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Minority Language Education in Belarus

A Story of Silenced Voices and Destroyed Achievements

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Abstract

This article examines the elimination of minority language education in Belarus following the 2022 Education Code revision, which effectively erased programs previously available in Lithuanian and Polish in a small number of schools. While nominally permitting minority language study, the new code, implemented under the Lukashenka administration, restricts instruction to language and culture classes contingent upon formal student requests and official approvals. Given Belarus' position outside the Council of Europe and the resulting lack of influence from legally binding minority rights instruments, this article explores the relevant legal framework, the Lukashenka administration's political reasoning and communication tactics, and reactions from neighboring kin-states within Brubaker's triadic nexus. It reveals how broad discretionary power undermines minority language rights, silences minority voices, and dismantles prior educational achievements within this complex political and legal landscape.

Keywords

political communication, national minorities, minority education, Belarus

1 Introduction

Starting 1 September 2022, the beginning of the school year, instruction in languages other than Belarusian and Russian, the country's official languages, was no longer offered in Belarus. This resulted from the revised Education Code adopted on 14 January 2022. In practice, this change affected only four schools in the Hrodna region: two urban schools, where Polish had been the language of instruction, and two rural schools, where Lithuanian had been used. Some other schools throughout the country with minority language components were also partially affected by policy changes that removed virtually all of those elements. Minority languages were not formally removed from the Education Code, but their use was limited to language and literature classes, subject to formal student requests and their official approvals.

On the one hand, many post-communist European countries have modified the educational rights of national minorities, frequently reducing them. The Belarus authorities' actions follow this pattern. However, in practice, this measure is a drastic step, effectively eliminating minority language education in Belarus.

On the other hand, this situation deserves attention because Belarus has never joined the Council of Europe (CoE). As a result, despite notable parallels, its ethnocultural policies have not been directly influenced by the CoE's legally binding minority-related instruments, such as the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML). These policies have instead been shaped primarily by the approaches developed during the late Soviet period (Osipov, 2012, 196). This divergence explains the need to analyze this particular case and its implications within the specific minority-related and broader regional contexts.

This article examines the closure of minority language schools in Belarus, moving beyond a simple legislative analysis. It relies on Brubaker's (1996, 56) triadic nexus of minorities, their country of residence, and their external homelands to analyze the political reasoning and communication surrounding the school closures. Smith's (2020) quadratic nexus, which updates Brubaker's framework by incorporating the impact of international minority rights norms implemented through international organizations, is less applicable in this case primarily due to Belarus' non-participation in the Council of Europe's legally binding instruments on minority rights. The article therefore proceeds as follows: it first explains the relevant ethnic and historical context, the legal framework and its limitations, and the history and development of minority education in Belarus. It then analyzes the Lukashenka administration's reasoning, communication tactics, and the kin-states' reactions, considering Belarus' specific circumstances.

2 Explanation of relevant ethnic and historical contexts

Belarus is a relatively homogenous society in ethnic terms, with Belarusians accounting for 84.89 percent of the population, according to the 2019 national census. Russians make up 7.51 percent, followed by Poles at 3.06 percent and Ukrainians at 1.70 percent. Other ethnic groups are small, each representing less than 0.15 percent of the total population. The Polish community includes 287,693 self-identified individuals, with 223,119, or 77.55 percent, residing in the Hrodna region, where they form 21.73 percent of the local population. Lithuanians, another traditional minority, numbered 5,287 as per the 2019 census, making up 0.06 percent of Belarus' population. Of this group, 2,174 individuals, or 41.12 percent, live in the Hrodna region, where they constitute 0.21 percent of its residents (Belstat, 2021b, 228, 246).

The presence of ethnic Polish and Lithuanian components in the current Belarusian population is rooted in the centuries-old, shared history of the ancestors of these three contemporary ethnic groups. This history includes coexistence within the same historical state formations, joint fight for independence against the Russian Empire in the 19th century, competing modern national movements, as well as territorial conflicts and border shifts during the 20th century (Snyder, 2003, 15–102). However, the analysis of these past developments should be left to historians. What remains undeniable is that all these ethnic groups have traditionally lived within the present-day borders of each country, forming an integral part of their societies.

