

Berlinsk: Another City, Another Life. Belarusian Contemporary Art Migration to Berlin, 2020–2023

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Берлинск: Другой город, другая жизнь. Белорусское современное искусство: миграция в Берлин, 2020–2023

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Slavic Language Education

Ausgabe: 4/2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18452/28705>

Herausgegeben an der
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Institut für Slawistik und Hungarologie

ISSN: 2748-5226

Abstract:

This article delves into the complex interplay between language and identity within the Belarusian artistic diaspora in Berlin starting from the founding of the Belarusian People's Republic throughout its present-day consolidation. By emphasizing the role of individual agency, personal experiences, and cultural dynamics, this study accentuates the fluidity and intricacy inherent in diasporic identities.

Аннотация:

Настоящая статья исследует сложное взаимодействие между языком и идентичностью в белорусской художественной диаспоре Берлина, начиная с основания Белорусской Народной Республики и до современной консолидации. Выделяя роль индивидуальной агентивности, личного опыта и культурной динамики, это исследование подчеркивает непостоянство и сложность диаспоральных идентичностей.

Keywords: Belarusian, contemporary art, exile, forced migration, Berlin

Ключевые слова: белорусский, современное искусство, изгнание, вынужденная миграция, Берлин

Zitieren des Artikels: Рейзор, Саша (2024): Berlinsk: Another City, Another Life. Belarusian Contemporary Art Migration to Berlin, 2020–2023, *Slavic Language Education* 4/2024, S. 179-199, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18452/28705>.

BERLINSK: ANOTHER CITY, ANOTHER LIFE

BELARUSIAN CONTEMPORARY ART MIGRATION TO BERLIN, 2020-2023

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Abstract

This article delves into the complex interplay between language and identity within the Belarusian artistic diaspora in Berlin. Belarusians have established their presence in Berlin back during the founding of the Belarusian People's Republic, with a significant influx occurring during the 1940s when many found themselves in displaced persons camps after World War II. Migration from the Byelorussian SSR continued during the 1970s and after the dissolution of the USSR. Initially rather scattered, the Belarusian community in Berlin began consolidating in 2020 onwards, leading to the establishment of organizations like Razam e.V., which serve as hubs where Belarusian-German identity is forged. This article focuses on the Berlin-based Belarusian artist community. The broad linguistic behavior within this community encompasses the use of Belarusian, Russian, German, and English, among other languages. In addition to their multilingual abilities, Belarusians tend not to exhibit their national pride or national symbols as prominently as other diaspora communities. This indicates that their sense of identity is not solely rooted in language or symbolic representation. This article employs decolonial approaches to scrutinize these circumstances, contesting the conventional narrative that directly associates language use with national identity and proposing a more nuanced comprehension of diasporic identities in contact and change. By emphasizing the role of individual agency, personal experiences, and cultural dynamics, this study accentuates the fluidity and intricacy inherent in diasporic identities. Its discoveries offer vital insights into the multifaceted process of identity negotiation within global artistic diasporic networks. In the face of community adversity, these networks step forward to shape the future trajectories of group development, both suppressed and relocated, and culture in exile.

Keywords: *Belarusian, contemporary art, exile, forced migration, Berlin*

Introduction

The mosaic of Belarusian diasporas extends across the globe, from Warsaw to Vilnius, Berlin to Chicago, New York, and even Australia and Brazil. Each of these communities possesses a unique identity and patterns of language use. This diversity among the diasporas is influenced not only by time – the era during which people emigrated – but also by geographical proximity to Belarus and the specific support programs offered by the host countries to welcome the refugees.

Belarusian diasporas worldwide present unique insights into identity evolution across various timelines and spaces. The lengthy history of Belarusian presence in the nearby cities of Warsaw and Vilnius has resulted in identities deeply interwoven with local cultures over the centuries with migration being a continuous process of back and forth. In comparison, distant areas like the South River neighborhood in New Jersey and specific migrant regions in Canada have become the refuge of an exiled Belarusian community closely tied to the first Belarusian government-in-exile, the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR), remain committed to conserving their linguistic and cultural heritage. The failed 2020 presidential elections, which led to the Belarusian uprising, launched a new wave of migration from the country with approximately 500,000 Belarusians leaving the country between 2020 and 2023. Despite the lacuna in research on the language of the Belarusian diaspora across various migration waves, I recognize my own perspective and role as the author of this piece. My observations are drawn from personal involvement in diasporic activism, spanning from August 2020 until now, within both North American and Western European diaspora settings. Since 2020, the Belarusian language began taking precedence in transatlantic activism and diaspora networking associated with the most recent wave of migration from the country. This phenomenon is noticeable in a variety of platforms ranging from activist online groups, and Association of Belarusians of America meetings to international diaspora congresses led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's office. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 further pushed the activist groups' switched to speaking Belarusian. What used to be a mixed usage of Russian alongside Belarusian in 2020, has now been transitioned to the more noticeable presence of Belarusian language and culture in activist circles. Consequently, individuals who have not switched to using Belarusian are currently seen as outliers, and this alone indicates a significant shift in the linguistic landscape of Belarusian diasporas since 2020. The latest European and North-American diasporic groups, which once had a majority of Russian speakers over Belarusian, are now shifting towards using Belarusian exclusively, especially for public announcements, events, and leadership gatherings.

