



PHOTO: ANONYMOUS PHOTOGRAPHER, FOR BAL TIC WORDS

An outdoor TV screen in front of the Palace of the Republic in Minsk. The historic coat-of-arms and the white-red-white flag used by the Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918 before the country's occupation by the Bolsheviks and in the brief period of freedom in 1991–1995 are banned by Lukashenko's regime and people wearing these colors have been prosecuted. The official authorities have now flooded public spaces with the Soviet red-green symbols installed in front of every public institution; from courts to schools. May 9, 2024.

# The silent colonization of Belarus

by **Olga Bubich**

**R**ussian military personnel driving vehicles without license plates, billboards advertising holidays in Moscow, and Belarusians facing the demand to speak “a normal language” – that of the aggressor country responsible for about 30,000 civilian casualties in Ukraine since 2022.<sup>1</sup> As well as these, one can find many more indicators of the growing presence of the so-called “Russkiy mir” (Russian world) in Belarus, a state in which Putin’s occupation is using less obtrusive tactics.

“Ensuring the dominant influence of the Russian Federation in the areas of social policy, trade, economics, science, education and culture“ is the exact wording of Moscow’s strategic vision of the colonization of Belarus, presented in a 17-pages internal document which was revealed by a group of European journalists earlier this year.<sup>2</sup> Its far-reaching result is the creation of the Russo-Belarusian “sovereign” Union State with Belarusian laws “harmonized” in accordance with the Russian legislation by 2030. And how

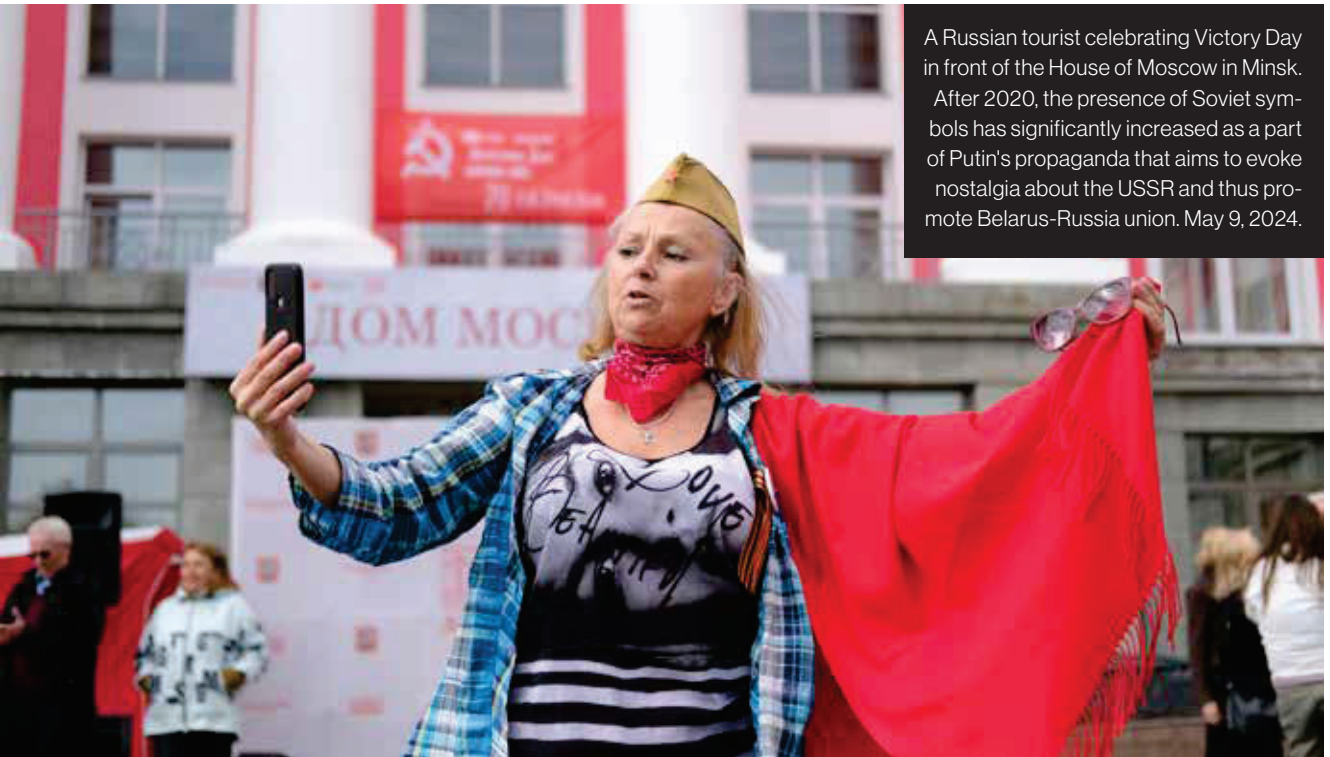
exactly such a “harmonious” state will be ruled the world already knows too well: since Putin came to power in 2000, Russia was engaged as an aggressor or a military ally in the wars in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, the Central African Republic, and Ukraine. Keeping his promise<sup>3</sup> given at a press-conference in Astana in September 1999, the former KGB lieutenant rules his empire with an iron fist.

