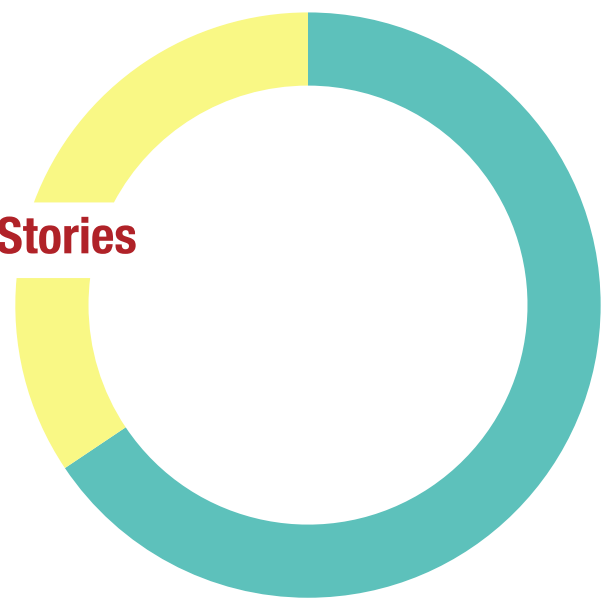


Accessibility and Discrimination of the Belarusian Language in Belarus

Survey Results, Statistics, Personal Stories



Alina Nahornaja

For centuries, the Belarusian language has been facing discrimination and obstacles in its public use – in education, printing, government, and culture. But despite this, Belarusian remained the main language of communication for the vast majority of Belarusians until the end of World War II, even when Belarus was part of the Russian Empire.

In the 1950s, the Soviet government took a course for the complete russification of the whole Belarusian society. This process has been going almost continuously ever since. The only exception was a short period of deceleration, but not a complete halt, of the russification during the first half of the 1990s after . In 1990, Belarusian became the sole state language of what was then the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. However, just a few years later Russian became a state language as well, and russification resumed to be the main state language policy of the Republic of Belarus, despite the country becoming independent in 1991.

The Russian language was granted a formally equal status to the Belarusian language basing on the results of a referendum held in 1995. This referendum was conducted with major violations. Those who opposed it, including members of the Belarusian parliament, suffered repressions.

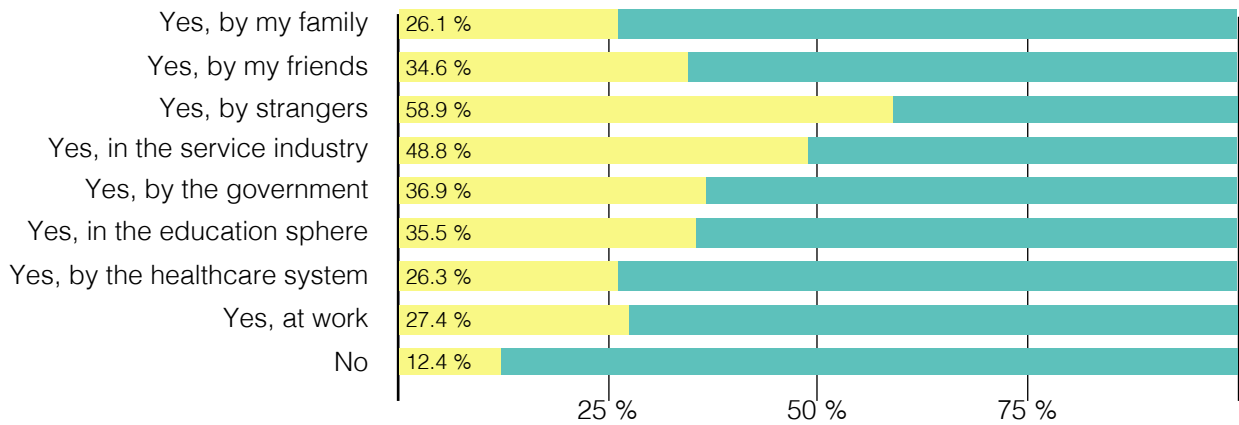
According to the current Constitution of Belarus, Russian and Belarusian are the country's two official languages. But despite their equal status, Russian dominates in all fields of life, and Belarusian speakers face discrimination every day. It is virtually impossible to get education, issue a bank card, buy groceries or get important technical information in Belarusian. If someone speaks in Belarusian to a shop assistant, a state employee, or just a passer-by in everyday life, they would most likely face a reaction to the fact of using the Belarusian language itself rather than to what was actually said. The reaction can be either positive or negative.

UNESCO added the Belarusian language to the list of endangered languages (status: "vulnerable").

We interviewed 482 Belarusian speakers people aged between 15 and 72 living in Belarus. Our survey focused on the accessibility of education, information, and services in the Belarusian language.

This research shows the results of questionnaire survey. It also includes legal information, statistics and personal stories of Belarusian-speaking people living in Belarus.

I am treated unusually because I speak Belarusian (either in a positive or a negative way; if I spoke Russian, I would be treated as usual)



Volha: I started speaking Belarusian actively since this summer. When I said that from now on, I would be speaking Belarusian, my family’s reaction was: “speak a normal language” and “speak normally”.



Siarhiej: Well, even when people try to pay you a compliment because you speak Belarusian, you feel like an African having to listen to people being amazed at how “black” your skin is.



Aksińnia: When I started using Belarusian, my classmates were looking at me like I was crazy.

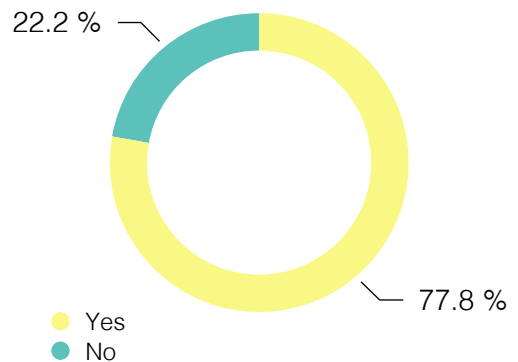


Alona: I went to an information kiosk, and was offered several languages to choose from: Russian, English, Chinese, but no Belarusian. I filed a complaint to get this issue resolved and received an official response saying that “it is technically impossible to add the Belarusian language”.



Hienik: 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.

I face difficulties when I use the Belarusian language



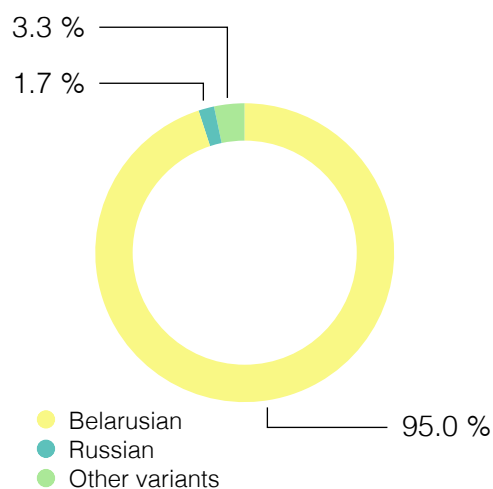
Education and Belarusian language

Technically, Belarusian citizens have the right to education in Belarusian. The Constitution says: “In accordance with the law, the State shall guarantee the freedom to choose the language of upbringing and education.”

According to article 82 of the Education Code of Belarus, the country’s official languages should be the main languages of education and upbringing. The state guarantees its citizens the right to choose one of the official languages for education and upbringing.

