

TOPIC: HOW THE BELARUSIAN NATIONAL-CULTURAL REVIVAL OF THE 1980S BEGAN

LESSON DURATION: 45 minutes

TARGET AUDIENCE: Schoolchildren, 14+

MATERIALS: Video links or other visual aids/equipment (projector, screen, etc)

LESSON BASED ON: An interview with Siarhei Chareuski, articles and book excerpts (see below)

ABSTRACT

In the mid-1980s, Belarus was one of the most industrialized and urbanized republics of the USSR. Minsk held a dominant position: in 1985, 10 million people lived in Belarus, of which about 1.5 million lived in Minsk. Being the capital and largest city of the BSSR, it was predominantly Russian-speaking. The Belarusian language occupied a very modest, formal place in the city's cultural landscape. One could regularly hear "trasyanka" (a mixed Belarusian-Russian dialect) spoken among the population, but Russian was the language of the administration, economic structures and universities. Publicly speaking or performing in literary Belarusian was considered acceptable only for a narrow portion of the intelligentsia. This way, Belarusian's official public status was demonstrated, although in fact it was isolated in a kind of cultural bubble. At first glance this is completely unusual, but in the mid-1980s, even before perestroika ("restructuring") officially took hold in the USSR, interest in Belarusian and national culture began to appear among the youth of industrial Minsk. Informal and creative youth organizations ("Maistrounia," "Talaka") emerged. This cultural revival eventually became one of the driving forces of various political and social processes from the late 1980s to the early 1990s.

COURSE OF EXERCISE:

1. Belarusian in the BSSR ("Belarusian Socialist Soviet Republic") during the 1980s

Briefly tell the students (discussion participants) about the status of languages

in the BSSR in the 1980s using the [article “The Formation of the Belarusian Language at the Current Stage” by Ales Bialatski \(The Situation of the Belarusian Language at the Current Stage, 1983\)](#) and the [book Native Language and Moral and Aesthetic Progress by Aleh Bembel, published in London in 1985 \(second edition: 2024\).](#)

After the teacher's information, watch the interview with Siarhei Chareuski (15:00–18:10).

From Ales Bialatski's article:

“Let's talk about Belarusians in the city. Fifty five percent of Belarusian children currently live in cities. And even if the child's father or mother knows and speaks Belarusian, the child himself does not think of it as their native language. This starts from kindergarten, as not a single city teacher speaks Belarusian, the native language of the children she works with.) Then there's the cinema, cartoons, books and, finally, school. Everyone speaks Russian! Let's take the Gomel region. Gomel city has about 400,000 inhabitants, Mazyr about 100,000, Rechytsa and Svietlahorsk have 60,000 each, and Zhlobin, Ragachou and Kalinkavichy each have 40.000. About twenty percent of residents in these cities are not Belarusians. Which means that about 600,000 in these cities are Belarusian. Is there at least one Belarusian high school in these cities? No. This is terrible.

I simply cannot understand why it's considered natural to belittle and neglect the native language. Who's supposed to benefit from this? And why is everyone silent? We are one people!

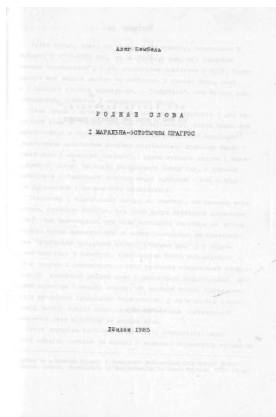
In Russian schools, Belarusian is taught 3-4 hours a week. This is just enough to teach students to write "I" instead of "И" and teach them to distinguish “Yanka Kupala” (a Belarusian folk festival) from “Yakub Kolas” (a Belarusian writer). And children do not want to learn Belarusian for understandable reasons. It's not used in the city. No one speaks it and no institution uses it as a working language. It's useless. Except for the radio, which no one listens to, and TV advertisements, which no one watches. Belarusian is not actually the state language of Belarus. The attitude towards it in schools is about the same as towards Latin, a dead language.

