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Some Linguistic Phenomena in Belarusian Cities during the 2020 Mass Protests in Belarus

After the announcement of the results of the presidential election in Belarus in August 2020, mass protests broke out in the country. According to the anti-government movement, the whole election process was compromised and the results were rigged. The mass protests were indeed unequivocal and unique in their form and scope and were met with a harsh response from the authorities. These events completely changed the life of the entire country for several months (with the lives of large-city inhabitants being affected the most). The citizens of Belarus found themselves in a completely new reality: without reliable access to the internet, with limited public transport, and with the presence of the military and special forces units on the streets. They also enjoyed unprecedented *solidarity between neighbours and citizens. Apart from marches of several thousand demonstrators, neighbourhood concerts, discos and picnics were also organized. All this led to mass repression, arrests, and persecution.*

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Observing the largest wave of protests, one could spot several phenomena which were linguistic in nature. Apart from an influx of linguistic creativity[1], these phenomena were mainly constituted by an increase of the prestige of the Belarusian language in cities, a positive attitude towards regionalisms and the so-called *trasianka*[2], and the introduction of new toponyms by protesters. This paper is devoted to these issues. Collected street texts (poster inscriptions, slogans, appeals, murals, inscriptions on city walls) and electronic texts (archived posts from social networking websites and communicators) served as linguistic material for the study.

The Belarusian protests were clearly carnival-like in nature (Колесников, 2020). Similarly to all such social protests, they aimed to provide a sense of a real enclave of freedom in the surrounding reality. This form of opposition always seems like a vital force that cannot be fully predicted or controlled. It cannot be contained in a safe area and aims to take over the representational spaces (Kowalewski, 2014, p. 202). In Minsk, a grassroots action to rename streets, squares and parks was adopted on a mass scale. The inhabitants designed plates with new toponyms, most often in Belarusian (*плошча Пераможцаў*[3], *плошча Праўды*[4], *плошча Купалаўцаў*[5], ill. 1, 2). These names have already been widely accepted in society and function as unofficial urban toponyms which mostly name residential backyards, colloquially called *protest backyards* (*протестные дворы*). Above all, these new toponyms refer to the values declared by the protesters or to important events from their lives. They integrate the local community of people with anti-government views. The first type is represented by such toponyms as *плошча Праўды* (ill. 1), *плошча Свабоды*[6], while names such as *площадь Перемен*[7], *плошча Купалаўцаў* are linked with events that are important to the community. The first of these refers to a song from the Soviet era by the group "Кино," performed by Victor Tsoi.

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[1] The issue of linguistic creativity was addressed in an extensive paper by A Kiklewicz and H. Pociechina "Языковая креативность протестных дискурсов в Белоруссии после президентских выборов 2020 года" (Kiklewicz & Pociechina, 2021) and A. Kiklewicz, J. Mazurkiewicz-Sułkowska, H. Pociechina "Menschen zu sein… Soziokulturelle und semiotische Aspekte der Protestdiskurse nach den Präsidentschaftswahlen in Belarus im Jahre 2020" (Kiklewicz et al., 2021).

[2] A mixed form of speech that combines Russian lexis with Belarusian phonetics and syntax.

[3] *The Square* of *Winners*. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are by the author.

[4] *The Truth Square.*

[5] *The Square of the Kupalauski Theatre Actors.*

[6] *The Freedom Square.*

[7] *The Square of Changes.*

Translated into English, this song has the following chorus: "We want change! It's the demand of our hearts. We want change! It's the demand of our eyes. […] We want change!" (translation from: http://russmus.net/song/7257; *Перемен!*, n.d.). This became the main protest song during the summer of 2020 after being played by two DJs during pro-government ceremonies. The crowd reacted enthusiastically, and the DJs (arrested right after the ceremony) were named DJs of change (диджеи перемен) (ill. 3). *Плошча Купалаўцаў* was created after most of the employees of Yanka Kupala National Academic Theatre were fired (the theatre is colloquially called "Kupalauski Theatre"). This happened because the artists condemned the election fraud and the violence used by the uniformed services and demanded the reinstatement of the dismissed director, Pavel Latushko. Other toponyms are optative in character and aim to cheer up and support protesters who are fighting for their rights (e.g., *плошча Пераможцаў* – ill. 4).

Ill. 1, *Truth Square*. Source: belsat.eu

Ill. 2, *The Square of the Kupalauski Theatre Actors*. Source: https://politring.com

Ill. 3, *The Square of Changes*. Source: charter97.org

Ill. 4, *Overcomer's Square*. Source: belsat.eu

The city dwellers not only named backyards but also frequently organized contests for designing flags for residential areas and districts. The proper names on these flags (always in the national colours of white-red-white) were most often written in Belarusian (ill. 5).

