

Belarusian Identity in the Post-colonial Labyrinths

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The paper focuses on an understudied aspect of the Belarusian identity. The special attention is paid to the key role of patterns in a collective consciousness, which determine the direction of human behavior and further development. Some typical mental stereotypes of modern Belarusians are analyzed in the context of Post-Soviet worldview. The paper emphasizes that the Belarusian society needs to define a clear basis of national idea, language, symbols, values, and traditions. This sphere becomes the place of power struggle today. The current colonial expansion by more powerful states is going now on more refined scheme than the previous primitive armed intervention, namely through cultural expansion and economic dependence of neighboring weaker countries. Interrelations between Russia and Belarus today are a vivid example. It is necessary to understand that the “Russian World”, that Kremlin’s propaganda offers to modern neighboring nations, will hold only a dictatorship, militarism, repression, and suppression of freedom. Today this is the main challenge not only for Belarusian identity but for its independence as well.

Keywords: Belarus, protests, nationalism, identity, post-Soviet matrix

Introduction

For a long time, Belarus was ignored by politicians and the international academic community or perceived as a part of the post-Soviet area. But the situation has been changed after the protests against the fake presidential election in 2020 with its brutal crackdowns by security forces which have seen thousands detained, with hundreds severely beaten or tortured, and dozen killed. Possessing the most varied and imposing array of hard and soft power ever assembled in history, the most powerful world leaders nevertheless find themselves oddly irrelevant and with a sharply circumscribed ability to influence events in Belarus. It happens, in particular, because the West does not want to get an escalation of conflict with Russia and treats Belarus as a buffer zone.

Belarus has a millennium of history, but the present name of the country and its borders appeared only quite recently. A Belarusian narrative of history goes back to the Polack and Turau principalities of the 10th century. Later, they and other lands became parts of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, which subsequently united with the Kingdom of Poland in the 16th century.

Balto-Scandinavian elements played an important role in Slavonic ethnogenesis of Belarusians. The legendary trade route from the Varangians to the Greeks, which went down the Dnyapro (Dnieper) River from Scandinavia to Greece, promoted the development of trade and the interpenetration of cultures (Shumskaya, 2015, p. 5).

In the 18th century, the great European powers partitioned the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The present day conception of Belarus and its territory first appeared during the Russian Empire’s rule over the

lands, an event that over the last two centuries resulted in massive Russia influence over nearly all aspects of Belarusian life. It was only in the 19th century that the Russian introduced the name “Belarus” as a formal designation for the territory.

Just as in the 1920s, in the 1990s Belarus was swept by a new wave of cultural emancipation which emphasized the distinctiveness of national culture. Official state and national symbols which referred to pre-Soviet Belarusian history were created and approved (the state coat of arms, Pahonia [“Pursue”], was the coat of arms of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and of the Belarusian People’s Republic in 1918, and a white-red-white flag as a state heraldry legacy from the Belarusian People’s Republic of 1918-1919).

Nevertheless, Belarus, in contrast to, for example, Ukraine, has never consolidated a strong national identity despite Belarus is far more homogeneous ethnically and linguistically than is Ukraine. The majority of Belarusians still have a rather weak national identity. Instead, the territory and the state itself became the main subject of affiliation for them. Inside Belarus, where alternative political subjects and civil society have been destroyed, no strong advocacy group that might propose an alternative identity can effectively function or push their agenda.

Even in August-September 2020, sending a clear message against the active involvement of Russian authorities into Belarus’s domestic affairs or any military intervention not wanting to repeat either the Crimea or Donbas scenario, many protesters support the continuation of a friendly relationship with Russia including close economic relations and cooperation. Such vision was also expressed by the members of the Coordination Council and members of S. Tsikhanouskaya’s team. The same rhetoric we can observe from the teams of other so-called new opposition leaders: V. Babaryka, V. Tsapkala, etc. Moreover, these politicians called the names of various political prisoners in Belarus avoiding paying attention to national-oriented protesters.

Despite of the understanding of the importance of sovereignty, the majority of the population of Belarus still do not want to sever relations with Russia, which just demonstrates the main threats to its sovereignty. The part of society that did not support the hard anti-Russian rhetoric (but at the same time did not mind Belarusian national independence at all and could be democratically minded in principle) left the ranks of those mobilized by Belarusian nationalism, which often meant abandoning politics. But the top place on the list of the reasons for the failure of nationalist political forces is occupied by the national self-consciousness of the Belarusian people themselves, or, to be precise, by its weakness.