Most young people from villages who come to the city to earn money have to quickly "relearn" to speak Russian. That's because speaking Belarusian implies that you're from the village or that you're backward and uncultured. It is interesting to watch how a mother walks into a bookstore, looks at the children's books, wrinkles her nose and says: “There are only Belarusian ones; there's nothing to buy.” It is scary. But from the outside, everything looks good. The BSSR is a member of the UN, Belarusian writers receive state awards, “Pesniary” and “Vierasy” are known throughout the country. All this is good. And people... disappear. But what about the BSSR Ministry of Education, or in the end the government? Are they all the same? Will Belarusians really disappear as a people in 50 years?

I want to scream. But will anyone hear? Each of us must do everything in our power. Belarus must finally wake up. We must gather at least what is left because in time it will be too late. Belarusians, understand that you are a people like other peoples.. That you have a richer history, culture, literature and your own customs.”



Photo: Aleh Bembel, Belarusian dissident Mihas Kukabaka and Belarusian journalist Antanina Khatenka



Title page of Aleh Bembel's book

From Aleh Bembel's open letter to the General Secretary of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev (1987):

*"I was forced to write the book **Native Language and Moral and Aesthetic Progress** due to my deep concern for the state of the Belarusian language in today's Belarus. Of course, I cannot say how perfectly I managed to implement my plan. But I, to the best of my ability, tried not to deviate from the principles of complete truth and openness, which, in the words of Pravda [the central newspaper of the Communist Party], is 'a sword that heals wounds.'"*

Ask the following questions:

- What was the status of the Belarusian language in the BSSR in the 1980s?
- Were the Belarusian intelligentsia and urban youth aware of the crisis of the Belarusian language?

Optional material for teachers:

Excerpts of an interview from Aleh Bembel's book **Native Language and Moral and Aesthetic Progress**:

(Woman, 30, Russian, English teacher at Minsk University)

"After all, what happened to Belarusian intellectuals [in the early years of the USSR]? Naive, open, gullible: almost all of them were killed...

...Georgians, Lithuanians, they won't speak Russian without an accent, although they can speak perfectly. But Belarusians are ashamed of their accent. Russian boys who are 17 years old, silly guys, they start laughing. Our language is funny to them, and Belarusians, their peers, for some reason feel awkward. I show them how many Belarusian words, as well as English ones, have a Latin root (article, palace, lover) and they somehow start to be proud...

...This feeling of false shame begins even in kindergarten. Our Vania is the only child in the group who read a poem in Belarusian on March 8th. The teachers turned on him and asked, "Why, what's the point?"...

(Man, 30, Belarusian, art critic)

"The most dangerous thing is the school problem. In essence, fundamentally negative attitudes towards the language are formed in kindergarten and school. The absence of the native language leads to spiritual underdevelopment and has a powerful effect on the psyche. People start disbelieving in their own strength. Disbelief in the strength of one's people, nation, culture."

(32, Belarusian, artist)

"I studied poorly at school. And the most difficult subject was Russian. And I remembered this. The same thing happens now with my child: every day a little enemy of national culture comes from kindergarten."

(Born in 1925, Belarusian, mathematics teacher)

"In my opinion, it seems that teachers who teach like this are not doing it quite right. I don't know how to put it better. The textbooks are in Belarusian, the teacher studied at a Belarusian pedagogical institute, but he teaches in Russian. The school is considered Belarusian. But let him put himself in the shoes of a fourth or fifth grader who finished their first three grades in Belarusian."

It seems that this issue requires a thoughtful solution coming from the higher authorities, because this is widespread in the Minsk region."

(Woman, between 30 and 40, Polish-Belarusian, hydrobiologist)

"Belarusian... Well, I don't know any other language like it. It's not costumes or anything else but language that reveals the soul of the people. Recently, an old lady started swearing on the bus. Someone stopped her from getting off at her stop. The whole bus listened with great pleasure! And we were very sorry that she got off at the next one."

(Man, 30, Belarusian, art critic)

"The idea that the Belarusian language is 'ugly' or 'unoriginal,' this is again the result of opinions imposed on us at an age when we couldn't think for ourselves."

