pro-Communist Popular Movement attempted to initiate a referendum on various issues, including the language issue. The request submitted by this group was considered by six parliamentary commissions and the Ministry of Justice. All of the seven institutions turned the request down for "more or less the same reasons," as the newspapers wrote. In their refusals, the institutions referred to Article 3 of the law on referenda that forbade holding referenda on issues "violating the inalienable right of the people of the Republic of Belarus to the state-guaranteed existence of Belarusian national culture and language." In October 1994, the central commission for elections and referenda explained to the applicants that the question as to whether the Russian language should be given official status "is directly forbidden by the republic's legislation."

In the fall of 1994, a committee "For the Free Choice of Language in Education" was founded in Minsk, under the aegis of the Slavic Union. On 29 November, the committee led a demonstration of approximately 20 parents, demanding education in Russian, to the building of the Minsk City Council. Footage of this rally, spiced with comments, was shown on state television.

Meanwhile, the manner in which the law on languages was being implemented and the on-going campaign for revising language legislation caused numerous protests from various organisations and parties, such as BLS and BPF. A non-governmental committee for the defence of the Belarusian language was founded at the end of 1994. Moreover, an alternative campaign was underway for Belarusian State University to completely transition to the exclusive use of Belarusian by 1 September 1995. In January 1995, activists of the committee picketed the buildings of the university, Ministry of Education, Constitutional Court and UN post. Later that month, the committee adopted a statement that called on the citizens to inform the Prosecutor's Office about all attempts at violating the official status of the Belarusian language by government employees. On

16 February 1995, the committee published its complaint to the Prosecutor General regarding president Lukashenka.

The president, however, intended to hold a referendum about the official status of the Russian language. He first shared this idea with representatives of veterans' organisations on 2 February, and soon confirmed his intention on 20 February. On 18 March, newspapers published a letter addressed to president Lukashenka, signed by 60 MPs (mainly delegates of veterans' organisations) in which they asked him to initiate a referendum concerning language issues. Three days later Lukashenka spoke in detail about the approaching referendum to the Supreme Soviet, although he did not present the precise questions. At the time, many seemed to believe that a referendum was rather unlikely, in view of the 1994 refusal. This was the opinion of Valery Tsikhinya, chairman of the constitutional court, expressed during a press conference on 22 March. He justified his point of view with Article 3 of the law on referenda. On 31 March, the general assembly of the Humanities Department of the Academy of Science adopted an appeal not to include a language-related question in the referendum.

Nevertheless, Lukashenka filed his proposal of initiating a referendum comprising four questions to the Supreme Soviet. However, the proposal was turned down on 11 March, after the parliamentary commissions had debated the proposal and objected to three questions, including the one on languages. The president responded by threatening the Supreme Soviet with holding the referendum without its consent, which resulted in more than twenty MPs beginning a hunger strike in the parliamentary session hall. However, on the night of 12 March they were thrown out of the Supreme Soviet building by a military detachment acting on orders of president Lukashenka. This extraordinary event resulted in the demoralised deputies violating procedure and adopting a resolution to hold the referendum on 13 March. On 26 March, the parliamentary commission for culture and historical heritage filed a request to the constitutional court to consider the legitimacy of the Supreme Soviet's resolution but the court refused to hear this case.

The referendum was held on 14 May 1995. The first of the four questions was as follows: "Do you agree with granting the Russian language equal status with Belarusian?" According to official data, voter frequency was 64.8%. Of those voting, 88.3% (53.9% of all eligible voters) voted "yes" with respect to this question. Numerous violations committed during the preparation and holding the referendum soon came to light.

First, Article 3 of the law on referenda was violated (the law mentioned above that forbids the holding of referenda on such issues).

Second, Article 148 of the Constitution did not permit any changes or amendments to the constitution during the final six months of the parliament's term of office.

Third, members of the referendum commission were appointed in violation of Articles 18 and 20 of the law on referenda.

Essentially, limitations were imposed on the campaign against the proposals of the referendum. As a result, the referendum had to be carried out under the strict control of the executive power. The state-owned media, especially the electronic media, mainly presented the views of the referendum's initiator. Before the referendum, the Belarusian Language Society twice asked the management of the State TV and Radio Company to allow Society representatives to go on the air. One of the deputy chairpersons of the Society recorded an interview for Programme 2 of Belarusian Radio. The interview was never aired and no explanation was given. Meanwhile, the State TV kept showing activists from the Slavic Union and the committee "For the Free Choice of Language in Education."