A Denationalized Nation

Basically, identity can be described as the entirety of how we as individuals or a group view or perceive ourselves as unique from others.

As Tadeusz Paleczny pointed (2008),

When we use the notion of identity, we always put it next to an adjective; the identity can be individual, collective, ancestral, family, tribal, caste, ethnic, national, national, civilization, religious, territorial, regional, etc. The socio-cultural dimension shapes these elements of identity, which are connected with the sphere of values, norms, symbols (language included), aesthetics, morality, and group bonds. Cultural separateness, the difference of values, norms, behavior, even desires, is a reflection of the historically different processes of the shaping of social bonds and also of the identity of individuals. (p. 354)

In the book titled *A Denationalized Nation* David Marples shows that nationalism did not become a new ideology of Belarusians after the disintegration of the Soviet Empire and was not able to take the role of a

consolidating force of Belarusian society. Marples explains it by the alienation of Belarusians from their own national idea, which resulted from decades of the Soviet period that became an obstacle on the way to democratic society (Marples, 1999, p. 52).

George Sanford sees post-communist Belarus as a “combining weak or divided national consciousness with an insignificant experience of independent statehood” (Sanford, 1997, p. 227). Ed Jocelyn says that in Belarus “national consciousness is a highly problematic concept”, and that “Belarusian national identity is fragmented, and its roots lead in different directions” (Jocelyn, 1998, p. 78).

Dawisha and Parrot insist (1994):

Belarus has a shortage of ingredients critical to the construction of a durable nation-state: a vigorous sense of its distinctive national identity. [...] The Belarusian case demonstrates the difficulty of basing a new state on a conception of the nation as a sovereign people when the core population’s sense of ethnic distinctiveness is comparatively undeveloped. (p. 75)

From this perspective, existence of an independent Belarusian state seems an exceptional case. As Thomas Winderl writes (1999), “True enough, Belarus still exists as a sovereign state. But Belarus is definitely an example where an attempt to establish a strong national identity failed within a short period of time” (p. 94).

Pavel Loika considered the multicultural way of being as the historical destiny of Belarus (2001):

While taking into account the dramatic character of Belarusian history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, associated with our Fatherland being torn between Warsaw and St. Petersburg, between Catholicism and the Orthodox faith, we should not abjure our ancestors’ achievements. There is no sense in considering only texts written in Belarusian to be “national”. There are no grounds for granting our neighbors or anyone else the Belarusian cultural values created in Polish, Russian, and Latin. In general, Belarus both today and in the remote past has had a multiethnic and multilingual character.

According to Ihar Lialkou (2002),

modern Belarusian society is deeply split. One part of our society is so radically separated from the other that if a casual observer were to overhear conversations and read articles by the two groups, it could be concluded that they live in different worlds. Of the parameters that identify a nation, place of residence is the only thing these two groups have in common. (p. 12)

They differ by language, their historical memory, identity (despite the fact that both call themselves Belarusians, the meaning is completely different), relations with other nations (close and distant), their vision of the country’s future development, etc. It sometimes seems that these two groups would feel more comfortable in two different countries.

So being between traditional ethnic and civic approaches of identity, Belarusians try to demonstrate “the third way” and “the meeting point of civilizations”, which aimed to accommodate others and accept them as a part of its own identity.

Belarusian Language as a Sign of National Identity

Language policy in Eastern Europe has always been deeply connected to politics and to national identity. This is also the case in Belarus, though the development of Belarus is quite different from the development of other Eastern European countries. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, former Soviet States were left with the task of building a national identity to replace their Soviet one. The new question of national identity

seemed, in the case of many of these former Soviet States, to hinge on questions of language. Belarus stands apart from the other former Soviet States in that Russian remains dominant language.

In 1986, a team of Belarusian intellectuals even wrote a letter to Gorbachev emphasizing their view on the importance of the Belarusian language for the integrity of the Belarusian identity:

Language is the soul of a nation, the supreme manifestation of its cultural identity, the foundation of its true spiritual life. A nation lives and flourishes in history while its language lives. With the decline of the language, culture withers and atrophies, the nation ceases to exist as a historical organism. (Letters to Gorbachev, 1987; via Brown, 2005).