This is why the historical dimension of this analysis begins with the period following the end of World War II, when the current borders in the triangle of Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland were established. The divergence between Belarus and Lithuania under postwar Soviet occupation needs to be addressed here to better contextualize the differing policies toward the Polish minority, which are necessary for understanding some Belarusian-specific contexts explained later in the text. In Lithuania, Vilnius (Polish: *Wilno*) and with its environs became a center of Polish cultural life in the USSR, featuring schools, press, and elements of cultural

and religious life, although these were strictly controlled and engineered by Soviet authorities (Bobryk, 2013, 23–27). In contrast, in Belarus, the last Polish school in Hrodna (Polish: *Grodno*) was closed in July 1948, and all manifestations of Polish identity were suppressed, as the Polish minority was subjected to total assimilation and Sovietization (Gawin, 2018, 263, 276). Thus, the administrative border between these two Soviet republics effectively marked a significant dividing line in the experiences of the Polish minority on either side. While Soviet authorities in Lithuania allowed for a controlled and highly regulated form of Polish cultural and educational life, in Belarus they pursued a policy of complete erasure of public Polish identity.

3 Relevant legal framework[1]

3.1 Domestic context

Article 50 of the Belarusian Constitution[2] guarantees individuals the right to use their native language and choose their language of communication, while ensuring, in accordance with the law, the freedom to select the language for upbringing and education. On one hand, this wording paved the way for national minority languages to be included in the school curriculum or used as a medium of instruction. On the other hand, the reference to relevant legislation allows the state to alter these provisions based on its rationale and political expediency.

There are two key laws that regulate this matter: the Code of the Republic of Belarus on Education[3] and the Law on Languages in the Republic of Belarus.[4] Both were amended after Belarus' disputed 2020 presidential election, which led to widespread durable protests and a subsequent crackdown on civil society with the introduction of repressive laws (Kascian, 2022, 7–8).

The Belarusian Code on Education, while stating that the language of instruction should be determined by the founder of the educational institution, taking into account the wishes of students or their legal representatives, grants significant discretion to local education authorities. In practice, this authority most often designates Russian as the primary language of instruction. This creates significant barriers for children seeking to exercise their constitutional right to education in Belarusian, the native language for the majority of the population, as a medium of instruction, with the situation being even more challenging for those wishing to be educated in minority languages like Polish or Lithuanian. The revised Code on Education, adopted on 14 January 2022, further exacerbates this issue. Previously, Article 90 of the older version allowed for the establishment of preschool and general secondary education institutions, as well as classes and groups within those institutions, where instruction and upbringing could be conducted in a national minority language,

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[1] Note that certain official websites in Belarus cited in this text below may be inaccessible from foreign IP addresses due to temporary restrictions imposed by the Belarusian authorities for political purposes.

[2] Kanstytucyja Respubliki Bielaruś [Constitution of the Republic of Belarus]. 15 March 1994, as amended. Online: https://tinyurl.com/yrs3v66t

[3] Kodeks Respubliki Belarus ob obrazovanii [Code of the Republic of Belarus on Education]. 13 January 2011, No. 243-3, as amended. Online: https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=hk1100243

[4] Zakon Respubliki Bielaruś ab movach u Respublicy Bielaruś [Law of the Republic of Belarus on the Languages in the Republic of Belarus]. 26 January 1990, No. 3094-XI, as amended. Online: http://world of law.pravo.by/text.asp?RN=V19003094

or where such a language was taught as a subject, based on the wishes of students and their legal representatives, with approval from local authorities and the Ministry of Education. However, the new version, under Article 82, significantly restricts this provision. Now, it only permits the establishment of groups and classes where children study the language and literature of a national minority, eliminating the possibility of receiving a full education in their native language.

Changes to the Law on Languages were made on 17 July 2023. Among other things, these amendments aimed to align the law with the Code on Education, and they also restricted education in minority languages. Previously, Article 22 allowed for instruction and upbringing in minority languages in designated institutions, groups, and classes. The amended version limits this to the study of minority language and literature only.

It is notable that the Law on National Minorities[5] has not been amended after the 2020 election, likely because its nature is primarily declarative. Although, Article 6 of this law affirms the right to state support for the cultural and educational development of minorities, and the right to choose the language of upbringing and education, it links the implementation of these rights to the existing Belarusian legislation. Consequently, the Law on National Minorities is, in effect, secondary to the two laws mentioned above.