The 1995 referendum coincided with the parliamentary election campaign. The OSCE delegation that observed the referendum and the elections concluded that neither complied with international standards of free and fair voting. In particular, the delegation noted the government's control over the media (which resulted in the media broadcasting "edited" or false information), interference of the executive branch in the electoral process, discrimination against political parties, etc. The US State Department issued a special statement expressing its regret about the way and the atmosphere in which the leaders of Belarus conducted the 1995 referendum and elections.

Belarusian society, suffering economic hardships at the time of the referendum, failed to see (and to a large extent did not want to see) the threat posed to the Belarusian language hidden behind the "innocent" formulation of the question regarding the "equality" of the two languages. It turned out that Lukashenka's initiative suited the wishes of a large part of society, which wanted a return to the good old communist times with cheap sausage in shops and no language problems whatsoever. With the help of this referendum, the president of Belarus wanted (as he mentioned to members of Homel city council) to gain public support for his personal conviction that "the Belarusian language is simple and that it is impossible to say anything profound using it."

The results of the 1995 referendum shocked those supporting the broader use of the Belarusian language. It was only six weeks later that the secretariat of BLS adopted an appeal to the citizens of Belarus, questioning the results of the referendum as the expression of the nation's will. The authors of the appeal referred to the uncounted votes of "the people from the new generation — our children and adolescents who have tasted their native language in kindergartens and schools," to the will of "many generations of our ancestors" and "millions of victims of Stalinism and fascism." Moreover, the appeal admitted that "we have now been squelched."

Reacting to the results of the referendum, and hoping to get the situation at least slightly under con-

trol, the Supreme Soviet's commission for education, culture and preservation of historical heritage adopted two resolutions in June 1995. The first recommended ministries and other state institutions to implement various provisions in order to encourage state officials, leaders of organisations and enterprise executives to gain command of both the Belarusian and Russian language. The resolution stressed the need to learn the language, which the officials did not know, to a degree sufficient for them to conduct official duties. The other resolution recommended the Ministry of Education and Science to introduce an obligatory entrance examination involving both Belarusian and Russian in all higher and secondary special educational establishments. The latter recommendation actually only added Russian to the entrance exams lists as Belarusian had already been on these lists. Due to the fact that the term of office of the 12th Supreme Soviet was coming to an end, and the referendum worked against a wider use of Belarusian, the two resolutions had no legal or practical importance whatsoever. Aimed at lowering the status of the Belarusian language, the 1995 referendum was certainly not held to make state officials study and use Belarusian. On the other hand, the recommendation to make all university entrants pass two extra linguistic exams, no matter what they chose to study, sounded like a good idea but had no chance of support.

The statement issued by the 2nd International Congress of the Belarusian Pen Centre, regarding the May 1995 referendum (held in August), stated: "In practice, the introduction of Russian as the second official language will affirm today's real disparity of the Belarusian language and will assist in eliminating it, which means a continuation of the policy of russification and denationalisation of the Belarusian people previously pursued by the Russian empire and then the USSR." The congress adopted the resolution "On Freedom and Responsibility of the Media" that read in part "in Belarus, freedom of speech and press applies only to some citizens, mainly those close to power structures, whereas responsibility for the spoken, published or circulated word is imposed onto others who mainly belong to 'the opposition minority' or the 'Belarusian-speaking' part of the population." Congress documents mentioned that the referendum, the regime's occupation and subordination of the media to state power had paved the way for introducing "reservations for 'Belarusian-speaking' Belarusians." The referendum itself was referred to as a manifestation of "muscle democracy" or "democracy substituted by pseudo-democracy" (Nasha Slova, November 1, 1995).

Previously, advocates of the broader use of Belarusian referred to "the people's will," allegedly witnessed by the population census, whereas after the referendum they were shown the will of "another people," or rather, "another will," according to which the situation of the Belarusian language would be in acceptable only formally, on paper. Therefore, the issue of the Belarusian language having a "real existence" was no longer an urgent matter. The

importance of this lesson for the Belarusian intelligentsia, which is traditionally very strongly influenced by popular convictions, should not be underestimated.

The 13th Supreme Soviet elected in May and December 1995 was not particularly interested in language issues. On the one hand, there were very few MPs who, in the unfavourable situation of 1995–96, would raise the issue of developing the Belarusian language and resolve it in a positive way as no BPF representatives were elected to this parliament. On the other hand, after the idea of belarusification had been crushed by the referendum, this defeat could be used in practice by eliminating some of the acts that promoted the use of the Belarusian language. This was not difficult to do.

