

Mural for the Belarusian Opposition in Wrocław, Poland.



Змагацца

is not “to struggle,” it is “to resist”
– on the situation of the Belarusian language in Belarus

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How does a language become endangered? There are as many answers to this question as there are languages in danger but for the Belarusian language, the answer is the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko. Or is it Alyaksandr Lukashenka?

The first being the English transliteration of the dictator’s name in Russian. The second coming from Belarusian. In 2006, Lukashenka claimed that there are only two great languages worldwide – Russian and English. Belarusian, according to him, is a poor language, which cannot express anything great. Lukashenka has been in power since 1994, the same year the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus was adopted. To see the document, I went to the Belarus Legislation Databank where I read this:

“The online version of the Belarus Legislation Databank contains the complete set of laws of the Republic of Belarus, acts of the President of the Republic of Belarus and the Government’s decisions (only in Russian and Belarusian

language). To search in the Belarus Legislation Databank, go to the Russian variant of this page. The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus and Codes of the Republic of Belarus are available there in Russian free of charge.”

And so, in the Russian version of the constitution “available free of charge,” I found article 17: “The state languages in the Republic of Belarus shall be the Belarusian and Russian languages.” This article effectively makes Belarus a bilingual country, just like Finland with Finnish and Swedish as the two official languages. Well, actually, not at all like Finland.

According to the UNESCO World Atlas of Languages, Belarusian is spoken by about 2.2 million people in Belarus, while Russian is spoken by around 6.7 million. These data align with the results of the latest census from 2019, where only one-fourth of Belarusians reported using Belarusian at home. Additionally, there was a noticeable drop in the number of people who identified Belarusian as their native

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tongue, which was 60% compared to 85% twenty years earlier. With 2.2 million speakers, Belarusian has significantly more speakers in Belarus than the 300,000 Swedish speakers in Finland. So why does UNESCO consider the Belarusian language within Belarus vulnerable?

During his trial in 2011, Belarusian Nobel Peace Prize winner and activist Ales Bialiatski demanded translations of the Criminal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure — the laws under which he was being tried—into Belarusian. He also requested that his trial be conducted in Belarusian. Both motions were denied.

Research conducted by Belarusian human rights activist Alina Nahornaja on the accessibility and discrimination of the Belarusian language in Belarus

documents numerous instances of linguistic discrimination across many aspects of society. According to the study, 77.8% of respondents answered “yes” to the question, “Do you face difficulties when using the Belarusian language?”. The participants also share their personal stories. One participant Hienik recounted: “On the third day [of my arrest for participating in mass protests], the trial finally started for the inmates of our cell. The trial was held online, and the judge didn’t bother going into details. Someone was randomly sentenced to 13 days of imprisonment, someone to 15. I was sentenced to 20 days. And I know why — because I spoke Belarusian.”¹

Since the protests in 2020, official propaganda has started referring to Belarusian speakers contemptuously as “*zmahars*”. The word comes

from the Belarusian “змагацца,” meaning “to struggle,” or “to grapple with something.” In the eyes of the propagandists, zmahars are just powerless trolls, active, especially on the internet. Zmahars, themselves, see their struggle as a road to a better future – a free and democratic Belarus.

Ihar Sluchak, a lawyer and a Belarusian language activist, who has been forced to flee the country due to his human rights activity, says that Belarusian-speaking citizens in Belarus are an unprotected and vulnerable group. According to Sluchak, the access to education entirely in Belarusian (especially in the cities) is limited, the same applies to the healthcare sector. About 1% of all legal acts in the country are written in the language.²

According to the Viasna Human Rights Center based in Minsk, after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, people in Belarus started to switch from Russian to Belarusian as a sign of protest - not to speak the aggressor’s language. While it is possible for a language to survive (and thrive) without a state, it needs people or in the case of the Belarusian language, *zmahars*. People who will send appeals so that more Belarusian appear in public spaces, people who will speak Belarusian even if the reaction they get is “speak a normal language”, people who will teach their kids to be proud of the Belarusian language, people who will resist.³

[1] Alina Nahorjnaja (2023). *Accessibility and Discrimination of Belarusian Language in Belarus*.

[2] Katsiaryna Lutsevich (2024). “The fight for my language made me a refugee” In: *Global Bar Magazine*.

[3] *Language as a protest*. (2024) In: *Viasna*

About Alicja Kiełpińska



Alicja is a Master's student of General Linguistics at the University of Helsinki and a graduate of Scandinavian Studies at University College London. Her linguistic expertise and interest is in researching multilingual communities and their language practices. She is also interested in language policy and how it shapes language use or shift.