There is a caveat: the language of education and upbringing is determined by the administration of the respective educational institution in accordance with the wishes of the students’ parents. The Ministry of Education assumes that Belarusian-speaking schools and classes are opened at the parents’ request. However, it is the local authorities that make the ultimate decisions to open or close schools and classes. Therefore, a parent’s request will not guarantee that their child will be taught in Belarusian.

Which language would you choose if you or your children were to receive education in Belarus?



Kindergartens



Valeryja: You start to feel the discrimination most strongly when you begin raising a child. On one hand, it is very expensive to purchase books and educational materials in

Belarusian, as it is not possible to simply go to the store and find word cards like Russian-speaking mothers can. On the other hand, kindergartens that claim to have a Belarusian-speaking environment are often deceptive. For example, they may be advertised as "Belarusian speaking," but in reality, there might only be one day when activities or instruction in Belarusian actually take place.

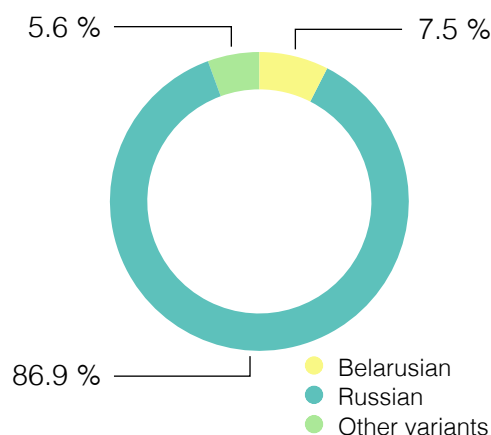


Alaksandr: At the kindergarten, we had to fill out a questionnaire. There was a new question added recently, asking about the desired language of communication with the child. Naturally, we thought: "Great, we can choose Belarusian!" But as I was going to tick the respective box, the employee responsible for the documents rushed to me and moved my pen away, saying: "Please, do not select the Belarusian language." I asked: "What's the problem? This question is part of the questionnaire, and I want my child to be brought up in the Belarusian language, since I'm offered such an option".

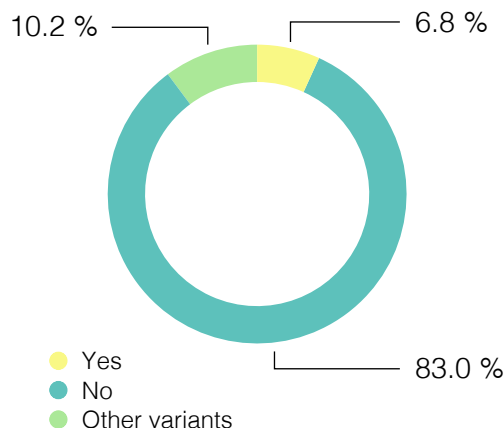
We've been arguing for ten minutes, but the employee managed to persuade me to tick the box for "Educate in Russian".

What's worth mentioning is that we were looking for a Belarusian-speaking kindergarten in our neighbourhood, and there was one not too far away. But there was a long waiting list, so if we had decided to go there, we wouldn't be able to get in.

Which language did you and teachers use to speak when you went to kindergarten?



Did your parents have the option to choose Belarusian language for your kindergarten education?

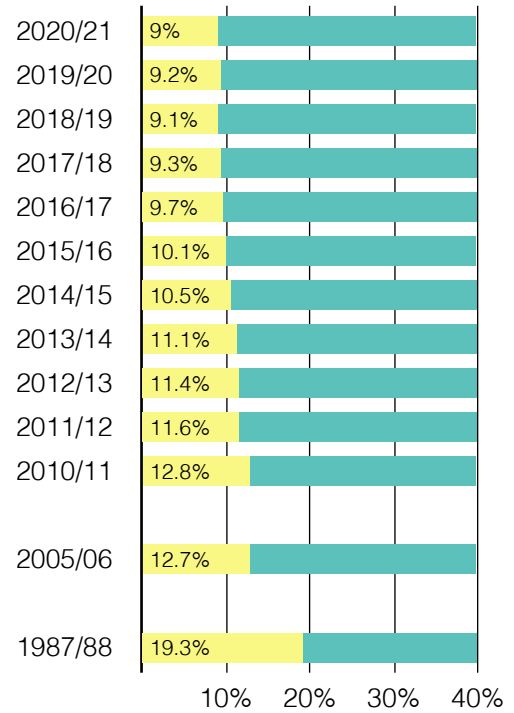




Alaksandra: In the Pieršamajski District of Minsk, some parents wanted to have a Belarusian-speaking kindergarten group. Our district administrations usually say that such groups don't exist because there is no demand. In this case, the demand was clearly there, and the parents requested for the group to be set up. The officials tried to worm their way out of this. They were saying that it was impossible. The parents kept pushing and demanding week after week, and the administration kept refusing.

Eventually, the parents went to court. But the court simply refused to accept their lawsuit. Then the parents filed a complaint against the court itself because of that decision, and only at that point the officials gave up. The Belarusian speaking group was set up, but in a location that wasn't convenient for anybody. The Pieršamajski District is large, and it was too far for the parents to drive their children there.

The amount of people who have **preschool education** in Belarusian at the beginning of the school year.



Schools

According to official statistics, the number of school students who studied in Belarusian was decreasing by an average of 1% every year from 1996 to 2021. Due to the decrease of Belarusian-speaking students, the number of Russian-speaking students grew each year.

The low percentage of Belarusian-speaking students leads to the decrease in the number of people speaking Belarusian naturally in everyday life. This directly increases the risk of extinction of the Belarusian language.

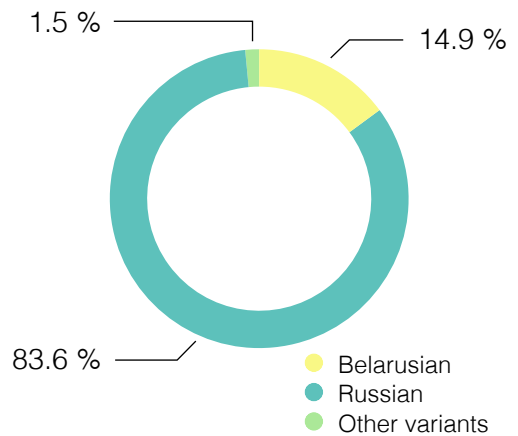


Alesia: One time, during a math test at school, my teacher saw me writing “Test” in Belarusian on the test sheet. She started yelling at me for that, saying: “We are at a Russian-speaking school.” I replied that since we lived in Belarus, I had the right to speak Belarusian, and that should not be an issue. Then she started arguing: “What if an inspection comes, and they see this written in Belarusian?” Eventually, she made me cross it all out and re-write in Russian.

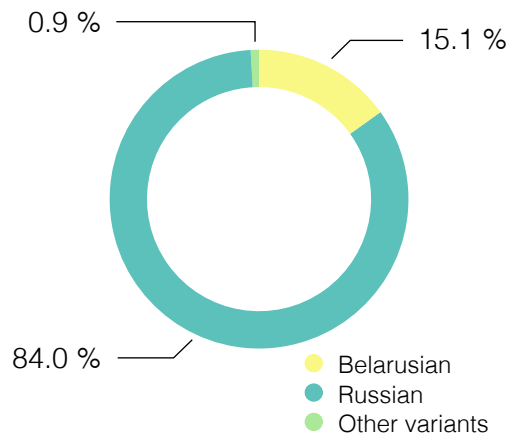


Valeryja: When I started looking for a school, I found out that among the many classes in Zavadzki District that were officially listed as Belarusian-speaking, only two were Belarusian-speaking in reality.