The results of the referendum were published on 26 May. On 30 and 31 May, even before the results were approved by the parliament, the Ministry of Education ordered the Russian language and literature to be added to the list of entrance exams of higher and special secondary educational establishments. The ministry explained that the entrants did not have to pass exams on both languages but could choose one of them.

In June 1995, the Ministry of Education published its guidelines in regard to enrolling children in the first grade and kindergartens. This was now to be done according to the wishes of their parents. The administrative offices of schools and kindergartens were instructed to hold parental meetings, during which parents were to submit applications in which they specified the desired language of their children's education. It was correctly foreseen in the ministry's document that such unlimited choice could result in schools becoming bi-lingual, but this was assessed as "a transitional period." The principle of choosing the language was not limited to kindergartens and first grades, it also applied to the second, third and fourth grades.

The new language-in-education policy soon yielded results. Aware of the new trend, a large majority of parents in the city began to choose Russian as the language of instruction for their children. In 1995, 62% of first grade pupils studied in Russian, compared to 25% during the previous year. As a consequence, the percentage of those studying in Belarusian fell from 75% to 38%. The following year (in 1996), this trend continued and the relation was 68% Russian and 32% Belarusian. The number of pupils in the 2nd–4th grades, and sometimes even older, taught in Belarusian was also decreasing, but not as rapidly as in the case of the lower grades. Parents of children who attended Belarusian-language classes in the 2nd and higher grades sensed the change and began to demand those classes be changed to Russian, often ignoring the linguistic habits their children had developed and the terminology they used. Those demands were met.

The 1995 changes in the language structure of schools were accompanied by conflicts among the parents of schoolchildren as well as between parents and school authorities. In the new situation, advo-

cates of Belarusian-language schools in the city often found it difficult to collect enough applications to open a Belarusian-language class even in the larger schools. As a result, they either had to abandon education in Belarusian or look for a Belarusian-language school outside their neighbourhood. As for the 2nd and higher grades previously taught in Belarusian, parents frequently found themselves in conflict over the language of their children's education. While some demanded a change into Russian, others resolutely stood for maintaining the status quo. The choice of the language was in fact in the hands of the school administrations, which forced one of the sides to abandon their demands. Since the general trend of the summer and fall of 1995 implied education in Russian, those conflicts were resolved to the benefit of Russian. When pro-Belarusian parents became only a minority, these conflicts became latent and to a large extent were hidden from the public. In such cases, on perfectly "lawful" grounds and in accordance with the rules of democracy, it was suggested that the Belarusian-speaking children leave the class or school that had only recently had a Belarusian-language status. Sometimes pupils had to change schools several times as each new school they attended would adopt Russian according to the will of the parents. A parent filed suit against the Harodnya administration in 1997 complaining about a school that refused to educate his daughter in the Belarusian language after she had completed the 5th grade. He lost the case. In general, the social situation after the referendum was unfavourable for the Belarusian language and many complaints about violating linguistic rights and freedoms of Belarusian speakers were not considered, let alone resulted in legal action. Some schools themselves initiated changes into Russian and sent notices to the parents demanding that they submit applications for this change of language.

The rapid decline in the number of Belarusian-language schools and classes in the fall of 1995, accompanied by strong administrative pressure, resulted in the Executive Committee of the United Civil Party of Belarus issuing a statement in September 1995. The document protested against forcing the Russian language into school education, and pointed out that some officials interpret referendum results in a biased way. The party demanded that the rights of parents to teach their children in either Russian or Belarusian be not hampered.

Meanwhile, the 13th Supreme Soviet had not approved the results of the referendum. On the one hand, the rapid advance of Russian and the withdrawal of Belarusian were so blatant that they needed no legal grounds. On the other hand, individual leaders of the parliament spoke about the future of linguistic regulations in a way differing from the view of president Lukashenka. For example, spokesman Syamyon Sharetski did not think that the unconditional victory of pro-Russian forces in the referendum should have been affirmed automatically without consideration. The parliament's revision of the 1990 law on languages was delayed