3.2 Bilateral treaties with Lithuania and Poland

Belarus's non-participation in the Council of Europe not only shapes the content of its minority-related legal framework and domestic policies but also positions bilateral agreements as the primary legally binding mechanism for regulating specific minority rights. In this regard, bilateral agreements with Poland and Lithuania serve as illustrative cases.

Belarus and Poland signed a bilateral Treaty on Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation on 23 June 1992.[6] The treaty underscores the shared historical, ethnic, and cultural ties between Belarusians and Poles, with particular emphasis on the rights of national minorities, namely Poles residing in Belarus and Belarusians residing in Poland. It affirms their right to preserve and develop their ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious identities, ensuring protection against discrimination and guaranteeing full equality before the law. Article 16 confirms that both parties will endeavor to provide national minorities with opportunities to study their native language or receive education conducted in their native language within local educational institutions. Furthermore, the curricula of schools attended by these minority groups are to incorporate a broader representation of the history and culture of national minorities. The treaty also safeguards the right of minorities to participate in public affairs, particularly in areas related to the preservation and reinforcement of their identity. In this context, the treaty requires consultations with organizations or associations representing these minorities when necessary. Finally, the treaty establishes provisions to enable the use of minority languages in interactions with public authorities, where circumstances permit and where it is deemed necessary.

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[5] Zakon Respubliki Belarus o natsionalykh menshinstvakh v Respublike Belarus [Law of the Republic of Belarus on National Minorities in the Republic of Belarus]. 11 November 1992, No. 1926-XII, as amended. Online: https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=v19201926

[6] Traktat między Rzecząpospolitą Polską a Republiką Białoruś o dobrym sąsiedztwie i przyjaznej współpracy, podpisany w Warszawie dnia 23 czerwca 1992 r. [Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus on Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, signed in Warsaw on 23 June 1992]. Dz.U. 1993 nr 118 poz. 527. Online: https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19931180527

On 20 July 2016, Belarus and Poland signed a bilateral agreement on cooperation in the sphere of education.[7] Under Article 8 of the Agreement, and in accordance with their respective domestic legislation, both parties committed to establishing conditions that allow Poles residing in Belarus and Belarusians residing in Poland to study in and learn their native languages. They also pledged to create conditions for learning the culture, traditions, history, and geography of their respective kin-states.

A similar bilateral treaty on good neighborliness and cooperation was signed between Belarus and Lithuania on 6 February 1995.[8] Among other issues, this treaty addresses minority rights for Belarusians in Lithuania and Lithuanians in Belarus. Article 11 specifically guarantees that ethnic Lithuanians in Belarus and Belarusians in Lithuania have the right to education in their native language, as well as the opportunity to study it in schools. Article 12 emphasizes that both parties will strive to ensure that minorities can receive education in their mother tongue or study it at the preschool, primary, and secondary levels. The same article also envisages that the state party to this treaty is committed to consulting with representatives of the relevant minority residing within its borders, as necessary. Additionally, the treaty obligates the parties to foster conditions that safeguard the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity of these minorities while preventing their discrimination or forced assimilation. It further ensures the right of individuals to use their native language freely in both private and public life and to engage in cultural and educational activities that promote and preserve their heritage.

While these bilateral treaties guarantee minority language education rights, their wording allows Belarusian authorities to determine the extent of their implementation. The agreements provide for the opportunity to study minority languages, but not necessarily for education conducted entirely in those languages. Therefore, offering minority language instruction only as a subject, rather than the primary language of instruction, would technically fulfill the treaties' obligations.

4 Minority schools as an element of Belarus' education system

The late 1980s witnessed a national revival across the former USSR, marked by subsequent dismantling of the communist regime. This led to the independence of former Soviet republics and a liberalization of political and cultural life. Consequently, minorities gained new opportunities to develop their identities and assert their rights, free from the strict control of communist authorities. The establishment of four schools teaching in Polish and Lithuanian in Belarus was a direct consequence of these transformations. However, no new schools with minority language of instruction have been created in Belarus since the late 1990s. In recent years, before their closure, minority language schools educated just over 0.1 percent of all schoolchildren in Belarus (Belstat, 2021a, 18). The subsequent sections address the distinct contexts of Polish and Lithuanian schools, respectively.