Which language did your teachers use at most lessons in school?



What language were most of your school textbooks in?

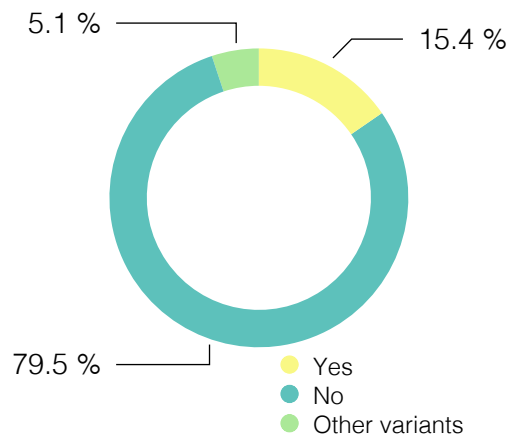




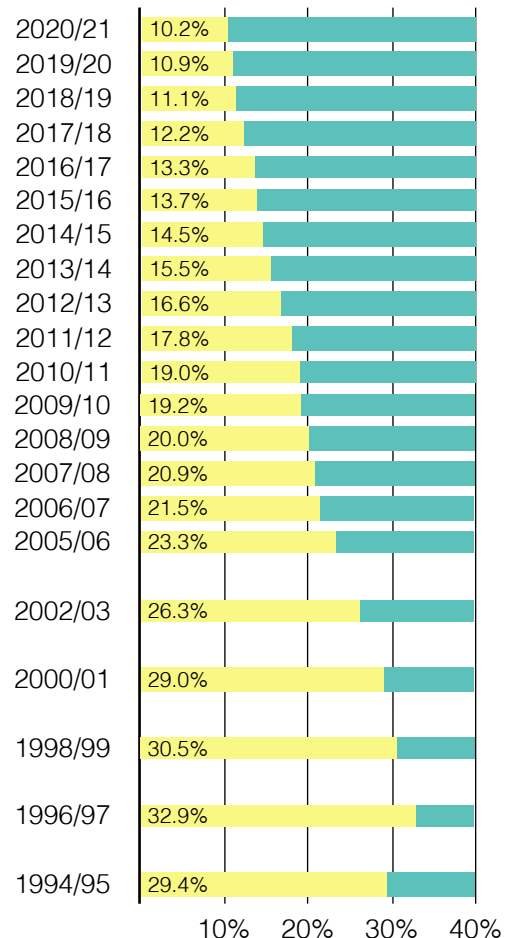
Siaržuk: The first language I learnt was Belarusian. Until the age of 6, I was raised by my grandparents in a village. Belarusian was my native language since the early childhood. When I went to school, I could read equally well in Russian and Belarusian.

At school, half of the textbooks that were handed to students were in Belarusian [and the other half were in Russian]. When the class, one by one, read aloud a paragraph from a book, and the turn came to someone who had a book in Belarusian, they naturally continued reading in Belarusian from where the previous student had stopped. But almost all teachers would say: “Give him a Russian textbook, so everything is in Russian”. When you’re a small child it’s not a big deal, but that’s how I had forgotten Belarusian language and stopped using it. Only when school finished, I became interested in the Belarusian language again.

Did your parents have an option to choose Belarusian language for your school education?



The amount of people studying at **schools** in Belarusian at the beginning of the school year, as a percentage of all school students.



Universities/Colleges

In Belarus, students of technical and natural sciences, law, economics, as well as all non-liberal arts students, study in Russian. That said, it is worth mentioning that Belarusian universities officially practice teaching medical specialties fully in English. This means that Belarusian professors can master even a foreign language well enough to provide education in that language.

Due to the constant decline in the number of subjects taught in Belarusian, many universities close down their departments of Belarusian studies. Two examples of this mass phenomenon would be Hrodna Agricultural Institute and the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (hereinafter – the MIA Academy).

In education, Belarusian, the national language of the Belarusian people and the official language of the Republic of Belarus, is often grouped together with foreign languages, as clearly demonstrated by the name of one of the departments of the MIA Academy: “The department of Belarusian and foreign languages”.

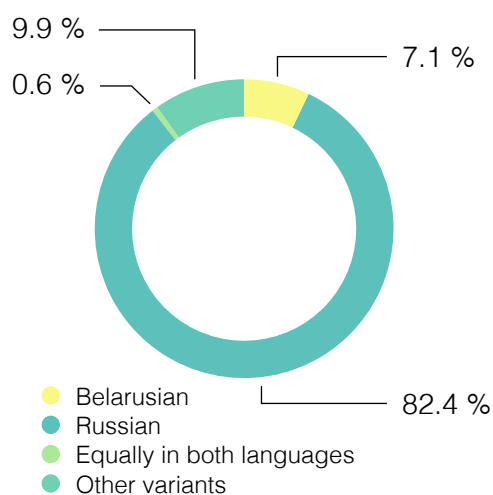


Kaciaryna: At the Faculty of History, all the subjects that weren't connected to History were taught in Russian. Teachers refused to teach economics, physiology, politics, anthropology, or other subjects in Belarusian.

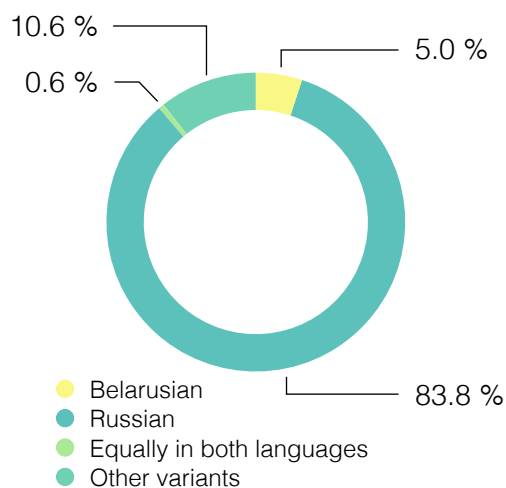


Darja: Why can't we, lawyers, who are studying to become civil servants and must know Belarusian to communicate and work, get the necessary knowledge at the university?

What language were you taught in at university or college?



What language were your textbooks written in at your university or college?





Taciana: A telling case happened to my friend in the early 90s. She was getting her degree in biology in Viciebsk. Her graduation work was in Belarusian but she wasn't allowed to present it. She managed to do it only next year, after translating her work into Russian

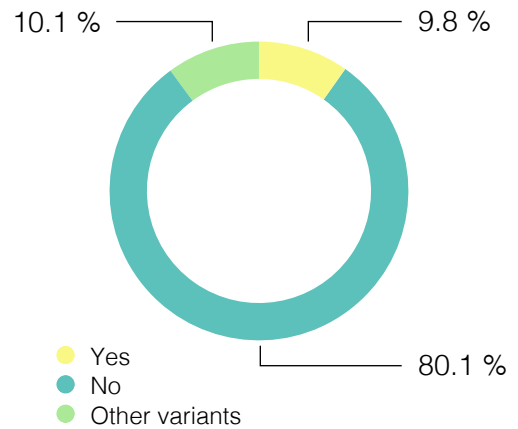


Darja: I studied law at the Belarus State Economic University. Naturally, I spoke Belarusian. However, to this day, laws and regulations, as well as textbooks, still don't exist in Belarusian. The professors don't speak Belarusian. If a professor didn't know Belarusian, their subject would be taught in Russian even if it was supposed to be in Belarusian.