The introduction of new toponyms, the creation of a map of protests in Minsk, and other similar activities are clearly linked to so-called occupational protests that involve the occupation of public spaces without the use of violence (Occupy Wall Street movement), see mural *Гэта наш горад*[8] (ill. 6). This is also evidenced by reports from neighbourhoods as they usually showed people as a whole centred around a common idea and space rather than focusing on the leaders. The taking over of a public space by an anonymous crowd is undoubtedly a tactical action. The act of naming of such places fits perfectly into the assumption that the protests were occupational in character. This strategy forgoes the face and character of a charismatic leader in favour of faces in

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[8] This is our city.

the crowd and the face of the crowd. Therefore, similar to the Occupy movement, images in social media often showed not faces but a space, or rather an anonymous group of people occupying this space and confirming this fact by giving it a toponym (cf. Mitchell, 2013).
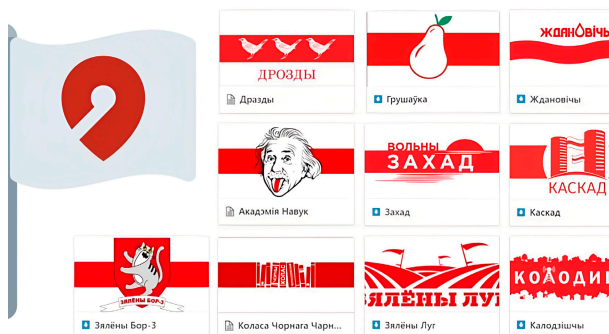
Ill. 5, *Flags*. Source: dev.by

Ill. 6, *This is our city*. Source: Telegram/Страна для жизни

As I have already mentioned, most of the toponyms were created in the Belarusian language. *De jure* this is one of the two official languages of the Republic of Belarus. *De facto*, however, the country is mostly Russian-speaking and until recently Belarusian was perceived as a sign of rural origins and low social status. For several years, however, researchers have emphasized that the number of city residents who consciously abandon the Russian language in favour of Belarusian has been growing. The linguist T. Ramza calls such people "new users" (Рамза, 2017). The use of Belarusian clearly increased during the protests in 2020, in which it played an integrative and symbolic role. This phenomenon was discussed in detail

in the article "Język białoruski w protestach antyrządowych na Białorusi w drugiej połowie 2020 roku / The Belarusian language in anti-government protests in Belarus in the second half of 2020" (Kiklewicz & Mazurkiewicz-Sułkowska, in press). The Belarusian language, regardless of the language level of the people participating in the protests, began to appear as one of the characteristics of this community. It is worth emphasizing that the decision to choose a language, especially in an urban environment, is more and more often seen as a determinant of belonging to a community of opponents of power, as well as a tool for building a democratic state with a nation that is conscious of its own identity. This is confirmed by posters such as *Кожнае слоўца па-беларуску ёсць цаглінкаю ў мур дзяржаўнасці*[9]. Belarusian has become the same national symbol as the coat of arms or the flag (*Мова – гэта наш сцяг*[10]). It is also sometimes called a weapon against dictatorship (*Мова – гэта наша зброя*[11]). Such a phenomenon can be called linguistic resistance according to Vakhtin and Golovko (Rus. *языковое сопротивление*) (Вахтин & Головко, 2004, p. 222). The painter and musician Andrus Takindang notes that after the presidential election, the Belarusian language and culture suddenly became a tool in the eyes of the society, distinguishing honest people from executioners and murderers, i.e., representatives of power (*Беларуская мова*, 2020).

The role of the national language amongst city inhabitants was not constant from the beginning of the protests, but it increased with each following month. In the initial stage, it was only a symbol highlighting national identity; later, however, with an increase in the level of terror and even more so the role of language increased after the introduction of numerous bans on the means of expressing one's opinion and civic position (arrests for possession of a white-red-white flag; penalties for going out wearing clothes in national colours; fines for white and red window decorations at Christmas and on New Year's Eve). Writer Alhierd Bakharevich said in an interview for the portal tut.by[12] that the repressive actions of the authorities had had the completely opposite effect to what was intended because, in the situation of omnipresent terror and violence, Belarusians remembered their language, history, literature, and dignity (Панкратова, 2021). Journalists of the opposition media put together the so-called alphabet of revolution (МГ, 2021) and directly called the national language a weapon against power

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[9] Every Belarusian word is a brick in the wall of our statehood.
[10] Language is our flag.
[11] Language is our weapon.
[12] The most popular Belarusian information portal. Blocked by the authorities on July 2, 2021.

(БЕЛСАТ LIFE, 2021). Opposition activists also called for the use of this unusual weapon. For example, the chairman of the Young Front, Zmitser Dashkevich, wrote on his Twitter profile that if someone does not know how to continue to live and function under the occupation administration, then he should use his most significant weapon: the mother tongue (Дашкевіч, 2001).