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[7] Porozumienie między Rządem Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej a Rządem Republiki Białorusi o współpracy w dziedzinie edukacji, podpisane w Warszawie dnia 20 lipca 2016 r. w. [Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Republic of Belarus on cooperation in the sphere of education, signed in Warsaw on 20 July 2016]. M.P. 2017 poz. 49. Online: https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WMP20170000049

[8] Lietuvos Respublikos ir Baltarusijos Respublikos sutartis dėl geros kaimynystės ir bendradarbiavimo [Treaty on Good Neighborliness and Cooperation between the Republic of Lithuania and the Republic of Belarus]. Valstybės žinios, 10 May 1996, Nr. 43-1047. Online: https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.27321

4.1 Polish schools

After the last with Polish as the medium of instruction in Hrodna was closed by Soviet authorities in 1948, Poles in Belarus could no longer receive education in their native language. Contrary to Belarus, schools with the Polish language of instruction existed in Lithuania under Soviet rule. This fact offered a solution for some Belarusian Poles residing in the areas adjacent to the Belarusian-Lithuanian border who sent their children to these Polish schools on the Lithuanian side of the border to ensure them the possibility to receive education in the mother tongue (Gawin, 2018, 263). The outcomes of the postwar Soviet policies aimed at closing Polish schools and suppressing the language are still felt today, with Poles in Belarus largely abandoning Polish even at home (Gawin, 2018, 185).

The changing political environment in the late USSR allowed Polish activists in Belarus to achieve the implementation of Polish as a school subject in September 1988 through grassroots efforts, despite facing a complete lack of existing infrastructure (Gawin, 2010, 119, 130–131). In September 1991, two classes with Polish as the language of instruction were established in Hrodna, creating the basis for a potentially well-developed Polish minority school system (Gawin, 2010, 124). These classes also became the foundation for the first school with the Polish language of instruction – Secondary School No. 36 – opened in Hrodna in September 1996. As of the 2021/22 academic year, the school in Hrodna had 620 students (RFE/RL, 2023), being the largest minority school in Belarus.

Secondary School No. 8 in Vaŭkavysk (Polish: *Wołkowysk*) was inaugurated in October 1999 as the second school with Polish as a language of instruction in Belarus. Its origins trace back to a class with Polish as a language of instruction established at the town's Secondary School No. 2 in September 1992 (Vaŭkavysk school, s. a.). As of the 2021/22 academic year, the school in Vaŭkavysk had 250 students (RFE/RL, 2023).

In addition to these two schools, Polish was the language of instruction in some classes at Secondary School No. 9 in Brest (Polish: *Brześć*) and a subject taught in some schools in Hrodna, Brest, Mahilioŭ (Polish: *Mohylew*), Lida (Polish: *Lida*) and other Belarusian cities, but this all was discontinued after the 2022 amendments to the Education Code (Jasina, 2022; Kłysiński, 2021; Polish Radio, 2022).

An analysis of the revival and development of Polish minority education in Belarus demonstrated that its activists had to cope with considerable challenges and often uncooperative local authorities. On the one hand, it highlighted the minority's resilience and the potential for Polish-language education in Belarus. On the other hand, it revealed that serious linguistic issues are insufficiently discussed in Belarus at the official level and remain largely unresolved (Pushkin & Osipov, 2014, 118). The creation of Polish-language schools in post-Soviet Belarus depended not only on the proportion of ethnic Poles in specific towns but also on interest in such classes and grassroots efforts, with places like Lida, Voranava (Polish: *Werenowo*), and Ščučyn (Polish: *Szczuczyn*) lacking sufficient number of activists to drive their development, and commonly overcoming reluctance or even obstacles from local authorities (Kapcewicz, 2022, 131).

Belarusian authorities often cited financial constraints in their interactions with representatives of the Polish minority. The two aforementioned schools were funded by the Polish state budget. The Polish minority sought to expand the network of schools with Polish as the language of instruction. In 1994, shortly before Lukashenka's first presidency, then-Prime Minister Viachaslau Kebich promised the Union of Poles in Belarus that a second Polish school in Hrodna would be built with funding from the Belarusian budget. However, this promise was abandoned after the change in the country's leadership (Gawin, 2018, 16). In May 1997, the

district government in Navahrudak (Polish: *Nowogródek*) refused the Polish minority's appeal to construct a school funded by the Polish government, despite significant local interest in establishing such an institution. The authorities justified their decision by claiming insufficient funds in the local budget for the school's maintenance once constructed (Kapcewicz, 2022, 131).