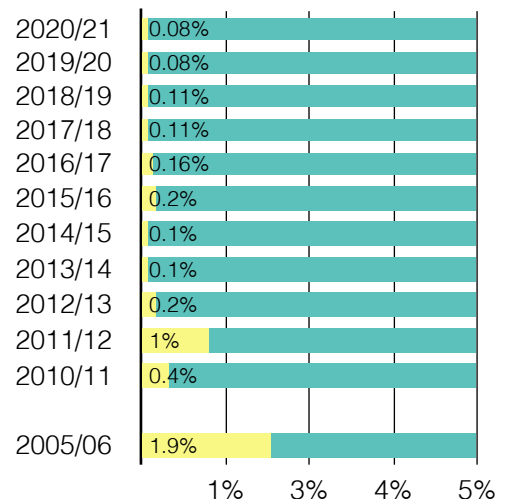
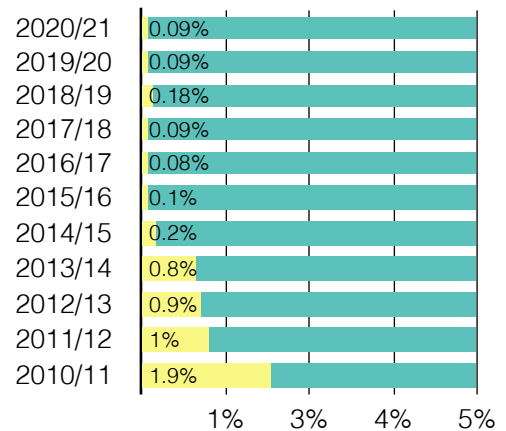


Maksim: At an exam, I picked a card with a question, sat down, and started answering in Belarusian. The professor interrupted me and said "No-no-no! You will not be answering in Belarusian!"

Did you have the option to choose Belarusian language for studying at university or at college?



The amount of people who study at colleges (top) i universities (bottom) in Belarusian, as a percentage of the whole amount at the beginning of the school year.



Information and Belarusian language

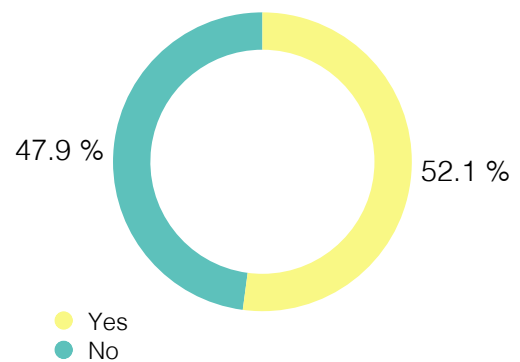
News

From the early 2000s, most key mass media in Belarus started to be published in Belarusian.

In 2011, only 626 hours of broadcasts on national television (4% of total airtime) were in Belarusian. 14 882 hours (96% of airtime) were in Russian. Nowadays, there is not a single TV channel in Belarus broadcasting solely in the Belarusian language.

In 2015, a total of 906 magazines and 585 newspapers were published in Belarus, with a total annual circulation of almost half a billion copies. Among those, 135 magazines (15% of the total amount of magazines) and 185 newspapers (32% of the total amount of newspapers) were in Belarusian. Their annual circulation was one-fifth of the total circulation of the country's print media. In 2018, the number of newspapers in Belarusian was even lower, although their percentage rose by almost 10% due to a more significant drop in the number of newspapers in Russian (there were 176, or 35.1%, of Belarusian-language newspapers out of 501). That said, all national newspapers, with the exception of the newspaper *Zviazda*, were published in Russian.

I can find all the news I'm interested in in Belarusian



The Internet

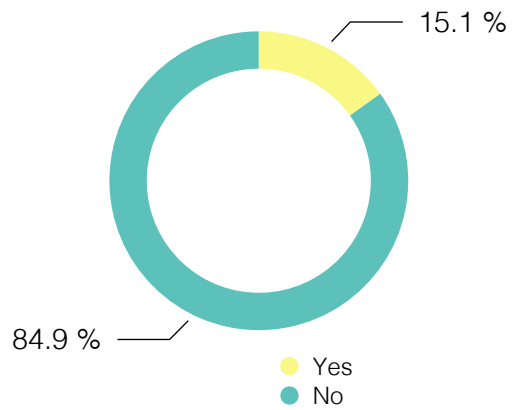


Jaŭhien: Many Belarusian online stores and platforms simply ignore the Belarusian language and don't have localized interfaces. I could go on and on about this.



Maryja: You face discrimination when using websites of online shops and, for example, filling order forms. Sometimes a website does not have a Belarusian version, but you can still fill in the form in Belarusian. But sometimes it's just impossible to fill in anything in Belarusian: the website won't accept a Belarusian text and shows an error message.

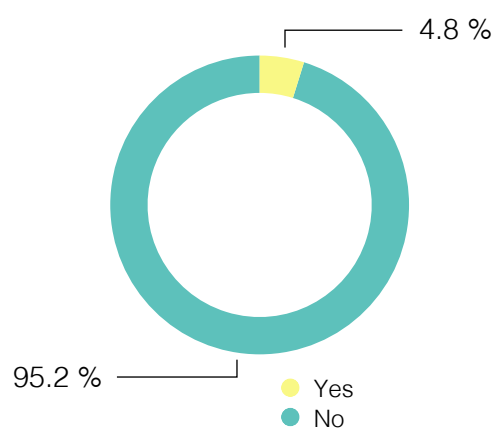
I can find all the information I need in Belarusian on the Internet



Official notifications

During the 2019 census, a curious legal situation unfolded. Belstat (the state-run national statistical office of Belarus) sent out text messages in Russian inviting to participate in the census. However, Belarusian legislation prohibits the violation of language rights and any hindrance to the use of the Belarusian language. In response, a civil campaign was launched with the objective of holding Belstat accountable. Dozens of people signed a petition, but they did not receive any official response, and no one faced administrative consequences. Interestingly, the subsequent text messages from Belstat were in Belarusian.

I receive important public notifications (about dangerous weather events etc.) via text messages/radio/television/newspapers in Belarusian



Name plates and signs

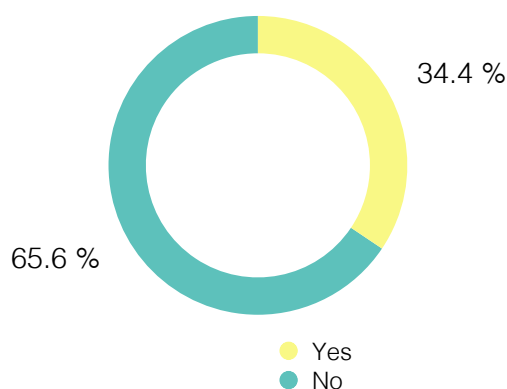


Zinaida: I reside in Sluck, a Belarusian town. However, as I wander its streets, it often feels more like a Russian province. The street names predominantly bear the marks of the Soviet era or are named after famous Russians, while all the street signs are in Russian. This situation is deeply disheartening and disrespectful to our history, renowned figures, and language. What's even more ludicrous is that when it came to honouring Alhierd Abuchovič, a distinguished writer who resided in Sluck, the authorities not only chose a street on the outskirts of the city, but also inscribed his name in Russian on the street signs. This decision contradicts the fact that Abuchovič actively participated in an uprising against Russian rule and exclusively composed his fables in the Latin-based Belarusian language to maintain a distance from Russian influences.