Despite the noticeable linguistic shift and the resurgence of national symbols that re-entered mass circulation during the 2020 protests within diasporic groups worldwide – such as the historic white-red-white flag and the Pahonia coat of arms – the situation in Berlin illustrates a strikingly divergent scenario. In a confidential dialogue with the author, an art worker residing in Berlin, who is of Belarusian origin and opted to remain unnamed, characterized the Berlin diaspora as "advanced" or *prodvinutaia* (Anonymous 2022). According to their description, their community is largely devoid of "embroidered shirts and nationalism," thereby underlining a distinctive aspect of the Belarusian diaspora in Berlin. Based on their description, their community largely lacks "embroidered shirts and nationalism," highlighting a unique characteristic of the Belarusian diaspora in Berlin. While this observation may be personal and potentially subjective, it adds another dimension to the diverse nature of Belarusian communities overseas. Notably, the art worker's perspective seems to view nationalism (despite the term's polysemic and ambiguous nature) in a negative light, offering fresh insights about the Belarusian identity in Berlin.

The objective of this article is to probe the complex situation surrounding the Berlin art community's attitudes and beliefs concerning language and identity, in an effort to unravel the underlying dynamics. The examination delves into the multifaceted landscape of socio-cultural and linguistic identities within the Belarusian artistic diaspora in Berlin. It emphasizes how a combination of factors, such as historical and cultural contexts, interactions with diverse linguistic and ethnic groups in Berlin, and the impact of support programs from the host country, together shape their distinct attributes. Furthermore, the discussion will delve into understanding why this specific group might contest the notion that language directly correlates with identity. This exploration will be supported by an in-depth examination of contemporary art practices and dialogues.

The goal of the Art Prospect residency, a program that I was a part of in July–August 2022, and whose outcomes are showcased in this article, emphasized the importance of exploring the history of Belarusian migration to Berlin. My research thus relies on a blend of historical and contemporary data. For the former, we examined memoir writings and historical press releases and undertook archival research to trace the course of previous waves of Belarusian migration to Germany. For the latter, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Belarusian art workers and curators in Berlin, complemented by observational fieldwork within the community. This fieldwork was conducted during the mapping project we launched in collaboration with Razam Kunst, Ambasada Kultury, and CEC ArtsLink on August 9, 2022.

Collaborating closely with Ambasada Kultury, an initiative by Belarusian culture workers and activists from Minsk, now based in Berlin, Germany, was an essential aspect of this study, providing valuable insights into the role of art in forming diasporic identities. A thematic analysis of the gathered data ultimately facilitated the recognition of patterns and discrepancies in the experiences and identities of the Belarusian artistic diaspora in Berlin. By melding historical research with auto-ethnographic and personal narratives, this methodology fosters a comprehensive exploration of the identity of the Belarusian artistic diaspora in Berlin, exhibiting the intricate nature of intersecting migration waves. The final project discussion, held virtually and hosted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, illuminated the additional complexities in self-description narratives among the artists. As my concluding remarks will illustrate, these artists rely on a multitude of identity narratives, which adds further complexity to our comprehension of their distinctive experiences in exile.

Justification

Artists, art workers, and curators hold a distinct position in society as creators and interpreters of culture. They are often at the forefront of cultural changes, their work reflecting, examining, and influencing societal norms and identities. Here are some ways their perspectives may enrich our understanding of the intersection of language and identity:

1. Transcending boundaries: Artists often navigate linguistic and cultural divides, imbuing their language use and identity with depth and nuance. This is particularly true for artists in exile, who, through their experiences between cultures, offer unique perspectives on how migration,

displacement, and tension between “home” and “host” countries affect identity and language use.

2. Art as representation and medium: Artistic expression both mirrors and shapes societal attitudes towards language and identity, offering insights into broader cultural trends. Through their work, artists plumb complex themes, such as identity, culture, and language, creating a rich data source illustrating these issues. Language often serves as more than just communication for these artists; it is a medium revealing subtle dynamics of language use and identity. Artists in exile especially experience language transitions that reveal dynamics around language learning, loss, and adaptation.
3. Agents of change: Artists are known to challenge societal norms and redefine boundaries, shedding light on how communities resist, negotiate, and reshape linguistic and cultural identities. Artists in exile, facing identity transitions and precarious circumstances associated with exilic experiences, use their work to express resilience, acting as cultural mediators blending elements from their home and host cultures.

Therefore, engaging with artists and curators is vital in studying language and identity as they often embody, reflect, and influence these complexities. By focusing on artists in exile, we can gain a deeper understanding of the intersection of language, identity, and the experience of exile, providing valuable insights into the realities of displacement, fluidity of identity, and the role of language in this process.

Language and Identity in Decolonial Perspective

A decolonial sensibility offers a powerful lens to explore questions of language and identity within the art community in Berlin, especially in the context of its Belarusian diaspora. This approach is particularly useful for several reasons, such as the historical legacy of colonialism, the plurality of knowledge and identity, and the agency formed in the process of intersectional resistance. By appreciating the role of language in shaping cultural identity, and acknowledging that identity extends beyond language to a broader array of cultural practices, we can analyze the situation of the Belarusian artistic diaspora in Berlin.

Historically, Russian was imposed on Belarusians during the Russian Empire and the Soviet era as part of a cultural homogenization policy, representing a classic case of colonial linguistic dominance. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there’s been a resurgence in Belarusian language usage both within Belarus and abroad. However, despite these efforts, Russian remains the language for daily interactions for the vast majority of Belarusian citizens. But, is it fair to say that the use of Russian dilutes Belarusian identity? Or should we understand identity as extending beyond language to include shared histories, customs, beliefs, values, and traditions? What type of cultural practices, then, would prove to be the most potent avenues for analysis: folklore and traditional culture, including food, music, dance? Or national history and literature narratives, or more recent collective experiences such as those of political trauma, mass incarceration, and forced migration?

While thinkers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), Frantz Fanon (2008, 2018), and Walter Dignolo (2011) highlight language as a tool of colonialism, this concept may not fully apply to the specific group of Belarusians in Berlin. Their continued use of the Russian language reflects the complex historical realities of their homeland and the fluidity of cultural practices in exile.