As these cases highlight, the excessive discretionary power granted to authorities in Belarusian minority-related legislation presents a key challenge for minority advocacy. Furthermore, minorities lack effective channels for communication and influence over official decisions, and attempts to improve this situation through legislative changes, strengthening minority advocacy by curtailing such discretionary power, have been consistently ignored (Pushkin & Osipov, 2014, 119–120). Consequently, Polish minority activists shifted their focus from attempts to expand the number of schools with Polish language of instruction to protecting the two existing ones from unfavorable modifications imposed by authorities.

The vulnerability of minority schools to the authorities' discretionary power is illustrated by several examples. In 2012, Hrodna regional authorities attempted to place two Russian-language classes in Secondary School No. 36, citing overcrowding in neighboring schools. This initiative was abandoned after protests and appeals by minority activists, along with diplomatic intervention from Poland. In 2014, the attempted modification of the Education Code to require subjects like History of Belarus or Social Studies be taught only in official languages was unsuccessful, partly due to minority mobilization (Kapcewicz, 2022, 134–135).

However, access for first-graders to Polish-language education presented the biggest challenge. Despite growing interest in such education, officials employed tactics to restrict first-grade enrollment in Hrodna and Vaŭkavysk schools, preventing many students from receiving it. Authorities typically justified their actions by citing the alleged need to comply with sanitary and safety conditions in the school premises, funding capacities, complications with the introduction of a two-shift educational process, and problems with the organization of electives. However, school administrations consistently maintained that they possessed the necessary technical and material capacity to admit all applicants. Starting in 2015 in Hrodna and 2018 in Vaŭkavysk, this restriction denied many students access to education in Polish. This culminated in the 2018/19 school year when only two first-grade classes were initially allowed in Hrodna and one in Vaŭkavysk, disregarding higher demand. Following protests and Poland's involvement, the school in Hrodna admitted 84 first-graders, all applicants split among three classes. However, in Vaŭkavysk, only 18 of 31 applicants were accepted, denying 13 children education in their native language (Polish Radio, 2018).

This situation demonstrates a lack of proper communication between the Belarusian authorities under Lukashenka and the Polish minority activists in Belarus. The authorities have long exploited their significant discretionary power to control the organization and content of education. Their proactive efforts, based on a formal and often politically motivated interpretation of relevant laws and bylaws, have been disadvantageous for the implementation of citizens' constitutional rights to freely choose the language of education. For a long time, Polish minority activists effectively defended the right to education in their native language through their cultural and civic engagement. These challenges have been reported by the media on both sides of the border and have long been part of the difficult dialogue between Belarus and Poland on minority issues. However, the 2022 amendments to the Educational Code led to the collapse of Polish minority education in Belarus, as the schools in Hrodna and Vaŭkavysk switched to Russian as the language of instruction, eliminating all aspects of Polish language and culture from their curricula. Oddly, students at these schools were not offered the option of choosing whether to further study in Belarusian or Russian, as that was also decided by the authorities (Hrodna.life, 2022).

4.2 Lithuanian schools

Schools with Lithuanian as the language of instruction also appeared in Belarus only after the collapse of the USSR. There were two schools with Lithuanian as the language of instruction in Belarus, both situated in rural areas of the Hrodna region near the Belarus-Lithuania border, where the Lithuanian minority has traditionally lived. These schools were small and had relatively few students, which is typical of rural schools in Belarus.

The first school was in the village of Pieliasa (Lithuanian: *Pelesa*) in the Voranava district. Established in 1992, it was fully funded by Lithuania. Notably, the local Lithuanian minority achieved greater success than Belarus's Polish minority in securing the right to learn their native language under Soviet authorities. After numerous and consistent efforts, villagers succeeded in launching Lithuanian language classes at the local school in 1957 (Pieliasa school, s. a.). In the 2021/22 academic year, the school had 127 students and 23 teachers, 11 of whom were citizens of Lithuania (Delfi.lt, 2022). The second school was in the village of Rymdziuny (Lithuanian: *Rimdžiūnai*) in the Astraviec district. Built in 1996 with Lithuanian funding, it was financed by Belarus. During the 2021/22 academic year, the school enrolled 82 students and employed 18 teachers, 14 of whom were Lithuanian citizens (Delfi.lt, 2022).