The role of the Belarusian language in the protest discourses is evidenced by the fact that all of the main slogans were formulated in it from the beginning of the 2020 election campaign. Even before the election, the slogan of the united staffs of the three opposition candidates was announced: *Верым, можам, пераможам!*[13] (ill. 7). The slogan *Жыве Беларусь!*[14] (ill. 8) became the symbol of the whole protest alongside the responses *Жыве!*[15] and *Жыве вечна!*[16]. Militia and special forces officers and members of the authorities (including election commissions) were greeted by the crowd with the shout *Ганьба!*[17], while factory workers and students called for strikes, chanting *Далучайся!*[18]. The 19th-century slogan of the Vilnius Revolutionary Organization gained popularity: *– Каго любіш? – Люблю Беларусь! – То ўзаемна!*[19] (ill. 9).

Ill. 7, *We believe! We can! We will win!* Source: https://twitter.com/minimayakovsky

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[13] We believe! We can! We will win!
[14] Long live Belarus!
[15] Long live!
[16] Live forever!
[17] Shame!
[18] Join in!
[19] Who do you love? – I love Belarus. – It is mutual!

Ill. 8, *Long live Belarus!* Source: belsat.eu

Ill. 9, *Who do you love? – I love Belarus. – It is mutual!* Source: https://nashaniva.com /?c=ar&i=226567

The positive attitude of Belarusian city dwellers towards broadly understood provinciality, including Belarusian phonetics and regionalisms, is a new phenomenon. Until recently, they were viewed as being linked with low social standing and, consequently, Belarusians distanced themselves from them (Рамза, 2017, p. 362). Although Belarusian phonetics (especially the articulation of soft [c'] and [dz'] instead of soft [t'] and [d'], hard pronunciation of [č], [r] and voiced [ɦ]) are often attributed to a rural background, they gained positive connotations during the protests. The popularity of the song *Шчучыншчына*[20] can be viewed as an example of this tendency. It was performed by the artists who were fired from "Kupalauski Theater" and can be viewed as a parody of so-called agro-pop (bel. *агро-поп*) (a music genre dominant in the regime media) (ill. 10, 11). The video for the track gained popularity not only because it accurately depicted the tacky aesthetics of this genre, but mainly owing to

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[20] A region in western Belarus with the city of Shchuchyn as its centre.

the almost impossible to pronounce (for a Russian-speaking person) name of the Shchuchyn region.

The capacity to understand regionalisms and articulate the name *Шчучын-шчына* suddenly became a sort of test of national identity: only those who are able to pronounce the name of this region are truly Belarusians and belong to the elite of the nation (ill. 11). In a meme showing a soldier wearing a white-red-white uniform, a human-like entity resembling the chief of internal security forces (Jury Karayeu, who is Ossetian by birth) is asked to pronounce the said name (ill. 12).

In another meme, two elegant men talk and are being watched by a neanderthal. Text above the graphic states that the two are from Grodno and are discussing the etymology of the regionalism *аліж ты*, while the neanderthal (a member of OMON[21]) is listening (ill. 13).
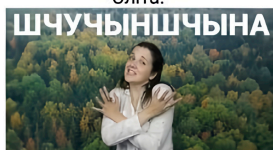

Ill. 10, *We will continue to pronounce [c'], [dz'], [č] and [h]!* Source: Telegram/Страна для жизни
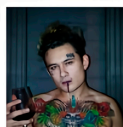
Ill. 11, *Shchuchynshchyna*. Source: https://matchlyric.com

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[21] OMON – Special Purpose Mobile Unit.

Ill. 12, *Say "Shchuchynshchyna"*. Source: Telegram/Страна для жизни

Ill. 13, *Discussing the etymology of the regionalism "аліж ты"*. Source: Telegram/
Страна для жизни

A clear rejection of social complexes resulting from Belarusian phonetics (considered to be provincial) is presented in a second video clip by ex-members of Kupalauski Theatre for the track "Мы будзем дзекаць і цекаць"[22]. The chorus of the song is *Мы будзем дзекаць і цекаць, чэкаць, шчэкаць і гэкаць, гэкаць, гэкаць*[23] (ill. 10). The artists of Kupalauski Theatre referred to folklore in a gesture of farewell to the audience and put up posters displaying the so-called folk wisdom:

Тудэма сюдэма і мы вернемся!!![24]
Што было, тое сплыло, і болей не будзе![25]

On posters, murals and memes from the period of the greatest protest activity, one can often see so-called trasianka (vide footnote 2)(Лукашанец, 1998,

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[22] Verbs denoting the typical Belarusian pronunciation of several consonants.
[23] We will continue to pronounce [c'], [dz'], [č] and [ɦ]!
[24] This and that and we will be back!
[25] What's done is done and will not return!