The status of the Belarusian language in its historical context is beyond the scope of this study. We focus on a niche segment of art workers in Berlin who migrated in the last three years during significant upheavals for this community, related to persecution in their homeland and the onset of a full-scale war. Nevertheless, the Belarusian language and its status have been described by Woolhiser (2001, 2007, 2011, 2013), Mojeiko (2020) detailing the process of post-Soviet linguistic and identity transformations in the country.

While language is not the sole determinant of cultural identity, decolonization involves more than reclaiming native languages; it necessitates the affirmation of all diverse cultural practices that contribute to a community's identity. The linguistic practices of Belarusian art and culture workers in Berlin illustrate how identity can persist and evolve beyond language, representing a form of resistance against past homogenizing forces. These individuals exercise their agency by interrogating, contesting, and engaging in discourse about established norms, highlighting the necessity for a refined comprehension of the connection between language and identity in varied contexts.

History of Belarusians in Berlin: A Survey

Charting the waves of migration from Belarus presents a daunting task because the concept of Belarus itself is layered with complexity, embedded in historical contexts of the socio-political entities it had been historically a part of, such as the Great Duchy of Lithuania (1236–1795) and the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795). As a result of Russian colonization and imperial oppression in the following period that followed, numerous individuals were forced into exile. An argument could even be made that the preeminent poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) was one of the first Belarusian migrants to Germany. Mickiewicz is considered a representative figure for several cultures, including Polish, Lithuanian, and Belarusian. Born on the territory of what is now Belarus, Mickiewicz wrote in Polish, was exiled to Russia in 1824, and spent the next five years in Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Odesa, and Crimea before arriving for a short visit in Berlin in June 1829 (see Koropeckyj 2008).

Like many other experts, I acknowledge the 1918 Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) as the first major political expression of Belarusian identity and the first endeavor to carve out an independent state, however short-lived. It existed from March 25, 1918 to December 3, 1918 under German occupation. As early as December 1918, Minsk fell under the control of Red Army units. Despite this, the government of the Belarusian People's Republic persisted with its activities while in exile. Although the Belarusian People's Republic Council was exiled in Prague, a special department was established in Berlin. Interestingly, the BNR passports were printed in Berlin, under the permission of German authorities (see Fig.1). This noteworthy event marks the genesis of the first documents of the Belarusian state, and arguably, the inception of the Belarusian presence in Berlin.



Fig. 1. The Belarusian passport of Kłara Zajac, issued to her by the Belarusian People's Republic consulate in Berlin in 1920. This document is part of the Hrodna State Historical-Archaeological Museum's collection. The passport, an artifact of a Belarusian citizen, is displayed in the exhibition "1918: BNR — Idea. Region. State. Step towards Independence" at the National Historical Museum. The document is preserved in the collections of the Grodno Historical-Archaeological Museum.

Although the Belarusian People's Republic Council was exiled in Prague, a special department was established in Berlin. The early 1920s saw a wave of immigrants from the Russian Empire flood into Berlin, converting the city into a thriving center for literary emigration, giving birth to the distinctive 'Russian Berlin' identity (for more about Russian Berlin, see Igumnova and Brett 2002, Popov 2010, Russova 2010). However, another captivating narrative endures, that of the Belarusian Berlin. An allusion to its origins can be found in Aleś Vinicki's account of Belarusian migration to Germany in 1939–1951, which offers an intriguing historical insight:

Following World War I, Andrej Baroŭski was the sole known Belarusian in Berlin, delegated by the government of the Belarusian People's Republic as its consul. He faithfully served in this capacity until 1927 when the Belarusian Consulate's activities were prohibited by German authorities. Subsequently, Baroŭski, being proficient in various languages, established a translation bureau in Berlin, earning his living through this service until World War II. (Vinicki 1994)

The 1930s witnessed an increase in the Belarusian presence in Berlin. Two students from Vilnius, Anatol Škutka and Michaś Maskalik, arrived to study at a German Technical School. After two years of study, Maskalik left this school and moved to Munich to study theology. During their time in Berlin, these two students established an organization—the Belarusian Student Union. Due to a lack of personnel, the former consul, Andrej Baroŭski, was recruited for the Union's management and appointed as its secretary. This signified the inception of the Belarusian student organization in Berlin (Vinicki 1994).

The tides turned dramatically in 1939 with the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. A significant portion of Poland, and along with significant number of ethnic Belarusians — people who spoke Belarusian and identified as Belarusians — found themselves in Germany. The early stages of World War II resulted in 70,000 of captured Belarusians from the Polish army and sent to Germany (Hardzijenka 2003). Together with this group, Vinicki counts about one million of Belarusians in Germany during 1939–1945, comprised of Belarusian prisoners of war who previously fought in the Polish and Soviet armies, slave workers, and the Belarusian collaborationists who left with the Germans in the summer of 1944 (Vinicki 1994).

Even though it is difficult to track the exact number of Belarusians residing in Berlin during the Second World War, the diaspora of those years was represented by an impressive number of organizations, educational institutions, and media outlets. Key organizations included the Belarusian Central Displaced Persons Association, the Belarusian Charitable Association Abroad and the World Association of Belarusian Emigration. Equally notable were the Union of Belarusian Journalists, the Bibliographic Service, and the Union of Belarusian Farmers. Newspapers *Ranica* (see Fig.2) and *Bielaruski robotnik*, as well as, a literary group *Bajavaja Ūskaloś* was a testament to the efflorescence of cultural undertakings of the time, despite the extremely arduous circumstances of that era (Hardzijenka 2003).



Fig. 2. Fragment of Newspaper *Ranica* published in Berlin in 1944.

