

Commentary presented at the [European Forum on Education, Language and Human Rights of Minorities](#) at the panel on Public Policy Objectives and Practices for Education in Minority Languages

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Belarus still represents a white spot on the map of Europe, as little research was done on addressing national minorities in Belarus in general and the minority education, including education in mother tongue/minority language, in particular.

National minorities represent approximately 16 per cent of the total Belarusian population (according to 2009 Census there were 9,5 mil people). The major minorities are Russians (8.3 per cent), Poles (3.1 per cent), Ukrainians (1.7 per cent) and other the minorities (0.1 per cent each, including Lithuanians).

Minority education is presented by the four schools in Belarus, where a minority language is the main language of instruction. These are two schools with the Polish language (in Hrodna and Vaŭkavysk) and the other two – in Lithuanian language (in Rymdziuny and Pieliasa). Those four schools are located in the Hrodna region (*voblasć*) in Western Belarus in the areas of compact residence of above-mentioned minorities.

Following the transitions in Belarus in the late 1980s, minority organizations were focusing their activities on the establishment of the schools with their mother tongue as the language of instruction. The most active were Poles and Lithuanians, backed by their respective governments who succeeded to establish their schools. The situation with the Lithuanian schools is stable and does not attract much media attention. The situation of Polish schools is completely different. There were attempts to reorganize school processes in these schools by the authorities at the local level. The ideas of teaching some classes in Russian or Belarusian, as well as by adding classes with the Russian language of instruction in the same school premises were announced by the authorities from time to time. These endeavours resulted in negative reactions by the parents, Polish minority activists and the Polish state and subsequently led to the cancellation of the plans of the Belarusian authorities.

The essential criteria for the establishment of minority school in Belarus (with the instruction in a minority language) are to obtain approval by the country's Ministry of Education and to have a sufficient number of proactive parents who want to send their children to such school (declaration of will is necessary). In addition to these formalities, in many cases, parents have to overcome additional obstacles.

Such a statutory "regulatory approval/authorization" system with regards to minority education, in fact, led to the exclusion of the of national minority language(ies) from the sphere of education into the sphere of culture (minority languages are studied in "weekend school groups" (public schools) organized by national-cultural associations). However, the fact that minority languages are learnt as an optional class or at the language courses, significantly decreased its accessibility and promotion, not saying about the level of language proficiency.

The only private school – Lithuanian minority school in Pieliasa funded by the Foundation of Culture and by the Ministry of Enlightenment and Science of Lithuania. The school is fully financed by the Lithuanian state, but the education is based on the educational plans of Belarus and the programmes of the Ministry of Education of Belarus. Every five years the school is certified against the Department of Education Quality Control under the Ministry of Education of Belarus.

Back in the 1990s, the Polish minority launched a campaign to establish a school with the Polish language of instruction in the town of Navahrudak (Hrodna region). This school never became a reality because the local authorities impeded this process under the pretext of the

allegedly insufficient number of interested families ready to send their children to this school. In the 2000s, a similar situation with the same outcome occurred in the city of Lida (Hrodna region). The ideas and campaigns of other minorities to establish a state-funded secondary school with their mother tongue as the language of instruction are not traceable. Therefore, the learning of language and culture of minorities in Belarus is typically represented by different types of electives and courses or offered by different Sunday or public schools.

In the past several years, the Polish schools faced challenges with regard to the number of first-year students accepted to start their education, which was artificially limited by the Belarusian authorities. For example, in June 2018 parents who wanted their children to be enrolled into the first grade at the secondary school No. 8 with the Polish language of instruction in Vaŭkavysk (Hrodna region) had to stand in an overnight queue. This situation was caused by the decision of the Vaŭkavysk local authorities who authorized only one class of 18 students to be formed, being aware of the higher number of the applicants. The authorities argument was that a bigger number of classes could cause anti-sanitary conditions at the school premises.

In spring 2018, a similar situation took place in Hrodna. The issue was settled down after the protests from parents, local Polish organizations and. Initially, the Hrodna local educational authorities authorized the formation of two first classes for the school year 2018-2019 at the secondary school N 36 with Polish language of instruction. Their capacity was lower than the number of students enrolled in the preparatory classes and the number of applications (75 in total) for the enrolment as first graders. An additional first-grade class was needed to meet the needs of all who filed their applications. Similarly, the authorities explained their decision by technical issues related to the capacities of the school premises. As a result of the protests, the authorities withdrew their initial decision and approved the formation of the third class for the first-graders.

The said limitations and reluctance of the local authorities produce insecurity and uncertainty for the schools with the Polish language of instruction. It is not always clear whether this strategy towards the Polish schools comes from the local or central authorities because the initial decisions reasoned by non-compliance with sanitary norms have always been revised in favour of the prospective students and their parents. However, the annual nature of these challenges¹ can result in the reduction of the total number of students in both schools (in Vaŭkavysk and Hrodna). If it happens, the educational authorities might initiate the closure of reorganization of those schools arguing that the number of pupils enrolled is insufficient.

Tendencies of minority education in Belarus:

1. a limited number of minority schools in Belarus with no new schools being introduced since the late 1990s;
2. the state mostly **reacts** to the situation related to minority education, instead of being **proactive**, i.e. no initiative comes from the state, just a reaction on the problems and criticism;
3. a formalistic approach towards minority education;
4. the lack of political will of the accommodating state (home state) to support the creation of these schools;
5. the politicization of minority education (especially in case of Polish minority since the split of the Union of Poles in Belarus in 2005 into two confronting unions, one recognized by the Belarusian government, the second – by the Polish one).

¹In the previous four years, the policies of artificial limitation of the number of first-graders were applied only towards the school in Hrodna, while in, while all applicants in Vaŭkavysk were accepted. However, in 2018 the similar strategy was for the first time applied towards the school in Vaŭkavysk.

The most common **explanations** of the tendencies in minority education by the Belarusian public bodies are:

- a. the decrease in demand for education in minority languages;
- b. the possibilities to obtain an education in national minority languages in the already existing schools or language classes;
- c. insufficient effort and willingness of parents to teach their children in languages other than the official ones.

Recommendations to Belarus:

- I. Although the ratification of the FCNM and ECRML could be an important tool to ensure the protection of minority rights, this step does not seem feasible in the close future because Belarus is not a member to the Council of Europe. However, **adoption and implementation of anti-discrimination legislation** could become highly beneficial for the protection of minority rights;
- II. **Raising awareness** is an important tool **to ensure the protection of human rights in general and the minority rights in particular** (through trainings, seminars, university courses, journalism trainings, etc.), as there is still little knowledge and understanding among Belarusians (both public officials and general public) on the reasons why minorities require education in their mother tongue; in additions, raising awareness is also needed **to prevent hate speech and xenophobia**, especially in media and in the speeches of the public officials;
- III. **Bilateral agreements** are an important instrument for minority rights implementation (the case of the Lithuanian minority in Belarus), but it is advisable to avoid politicization of minority groups or to involve them in the political agendas (the case of the Polish minority in Belarus);
- IV. **Financial aspects are not always an issue**. The core aspect is the political will and fulfilment of the obligations and responsibilities. The example is the case of the only private school – the Lithuanian minority school in Pieliassa which is fully funded by the Foundation of Culture and by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of Lithuania. While the school is financed by Lithuania, the education process is based on the programmes of the Ministry of Education of Belarus.