Initially, like other nationalist groups in the former Soviet States, Belarusian nationalist movements used language as a means of mobilization, and in January of 1990, at the urgings of the “oppositional elite” Belarusian was made the official language of the republic in spite of general disapproval among the Belarusian Soviet authorities. However, the nationalist movement began to lose momentum, and when Belarus did ultimately declare independence from the Soviet Union. Mark Beissinger (2002, p. 123) indicates that the August 1991 declaration of independence was largely an acquiescence to external pressures on the part of the Belarusian Soviet authorities and that “failure to recognize Belarusian independence and continued defense of the integrity of the USSR (a position that the Belarusian leadership had taken up to that point) would have led to a gaping strategic opening for oppositional elites”. Prior to this declaration of independence, the majority of Belarusians had voted to preserve the USSR in the referendum held by M. Gorbachev in March of 1991. As such, unlike in other Soviet States, independence was achieved due to external pressures, and not due to the nationalist tides so characteristic of the other Soviet countries.

During last 25 years the Belarusian language was losing its importance as a sign of national identity of Belarusians. The share of those who advocate Belarusian to be the only official language in Belarus is almost equal to the share of those who want to see Russian as the only official language.

The Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) asked the question on differences between Belarusians and Russians in their surveys. Dynamics of answers since 2002 was essentially insignificant (Figure 1).

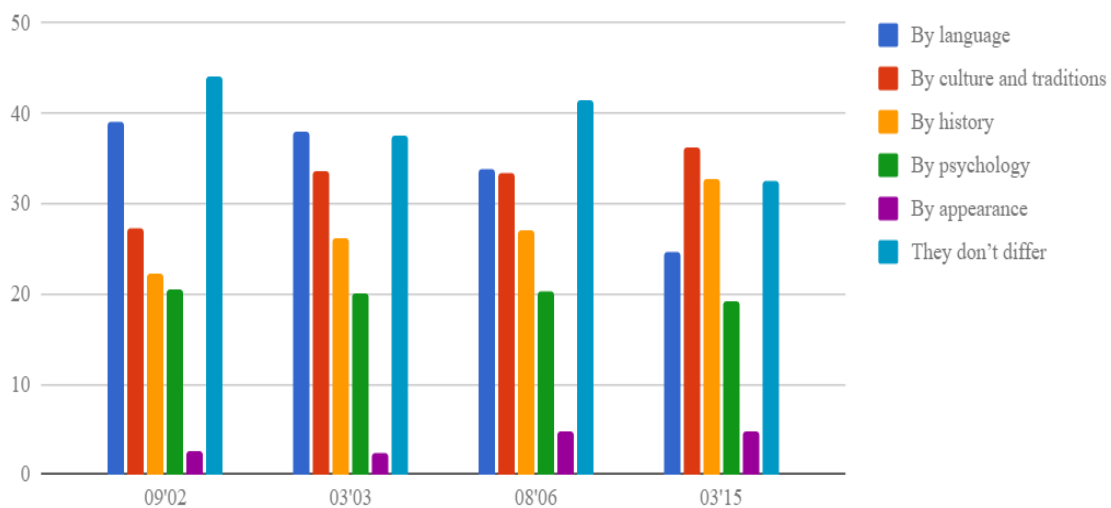


Figure 1. Dynamics of answering the question: “How Belarusians differ from Russians?”, % (more than one answer is possible).

National identity even in the most liberal interpretation includes realization of own singularity, distinguishability from others, even those, who are very close and nice, a realization of own collective “us”, which does not include others, even if the attitude towards them is very good.

In the surveys conducted between 2002 and 2006 the most popular variant of national identity’s markers was the Belarusian language. However, you may notice, how from one survey to another it was losing its ground as a quality which differentiates Belarusians and Russians. In the last survey it yielded the palm to differences in culture, traditions, and history.

Many researchers noted the role of the Belarusian language as a means of “symbolic communication”, as a sign of national identity. But as a matter of fact, for Belarusians language is not the main identifier of their difference from Eastern neighbors anymore. However, this process did not lead to a weakening of realization of differences in general. This happened at the cost of strengthening of other identifiers such as culture, traditions, and history. As a result, Belarusians began to realize that they are different from their Eastern neighbors to even a greater extent.

According to the surveys made by IISEPS, those, who think that Belarusians differ from Russians by psychology and appearance, are ready to resist an armed invasion to the greatest extent. Among those, who suppose, that the difference is in the language, the share of those, who are ready to fight, is the same as among those, who see the difference in culture and traditions. However, among those, who emphasize linguistic difference, the share of those who would greet an invasion is the lowest. It is quite natural, that respondents, who see no difference between Belarusians and Russians, are the least prone to resist an intervention from Russia.