Following the end of the WWII, several hundreds of thousands of Belarusians found themselves inhabiting German territories; however, the majority of this population eventually returned to their homeland. A residual group of about 100,000 individuals preferred not to return for various reasons and remained mostly unsettled during the latter half of the 1940s. Primarily dwelling in camps for displaced persons, these individuals anxiously awaited the prospect of permanent settlement in foreign countries (Kipel 2020: 159). From the mid-1940s on, Berlin witnessed a decline in the number of Belarusians. They dispersed globally, migrating to France, the USA, Canada, and even as far afield as Australia. The early 1950s witnessed an exodus of Belarusians from Germany resulting in a noticeable depletion in the diasporic population. Those who did remain were spread out across various cities, with a discernible Belarusian enclave only taking root in Munich (for more about the Munich Belarusian diaspora, see Maksimiuk 1994, Bird 2011).

During the 1970s, there was an outpouring of emigrants from the USSR, mainly Jewish Refusniks. The primary heavens for those immigrants were Israel and the USA, reached via Italy, yet Germany also received many Jewish immigrants. From 1991 on, more than 200,000 former Soviet Jews were able to resettle in Germany as the so-called “quota refugees” (Kontingentflüchtlinge) (Astrouskaya 2022). This migratory trend is one of the least explored subjects in historical studies. For those born in the late 1970s and the 1980s, their exposure to Germany was largely influenced by numerous rehabilitation programs for the children affected by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Later on, avenues such as cultural exchanges, educational pursuits, and career development opportunities essentially redefined how they engaged with Germany.

The peculiarity of the migratory dynamics during this historical period is the intricate blend of motivations that catalyzed movement: familial, economic, professional, and political factors were often intertwined. For instance, a student leaving to study might have concurrently been escaping politically motivated persecution. Family reunification could also have encompassed economic motivations. These phenomena suggest the complex interplay of immigration, repatriation and integration into the new society.

The creative migration of the 1990s and early 2000s, a part of the post-Soviet migration wave, is documented through various publications, private archives, and preserved exhibition catalogs. It is epitomized by the renowned Berlin squat, Kunsthaus Tacheles. Starting in 2001, it housed the DAKH contemporary art festival, which became one of the most vibrant exhibitions of Belarusian art outside the country until the residency closed in 2012. Several of the Tacheles artists, including Ihar Kaškurjevič (see Fig. 3) and the recently deceased Ales Rodin (1947–2022) were immortalized in Arthur Klinau’s novel *Šalom: Vaenny Raman* [Shalom: a War Novel] (2011) and a documentary short by Yahor Surski titled *Art Repatriation* (2011) capturing the life of Belarusian artists in Germany. While the longer version of the film underlines the complexities of cultural identity and artistic expression among Belarusian artists living abroad, within the broader context of migration and repatriation, its shorter version offers a close-up portrait of Belarusian artist Ihar Kaškurjevič.



Fig. 3. Artist Ihar Kaškurjevič. A still from *Art Repatriation* (dir. Yavor Surski, 2011)

As of 2019, Germany was home to 22,980 individuals holding Belarusian passports (Statista 2023). The Razam e. V., a Belarusian organization, was formally established on August 9, 2020, coinciding with the 2020 Belarusian presidential election, the results of which were deemed fraudulent (<https://razam.de>). By May 2021, it had become one of the largest group of Belarusians abroad, representing, according to various estimates, 26,000 Belarusians residing in Germany. Obtaining accurate data on migration is complex, as it not only involves tracking movement from Belarus, but also includes individuals migrating from third countries who often hold various citizenships.

Presently, Berlin is host to a substantial cohort of prominent representatives of Belarusian culture, ranging from writer Sviatlana Alexievich to poet Dmitry Strotsev, or performers Svetlana Ben and Galia Chikiss and many others. Additionally, numerous artists, curators, and art managers who left Belarus during 2020-2021 inhabit a complex network of German art residencies. Their gravitational core, is indisputably Berlin, a topic explored in the next part of this text. All in all, among the art workers who lived and worked in Berlin during 2020–2023, one can include the following names: Marina Naprushkina, Antonina Stebur, Olga Shparaga, Valentina Kiselyova, Anna Chistoserdova, Aleksander Komarov, Aliaksandr Belski, Lena Prents, Vlad Lappo, Andrei Loginov, Oksana Gourinovich, Anna Karpenko, Nadya Sayapina, Vasilisa Palianina, Andrei Anro, Uladzimir Hramovich, Lesia Pcholka, and eeffff. All names are rendered in the manner in which the artists have spelled them on their professional and social media profiles.

Distinguishing temporary stay from migration is challenging, one of the many ambiguities when dealing with blurred definitions, residencies, scholarships, and the unclear naturalization process. Issues related to paperwork and documentation compound the complexity. According to Zmicier Č, the leader of the Razam Kunst, the art division of the nationwide German non-profit Razam e. V, before 2020, Belarusians in Berlin were largely unacquainted with each other, occasionally intersecting at concerts (Č 2022). Only in 2020 did they unite and establish an organization, securing a location at an artists' squat in the Hous der Statistik (see Fig. 4), and thereby integrating the

Belarusian community into German cultural life. When the city of Berlin began renovating the building, the artists' offices have been temporarily moved to a building made out of construction containers, which they shared with a number of cultural organizations, including ABA (Air Berlin Alexander Platz), an art platform co-founded by Aleksander Komarov, an artist from Belarus who was able to secure funding for a number of residencies for Belarusians in 2020–2021, thereby launching a new era of the Belarusian artistic migration to the city (<https://airberlinalexanderplatz.de>).



Fig. 4. The façade of Razam headquarters in a temporary make-shift squat during the reconstruction of the Haus der Statistik. View from Otto-Braun-Straße.