Ask the following questions:

- What was the situation of the Belarusian language in the BSSR in the 1980s?
- Did the Belarusian intelligentsia and urban youth realize that the Belarusian language was in crisis?

2. How to organize a Belarusian disco in Minsk in the mid-1980s?

Briefly tell the students (discussion participants) about discos as a form of youth leisure in the 1980s. This form of activity was then under the control of the Komsomol. Briefly introduce the audio equipment that was used in the 1980s: reel-to-reel tape recorders ("bobbinniks").

After the introduction, show the interview with Siarhei Chareuski (20:00–25:00).

For teachers:

Due to the unavailability of records from abroad, and the poor quality of cassettes, reel-to-reel tape recorders ("bobbinniks") became the favorite equipment for Soviet music lovers. That said, bobbinniks were difficult to operate and maintain. Loading the film, cleaning the heads and setting up recording sessions took a lot of time, and the reels themselves took up all the free space in the apartment. But the film itself was wide and allowed for high-quality audio storage, and the tape recorders themselves had a wide range of speeds.

For students:

According to Siarhei Chareuski's memoirs, he recorded music from his friends' "Kometa" tape recorder, and at school they played it through the speakers of an "Astra" tape recorder.

Soviet reel-to-reel tape recorders from the 1980s



Kometa-212 stereo reel-to-reel tape recorder

One of the most common tape recorder models in the USSR. It was produced in Novosibirsk.



Astra-209 stereo reel-to-reel tape recorder

The "Astra" from Leningrad had a good design and their technical characteristics were above average. These recorders were always a standard in any large radio and electronics store. Astra-209 stereos had speakers and even a remote control, and it cost less than 300 rubles. This was more than two months' salary on average, but it was an average-priced tape recorder.

Ask the following questions:

- Was it easy to organize discos in Minsk during the mid-1980s?
- How important was it to organize Belarusian-language discos for young people in the Russified Minsk of the 1980s?

Educational game: Organize a Belarusian disco in Minsk during the 1980s

Students are divided into groups of 5-6 people with the goal of organizing a disco. They must draw a poster and explain how they will invite people. They should also discuss technical aspects, like obtaining or copying music recordings or finding tape recorders and amplifiers. It's very important that they mention the names of Belarusian rock bands from that time who could be played at a disco.

3. What Belarusian-language rock bands existed in Belarus in the mid-1980s?

Briefly tell the students about the 1980s Belarusian rock movement. Use the [book "Praz-rok-pryzmu" by Vitaut Martynenka and Anatoly Myalguy](#).

Interview with Siarhei Chareuski (21:21 – 22:20)

The first Belarusian-language rock bands of the 1980s (information for printing and distributing to students).

Bonda



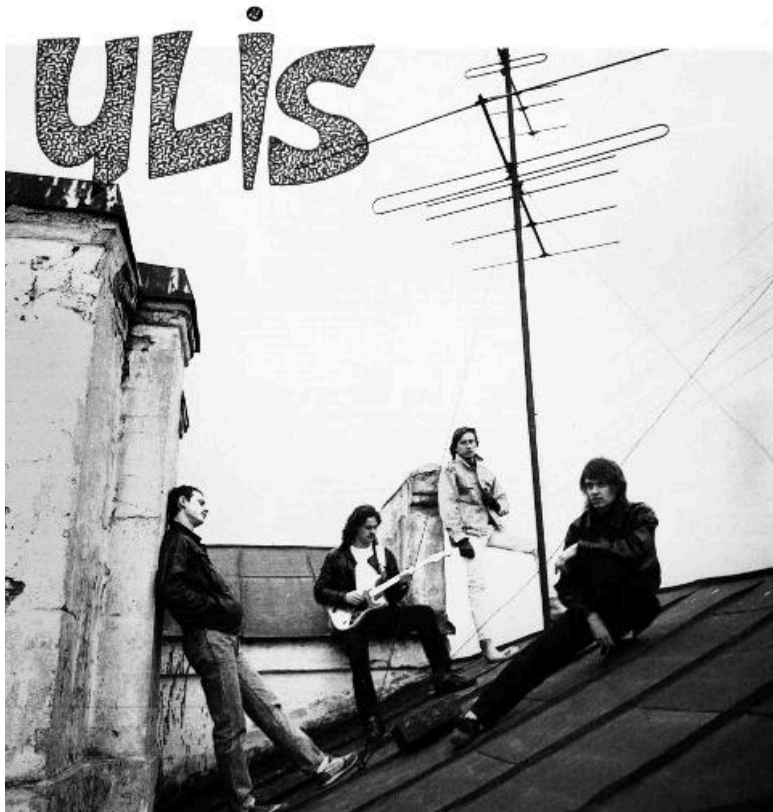
Bonda was one of the first Belarusian rock bands. They played from 1980 to 1989 and inspired bands like Krama, Rokis, ULIS and The Little Blues Band.

