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## **PROSPECTS FOR RUSSIAN-BELARUSIAN BILINGUALISM: THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC ASPECT**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Today, in the context of globalization, the development of media space, and migration processes, a rather heterogeneous social environment is emerging. On the one hand, this contributes to the formation of a multi-cultural and multilingual society, but on the other, it is crucial to restore and appeal to national values as well as cultural and linguistic identity.

The language issue is particularly interesting now, in the period of global ethnic awakening, when ethnic groups around the world are re-defining and reevaluating their identity, reviving and developing their culture, national language, and relationships with the titular ethnic groups of the countries of residence. For this reason, research focusing on the post-Soviet space, where the Russian language played the dominant role for a long time seems relevant. However, after the collapse of the USSR, the governments of the newly formed countries gave preference to the development of national languages (languages of the titular ethnic groups). In turn, this led to the creation of conditions for the functioning of bilingualism.

Within the framework of this study, an attempt is made to determine the prospects for Russian-Belarusian bilingualism. It is primarily due to the high level of russification at the time of the collapse of the USSR, as well as

to the fact that the Russian and Belarussian languages belong to the same language family and are “mutually intelligible” (Comrie 1981: 145).

The object of our research is the linguistic situation in Belarus and its influence on the prospects for the formation of bilingualism. The material for the study is language legislation and language education that are the most sensitive to any disturbance of linguistic balance and at the same time constitute one of the most powerful drive in the emerging bilingualism and – in some cases – multilingualism.

## 2. LANGUAGE LEGISLATION AS A FACTOR IN THE FORMATION OF RUSSIAN-BELARUSIAN BILINGUALISM

The contemporary bilingual situation in Belarus dates back to “the late 1980s” when the so-called *second Belarussian Renaissance* began (Mechkovskaya 1994: 299).

During this period, there appeared newly-formed social organizations such as the Belarussian Language Society<sup>1</sup> founded in 1989 and registered in 1991. On January 26, 1990, the law *on Languages in the Byelorussian SS* was adopted, which gave the Belarussian language the status of an official language. In September, the Council of Ministers of the BSSR adopted the State Program not only for the development of the Belarussian language but also, importantly, for other national languages. This, in turn, became a ground for bilingualism if not but multilingualism, if we take into account the multi-ethnicity of this region.

After the collapse of the USSR, in the newly formed republics, “since 1990, national-patriotic forces have tried to expand the scope of the titular languages” to consolidate their positions in the legal field, education, culture, and public space as a sole official language in the country (Mechkovskaya 2011: 76). As for Belarus, by the time of gaining independence, it had become “the most russified republic”, which indicates that Belarussian linguistic environment of the day was dominated by monolingualism where the Belarussians spoke Russian either as a mother tongue or gained a native-like fluency in that language (Mechkovskaya 2003: 30).

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<sup>1</sup> Таварыства беларускай мовы імя Францішка Скарыны [Tavarystva belaruskaj movy imya Francishka Skaryny].

After A. Lukashenko won the presidential elections in 1994, radical changes took place in the Belarusian language policy. In particular, on May 14, 1995, a referendum was held, with one of the issues being that of giving the Russian language the status of an official language equally to Belarusian. According to the referendum results, 83.3% of respondents approved of that. Commenting on the 1994 referendum, A. Lukashenko said:

Люди, которые говорят на белорусском языке, не могут ничего делать, кроме как разговаривать на нем, потому что на белорусском нельзя выразить ничего великого. Белорусский язык – бедный язык. В мире существуют только два великих языка – русский и английский<sup>2</sup>

In this speech, it is important to pay attention to the rhetoric: since the majority of votes in the referendum preferred linguistic equality between Belarusian and Russian, the President, while delivering his speech, pointed out the poverty of the Belarusian language, thereby presenting it as uncompetitive and having an extremely limited scope of functions and applications compared to Russian and English that he called *great*. Thus, the former linguistic imbalance characteristic of Soviet times was established in the country, when “Russian again became the language of state power, and Belarusian the language of the opposition” (Mamul 2011: 109).