Select case-studies of language use: interviews with Belarusian art workers in Berlin

In the summer months of 2022, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews to understand the nuances of Belarusian language use and identity among a group of artists and art managers residing in Berlin. This group included Zmicier Č, the founder of RAZAM KUNST, which has its headquarters in Haus der Statistik, an art squat near Alexanderplatz. Anna Chistoserdova and Valentina Kiselyova also participated. They are art managers who run Ambasada Kultury. Other participants included curator Lena Prents and artists Aleksander Komarov, Aleksandr Belski, Uladzimir Hramovich and Lesia Pcholka. As a Russophone speaker, I adapted to the language of the interviewee, speaking Belarusian with Belarusian speakers and Russian with Russian speakers. Among the participants, Zmicier Č, Uladzimir Hramovich and Lesia Pcholka used Belarusian on a daily basis, while the others primarily spoke Russian. However, my field observations of this group in various situations yielded mixed results, as detailed below.

The language usage of prominent Belarusian art managers based in Berlin presents a compelling example of fluid language use, in which Russian serves mostly as a practical tool for daily

communication, while Belarusian assumes a more performative role. Although they are Russian speakers in their everyday life, both Valentina Kiselyova and Anna Chistoserdova exhibited a preference for Belarusian in their social media announcements, circulation of promotional materials, and public presentations. For example, Anna Chistoserdova opened an event commemorating the second anniversary of the Belarusian uprising of August 2020 in Belarusian, and she also spoke Belarusian at a roundtable discussion held in September 2022 (Razor 2023). This group often switched to Belarusian in their daily lives when interacting with Russian speakers in public places in Berlin. In a private conversation, Chistoserdova explained that this is a deliberate attempt on her part to disrupt the homogenizing power of the Russian language and create a space of linguistic diversity, thus integrating the Belarusian language into the linguistic landscape of Berlin and making Russian speakers aware of the existence of other linguistic groups. Therefore, this example of fluid, performative language use underscores the multidimensionality of identity within the Belarusian diaspora in Berlin and suggests that language should be examined within the context of linguistic contact zones in a large contemporary metropolis.

When considering the Belarusian-speaking art managers in Berlin, Zmicier Č of Razam Kunst, a subdivision of Razam e.V., arguably demonstrates the most robust example of a Belarusian linguistic identity within the diaspora. A dedicated Belarusian speaker for the past five years, his transition to the Belarusian language was not driven by a surge in patriotic sentiment sparked by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Rather, it resulted from his deeper cultural immersion in the Belarusian underground music and theatre scene. Originally from Zhlobin, a small town near Minsk infamous for its brutal prison conditions for protesters post-2020, Zmicier Č faced limited prospects for his future. During a semi-structured interview, he explained that he found himself at a crossroads: one path leading to a life steeped in petty crime and imprisonment, and the other offering the possibility of becoming a cultural worker and escaping his oppressive provincial environment. Zmicier Č chose the latter. In making this choice, he shifted his linguistic practice to Belarusian, a language popular among certain circles of creative intelligentsia in Belarus (Č 2022). Notably, Zmicier Č's vision for the development of the Belarusian diaspora in Berlin is inclusively intersectional. In an interview, he explained that Razam Kunst presents itself as an inclusive group, acknowledging that being a closed community in 21st-century Berlin is untenable. As Berlin residents, they have collaborated with various diasporic communities in the city, such as Russian poet Alexander Delfinov of the Panda Theater and members of the Kazakh and Uzbek diasporas (Č 2022). In contrast to Zmicier, his close friend Alexandr Belski, a fellow Zhlobin native and resident artist at Razam Kunst, consistently uses Russian in his day-to-day communication. Interestingly, despite his inclination for Russian in conversation, Belski's promotional designs for exhibitions and Razam Kunst events exclusively feature English and Belarusian. This strategy closely aligns with the broader cultural development approach advocated by the Belarusian Council for Culture, a non-government organization in exile. The council promotes the use of Belarusian and discourages bilingual documents in Belarusian and Russian, despite a considerable number of individuals who prefer using Russian in everyday life. This paradox underscores the intricacy of language choice and usage within the diaspora.



Fig.5. Young woman in Netherlands reading Belarusian-Russian dictionary. Still from *Language Lessons. Palipaduazennije* (dir. Aleksander Komarov, 2013). Film screened during the Dignity Day celebration in Berlin on August 9, 2022.

Examining the language use of representatives from an older wave of migration—those art workers who immigrated in the 1990s following the dissolution of the Soviet Union—provides a different perspective. Aleksander Komarov and Lena Prents represent intriguing cases within the diaspora. On one hand, they embody successful integration into their adoptive country: they’ve gained the EU citizenship, pursued education in Germany and the Netherlands, and carved successful careers in Berlin’s art institutions. Yet, their linguistic skills diverge considerably. Proficient in German, Dutch, and English, Komarov uses Russian for interpersonal communication and occasionally struggles with articulation, whereas Prents is equally proficient in German, English, Russian and Belarusian. This difference could perhaps be attributed to her frequent trips to Belarus and her continued engagement with the art community there.

Despite these variations in linguistic proficiency, both Prents and Komarov display a significant interest in the Belarusian language. In an interview, Prents said she was open to using Belarusian exclusively if her group of friends decided to do so collectively (Prents 2022). This sentiment, which she admits evolved during the 2020 protests, has already prompted her to use Belarusian in public situations, such as when moderating discussions or hosting events with Belarusian artists. Komarov’s interest in the language takes on a more conceptual approach, as showcased in his experimental short film titled *Language Lessons. Palipaduazennije*. The film explores Belarusian morphemes and studies the speech patterns of Belarusian diaspora members in the Netherlands (see Fig. 5). These narratives illuminate the fluidity and diversity of identity within the Belarusian diaspora in Berlin. They emphasize the fact that language is not the sole determinant of identity, but rather one aspect within a multitude of cultural practices and lived experiences. These individual experiences enrich the narrative of the diaspora, painting a detailed picture of how people negotiate their identities and

sense of belonging in a multicultural context, embrace hybridity, and determine their position within it.