Correlation between the characteristic under study and preferred status of official languages is quite enigmatic. As it was possible to suppose, adherents of Belarusian language officiality are most prone to the rejection of Russian intervention. However, the typical characteristic of the adepts of Russian monolingualism, despite the expectations, is not the readiness to greet “polite people” with flowers, but a contrast attitude—among them the number of those who are ready to adapt to the situation is the smallest, while the number of adherents and opponents of resisting is nearly equal. Indifferent people are the most inclined to greeting such course of events (IISEPS, 2014).

In general, the linguistic repertoire of Belarusian society should be analyzed, not in terms of vacillation between two languages (Russian and Belarusian), but as a component of general post-colonial reality.

In the Trap of Post-Soviet Matrix

The first years after the declaration of independence in 1991 was the worst period of the economic crisis that began in the late 1980s in the former USSR. Meanwhile pro-Soviet and pro-Russian forces, primarily grouped in so-called “force structures” (such as KGB) and who enjoyed strong support from outside, did not abandon hope to change the trajectory of history and involved themselves in incessant, secret and open, work among the population. This “work” was most gratefully accepted by the older generation, Soviet veterans of World War II and pensioners, for whom the USSR was the country of their youth and the unexpected changes brought only poverty and want (Ohana, 2007, p. 19). It is worth noting that at that time those people made up almost one third of the working population. All of these factors were the main reason for the victory of Aliaksandar Lukashenka in the first free presidential elections in 1994.

Majority of Belarusian population still have a mentality burdened by significant residues of the Soviet era, which have shaped it decisively. Importantly, this mentality is not rooted in historically relevant self-identification of Belarusian people with national awareness and Belarusian as their mother tongue. Their self-identification owns heavily to the mentality of Soviet, Russian-speaking apolitical citizen, living in the BSSR and counting upon a certain level of social needs. Weak and by no means self-evident national history, permanent state of occupation by foreign powers and only incipient and episodic experience of state independence (in 1918)—all these important moments, in a certain sense even decisive factors of the entire Belarusian politics, including the contemporary situation.

When discussing the culture sector in Belarus one is immediately confronted with an important duality, there are two culture sectors in Belarus. On the one hand, there is the “official” or state-sponsored culture sector. This sector includes commercial and state-funded culture producers that serve the neo-Soviet state ideology, in other words, the prolongation of Lukashenka’s dictatorship. On the other hand, there is what is increasingly referred to as the “counter-culture”. This is the independent cultural sector and includes all forms of cultural production that do not conform to the “official” line proposed by the state culture sector or that dare to demonstrate critical liberty and freedom of expression. While the official culture is associated with propaganda and servility, the independent “counter-culture” is associated with resistance and change. And, while some incidences of overlap or inter-penetration of these culture sectors can be observed, they exist at two extremes and are diametrically opposed to each other. In the understanding of those involved, the official culture is protected but servile. The counter-culture is suppressed, but free.

The official culture can be identified by several characteristics. In the first place, it is a product of the official ideology of the Lukashenka’s regime. This has its roots in Soviet pan-Slavism. In the 1990s the regime attempted to justify its efforts to create a state union between Belarus and Russia through the active promotion of Russian language culture and Soviet iconography, the ethnic affinity of the Belarusian nation with the Russian nation and the active suppression of Belarusian language culture. The nation building project has been focused on the creation of a Belarusian identity in the image of the leader and has not led to any rehabilitation of Belarusian language culture. Rather the opposite. Those who favor working through the Belarusian language are suppressed and marginalized.

Lovaz and Medich noted (2006),

It’s clear that the official Belarusian culture is morally corrupt and moribund. Typical products of the official culture include folk culture (folk dancing, music and arts and crafts), soap opera style TV series, Russian language “chick-lit” style reading material (romance novels, etc), mass pop entertainment, especially Russian language pop-music and, of course, the production of the state media. Importantly, the official culture promotes “home grown” Russian language cultural production, mostly in the field of pop-music and entertainment. This should be distinguished from the importation of mass cultural and especially entertainment products from Russia. As one respondent put it, the Belarusian regime a. produces its own ideologically charged cultural and entertainment products in the Russian language and b. uses the imported Russian mass cultural products to “cover the gaps” that appear due to the insufficiency of the domestic cultural production. (p. 46)

At the same time, the counter-culture is everything which the official culture is not: dynamic, modern, free, experimental, and creative. It is characterized by the use of the Belarusian language, its attitude of resistance to the regime (through which it has become intimately bound up with the democratic opposition) and its value based approach to its production, including its European outlook. Its typical products include rock music and

literature in the Belarusian language, innovative, experimental contemporary art and theatre, satire and a variety of forms of political comedy in the conditions when freedom of speech and expression is not respected.