until June 1998, three years after the referendum, when the house of representatives (the lower chamber of the parliament introduced by Lukashenka after the revolt in 1996) amended the 1990 law. The structure of the 1998 law was an almost exact copy of the 1990 law, however, the amended version had no preamble. (The preamble to the 1990 law presented an evaluation of the critical situation of the Belarusian language and stated the need to protect it.) The main characteristic of the revised law was that nearly half of its articles linked the Belarusian and Russian languages with the conjunction “or” (Articles 3, 9, 12–18, 21, 25, 28–30, 32), with “and (or)” being used almost as frequently (Articles 7, 8, 10, 11, 19, 20, 22–24, 26, 27, 31). For example, Article 14 maintains that legal proceedings in the Republic of Belarus are to be conducted in “either the Belarusian or Russian language”; and according to Article 20, the Armed Forces use “the Belarusian and (or) the Russian language.” Despite the official status of both languages declared by Article 2, the excessive use of the conjunction “or” in the text paves the way to using either of them without the mandatory use of the other. The 1998 law consciously pursues a “policy of no policy,” which enhances the disparity between the two languages and forces out the weaker language, Belarusian.

In the fall of 1996 another referendum was initiated by Lukashenka that gave him the support of voters in regard to a draft constitution, which greatly increased presidential power and involved Belarusian and Russian as the two official languages. The conflict between Alaksandar Lukashenka and democrats in Belarus became even more intense. The 1996 revolt presented an opportunity to reanimate activity aimed at a Belarusian-Russian union, the statutes of which were adopted in 1997. Article 38 of the statutes designated Russian the working language of the union’s institutions. Between 1996 and 1999, democratic forces in Belarus held several mass rallies against Belarus’ incorporation into Russia with Belarusian being the prevailing language of these demonstrations. In the late 1990s, the Belarusian administration was not interested in the development of the Belarusian language and the needs of Belarusian-speakers. The use of the Belarusian language was continually being pushed aside. The House of Representatives (the legislative body in the Lukashenka-appointed parliament) prepared official documents only in Russian. Some local administrations have been adopting legislation that banned the use of Belarusian. At the same time, Belarusian-speakers among the political opposition were being repressed. Some of the participants in mass political rallies were detained for speaking Belarusian. During court proceedings some people were forbidden to speak Belarusian or were charged for the services of interpreters.

As the conflict between president Lukashenka and the democratic forces escalated, along with the reduction in the official use of Belarusian and the

“disfranchisement” of politically active Belarusian-speakers, the Belarusian language began to be associated as an instrument for resisting presidential power. People who spoke Belarusian were almost automatically perceived as the opposition (unless they were the most socially backward part of the rural population that speaks Belarusian not because they stand for it but because they do not speak any other language). Having become a way of expressing opposition, the Belarusian language began to be used increasingly more frequently by democratic parties. When addressing the 50th session of the UN Sub-commission for the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in the summer of 1998, Mr. A. Sannikaw, co-ordinator of the political opposition movement Charter '97, mentioned the elimination of Belarusian culture, history and language as well as practices of “conscious mockery and suppression of the language” in Belarus. In February 1999, the Congress of Democratic Forces of Belarus adopted a special resolution entitled ‘The Discrimination of the Belarusian language in the Republic of Belarus,’ concluding that the Belarusian people’s rights for the free development of their native language and culture are being “grossly violated.”

Currently, the Belarusian language faces many challenges. It is insufficiently supported by the Belarusian state, the unfavourable situation of which continues to deteriorate. Issues regarding the development of the Belarusian language are traditionally neglected by the communist parties. As for democratic parties, the majority of them have only recently began to notice that the language is an important element of the Belarusian people’s identity. This realisation was unintentionally inspired by the 1995–2000 state policy, aimed at forcing Belarusian out of normal, everyday use and into the realm of a marginal “opposition-related” phenomenon.

The repressive state policy towards the Belarusian language can be expected to be revised in the near or distant future, regardless of any major political changes occurring in Belarus.

Syarhey Zaprudski, born 1957. In 1983 graduated from the philological faculty of the Belarusian State University, specialisation at Belarusian language and literature and Russian language and literature. In 1983–1986, studies for a doctor’s degree at the Institute of Linguistics of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. Worked in the Institute of Linguistics of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, Belarusian Institute of Theatre and Art and the “Nieman” magazine. Assisting professor at the faculty of history of Belarusian language of the Belarusian State University, deals with social linguistics (language policy, ideology of language, human language rights, language and ethnic identity), history of Belarusian linguistics and Belarusian literature language. From the beginning of the Belarusian Language Society (1989), taking part in its activity. One of initiators of the statement “Strategy of Developing Belarusian Language in 21st Century” (continued by now). Scientific secretary of the International Society of Belaruthenists.