Delving deeper into the linguistic choices of Belarusian art workers in Berlin uncovers the circumstantial character of language usage, often straddling the divide between public and private spheres. Take the couple Uladzimir Hramovich and Lesia Pcholka, for example. Hramovich, who grew up in the Belarusian-speaking household and learned Russian in school, speaks exclusively in Belarusian, while Pcholka, who grew up in the Russian-speaking family, has switched to using Belarusian exclusively only after the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In an interview, Pcholka said that one of the predicaments of switching to speak exclusively in Belarusian was the difficulty of sustaining the purity of the language among Russian speakers. In other words, it was more difficult for her to speak consistently in Belarusian out of the fear of making a mistake or mixing two languages in the predominantly Russian-speaking environments (Pcholka 2023). A linguistic fusion known as *miešanka*, a blend of Russian and Belarusian has a contentious history in Belarus and is stigmatized as indicative of uncultured and uneducated speech, something that the artist was trying to avoid.

These varied linguistic narratives within the Belarusian diaspora in Berlin and its extended art network underline the fact that language choice isn't a fixed or predictable characteristic. Rather, it is a dynamic and intricate reflection of personal experiences, cultural influences, and individual agency. As these narratives continue to unfold, they foster an enhanced understanding of the diversity that permeates the Belarusian transnational artistic diaspora, as illustrated by its representatives in Berlin and their respective audiences.

To conclude this section, it is pertinent to note that the term "identity" often attracts skepticism in the artists of this group, perceived as an essentialist category incapable of fully capturing the intricate nuances of individual experiences. For instance, a person can simultaneously embody multiple roles such as a Belarusian activist, art worker, refugee, speaker of Russian, speaker of Belarusian, speaker of German or English, as the choice of language is often contextual in its nature. In numerous instances, it is the artist's experiences navigating bureaucratic systems that shape their art practice, often critically engaging with the idea that life is defined by what the system deems significant, such as passports or various forms of documentation. This introspective process can serve as a catalyst for their creative work. Take, for instance, the latest exhibit titled *BY LAW*, showcased by Uladzimir Hramovich and Lesia Pcholka at the Museum of Emigration in Gdynia, Poland, running from December 10, 2022, to January 29, 2023. Both social artists and activists hailing from Belarus, Lesia and Uladzimir employ objects and video projections to explore the challenges they encountered while seeking approval for marriage in Poland as immigrants. The language in this installation is that of a bureaucracy, featuring numerous translations of their documents from Belarus, issued in both Belarusian and Russian, into Polish.

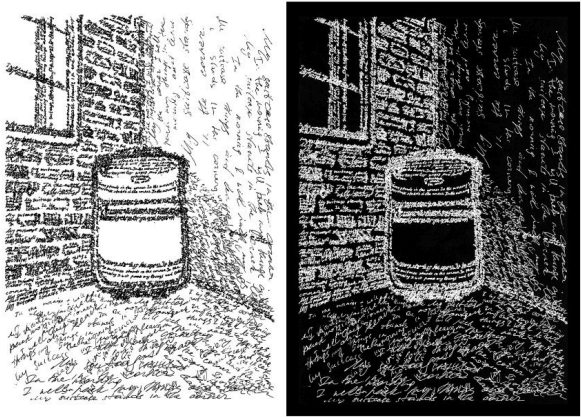
Mapping Berlinsk as a Networked Experience

The Day of Dignity, which is held on August 9 and commemorates the two-year anniversary of significant protests in Belarus, served as a global celebration for Belarusians. To mark this significant occasion, Belarusians in Berlin, together with organizations such as Amb sada K ultury, Razam Kunst, CES ArtsLink, and Air Berlin Alexanderplatz, have planned an event at Haus der Statistik’s garden under the title “Berlinsk: Another City, Another Life.” This gathering constituted an important sociocultural event featuring an array of artistic expressions, including experimental music by Refum (Eugene Buldyk), contemporary art workshop by Nadya Sayapina, silkscreen printing by Aliaksandr Belski, community mapping workshop by myself, Sasha Razor, poetry reading by Dmitry Strotsev, a Russophone poet from Belarus, and the aforementioned experimental short screening by Aleksander Komarov.

БЕРЛІНСК: ІНШЫ ГОРАД, ІНШАЕ ЖЫЦЦЁ

RAZAM KUNST, OTTO BRAUN STRASSE 70-72, BERLIN

У АЎТОРАК **9 ЖНІЎНЯ** 18:00 - 22:00



НАДЗЯ САЯПІНА / САША РЕЙЗАР/
ДЗЬМІТРЫЙ СТРОЦАЎ / REFUM /
АЛЯКСАНДЕР КАМАРОЎ / АЛЯКСАНДР БЕЛЬСКІ

АМБАСАДА КУЛЬТУРЫ У ПАРТНЁРСТВЕ З:

ABA CECartslink ART PROSPECT RAZAM KUNST

Fig. 6: The Dignity Day poster designed by Aliaksandr Belski, 2022

The event poster’s design by Aliaksandr Belski (see Fig. 6) bears traces of a minimalist approach. Contrary to the vibrant display of Belarusian national colors — white and red — commonly seen throughout the diasporas, the same color palette is subtly used in the poster, clearly revealing an aesthetic decision. The artwork featured on the poster is a part of Nadya *Sayapina’s Letter to Mom* project, which is “related to the subject of forced migration and the affective side of relocation experience. It turns to the stories of people who urgently left their homes and now are building lives in new places.” (For more, see the description of Letter to Mom: <https://cargocollective.com/>

NadyaSayapina/LETTER-TO-MOM.) These drawings consist of actual words or phrases in multiple languages, which the artist derived from her art practice, where she interviewed other refugees, and positioned these expressions onto a series of postcards titled *Postcard Nowhere*, thereby transforming these dialogues into tangible mail art objects. (For more, see the description of Postcard Nowhere: <https://cargocollective.com/NadyaSayapina/POSTCARD-NOWHERE>.)