Another referendum regarding the language issue was held on November 24, 1996. It was about the introduction of amendments and addenda to the 1994 Constitution proposed by the President of Belarus, A. Lukashenko, including the approval of the Russian language as an official language of Belarus. The original version of the Constitution guaranteed the unrestricted use of the Russian language as the language of interethnic communication. 83.7% of respondents voted for the amendments. Thus, Belarus became the only post-Soviet country that constitutionally established bilingualism.

If we take into account such aspect of bilingualism as “passive knowledge” (Basham, Fathman 2008) of one of the languages (the ability to perceive information in it), we can say that the entire population of Belarus is bilingual. This is due to the mutual intelligibility of the Russian and Belarusian languages. In the areas where the Belarusians co-existed

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<sup>2</sup> People who speak Belarusian cannot do anything but speak it, because nothing great can be expressed in Belarusian. The Belarusian language is a poor language. There are only two big languages in the world – Russian and English.

with the representatives of other nationalities (Ukrainians, Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians), there are other types of bilingualism (Belarusian-Ukrainian, Belarusian-Polish, etc.), and taking into account that the Russian language is also spoken in these areas, the linguistic situation in Belarus can be considered multilingual. With the expansion of the communicative prestige of the English language and the need to have foreign contacts, with English is the intermediary language, one can also speak of multilingualism in the Republic of Belarus. However, when it comes to “active bilingualism” (Bak 2016), namely fluency in both languages, the situation is significantly different. It is evidenced not only by population censuses reflecting low proficiency level in the Belarusian language, but also by the uneven presence of both languages in socially significant areas of society.

### 3. FEATURES OF BILINGUAL RUSSIAN-BELARUSIAN EDUCATION

Education is one of the spheres involved in the formation of bilingualism and its popularization, and at the same time the most sensitive to language policy. This implies that in Belarussian schools two languages are taught – Belarussian and Russian. *ge*.

If in the school year 1994–1995 (before the approval of the status of Russian as the official language) 40% of Belarusian schoolchildren studied in the Belarusian language, then in the school year 2012–2013 there were 16.5% of them, in 2013–2014 – 15.4%, in 2014–2015 – 14.4%, 2015–2016 – 13.6%, 2016–2017 – 13.2%, 2017–2018 – 12.2%, and 2018–2019 – 11.1%<sup>3</sup>. Thus, we can easily notice that over ten years, there has been a gradual and steady decline in Belarusian-language education.

According to statistics, in the school year 2020–2021, there were 3,009 institutions of general secondary education in Belarus, with a student population of 1,058,000. Of these, 89.7% are in Russian-speaking educational institutions and 10.2% in Belarusian-speaking ones. Foreign-language institutions of secondary general education account for only 0.1%. The number of students by the language of instruction was as follows: 107.6 thousand were educated in Belarusian, and 949.2 thousand were educated in Russian.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

At the same time, statistical data relating to the teaching staff in the context of the courses taught shows that the number of teachers of the Belarusian language and literature is even slightly higher than that of the teachers of the Russian language and literature, namely 9.9% (6732) and 9.7% (6635) altogether. This is due to the teaching of the Belarusian language in classes with Russian as the language of instruction. This is due to the Belarusian language teaching in classes with Russian as the language of instruction.

It must also be noted that 75.4% of students in rural educational institutions consider the Belarusian language as their mother tongue, and 57.5% – in urban ones<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, linguistic differences can be superimposed on social ones; that is, the Belarusian language is increasingly acquiring the image of a low-prestige language that has no practical significance in modern life. Thus, the current educational system of Belarus can be qualified as an instrument of russification.

An essential role in the popularization of education in the Belarusian language is played by the Internet resource *nastaunik.info*, where one can easily find information about classes and preschool institutions with the Belarusian language of instruction; thereby it facilitates the availability of information about the opportunities to receive Belarusian-language education. It seems important to mention the *Умовы для мовы* – a Facebook group focusing on language, whose members work on writing official appeals regarding the use of the Belarusian language, including the field of education. The appearance of such initiatives may indicate a rise in the status of the Belarusian and a growing interest in the study of this language.