Unlike Polish schools, Lithuanian schools in Belarus have never attracted significant media attention. At the same time, the case of Pieliasa school is interesting in terms of analyzing the official communication of the Belarusian authorities. In October 2017 and January 2018, the state-run media holding *Belarus Today* published two long articles about Pieliasa school, praising the fact that more and more children wanted to study there each year because of its modern infrastructure and comfortable, student-friendly conditions (Kandratsyeva, 2017; Sedunova, 2018). However, in August 2022, Hrodna regional officials declared that the conditions at Pieliasa School allegedly posed a threat to students' life and health (Hrodzienskaja Praŭda, 2022). As a result, the school was closed, formally due to a fire safety violation, although none of the previous inspections had ever identified this problem (LRT, 2022).

The Rymdziuny school was restructured following the 2022 Education Code amendments, merging it with another local school with Belarusian language of instruction. The school's current charter no longer includes any references to Lithuanian language or culture in its curriculum.

5 Lack of communication as the authorities' communication strategy

5.1 Domestic communication tracks

As previously noted, Belarusian authorities exercise significant discretion in shaping education policy in Belarus, drawing upon provisions within domestic legislation. The Constitution and the Law on National Minorities delegate the specifics of minority rights to other legislation, namely, the Education Code and, to a lesser extent, the Law on Languages. The wording of these laws, however, makes the realization of linguistic minority rights contingent upon the decisions of the authorities. This dependence is evident in phrases from Article 82 (formerly Article 90) of the Education Code such as "by decision of local executive and administrative bodies, in coordination with the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus," which illustrate how the efforts of minorities to exercise their constitutional rights can be obstructed by inaction at either decision-making level.

The cited bilateral agreements with Poland and Lithuania are not particularly helpful in this situation either. Their literal and formal interpretation suggests that the countries involved should offer opportunities for minority language study, but not necessarily full education in those languages. Therefore, simply offering minority language instruction as a subject, instead of using it as the primary language of instruction, would technically satisfy the agreements' requirements.

Some commentators argue that the Lukashenka regime's strategy toward the Polish minority, by obstructing minority language education, violates Article 8 of the cited bilateral agreement on cooperation in the sphere of education (Kłysiński, 2021, 3–4). Even after the 2022 Education Code amendments, this type of the situation assessment is not entirely accurate. Technically, the law permits minorities to study their languages as a school subject, seemingly consistent with the Constitution and Belarus' minority-related bilateral agreements. The Lukashenka administration's approach should be interpreted as the erasure of previously existing forms of minority education by formally allowing it at the bare minimum level. Access to this minimal level is heavily regulated by at least two levels of administrative decision-makers. Moreover, because establishing minority language classes requires civic activism, the state has effective tools to suppress these efforts before they even reach the relevant local executive and administrative bodies. In practice, this undoubtedly violates minority education rights, yet legally it maintains the lowest possible level of formal compliance, offering little to no chance for their practical implementation.

This implies a lack of proper dialogue between the state and minority activists, affecting access to information. Minority issues have always been a niche topic in Belarus, and the problem of minority education attracted attention from main opposition media only after the 2022 Education Code was adopted. However, the problem originated much earlier, as illustrated by several interconnected examples below.

Amendments to the Education Code were first drafted in 2017 and preliminarily approved by the government in 2018 (Kłysiński, 2021, 3). Prior campaigns by minority activists to protect schools with Polish as the language of instruction, especially the one in Hrodna, which was more vulnerable, against local officials' attempts to alter their linguistic profiles, invoked constitutional rights, the schools' unique curricula, Belarusian-Polish agreements, and Polish financial support. In 2017, authorities promised that these Hrodna and Vaŭkavysk schools would maintain Polish as their language of instruction and remain unaffected by the proposed Education Code amendments (Hrodna.life, 2022). Following the 2022 Education Code amendments, Polish minority activists advocated for retaining Polish as the language of instruction in Hrodna and Vaŭkavysk schools. The Ministry of Education responded that national minority language study is governed by domestic legislation, and the amendments introduced no violations. The Parliament maintained that the Education Code amendments followed all necessary procedures, thus preventing further changes (Belsat, 2022). This illustrates how the authorities strategically employed their discretion in shaping education policies, effectively curtailing the ability of minority activists to advocate for their rights.

