

Title: The Russian Language in Belarus: Language Use, Speaker Identities, and Metalinguistic Discourse

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Belarus is unique among the post-Soviet states with respect to the extremely weak linkage between national identity and active use of the “titular” national language. While the percentage of the country’s citizens identifying as Belarusian rather than Russian or Polish continues to increase (from 78% in 1989 to 84% in 2009), and although over the last two decades the majority of Belarusians have become more strongly committed to their country’s independence, Russian remains the dominant language in virtually all social domains. However, given the dominance of the ideological trope “one nation – one state – one language” in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet region, as well as a strong normative bias against official recognition of distinct national varieties of Russian beyond Russia’s borders, the status of Russian as the primary national language of the Belarusians remains highly contested.

In this paper I will examine “Belarusian Russian” as a discursive object, that is, as a construct in explicit metalinguistic commentary and evaluation, framed by ideological schemata based on the notions of “language/dialect,” “national language,” “native language,” “literary language,” and “language purity.” A number of key concepts and insights from cognitive sociolinguistics (Kristiansen and Dirven, 2008) and studies of language ideology (Irvine and Gal 2000) will be employed. I will draw upon a broad range of data representing different ideological orientations, both among elites and counter-elites, as reflected in the official and oppositional press; interviews with government officials and Belarusian opposition activists; and the results of an email survey of Belarusian school and university students, school teachers and university faculty. It will be shown that discursive representations of languages and their speakers in Belarus in effect play a crucial role in constructing or deconstructing entire speech communities, and in legitimizing, reproducing, or challenging the existing language regime.

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