I started going door-to-door and collecting signatures under an appeal to add inscriptions in Belarusian language to the street signs. I collected more than 600 signatures and sent the petition to the Sluck District Executive Committee.

Two years have already passed since I did it, and there is still no Belarusian language on the street signs of Sluck. And I don't know whether it will ever appear there.

In most cases, the information I require on name plates, street signs, road signs, and information boards is in Belarusian



Shops and pharmacies

Product packaging and labels

Belarusian manufacturers predominantly use Russian language on their packaging. Sometimes only the one-word-long company name is in Belarusian. The rest of the information, including instructions, are mostly in Russian.

The current Technical Regulation on Packaging Safety of the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia is in a collision with the norms listed in the Constitution of Belarus, in the Languages Law of Belarus, and in the relevant Belarusian standards.

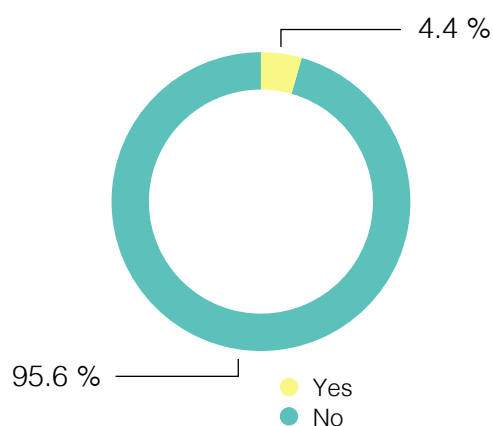
According to the technical regulation of the Customs Union, “information [on packaging] must be provided in the Russian language as well as in the official language(s) of the respective Customs Union member state if there are relevant requirements in the legislation of this Customs Union member state.”

According to the current Languages Law of Belarus, either one of the official languages, that is, Russian or Belarusian, should be used in the labelling of products sold in Belarus.

As a result, the combination of these two legislative requirements makes Russian language mandatory on product labels while leaving Belarusian language purely optional.

This contradicts article 17 of the Belarusian Constitution, according to which both Russian and Belarusian are official languages.

Shops and pharmacies. In most cases, I can get information about a product in Belarusian.



Advertising

Due to the lack of attention to the language issue in the Advertising Law of Belarus, Russian-language ads dominate in Belarus. 90% of the advertisements on the Belarusian market are presented in Russian. That being said, about 70% of Belarusians perceive Belarusian-language ads positively and 37% believe that Belarusian language is underrepresented in advertising.

Advertisements and trademarks are important parts of the linguistic environment and reflect the official language policy in this area. Advertising on the territory of Belarus is regulated by the Advertising Law, of which the paragraph 2 of article 10 states: “the advertisement on the territory of the Republic of Belarus in the Belarusian and (or) Russian languages.”

Belarusian-language ads account for less than 10% today.



Alaksandr: There was more Belarusian language during Soviet times than during this “independence”.

Discrimination is everywhere, even in stores. If you go to a store to buy potatoes, will you find “бульбу” (in Belarusian) or “картофель” (in Russian) there? If two languages are official, everything should be in those two languages. But very few people care about it here.

Transport



Siarhiej: One day I decided to speak Belarusian at the railway station when buying tickets. It was in my hometown Mazyr, at the Kozienki railway station.

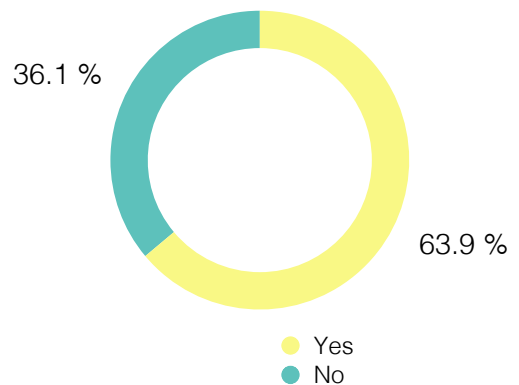
I came there and told at the ticket counter that I wanted to buy tickets. At first, the woman did try to answer me in Belarusian, but then for some reason she decided that I was Polish and started answering in English. It was very funny, but at the same time it was insulting.



Aleś: I noticed this linguistic imbalance in the Minsk metro: the station announcements are in Belarusian, while technical notifications and warnings are in Russian. The same applies to rules for using the metro that you can find on the metro map: the names of the stations on the map are in Belarusian but the rules are in Russian.

The Belarusian language plays some sort of a ceremonial role, while all the important information is only provided in Russian. The organizations don't feel the need to change the situation.

Public transport. In most cases, I can get information about the timetable, stops, fares from notifications, driver announcements, information name plates in Belarusian



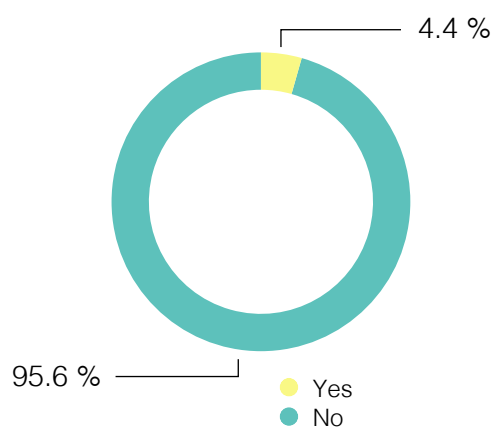
Books, films, articles

According to Belstat, literature in the Belarusian language makes up 11.4% of the total number of books published in the country and 17.1% of the total book circulation.

Films and cartoons translated into Belarusian account for less than 1% of the total amount available to viewers. All translations are made by private individuals interested in Belarusian-language content; the government does not support this work.

If people look for information on the Internet, in most cases they google information in Russian, since there are almost no materials in Belarusian on topics of their interest (parenting, recipes, relationships, health, etc.).

All the content I need (books, movies, articles on the topics I'm interested in) is translated into Belarusian



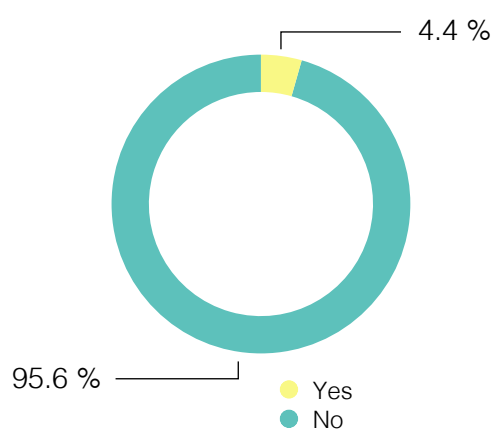
Menu



Aleś: I visited the Lido restaurant on Jakuba Kotłasa Square [in Minsk] and submitted a formal feedback noting the absence of a Belarusian-language menu. A few weeks later, I received a response stating that, according to article 16 of some regulation, the information can be presented either in Belarusian or in Russian, and having a menu in Belarusian is the right, but not the obligation, of a company.