With 1,375 Belarusians recognized<sup>4</sup> as political prisoners as of September 2, 2024, and many more imprisoned for

Historical reconstructions of WW2 traditionally held on May 9 as a part of Victory Day celebrations. On this day both the locals and tourists are invited to try on Soviet uniforms and be photographed wearing them. May 9, 2024.



A Russian tourist celebrating Victory Day in front of the House of Moscow in Minsk. After 2020, the presence of Soviet symbols has significantly increased as a part of Putin's propaganda that aims to evoke nostalgia about the USSR and thus promote Belarus-Russia union. May 9, 2024.







Russian tourists exposing the flag of the USSR during Victory Day celebration in Minsk. May 9, 2024.



Optimistic billboard in one of the central underground passages in Minsk. May 9, 2024.

## “TODAY’S BELARUS DIFFERS A LOT FROM THE COUNTRY A EUROPEAN WOULD REMEMBER FROM OPTIMISTIC FOOTAGE OF THE ‘FLOWER GIRLS’ PROTEST.”

criticism of the regime or Russian aggression towards Ukraine, today’s Belarus differs a lot from the country a European would remember from optimistic footage of the “flower girls” protest. More than 500 of them are in jail, with Maria Kalesnikava, the opposition frontwoman whose bright red lipstick became one of the protest symbols, sentenced to 11 years. For more than a year, there has been no information about her health or physical whereabouts in general: Despite the surgery she had in 2022, the activist is allowed no phone calls, correspondence, or visits of either her lawyer or family. “In fact, we can talk about the disappearance of a person. We don’t even know that she is still in the same penal colony,” Maria’s sister, Tatiana Khomich noted in an interview to Belsat, a Belarusian independent media channel in exile.<sup>5</sup> According to the recent alarming news from Homel penal colony where Maria is kept, her life is now at high risk. With the height of 1.75 meters, the activist’s weight is about 45 kilos, but, regardless of her condition, she is denied medial assistance and appropriate food. Neither was the question of her release raised during the recent big international prisoners exchange between east and west, described as “historical” by world media. Actually, none of

high-profile Belarusian political prisoners was discharged – the decision that caused shock and anger in Belarusians relying on the European diplomats’ support.

WITH MORE THAN 600,000 emigrants and many others cherishing no hopes for democratic change, Belarus does look like a semi-abandoned country. “Minsk is empty now,” comments a 30-year-old Belarusian, who prefers to stay anonymous, for *Baltic Words*. “Lively avenues and busy central quarters where music used to be played at the weekends and young people would hang out chatting, dancing, and drinking are desolate. This is probably the first impression you have entering the Belarusian capital.”

In August 2022, on the terrace of a still operating bar in one such downtown area, singer Meriem Hersimenka made an attempt to recall those good old days of freedom and, among other songs, performed *Obiymy* [Hug] – a famous hit by the Ukrainian rock band Okean Elzy. The regime’s reaction was immediate – the next day, both the 28-year-old singer and the bar owner were detained.<sup>6</sup> Later it became known that Hersimenka was sentenced to 3 years of restricted freedom.

“However,” remarks another source, a 35-year-old teacher, anonymous for the

same safety reasons, “if you check the big shopping malls, expensive restaurants, or hotels, you’d find them full. But not with locals – with Russians.”