Yet, the dismantling of minority education was gradual. On 21 June 2021, a ministerial order acknowledged the distinct requirements of minority schools, explicitly listing Lithuanian and Polish as compulsory graduation exams for students in schools with those respective languages of instruction.[9] This was reversed shortly thereafter. On 11 August 2021, the Ministry of

[9] Postanovlenie Ministerstva obrazovaniya Respubliki Belarus "O perechne uchebnykh predmetov, po kotorym provodyatsya vypusknye ekzameny, formakh provedeniya vypusknykh ekzamenov v 2021/2022 uchebnom godu" [Order of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus "On the list of academic subjects for which school-leaving exams are held, the formats of school-leaving exams in the 2021/2022 academic year"]. 21 June 2021, No. 129. Online: https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=W22136853&p1=1&p5=0

Education issued order No. 170.[10] Published on 24 August 2021, and effective 1 September 2021, this order removed the written school-leaving exams in Lithuanian and Polish for the 2021/22 academic year. It also amended ministerial order No. 38 of 20 June 2011, further suggesting that this shift was intended to be a permanent measure. Consequently, students in Lithuanian and Polish minority schools now faced the same compulsory exam requirements as those studying in Belarusian or Russian. This abrupt change, largely unnoticed by the media, was reported only by Sputnik Belarus (2021), a branch of the Russian state-owned news agency frequently cited as a propaganda tool. Other Belarusian media outlets were largely silent on this crucial change.

During the summer of 2021, Lukashenka's administration escalated its suppression of civic organizations, which may partially explain the closure of minority schools. He admitted to a "purge" of NGOs and later reported that authorities had identified 185 organizations as threats to national security. Accusing them of serving foreign interests, the authorities launched a widespread campaign to shut down various organizations, including those of national minorities (Kascian, 2023). In any case, the short interval between the two contradictory ministerial orders suggests a lack of consultation with national minority representatives. In turn, lack of media attention suggests that the wider Belarusian public remained largely unaware of the issue. Thus, the communication track between the Belarusian authorities and the country's national minorities is heavily state-dominated. This, combined with restrictive law enforcement practices, further limits minorities' ability to exercise their rights in the sphere of education.

5.2 International communication tracks

The communication track between the country of residence and the kin-states also proved ineffective. After the 2020 contested election in Belarus, Lithuania and Poland became the most vocal critics of the Lukashenka administration while simultaneously attracting a considerable number of Belarusian citizens fleeing political persecution for their opposition to the regime. In this situation, minorities found themselves targeted by changes in education policies that affected schools with Lithuanian and Polish as languages of instruction in Belarus.

The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the liquidation of schools with the Polish language of instruction in Belarus, viewing it as a violation of international law and discrimination against the Polish minority. It stressed that this move violated agreements between Poland and Belarus, as well as wider international obligations to safeguard minority rights. The ministry referenced the 1992 Treaty on Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, along with international instruments such as the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, and the 1990 Copenhagen Document, all of which protect the cultural and linguistic rights of national minorities (Jasina, 2022).

However, the Lithuanian situation reveals a particularly striking illustration of the failures in interstate communication regarding minority rights. Following the 2020 amendments to the Belarusian Education Code, Lithuanian authorities worked as long as possible to maintain

[10] Postanovlenie Ministerstva obrazovaniya Respubliki Belarus "Ob izmenenii postanovleniy Ministerstva obrazovaniya Respubliki Belarus ot 20 iyunya 2011 g. № 38 i ot 21 iyunya 2021 g. № 129" [Order of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus "On the amendments of the orders of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus No. 38 of 20 June 2011 and No. 129 of 21 June 2021"]. 11 August 2021, No. 170. Online: https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=W22137077&p1=1&p5=0

Lithuanian as the language of instruction, though these efforts ultimately failed. On 12 August 2022, the Lithuanian MFA lodged a protest with the Belarusian embassy in Vilnius regarding the closure of the Pieliasa school. The MFA condemned this action, asserting it was a deliberate attempt by Belarusian authorities to suppress Lithuanian-language education, violating bilateral agreements between the two countries and international conventions protecting the right of national minorities to education in their native language (LRT, 2022). The Lukashenka regime held firm in its decision. Lithuanian authorities, striving to preserve Lithuanian language and culture in the curriculum, attempted to negotiate a transition period for Rymdziuny school students (Jakubauskas, 2022), likely believing Lithuanian would simply be downgraded from the primary language of instruction to a regular subject, as could be read from the wording of the amended Education Code. These efforts ultimately failed, as the school's revised charter omits any mention of Lithuanian language or culture within its curriculum.