“Berlinsk: Another City, Another Life” mapping workshop was held with the participation of artists, activists, and members of the Belarusian diaspora. It drew on a unique blend of methodologies from community mapping, unitary urbanism, and speculative design to envision the city from the perspective of a community tied together by their Belarusian heritage. This initiative exemplifies a collaborative effort to capture the collective experience of the diaspora, thus providing a multilayered understanding of the transnational identity of the Belarusian community in Berlin. The results of this networked collective map are presented in Fig 7.

The name in its title, Berlinsk, is a hybrid of Berlin and Minsk, which was already in circulation among the members of this community, when I first traveled to Berlin in July 2022. (It is noteworthy that the construction of portmanteau words representing various places in diasporic communities is not uncommon. Other examples of similar word formations include terms like *Israilovka* or *Londograd*.) “Another city, another life” in the second part of the title alludes to the title of the *Internationale Situationniste #3*, which was circulated in 1959, while the idea of creating a speculative map of Berlinsk is inspired by Jorge Luis Borges’ story “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*” (1940), a parable of intellectual resistance to totalitarianism, in which the intellectuals invent their country, Uqbar, thereby creating an alternative reality.

Project Description:

Pavodle roznych acenak, ũ Bierlinie praŕyvaje kala tysiačy bielarusai, a bierlinskaja dyjaspara – adna z niešmatlikich supolak paza mieŕami krajny, jakija majuć mocnuju arhanizacyju i ũlasnaje pamiaškaŕnie. My zaprašajem usich ŕadajučych pryŕiać udziel u kalektyŕnym dašledavaŕni bielaruskaj prastory horada i adkazać z nami na nastupnyja pytaŕni: Što takoje Bierlinsk? Dzie znachodziacca jaho haloŕnyja arteryi? Jakimi maršrutami my ruchajemsia? Jak my stasujemsia z inšymi supolkami i arhanizacyjami? Jakija z vulic i rajonaŕ nahadvajuć nam Miensk albo inšyja harady Bielarusi? U jakich rajonach my imkniemsia ŕyć i u jakich ustanovach pracavać ũ budučyŕni?

According to various estimates, about a thousand Belarusians live in Berlin, and the Berlin diaspora is one of the few communities outside the country that has a strong organization and its own premises. We invite all those interested to participate in the collective research of the Belarusian urban landscape and answer the following questions with us: What is Berlin-like? Where are its main arteries? What routes do we take? How do we interact with other communities and organizations? Which streets and neighborhoods remind us of Minsk or other cities in Belarus? In which areas do we aspire to live and in which institutions do we aim to work in the future?

The collaborative map of Belarusian Berlin essentially amalgamates five cities, which were specified in the description of the project:

1. *Everyday City: Our reality, our usual city routes, keeping in mind the anonymity of information without personal names.*
2. *Activist City: Places where Belarusians in Berlin join protests or locations known for protest street art.*
3. *Friend City: Our friendly organizations that invite Belarusians to perform or offer their accommodations.*
4. *Doppelgänger City: Derived from the German word for “double,” it refers to areas of Berlin reminiscent of Minsk.*
5. *Future City: The city where we dream to launch new Belarusian projects, find housing (as many of my friends are currently looking), study, work, and relax.*

The workshop took place in the garden of Haus der Statistik in Berlin, offering a chance to establish a mapped network that linked areas of personal and collective significance. At the same time, it articulated the identities and narratives shaping the cityscape. Drawing inspiration from speculative urban design, the community map materialized as a city split into five distinct sections, each symbolizing unique aspects of the Belarusian diasporic experience in Berlin.

The map’s language featured a diverse blend of Belarusian, German, English, and other languages, mirroring the community’s multifaceted character. It marked physical locales and simultaneously indexed the histories, emotions, and narratives attached to these areas. Amplifying individual voices within this varied community was a crucial part of the endeavor. Transgender activist Alina, for instance, identified safe and inclusive spaces for the LGBTQ+ community. A Belarusian female refugee unanimously mapped her refugee camp outside Berlin, along with facilities that offered aid to asylum seekers, thus adding another dimension of shared experience to the community’s story. This layered mapping effort underscored the value of inclusivity, uncovering the city’s neglected or underrepresented aspects. In a significant display of cross-cultural engagement, a German participant marked his Belarusian friend’s residence, demonstrating the map’s ability to unveil intercultural connections.

The Berlinsk map also served as a testament to spaces charged with political dissent. Areas that hosted the initial rallies in support of Belarus were underscored, effectively charting the city’s terrain of resistance, bravery, and unity. The spaces identified extended beyond the human experience, including areas significant to animals and “outsiders”, thereby acknowledging the city as a shared habitat across both species and cultural divides. Consequently, the resulting community map stands as a representation of cooperative endeavor and collective urban envisioning, offering a unique lens through which to view the Belarusian diasporic experience in Berlin, a narrative filled with tales of perseverance, conflict, and hope.