Speaking about higher education, for the aforementioned academic year, out of 254.4 thousand students, 0.2 thousand obtained education in Belarusian, while in Russian – 153.8 thousand, and in two languages – 96.9 thousand. It should be emphasized that every year there is a drop in the number of students in all language departments; that is, the decline of students in particular language departments is not associated with a change in trends but with the reduction in the total number of students entering universities.

However, the attitude of Belarusian citizens towards the Belarusian language is rather contradictory. According to the 2019 census, 54% of citizens declared Belarusian as their mother tongue. At the same time,

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<sup>4</sup> Recommendations on the results of the republican monitoring of the personal development of students.

according to the results of the 2009 census, one may notice that the same figure 10 years ago was lower and amounted to 53%, with the highest figure recorded in 1999 – 73.7%.

Simultaneously, ethnic Belarusians accounted for 84.9% of the country's population in 2019. According to a sociological survey conducted in 2018 by the Research Center of the Institute of Privatization and Management, 65.9% of the respondents would like their children to speak Belarusian as well as Russian. 86.1% of Belarusians consider the Belarusian language to be the most vital part of the national culture that should be preserved as such. Only 2.2% of the subjects said they speak Belarusian at home; Russian – 73.7%; both Russian and Belarusian – 12.3%; a combination of Russian and Belarusian – 11.6%.

Based on the statistical data on language proficiency and the data related to education, it can be said that the Russian-Belarusian bilingualism does exist, but its percentage is low. However, the manifestation of interest in the language and the desire to get education with Belarusian as the language of instruction indicates positive prospects for the expansion of Belarusian and increasing proportion of bilinguals.

#### 4. THE RHETORIC OF THE PRESIDENT OF BELARUS, A. LUKASHENKO, REGARDING THE LANGUAGE SITUATION

Also, one cannot fail to note the influence exerted on the language issue by the President of Belarus. The impact in question can be visible when we analyze the discourse of the speeches of A. Lukashenko. Six official speeches representing the language issue and presented on the Official website of the President of Belarus from 1994 to mid-2022 were selected as the material for research.

The interviews with A. Lukashenko concerning the Belarusian language, his attitude towards Belarusian, and a possible revision of the results of the referendum fall beyond the scope of this study whose objective was to determine the official stance on the language issue; that would make it possible to define the prospects for Russian-Belarusian bilingualism.

While A. Lukashenko, in his speech after the announcement of the referendum results in 1994, spoke of the Belarusian language as an ordinary language unable to express anything great, he did not go unnoticed that ten years later his rhetoric changed significantly.

On April 22, 2014, A. Lukashenko stated in his annual speech: “Если разучимся говорить на белорусской мове – мы перестанем быть нацией<sup>5</sup>”.

It is noteworthy that in his speech delivered in Russian and concerning the Belarusian language, he used the Belarusian lexeme *мова*<sup>6</sup>. However, he paid much more attention to the “великий русский язык”<sup>7</sup>, which will develop freely in Belarus as “матчына родная беларуская мова”<sup>8</sup>, since the Russian language is “общее достояние трех братских народов: украинцев, белорусов, россиян”<sup>9</sup>. Further A. Lukashenko claimed that if Belarus eliminates Russian from official and everyday communication, it will “лишится ума”<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, by designating the Russian language as a value shared by three nations, A. Lukashenko did not identify the Belarusian people with the Russian language – instead, he thereby emphasized difference.

Importantly, the speech under scrutiny was delivered against the backdrop of Ukraine’s geopolitical conflict with Russia, the *Crimean Spring*<sup>11</sup>, and the raising of the language issue as a form of soft power or an opportunity for Russia to maintain control in the post-Soviet territory.

In the same year, on September 29, at a meeting with the members of the Council of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus, the President criticized the work of the Ministry of Education and expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that fewer hours are allocated for the study of the Belarusian language at school than for the study of Russian and English. He underscored that the Belarusian language is spoken less in everyday life and suggested increasing the number of study hours, though not at the expense of Russian, but of English.

Thus, even though A. Lukashenko in his speech drew the attention to the fact that Belarusian still seemed functionally underprivileged, he limited the communicative context to everyday communication only, and saw a pathway to expand the scope of Belarusian at the expense of English, while he failed to mention the linguistic dominance of Russian.