### “Almost Europe” – Belarus as an affordable tourist destination for Russians

Apart from the political alliance, promoted for decades by the Putin-Lukashenka tandem, a much denser presence of the Russians in Belarusian cities can also be explained by the Belarusian state’s attempts to make the country more attractive for tourists to visit. Due to the limited choice of travel destinations that results from EU sanctions, Belarus unexpectedly (and with a grain of irony) started looking “almost like Europe” to well-off and middle-class Russians.

“We are now a rather affordable alternative to Europe or Crimea, which is no longer safe,” comments a 35-year-old Belarusian culture worker still based in the country. “Russians arrive to enjoy food in restaurants, shop at Zara, see our castle in Mir and that’s it. But this is logical: if one door is closed, the search for other open ones starts. Nothing personal, just business!”



Historical reconstructions of WW2 on May 9 as a part of Victory Day celebrations, with a security guard in front. May 9, 2024.



Asian tourists celebrating the Victory Day in Minsk carrying USSR flags and red-and-green flags associated with Lukashenko's regime.

## “THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BELARUSIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE, WHICH IS NOW UNFOLDING IN BELARUS, IS AT LEAST NOT WITHOUT THE PARTICIPATION OF RUSSIA.”

The results of these business activities can be observed in different spheres: from the replacement of Belarusian goods by Russian ones to culture events held in Belarusian venues by the Russians for the Russians. For example, as the report “Russification in the Cultural Sphere of Belarus, 2022–2023”<sup>77</sup> states, only seven out of 37 children’s plays staged at Minsk Young Spectator Theater (TYZ) were in Belarusian.

**IN GENERAL**, the cultural sphere of Belarus, while continuing to suffer huge professional losses due to dismissals and bans imposed on professionals not loyal to the regime, is increasingly filled with Russian directors, artists, actors, conductors, and other cultural workers – invited to replace the Belarusian experts imprisoned, forced into exile, and thus dismissed. Numerous previously unknown Russian performers come on tour; Russian theatre and film performances, and art exhibitions, are held with an obvious ideological agenda; increasing numbers of Russian books are added to the stock of Belarusian bookshops and library collections.

“Our current situation could be described as a situation of active colonization. We are inside this very process

– where the neighboring state of Russia spends enormous resources to ensure that we become part of it or at least do not leave its sphere of influence. To ensure that our further development follows the trajectory Russia has determined. The destruction of the Belarusian language and culture, which is now unfolding in Belarus, is not without the participation of Russia”, comments Belarusian-speaking writer Hanna Yankuta.

“Neither we personally, nor our various communities, nor even the Republic of Belarus as a country currently have comparable resources to stop this colonization. And I dream of the times when the situation will change and we will have enough forces to break free from this colonization and finally deal with our own post-colonial problems. I don’t know if this is possible in my lifetime, but speaking of hope, I still have enough strength to move on, even without this assurance.”<sup>78</sup>

One of the steps taken by the pro-Russian state to foster collaboration with the aggressor is the provision of airline connections between the two countries. As the layout of the inflight magazine *OnAir* of the only Belarusian (certainly, state) airline Belavia shows, in 2020 only 18% of all 58 routes went to Russia, while the ma-

jority of planes headed towards Europe. Four years later, Belavia flies to seven countries only,<sup>9</sup> with six cities as destinations in Russia. Two more – Saratov and Vladivostok – are mentioned by Belavia officials as “interesting and promising for the future.”<sup>10</sup> Obviously, not promising for Belarusians.

**ANOTHER STEP** in reshaping the country’s profile towards closer collaboration with the aggressor is the Russification of public spaces. Following a decades-long tradition of praising Russian and ridiculing Belarusian,<sup>11</sup> in May 2019 Lukashenko addressed Parliament and, in his typical poor and largely inappropriate manner, criticized information signs in the Belarusian language, claiming that those are “not clear to Russian people.”<sup>12</sup> Since that moment, advisory and warnings signs, as well as bus display boards, previously featuring textual information in Belarusian, started getting replaced with Russian – transformed according to the needs and for the comfort of the invasive “guests”.