If Belarusian is an official language, everything must be available in this language: a restaurant menu, instructions, or anything else.

In cafes and restaurants, in most cases I can get a menu in Belarusian



Legal information

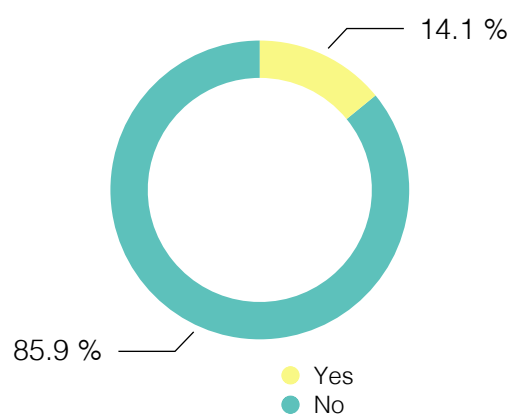
In 2015, the Constitutional Court of Belarus reported that only 3.1% from about 200 thousand Belarusian normative acts contained in its database, were available in the Belarusian language.

In 2021, the National Centre for Legal Information reported new numbers. As of 10 September 2021, out of 195 130 legal acts in their database of legal information, only 2 729, or 1.4%, were available in the Belarusian language.

As we can see, the already small share of legal acts adopted in Belarusian has decreased more than twice over the past few years. And most of those Belarusian-language acts are small, technical, and insignificant from a legal standpoint.

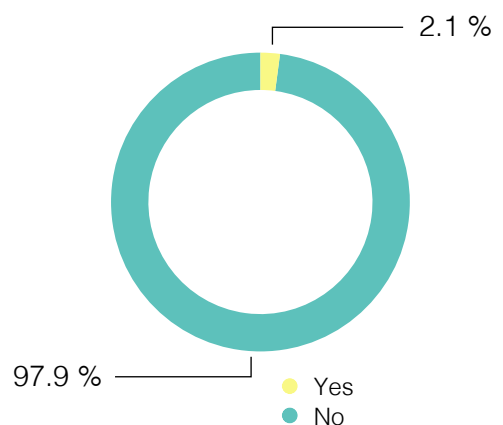
The court of the Maskoŭski District of Minsk refused to conduct procedures on the criminal case of Aleś Bialacki, the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize winner, in Belarusian. Prosecutor V. Sajkoŭski said that Bialacki's rights as an accused wouldn't be violated if the trial was conducted in Russian, since the witnesses testified in Russian, and the laws were also in Russian.

I can get all the legal information I need (about social benefits, taxes, traffic rules, etc.) in Belarusian



Service in institutions and the Belarusian language

I receive sufficient services in Belarusian language in public and private organisations



Hospitals



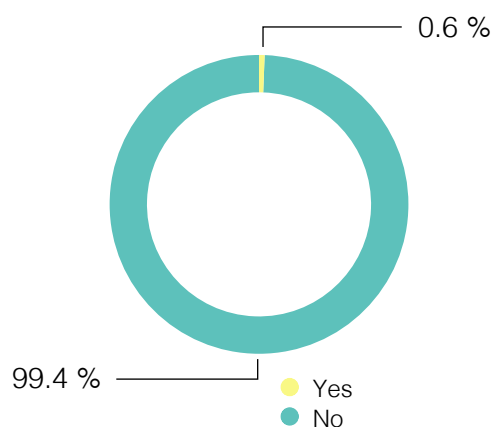
Iryna: I was the only pregnant woman in our hospital whose card was in Belarusian, and this resulted in lots of unpleasant moments. The woman at the reception desk just hated me. She would say: “God! I have never learned the Belarusian language!”. Once, while doing paperwork, she copied information from my passport and made four mistakes, then spent a lot of time correcting it with a white-out and rewriting on top of it. Also, my surname sounds differently in Russian and in Belarusian. And when the results of medical test would come, this would always cause problems. There were also many situations when they tried to educate me, for example, while performing ultrasound examination, asking: “How do you write this in Russian?”



Uladzimir: I work as a general practitioner and maintain all the paperwork in Belarusian: medical records, child development records and so on. Most people never cared about that, until one day I issued a death certificate. This document goes to the registry office and then to a central authority in Minsk.

The people from the Ministry of Statistics were the ones who got angry. They called [my supervisors] and told to “bring that doctor to senses”, because “what was he thinking?” So, I was asked to stop writing in Belarusian. I didn’t. I was called in and told that it’s ok to write “some papers” in my laboratory in Belarusian, but whatever is sent to Minsk must be written in Russian.

Communication in hospitals and medical institutions happens in most cases in Belarusian



Cafes

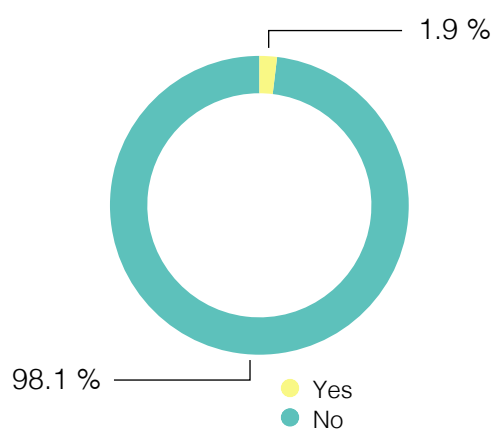


Natalla: I went into a fast-food restaurant to order a beef kebab. I was asked to “speak normally” there, I don’t remember the exact wording. I protested: “This is a state language, and you’re discriminating against me”. The seller replied that he wasn’t obliged to speak in “a dead language”. I wrote a formal complaint.



Taciana: We were walking along Drazdy lake and went to a coffee shop. I ordered coffee [“kava” in Belarusian]. Instead, the waiter brought me Cava – a Spanish sparkling wine.

In cafes and restaurants, the service is in Belarusian in most cases



Banks

OAO Belinvestbank has noted the following:

“We regret to admit that at the moment it would not be possible to recruit employees who are fluent in Belarusian. In fact, according to the Languages Law, ‘Belarus ensures comprehensive development and functioning of the Belarusian and Russian languages in all aspects of society. The citizens have the right to use the official language and choose the language of communication.’ Since none of the normative legal acts of the Republic of Belarus state that customer services in the banking sector must use the Belarusian language, OAO Belinvestbank has chosen another official language – Russian – as the language for customer communication.”



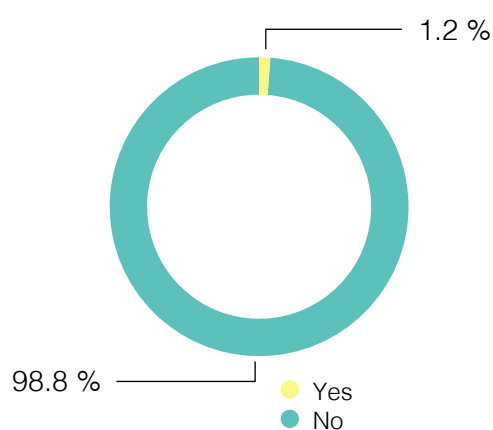
Ivan: When the National Bank issued a recommendation for banks to draw up contracts in Belarusian, I wrote appeals to all the banks that I used. All of them declined.

They wrote that this recommendation isn't obligatory.