p. 262; Рамза, 2017, p. 359). Trasianka, until present viewed only as a sign of rural origins, suddenly became a kind of indicator of "familiarity," as can be observed in the following examples:

Трудна сначала, прыятна патом[26].
Мы усе жывем багата, хутка будзе вабшчэ рай, патаму што падрастае Лукашэнка Мікалай![27]

Most often, however, trasianka was used when the authors wanted to refer to Lukashenka's quotes and the hard pronunciation of spirants and the phoneme [r], which is typical of his idiolect. The words *ашчушчэния*, *жэстачайша / жэстачайшэ* (ill. 14) and *красаўцы*[28] appeared especially often in posters and memes. The first word mentioned above alludes to the president's quote about the coronavirus, in which he used the Russian word *ощущения*, pronouncing it with the phonetics typical of his idiolect. The second refers to the quote "*Вы красавцы*," which was part of an address to the OMON officers who were defending the Presidential Palace. The third refers to the word *жэстачайшэ*, which is often used by Lukashenka to emphasize the finality and ruthlessness of the message.

Прыкрываецца дурдом алюмiневым шчытом, патому што на шчыце – ашчушчэнiя ня це.[29]
Беларусь 2020 год. Па ашчушчэниям 1937[30].
Беларусы, па маiм ашчушчэнiям красаўцы – эта мы[31].
Абрыдла жэстачайшэ[32].

The posters also repeatedly use an allusion to Lukashenka's words that the Americans are controlling the protest from outer space. For example, after the secret presidential inauguration, the slogan "Амерыканцы же, сволачы, из космаса видят всё. Патаму и втихара"[33] appeared (ill. 15).

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[26] At first it's hard, but it gets nice later. [written in trasianka]
[27] We all live wealthy, soon it will be paradise, because Nikolai Lukashenko is growing up. [written in trasianka]
[28] Impressions, ruthlessly, good guys (lit. handsome men).
[29] You cover the madhouse with an aluminium shield, because on the shield it feels different. [written in trasianka]
[30] Belarus the year 2020, but it feels like 1937. [written in trasianka]
[31] Belarusians, I feel like we're the good guys! [written in trasianka]
[32] We've had enough of ruthlessness. [written in trasianka]
[33] The Americans, scumbags, see everything from space. That's why it's in secret. [written in trasianka]

 Ill. 14, *I ruthlessly (жэстачайша) swear to serve ruthlessly the nation of Belarus (written in trasianka)*. Source: Telegram/Страна для жизни

Ill. 15, *The Americans, scumbags, see everything from space. That's why it's in secret.* Source: Telegram/Страна для жизни

All the above-mentioned phenomena occurred during the several-month-long protests and began to fade away after the intensification of state repression. The repression against Belarusian-speaking protesters was particularly brutal (a significant fact, for sure). Their bodies were marked with indelible markers in detention centres and treated worse than other detainees (Ковальчук, 2020). The following example is also characteristic: on the 26th of February 2021, the police detained 15 female pensioners who were reading Belarusian books (Калинина, 2021) on the train. The women were fined and sentenced to several days in jail for illegal picketing. Apart from street protests, the mere combination of the colours red and white also led to arrests. Access to most independent media websites was blocked in the country. Even using social media and creating memes is no longer safe, as the list of online chats and channels recognized by the authorities

as extremist is constantly growing, resulting in severe penalties for users of these means of communication.

Translation Jakub Banasiak

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O kilku zjawiskach językowych w białoruskich miastach podczas protestów 2020 roku

Po ogłoszeniu wyników wyborów prezydenckich w sierpniu 2020 roku na Białorusi wybuchły masowe protesty, które na kilka miesięcy całkowicie zmieniły życie całego kraju, a przede wszystkim mieszkańców dużych miast. W trakcie trwania najbardziej aktywnej fali protestów można wyodrębnić kilka zjawisk o charakterze językowym. Należy do nich przede wszystkim zwiększenie prestiżu języka białoruskiego w miastach oraz pozytywne nacechowanie wśród mieszkańców miast regionalizmów i tzw. trasianki, a także wprowadzenie przez protestujących nowej toponimiki. Tym właśnie zagadnieniom jest poświęcony niniejszy artykuł.

Słowa kluczowe: dyskurs protestowy, karnawalizacja protestu, język białoruski, trasianka, nowa toponimia

Some linguistic phenomena
during the 2020 mass protests in Belarus

Following the results of the presidential election in Belarus in August 2020, mass protests broke out in the country. These events completely changed the life of the entire country for several months, mainly that of large-city inhabitants. One of the characteristics visible during the largest wave of protests was linguistic phenomena. These include an increase of the prestige of the Belarusian language in cities, a positive attitude to regionalisms and so-called trasianka, as well the introduction of new toponyms by protesters. These are the issues to which this article is devoted.

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