The same trend is observed with the names of streets and public transport stops traditionally transliterated into the Latin alphabet. Initially done to facilitate navigation for foreign tourists but



One of the bars in Zybitskaya Street in the center of Minsk. Before the 2020 protests, it used to be one of the most popular weekend destinations among the local youth, with lots of informal music, dance and food-centered events and festivals regularly held there. May 10, 2024.

preserve Belarusian phonetics, now the linguistic decision underlying this logic is rethought. But these changes do not come as a surprise: a few years ago, it was Lukashenko himself who called Belarusian “a poor language” and claim that “nothing great can be expressed in it”.<sup>13</sup>

Russian tourists meanwhile appreciate Russification that makes their stay in the “almost European” country easier and linguistically less stressful and continue mocking Belarusian vocabulary and phonetics.<sup>14</sup> In the Belarusian segment of the Internet, the demand to “speak a normal language” is almost a sad meme: it is hard to find a Belarusian who, at least once in their life, has not heard this thrown at them by a Russian tourist.

The demand to speak “a normal language” can take different verbal forms, as a 26-year-old activist from a small town in the Belarusian south recalls for *Baltic Words*:

“I personally was also asked to use Russian because the man claimed not to understand my “crazy mix of Ukrainian and Polish”. Our teacher of Belarusian in a free course of “Mova Nanova” initiative [Language Anew] shared with us a really absurd story when a train conductor refused to serve him tea until he asked her in Russian, “chai” instead of Belarusian “garbata”. Moreover, in our region speaking Belarusian in everyday life is strongly associated with one’s political position, so very few dare to do it. Most either si-

lently ignore the Russians or show more obsequious behavior to benefit from their presence.”

### Between “normal language” and Mova

Trapped between the oppressive regime and the occupiers, many Belarusians, however, continue to show acts of resistance they can safely afford. They design and wear Belarusian brands with recognizable ornaments, purchase (currently often overpriced) books in the Belarusian language and form underground informal education initiatives. Another strategy is the conscious refusal to switch to Russian – but those doing it should be ready to accept risks.



“When I visited the regional center of Homel, on a short holiday trip with my girlfriend,” recalls a Belarusian-speaking activist for *Baltic Worlds*, “the first thing the landlady of our rented apartment asked me was, “Where are you from?” She found it hard to believe that a Belarusian permanently based in Belarus could speak his mother tongue on a regular basis. “Here no one does it,” she confessed.”

Strong associations between the use of the Belarusian language and belonging to the opposition are nothing new. “Mova” – the Belarusian word literally translates as “language” – has long been used both by Lukashenko’s propagandists and opponents as an easy way to identify one’s adherence to the latter group. Seemingly serving a logical function, it however played a negative role and contributed to increasing social polarization. In conditions of colonization, it acts almost like the yellow star of David forced onto the Jews – to point at a person who should be “legally” persecuted or discriminated. “In our town, as soon as you start speaking Belarusian, others immediately see in you a fighter against the regime and either despise you or step away in fear. I literally read it in people’s eyes,” confesses a 26-year-old activist from the Belarusian south.

**THE TESTIMONIES** of repressions against Belarusian speakers in prisons has recently been published on the site of the Viasna human rights organization.<sup>15</sup> Among the most resonant cases is the demand of Ales Bialiatski, a Belarusian pro-democracy activist and prisoner of conscience, awarded in 2022 Nobel Peace Prize, and his colleagues Uladz Labkovich and Valiantsin Stefanovich, to have court proceedings conducted in the Belarusian language. Neither their request nor the petition the three activists filed had any effect. The hearings were held in Russian.

However, both in and out of prisons, some Belarusians continue to use, teach and create in “mova”, consciously accepting the risks this entails. “It is important to mention that people do not put up with the occupation. Some still use Belarusian in their everyday communication. Unfortunately, I am not one of them – but I do

dare to say “kali laska” (please) and “dz-jakui” (thank you) in Belarusian in shops and banks and the reaction I see from addressees is always positive”, says a 32-year-old freelance journalist who cannot reveal her identity for safety reasons. “I know my resistance strategy might seem insignificant to those who are not fully aware of what is now happening in the country – like “how can you be afraid of using your mother tongue?” – but to me it really matters as my personal contribution against Russification.”

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