Vitalija: I filled in a form for a bank card in Belarusbank. For a long time, the card wasn't functioning. I went to the bank several times, and nobody could understand why the card did not work. Two months later, they found out that it was because my application form had been in Belarusian. I had to change it and rewrite the data.

In a bank, in most cases, workers communicate with me in Belarusian





Taciana: I've come to realize that getting any paperwork done in Belarusian at a bank is simply impossible. The option to conduct transactions in Belarusian is non-existent, which greatly obstructs the use of our national language, and it's truly disappointing. It's one thing to handle the paperwork for your own company in Belarusian, but when you go to a bank to open a company account, the only thing available in Belarusian is submitting a request. All subsequent paperwork, such as filling out forms and providing payment details, is entirely in Russian. When I inquired about the possibility of conducting these processes in Belarusian, the response I received was disheartening: "Our entire system, including the database, is in Russian, and there is no provision for conducting business in Belarusian."



Śviatlana: At a bank, I told the manager something in Belarusian. The girl at the counter didn't understand me. I asked: "What are we going to do?"

"Do whatever you want!" – she replied. I said: "Well. I don't know, then! If you don't understand me at all, call one of your superiors." And she did call someone – must have been a supervisor. I explained my issue, and her reply was: "If you don't understand, bring a translator with you. I can't help you, we have two official languages."



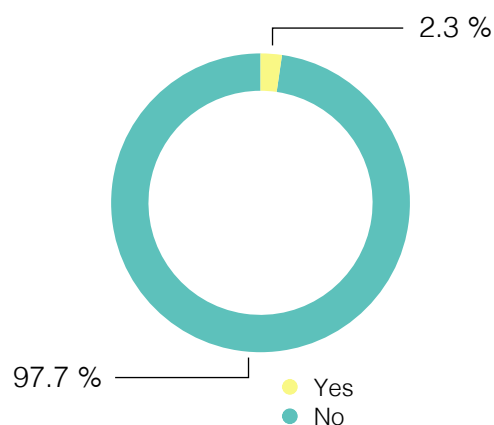
Żmicier: We were provided with MTBank cards through our workplace. However, when accessing their online banking platform, everything is solely in Russian. It's highly inconvenient, especially for those of us who are Belarusian speakers. Why should we have to navigate through information in a language we don't primarily use? Naturally, we expected the online banking system and website to be adapted for Belarusian-speaking users. I wrote a request to the bank, urging them to make the necessary adjustments for Belarusian speakers. In their response, they simply stated that everything is in order, citing the existence of two official languages and suggesting that we translate the content ourselves if we desire.

Hairdressers



Ihar: While in Kyiv, I decided to visit a hairdresser. I confidently explained in Belarusian what I wanted, and the hairdresser understood me perfectly and did an excellent job. It was a pleasant experience. However, this experience also made me reflect on hairdressing salons back in Belarus, where I would often default to using Russian-sounding words just to avoid any additional questions or confusion. The mere thought of having to compromise my language choice in order to simply get my hair done is sad.

In hairdressers (barbershops, beauty salons), in most cases staff serves me in Belarusian



Shops

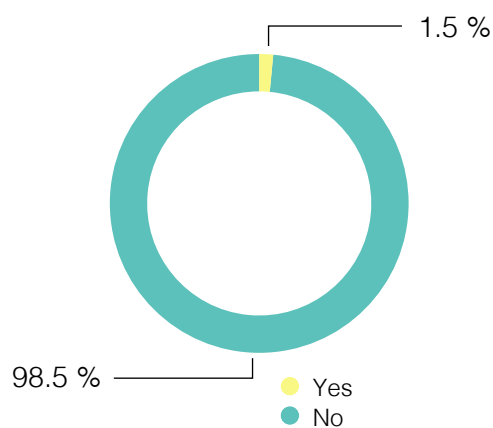


Barbara: I was in the Zamak shopping center, there was a cosmetics shop, Missha. We talked to the consultant, and then, when we went to the checkout, she was like, “Where are you from?”. I asked: “What do you mean?”. She said: “Well, you speak Ukrainian, so you must be from Ukraine?”



Jana: Everyday life is where it's the most inconvenient. When you come to a store, and they don't know what “vocat” is (Belarusian for “vinegar”). Or in coffee shops, I say, “kava” (Belarusian for coffee) and they're like, “cocoa?”.

In stores, in most cases, sellers and consultants communicate with me in Belarusian



Work / Studies



Andrej: I was assigned a job for two years after my graduation, and after that I went to my home region to find a new job. I was sent to a village school. Of course, I spoke Belarusian, and the principal said to me: “Just don’t bring this trash in here.”



Julija: There was only one Belarusian-speaking child in the class – our child. The classmates did not like the fact that the child used the Belarusian language in subjects that were taught in Russian.



Hanna: My boss gave me an ultimatum, insisting that I speak only Russian at work. She mentioned that I could speak any language I wanted during my free time, but when it came to work, Russian was the expectation. I stood my ground and refused to comply. In response, they threatened me with consequences. Eventually, they made working conditions so difficult for me that I had no choice but to leave the job.

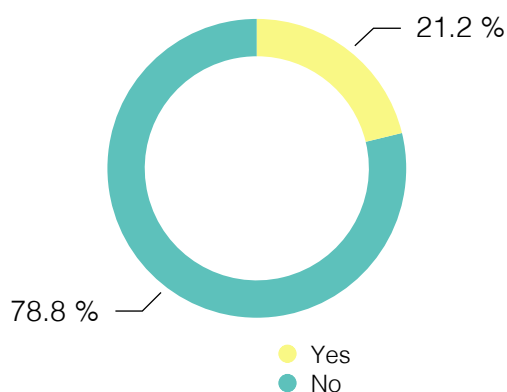


Aleś: I was pressured by the company management when using the Belarusian language in an informal communication at work: “We’re all speaking Russian here, you should respect that.”



Paŭlina: When I apply for a job and say [in Belarusian]: “Hello, I am interested in your vacancy”, I’m instantly met with aggression – either very active, or passive. Sometimes, people start sort of making fun of me.

At my work (studies) people communicate with me in Belarusian



Government agencies

According to the legislation on public service, public servants are required to have sufficient proficiency in both Belarusian and Russian languages to effectively carry out their duties. However, given the current situation in Belarus, it appears that government workers and employees of state organizations have an expectation that anyone contacting them should be fluent in both official languages.



Alesia: We entered the office, the officials were there. I asked them something in Belarusian, and the reply was: “Let’s speak in Russian, the human language”, in a derogatory tone.

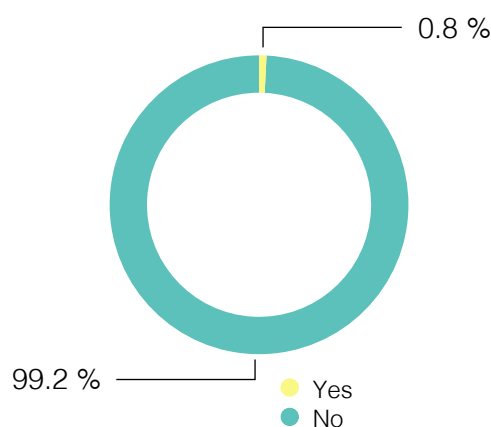


Aleś: The latest humiliation because of my language was when I was detained after [the mass protests of] August 2020. I was in the pre-trial detention centre No. 8 in Žodzina, in the 6th cell. I asked for medical help. And the warrant officer came and said, “You think you’re entitled to some special treatment? You will get help when you learn to speak a normal language.”