<sup>5</sup> If we forget how to speak the Belarusian language, we will cease to be a nation.

<sup>6</sup> [L]anguage.

<sup>7</sup> [G]reat Russian language.

<sup>8</sup> [N]ative Belarusian language.

<sup>9</sup> [C]ommon property of three fraternal nations: Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians.

<sup>10</sup> [L]ose mind.

<sup>11</sup> One of the names officially used by the Crimean authorities for the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation.

However, despite the official bilingualism in the country enshrined in legislation, the overwhelming majority of the president's speeches were delivered in Russian, which in turn accentuates the unequal position of the two languages. That imbalance hampers the development of bilingualism and shifts Belarusian to the periphery of communication. Besides after the first official Belarusian-language speech on Independence Day in 1994, A. Lukashenko gave another official speech in Belarusian only in 2014. In 2022, he delivered an official speech twice (on the eve of and on Independence Day on July 3). In his speech, he once again stressed the role of historical memory, national unity, and the importance of honouring compatriots, "якія змаглі захаваць сваю мову, культуру і веру"<sup>12</sup>. As it seems, his may be due to the fact that the President of Belarus attempted to shift the focus from the language issue. The issue may escalate again against the backdrop of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine – that he justified with the claim that the Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine required protection. Growing economic crisis resulting from tightened sanctions regime also has its role to play.

## 5. THE INFLUENCE OF MODERN GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES ON THE PROSPECTS FOR BILINGUALISM

The events against the backdrop of 2014 in Donbas, the annexation of Crimea, and tense situation in the region due to "a serious threat to the Russian and Russian-speaking population of Ukraine" gave rise to renewed attention to the language policy in the post-Soviet countries (Kofman 2017: 13).

In Belarus, in turn, the *Concept of Information Security of the Republic of Belarus* was approved, speaking of the "expansion of social functions and communication opportunities" of the Belarusian language was approved under the Decree of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus dated March 18, 2019. The development of Belarusian in the context of "constitutionally fixed bilingualism" will ensure humanitarian security of the state.

There seems to be a correlation between the rise in popularity of Belarusian among the population and the protests in Belarus in 2020. Accord-

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<sup>12</sup> [W]ho were able to preserve their language, culture, and faith.



ing to Belarusian sociologist Oksana Shelest, the protests were “mostly Russian-speaking” (Shelest 2020), namely, the slogans presented and the speeches of the opposing side were voiced in Russian. Among the most frequently encountered slogans, one can single out Belarusian *Верым, можам, пераможам!* and *Жыве Беларусь!*<sup>13</sup> This carries a symbolic meaning and, juxtaposed with Russian-speaking protesters, may imply that the Belarusian language is perceived as a symbol of statehood, ethnic and cultural affiliation, and opposition to the current pro-Russian government.

The Belarusian-speaking opposition and protesters were certainly included in the protests as well. But at the same time, from the very beginning of the protests, the attitude towards the language issue was neutral and no requirements regarding language legislation were voiced.

In recent years, the concept of “*soft belarusization*” has quite often been addressed in the media, showing the improving status of the Belarusian language and its functional expansion (Rudkouski 2017). However, without restricting the scope of the Russian language, the volume of the press and books appearing in the national language has slightly increased, presumably as a result of social campaign broadcast on television and on the streets “with a call to speak Belarusian”. This may have a positive impact on the prospects of Belarusian-Russian bilingualism (Danejko 2018).

Notably, the reaction of the Russian media reacted instantly, presenting such initiatives as a ban imposed on the Russian language and the resulting closure of Russian-language schools – all this perceived as undermining the constitutional position of the Russian language, and the process of *вышиванизацыя*<sup>14</sup>.

According to A. Demyanovich, the language situation in Belarus and the official language policy, directly or not, contribute “to the further displacement of the Belarusian language from circulation and narrowing its scope at the expense of Russian” (Demyanovich 2014: 323). It is confirmed by the analysis of the actual functioning of languages in the field of education, and has a significant impact on the prospects for bilingualism.