Post-Soviet Aesthetics vs. the Search for Distinctivity

Belarusian society is weighed down with different taboos (about politics, religion, history, Belarusian identity, human relations including sexuality, and so on). The counter-culture tries through its art to address these taboos. In so doing, it becomes taboo of and in itself—the simple act of doing something which is considered “non-traditional” or outside of mainstream norms makes it suspect, something to speak about in whispers. In practical terms, for the visual arts, other related genres and in music, this means to engage in aesthetic conflict—to confront the post-Soviet aesthetic with its own moral bankruptcy and to destroy it in the eyes of its audiences and to open up to modern and foreign influences from the contemporary art scene.

In this time of polarization, some cultural actors continue to believe they can maintain a neutral position, neither supporting nor opposing the Belarusian regime. But, any artist that has attempted to position themselves as independent or as “apolitical” has sooner or later been faced with having to choose between “towing the party line” and some form of punishment. An excellent example of this is pop-culture, which in many contexts is considered as mere entertainment, with no political value or objective. But, in Belarus it has become an important political instrument in the hands of the regime, which uses it to present its own version of reality to the masses.

Sometimes Belarusian artists choose a provocative performance art that often takes form of extreme acts as their political language. They are depicting the growing protest movement against the autocratic leader Alexander Lukashenka amid widespread allegations of election fraud and police brutality.

For example, in February 2020 the Belarusian artist Alexei Kuzmich burned his installation “540”, which he exhibited at the National Center for Contemporary Arts, blindfolded, took off his shirt and pierced his bare chest with a pin with the Belarusian Republican Youth Union badge. He timed his action to coincide with the entry into force of amendments to the Law of the Republic of Belarus “On Countering Extremism”. In August 2020, on Election Day, Kuzmich held a rally dedicated to the presidential election. It took place at a school in Minsk, where one of the polling stations was located. Kuzmich left the voting booth wearing a loincloth. On his chest, he had a ballot paper with a phallic symbol drawn on it and stood in a cross position. After the elections, Kuzmich was blocked in his apartment and detained. On September 1, 2020, he left Belarus and currently lives in France (*BelarusFeed*, 2021).

Rufina Bazlova, a Belarusian artist based in Prague, has been using the red-white color scheme and concept of traditional embroidery known as *vyshivanky* to create protest art that she posts on Instagram. She told Czech Radio that *vyshivanky* is both “a coded history of the people” and a way “to ward off bad spirits” (Kishkovsky, 2020).

Today, Belarusians live in an independent state called Belarus. But the authorities together with a part of the new opposition have long sought integration with Russia, present Soviet history and morality, as well as, Russian mass entertainment, as Belarusian culture, and make all this an obligatory tenet of the state ideology.

Modern Belarus is characterized by a strong alliance with Russia and a weak national identity, a Soviet-style economy, and a Soviet-era mentality among the bulk of its population and elites. So far, Russian support has provided the regime with stability but has also weakened its motivation to democratize and build a

competitive economy (Shraibman, 2018, p. 28). So Belarusian identity is still unformed on the one hand and based on the post-Soviet mentality of the population on the other hand. But, nevertheless, the effectiveness of the use of cultural methods and forms (theatre, films, literature, music) for the purposes of civic education is doubtless.

Conclusion

The idea of nations as victims of communist and authoritarian regimes is at the center of collective memory and has become a characteristic feature of Eastern European national discourses, one that appeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Identity played a major role in these anti-imperial movements, and those identities were often self-consciously anti-imperial.

Despite the weakness of national identity, Belarusians should be seen as an Eastern European nation that has more in common with Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine. In this context, the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Commonwealth of Poland become significant in the creation of Belarusian traditions and the foundational elements of Belarusian identity. During these historical periods, Belarusians had more in common with Poles and Ukrainians than with Russians, which underscores that Belarusians are a European people and nation, one with a European history.

The Belarusian government may be concerned about what they see as a pressure from the East, but they will not run the risk of restricting access to Russian TV channels, nor are they keen to balance them with other information sources. Though they believe they have the situation under control, this close connection between Belarus and Russia is a real problem, especially now, when Kremlin officially supports illegitimate Belarusian president.

The only strong ideological alternative to Putin's "Russian World" idea is the nationalism promoted two decades ago by Belarusian opposition. It turns out that this nationalism is a viable concept after all, despite new leaders still did not include it into its own rhetoric.

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