Mroya



Mroya was formed in 1981 by Minsk Art College students. The band plays hard rock with elements of punk and traditional Belarusian music.

ULIS



ULIS was a rock band formed in Minsk in late 1988 by former members of Bonda.

The teacher can ask students to listen to individual songs

BONDA: “Na stancii Koidanova” (1989)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6yAOXLLkTo>

<https://soundcloud.com/tuzinhitou/bonda?in=george-prakapovich/sets/ft4rarlh6ai7>

MROYA: “I am a rock musician” (1989)

<https://soundcloud.com/search?q=%D0%BC%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%8F>

ULIS: “Radio Svaboda” (recorded in 1990)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_iEEpdYTPO

Ask the following questions:

- *Why was the emergence of the 1980s Belarusian-language rock movement important for Belarusian culture?*
- *Why do you think 1980s rock musicians started performing their songs in Belarusian?*
- *Why do you think 1980s rock music in Belarus became a symbol of creative freedom?*
- *Do you think the songs of 1980s Belarusian rock bands had political relevance?*

4. What forms of cultural youth activity could exist in the mid-1980s? (Based on the example of the club "Talaka")

Briefly tell the students (discussion participants) about the Talaka youth club of the mid- to late 1980s. Use the materials:

Democratic Appearance of Belarus (1956–1991) — [Mn.: Archives of the New Historical Collection, 1999](#)

Civil Movements in Belarus. [Documents and Materials. 1986-1991 / Authors P. Tereshkovich, V. Lebedev. Moscow, 1991. Section IV.](#)

After the introduction, watch the interview with Siarhei Chareuski (0:35 – 7:51).

Talaka Club

Talaka (Minsk) was an independent youth organization as well as a historical and cultural association in the mid-to-late 1980s. It was founded in fall 1985 as a club for protecting monuments and became a successor to Maistrounia. Talaka became the largest and most influential informal organization up to 1989. Talaka brought together about 60 members, but many more participated in meetings and tolokas (volunteer work). Talaka worked on several fronts: restoration and archaeological work, protecting historical and architectural monuments, fighting to create Belarusian classes and schools, nature expeditions, cultural/educational activities and reviving folk holidays. They organized annual celebrations for Kupalle (summer solstice), Kaliady (folk Christmas), Klikanne vesny (the arrival of spring), which soon became traditions once again. On March 20, 1988, Talaka organized a rally to defend Minsk's historical Upper Town. This was the first public rally in Belarus in the late Soviet era.



The March 20 Talaka rally to defend Upper Town. On the podium is Talaka's chairman, Siarhei Vitushka with speaker Siarhei Chareuski. Photo by Mikola Sasnouski.



Talaka organizes Kaliady celebrations. Minsk, 1989. Photo by Aleh Grushetski.



Talaka organizes the Gukannya vyasny ("crying spring") festival with games for young people. Minsk, Gorky Park, 1990. Photo by Aleh Grushetski.

Ask the following questions:

- *What activities did Talaka association organize?*
- *Do you think such cultural and educational activities can be effective for developing civil society?*