At present, the Belarusian language, according to the UNESCO classification, is considered an endangered language, which is another factor negatively affecting the efforts to provide favourable conditions for the Belarusian-Russian bilingualism.

<sup>13</sup> Believe, we can, we will win! Long live Belarus!

<sup>14</sup> [V]yshivanyizatsiya.

The modern language policy in Belarus is, in fact, a continuation of the policy of Russification of the republic, consistently pursued by the Soviet authorities from the mid-30s to the end of the 80s of the last century. As noted by I. Kalita, a targeted language policy focused on the national language has taken place in Belarus only twice in recent history: “at the beginning and end of the 20th century, the rest of the time the Belarusian language is fighting for survival” (Kalita 2010: 12).

It should be noted that underlying such language policy were both pragmatic (from the point of view of A. Lukashenko and his entourage) and ideological/axiological reasons. The introduction of official bilingualism in Belarus was accompanied by the return of somewhat modified state symbols of the Soviet era, Soviet interpretations of Belarusian history, orientation towards Russia, and ideological repulsion from the West.

It is noteworthy that the Russian establishment along with the media, giving to the Belarusian language situation no less coverage than to the Ukrainian issue, express dissatisfaction with this outcome of the language policy, including the policy of the current President of Belarus, A. Lukashenko, who repeatedly highlighted the importance of the Russian language to the country and the Belarusian people.

This says a lot about Russian policy towards the Russian language and the Russian diaspora. However, it can be assumed that it is more about marginalizing Belarusian and Ukrainian national identities and replacing them with Russian identities. Therefore, the “*триединный народ*”<sup>15</sup> thesis increasingly appearing in the Russian political and media discourse has become a fact.

During the years of Lukashenko’s rule, several state programs for language development were adopted, which, if implemented, would undoubtedly lead to a normal state of affairs. As a matter of fact everything was done to achieve the contrary – to exclude the Belarusian language from the system of public life, state administration, legal proceedings, and information.

Speaking at the opening of the XIX World Congress of the Russian Press in Minsk on July 12, 2017, A. Lukashenko said that Belarus is a country “where they honor, respect, speak, and think in Russian”, while he noted that the Belarusian language was successfully raised “to the same level as Russian”. Nevertheless, the analysis of the language situation presented above suggests

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<sup>15</sup> The All-Russian nation. In his article on the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians dated July 12, 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin thus designated the peoples of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia.

the opposite: the Belarusian language, being forced out to the periphery during the Soviet era, could not strengthen its position during the years of independence of the Republic of Belarus. Measures aimed at its development have not brought significant results, and the use of the language still has a territorial and social framework. The events of 2020 showed a possible change in the situation since the Belarusian language has become a kind of symbol of the revival of national self-consciousness and ethnocultural identity.

Talking about the current situation of Russian-Belarusian bilingualism, we see the uneven functioning of languages and the dominance of the Russian language. If we consider the prospects, we can assume that against the backdrop of an unstable geopolitical situation and Russian invasion on Ukraine that Belarus borders on, the language issue may become a means of speculation on the part of the current regime of A. Lukashenko, and an attempt to demonstrate Belarusian independence from Russia in order to prevent "the use of the language issue by the opposition" (Bekus 2011: 124). Besides, Belarusian "is officially the language of worship in the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus", which plays a significant role in the strengthening of the position of the Belarusian language not only as a means of religious but also national identity (Dworzecka 2018: 59).

Thus, taking into account the growing interest in the Belarusian language showed by the Belarusians, who insist on the availability of education in their native language, it can be assumed that the Russian-Belarusian bilingualism is by all means feasible.

However, a spectacular effect may be achieved directly by functional expansion of the Belarusian language not only by its presence in the field of education and public administration, but also by way of popularization of the Belarusian-language literature, cinema, and the media, coupled with high quality translation and distribution of foreign literature and films, the development of teaching aids for the Belarusian language classroom, and the intense use of Belarusian as a means of national communication and an element of national self-consciousness and ethnocultural identity.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The language situation in Belarus is characterized by unstable Russian-Belarusian bilingualism. Even though both languages have equal legal status of official languages, they differ significantly in their essential role

and the areas of functioning. The Belarusian language currently acts as a minority language and requires special support from the state to function successfully and effectively within the speaking community of Belarus. Such support, however, is not provided for by modern legislation.