Dzianis: When my wife and I were about to register our marriage at the state registry office, we ticked the box on the relevant application form that we wanted the ceremony to be in Belarusian. There was such a point in the form, where you could select the language. And when we came to the registry office on our wedding day, all beautifully dressed, the registrar opened their mouth and conducted the whole ceremony in Russian.

Communication in state institutions (local administration, police, tax service, post offices, etc.) in most cases takes place in Belarusian



Documents

The following example illustrates the capability of Belarusian officials to use the Belarusian language but highlights their unwillingness to do so: an employee at a state institution in Pastavy shared that in order for office work in state institutions to be conducted in both Russian and Belarusian, it requires an order from higher-level authorities.



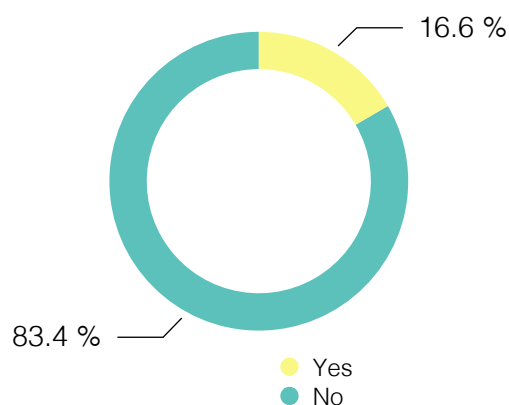
Iryna: 4 or 5 years ago, we had to get another visa. For a child, you need an exit permit from their mother and father. This is a strange paper that is filled in by hand. No one asks for it, but it needs to be done.

We went to the migration department of the police. We were given a form in Russian but filled it in in Belarusian. The police officer at the counter threw this form back to us and said: “No, this is not allowed! It must be filled in in Russian! Rewrite everything in Russian, otherwise I won’t accept it from you!”. She explained that “the border guards will then have to decipher this language of yours”.



Dzianis: When I took on the role of director at a culture and recreation centre, I proposed to my supervisors the idea of preparing all documentation in Belarusian. This would involve posters, notifications, and other materials. However, they rejected the suggestion. Their reasoning was that since they sent all the documents to the supervising regional executive committee, preparing them in Belarusian would only be feasible if all cultural institutions followed suit and conducted their paperwork in Belarusian as well.

I can get most legal documents (insurance, contracts, power of attorney, etc.) in Belarusian





Darja: There were two women sitting in the state office who, after looking at my documents in Belarusian, started laughing, and then looked at me and asked: “Why not in Chinese?”. I was shocked because I didn't expect such a reaction. I said, “Well, because there are two official languages, and I wrote it in one of them.”

- Actually, our main language is Russian.

- Why? Where is it written?

- Well, actually, yes, there's two official languages, but Russian is the main one and, in short, we don't accept documents in Belarusian.



Paviet: I once needed to register a company. I decided to do everything in Belarusian. The first minor issue came up when approving the name: the registration office kept insisting on translating it into Russian. But after ten minutes of negotiating, this was resolved in my favour. We then easily got the company seal made in Belarusian.

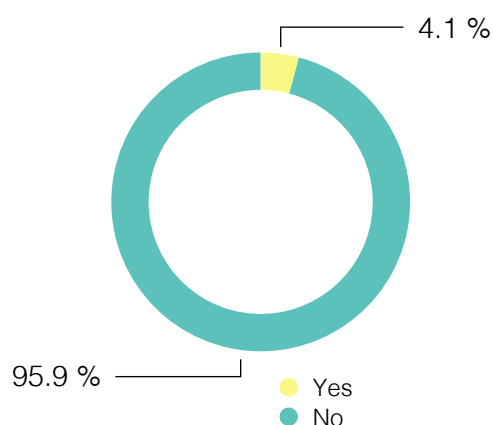
But things went differently in the executive committee. One of the documents we had to present there was a form with the basic information about the company. Of course, my lawyers prepared it in Belarusian, but it turned out that this form only existed in Russian in the legislation. And the committee employee declined the whole set of documents on this basis. In the process, she allowed herself remarks like “is it really that important to you, as a company manager?”, which was quite unpleasant.

Forms of state institutions

The Ministry of Justice regulation #4, titled "On Approval of the Instruction on Records Management in Government Institutions and Organizations of the Republic of Belarus," mandates that organizations and institutions of any ownership form should provide forms with bank details in both official languages. The regulation establishes that the languages of administration and documentation in Belarus are Belarusian and Russian. However, there is a lack of detailed procedures regarding the use of these official languages.

In practice, the use of the Belarusian language is more of an exception than a norm. For example, the Ministry of Taxation has refused to create a tax form in Belarusian and has prohibited the use of unofficial translations in Belarusian. In the Ministry of Transport and Communications, when asked about the language used in paperwork, officials seemed to have misunderstood the question and responded by stating, "The subject of your inquiry is not clear. The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus provides for two official languages."

Forms in state institutions (executive committees, police, tax service, post office, etc.) in most cases are issued in the Belarusian language





Eduard: When receiving my military ID, I had to sign for it, and fill in applications and forms beforehand. They were all in Russian. I asked: “Can you please give me the applications and forms in Belarusian, so I could fill them in in Belarusian?” The military enlistment office replied: “We don’t have such forms.”

Then I took a piece of paper, wrote those forms by hand and submitted them. They accepted the papers, and I was hoping to receive my military ID in Belarusian, which would be logical.

Then I came to them to receive the ID. It was in Russian. I said: “I refuse to sign it. Please give me [the military ID] in the Belarusian language.” What’s more interesting: there’s not a single word in Belarusian in that ID, but if you take a look at some other documents – birth certificates, death certificates, and so on – everything is duplicated in both languages.

I found it outrageous: it’s the armed forces of Belarus, not the neighbouring country.



Liza: If I ask for a form in Belarusian, all institutions tell me that they only have forms in Russian. Even if I find the forms in Belarusian on the Internet by myself, and even if it says there that they are official. But they tell me: “no, the form you have in Belarusian is not accurate, it is incorrect and we will only accept it in Russian.” For example, at a notary. I came to issue a power of attorney, but the notary did not even gave the option to do it in Belarusian.



Andrej: When receiving my passport, I wanted all the information and notes in it to be in the Belarusian language. But they refused to write my registration address in Belarusian. We were arguing for about ten minutes. They said that we have two official languages, and I cannot choose which one to write notes in, since “we write them in Russian to everybody.” Their reasoning was strange: “We cannot write in Belarusian because Russians are our brothers.” The end of this argument was also paradoxical, as I said: “My wife’s brother lives in Germany, so let’s write it in German.” Eventually, they did write it in Belarusian.

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Alina Nahornaja

Accessibility and Discrimination of the Belarusian Language in Belarus.

Survey Results, Statistics, Personal Stories.

According to the current Constitution, Belarusian and Russian are the official languages of Belarus. But despite their formally equal status, the Russian language dominates in all areas of life, and Belarusian speakers face discrimination on a daily basis. It is virtually impossible to get education, issue a bank card, make an appointment with a doctor, draw up a contract, buy groceries or get important technical information in Belarusian.

We interviewed 482 Belarusian speakers aged between 15 and 72 living in Belarus. Our survey focused on the accessibility of education, information, and services in the Belarusian language.

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