The Lukashenka regime's unilateral termination of the bilateral education agreement with Lithuania in September 2022, further exemplifies its uncooperative stance. On 27 September 2022, the Lithuanian Seimas (Parliament) adopted a resolution asserting that Belarus' suppression of Lithuanian-language education demonstrated a discriminatory policy against ethnic communities in Belarus, and strongly condemned such actions.[11] The resolution cited international frameworks protecting minority rights, including the 1960 UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education and the 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of National Minorities, and called on international bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council, the EU, UNESCO, and the OSCE, to take action against Belarus' discriminatory education policies. The adoption of this resolution, however, underscored Lithuania's limited leverage, both bilaterally and internationally, to effectively counter the Lukashenka administration's detrimental policies towards its ethnic-kin and other national minorities in Belarus.

6 Conclusion

The 2022 Belarusian Education Code revision, eliminating minority language instruction in Lithuanian and Polish, reflects a broader push for linguistic and cultural uniformity under Lukashenka. Although framed as allowing minority language study, the new code effectively dismantles existing programs by restricting instruction to language and culture classes, conditional upon formal student requests and official approvals. This policy shift, when viewed through Brubaker's triadic nexus framework, highlights the complex dynamics between the Belarusian state, its minorities, and neighboring kin-states in shaping minority language policy. This analysis reveals how Belarusian authorities use their discretionary power to weaken minority language rights, suppress minority voices, and dismantle prior educational gains.

Belarus' non-participation in the Council of Europe's legally binding minority-related instruments significantly amplifies the vulnerability of minority language education. While bilateral agreements with Poland and Lithuania address minority education, their wording, focused on the discretion of the state of residence to choose between language study as a subject and providing education fully in those languages, creates loopholes exploited by Belarusian

[11] Resolution of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania on the closure of Lithuanian schools by the Belarusian authorities. 27 September 2022, No. XIV-1431. Valstybės žinios, 10 May 1996, Nr. 43-1047. Online: https://www.lrs.lt/sip/getFile3?p fid=50251

authorities. This allows the government to technically fulfill treaty obligations while still significantly curtailing minority language instruction to the lowest possible level. Consequently, the lack of robust international oversight combined with vaguely worded bilateral agreements creates a permissive environment for the erosion of minority language rights in education in Belarus.

The Lukashenka administration's political reasoning behind these changes appears multifaceted. By restricting minority language education, the regime likely aims to consolidate its control over the educational sphere potentially appease segments of the population wary of external influences, particularly from neighboring countries with historical ties to these minority groups. The regime's communication tactics surrounding the code revision have been characterized by a lack of transparency and meaningful dialogue with minority communities. This has created an environment of uncertainty and distrust, further marginalizing minority voices and hindering efforts to preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Neighboring kin-states, Poland and Lithuania, have expressed concerns regarding the erosion of minority language rights in the sphere of education in Belarus, advocating for stronger protections for their respective kin-minorities. However, Belarus' position outside the Council of Europe limits the influence of that organization's legally binding framework. While the FCNM is itself considered a relatively weak instrument (Morris, 2005, 251), other international frameworks cited by Poland and Lithuania potentially offer even less leverage. This situation demonstrates the difficulties in protecting minority rights when political tensions hinder dialogue between kin-states and countries of residence, effectively making minorities pawns in larger political disputes.

The case of minority language education in Belarus underscores the precariousness of minority rights when legal protections are weak, and state control is substantial. The Lukashenka regime's actions demonstrate how seemingly neutral legal revisions can be exploited to undermine minority language rights under the pretext of administrative procedure. This is compounded by the lack of transparency and genuine dialogue with minority communities, suppressing their voices and impeding their advocacy for linguistic and cultural rights. The absence of strong legal mechanisms and avenues for redress ultimately limits the ability of minorities and their kin-states to effectively challenge these policies, making them pawns in larger political disputes. The Belarusian case serves as a cautionary tale about the vulnerability of minority communities when state power is employed to achieve political goals.

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