Besides the rhetoric of the current authorities and the specific use of language in the official speeches of the President of the Republic of Belarus A. Lukashenko, in fact there is little interest in resolving the language issue and an extremely rare speech in the Belarusian language. However, the analysis of the President's official speeches reveals that A. Lukashenko resorts to the Belarusian language in the case of aggravation of the geopolitical relations, such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 or Russian invasion on Ukraine in 2022, which may be seen as linguistic abuse, political manipulation and a distractor.

All this considered, further limitations on the communicative potential and functional scope of the Belarusian language, now mainly used in public administration, office work, and education appear inevitable. Education plays the pivotal role as it allows bilingualism to develop; yet, this requires an increased number of Belarussian classes and Belarusian-language schools. In addition, the authorities are expected to assume sufficient efforts, including the efforts to popularize the official language, show that it is competitive to Russian, and to review the role it has for the Belarusian society. Serious measures need to be taken in the field of national language policy to facilitate the development of bilingualism.

Thus, a change in the current situation is possible if appropriate steps are taken by the responsible institutions and through increased language awareness among the Belarusian-speaking community. A gradual, non-violent, steady expansion of the Belarusian language into the areas of intellectual activity would contribute to the development of bilingualism.

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### Abstract

This article is devoted to the topical issue of Russian-Belarusian bilingualism in the post-Soviet environment. Belarus is of particular interest not only because of the high level of russification at the time of the collapse of the USSR but also because of its close relations with Russia afterwards. Belarus is the only country in the post-Soviet space that has legally secured the equal status of the Belarusian and Russian languages as official languages, which results in legally fixed bilingualism. However, the actual position of the two languages is not equal at all and the functional scope of the Belarusian language is still limited. The purpose of this work was to determine the current state of the language situation and to determine the prospects for bilingualism based on the language-governing rules and the analysis of the education sector since it reacts most sensitively to any changes in legislation pertaining to language policy and most effectively influences the formation of multilingual society. In addition, research hypotheses were presented through the prism of political discourse, namely the rhetoric about bilingualism present in the official speeches of the President of the Republic of Belarus, A. Lukashenko).

**Keywords:** sociolinguistic aspect, bilingualism, language policy, education, political discourse

### PERSPEKTYWY DWUJĘZYCZNOŚCI ROSYJSKO-BIAŁORUSKIEJ: ASPEKT SOCJOLINGWISTYCZNY

#### Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest aktualnemu zagadnieniu – dwujęzyczności rosyjsko-narodowej w społeczno-kulturowej przestrzeni poradzieckiej. Białoruś jest szczególnie interesująca nie tylko ze względu na wysoki poziom rusyfikacji w czasie rozpadu ZSRR, ale także ze względu na bliskie kontakty z Rosją po nim. Białoruś jest jedynym krajem na przestrzeni poradzieckiej, który zapewnił na poziomie państwowym równy status języków białoruskiego i rosyjskiego jako języków

państwowych, co prowadzi do prawnie utrwalonej dwujęzyczności. Jednak faktyczna pozycja języków nie jest równa, a sfery funkcjonowania języka białoruskiego są nadal ograniczone. Celem niniejszej pracy było określenie aktualnego stanu sytuacji językowej i określenie perspektyw w oparciu o ustawy o języku oraz analizie sektora edukacji, jako jednego z najbardziej wrażliwych na zmiany w ustawodawstwie językowym i jednego z najważniejszych sposobów tworzenia wielojęzycznego społeczeństwa. Ponadto postawione hipotezy zostały przedstawione przez pryzmat dyskursu politycznego, a mianowicie retoryki o dwujęzyczności w przemówieniu prezydenta Republiki Białorusi A. Łukaszenki).

**Słowa kluczowe:** aspekt socjolingwistyczny, dwujęzyczność, polityka językowa, edukacja, dyskurs polityczny