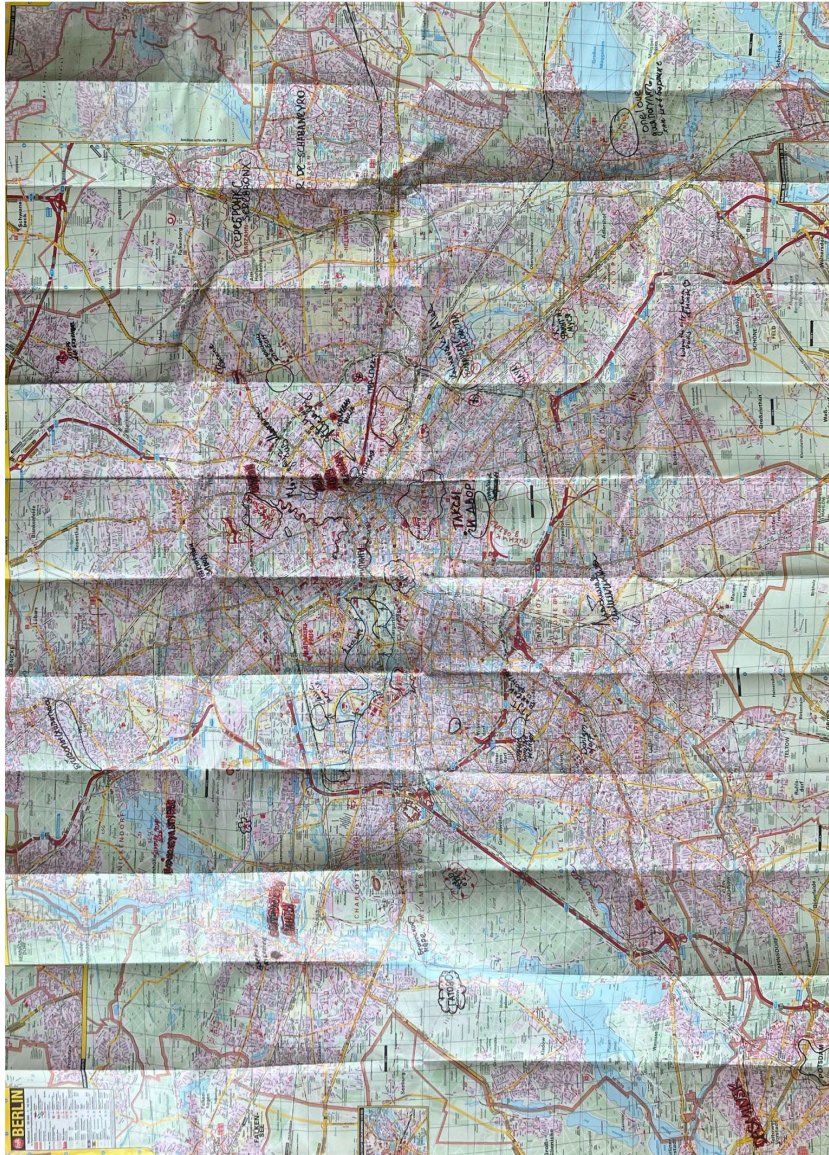


Fig. 7: Community Map of Berlin produced on August 9, 2022 at Berlinsk: Another City, Another Life at RAZAM KUNST. Berlin, Germany.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis of the Belarusian diaspora in Berlin underscores the fluid and multifaceted nature of diasporic identities. It acknowledges the rich tapestry of experiences, narratives, and identities that compose these communities, a perspective that aligns with the decolonial quest to challenge and subvert homogenizing and hegemonic narratives.

As of the summer of 2023, communication patterns within the Belarusian artistic diaspora in Berlin show inconsistencies in patterns related to language and identity that adhere neither to a distinct generational trend nor to the timing of when individuals departed from Belarus. The ability to adjust language use based on context, such as planning an art event in Belarusian or Russian, presenting the same event to the diaspora in Belarusian, delivering an art gallery presentation and curatorial texts in English for a global audience, conducting everyday interactions in German, having a private conversation in Belarusian in public spaces near Russian speakers, or responding in Ukrainian to the

speakers of Ukrainian indicates that identity is constantly negotiated and reshaped in response to social situations and changing circumstances. In the words of Sara Ahmed, "our bodies take shape when they come in contact with others" (Ahmed 2004, 1). In a similar vein, language and identity are not static; they are in constant flux, adapting and changing in reaction to the surrounding environment and interactions with others.

Transcending the demands of an artist's life amidst forced migration, these dialogues have the potential to contribute to wider, global discussions and be relevant for other displaced groups taking refuge in Germany. As expressed eloquently by Belarusian artist Uladzimir Hramovich, "Salidarnaści mnoha nie byvaje" [there can never be too much solidarity] (Razor 2023). This sentiment of communal resistance and resilience highlights the diasporic community's capacity to sculpt and redefine Belarus's shared future amidst war and forced migration.

With many post-Soviet migrant communities still evolving, it prompts the question: how might these intricate dynamics of language and identity continue to develop? Conventional frameworks of linguistics and identity studies may struggle to fully comprehend the complex realities of recently displaced and increasingly marginalized groups. How should we, as researchers and observers, navigate these shifting landscapes in ways that recognize their complexities, diversity, and dynamism? Although continued exploration of these questions will undoubtedly influence the future of language and identity studies, necessitating inventive theoretical and methodological approaches, a definite course for this group appears to be their escalating use of English in their art practice to connect with a global audience. This is highlighted by an English-language ironic message (see Fig. 8) created during Nadya Sayapina's workshop commemorating the Belarusian Dignity Day second year anniversary: **MIGRATION IS FANCY. FOR REAL.**



Fig. 8. Artwork by Eugene Buldyk at a workshop by Nadya Sayapina held during the Dignity Day celebration on August 9, 2022.

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