

Belarusian Nationalism: Taking Stock of Its Accomplishments

Grigory Ioffe, Radford University, Radford, Virginia, USA

Correspondence: gioffe@radford.edu

ABSTRACT

Belarus is a country with a blurred identity that has not cut the umbilical cord connecting it with Mother Russia. According to a representative national survey of April 2020, only 25 percent of Belarusians would prefer to retain statehood and national sovereignty of Belarus even if their living standards worsen whereas 52 percent would opt for limited sovereignty if it is the price to pay for retaining or improving the quality of life. This may be the best-kept secret of Belarus and it has implications more serious than just economic dependency on Belarus's eastern neighbor. Belarus used to be a contested borderland claimed by both Russians and Poles. Today, it is a country with two historical narratives and nation-building blueprints that have been confronting each other since the inception of the Belarusian national movement. While the neo-Soviet/Russo-centric narrative has held sway over the majority of Belarusians, the Westernizing narrative was hard-hit on several occasions but has been making headway since Gorbachev's Perestroika. Pluses and minuses of two narratives and the attempts at bridging the gap between them are analyzed. There are essentially two kinds of divisions in Belarusian society: between the respective projects of nation-building and between Lukashenka loyalists and his detractors. These two divisions do not quite coincide, but there is a growing tendency to couch the ongoing political crisis in nationalist terms. The point is made that a lack of cohesive Belarusian identity is an existential threat to Belarusian statehood.

KEYWORDS

Belarusian nationalism, Lukashenka, national identity, historical memory

This article contains reflections over history and unaccomplished mission of Belarusian nationalism. By all accounts, the Belarusian nation is still a work in progress which has much to do with bifurcation or lingering duality of collective memories and attendant nation-building blueprints of Belarus.

I drew basic ideas about nationalism from seminal contributions by A.D. Smith and M. Hroch.¹ “Nationalism” is a tricky term. In Russian, its connotation used to be overwhelmingly negative and synonymous to xenophobia. While this is not always the case today, it still is for the most part. In English, “nationalism” is frequently negative, too, but its neutral and even positive meaning – along the lines of dedication to a national cause is widespread. In that sense, absent nationalism, there can be no nation-building.

With respect to Belarus, the notion of nationalism is in particular need of semantic noise cleansing. At least from the beginning of the Soviet era, asserting Belarusianness has been tantamount to insisting that Belarus is no Russia. Consequently, only those propagating the idea of Belarus’s detachment from Russia and its leaning toward the collective cultural West have been referred to as nationalists. These *westernizing nationalists* discerned proto-Belarus in the Great Duchy of Lithuania, a consistently European entity, unlike barbaric and Asiatic Muscovy. On the contrary, the implicit or explicit followers of the so-called West-Rusism,² i.e., those insisting on inherent ties between Belarus and Russia that supposedly fall within a single civilization, but still seeing Belarus as a separate national community, have never been called nationalists, which does not seem to make sense.

For a long time, Belarus was perceived by its neighbors, Russians and Poles, as a contested borderland – for a simple reason that Russian and Polish nationalisms have emerged earlier than Belarusian. Within that borderland, the ancestors of today’s Belarusians were a *demotic ethnies*,³ i.e., a predominantly peasant group without upper classes, which paid allegiance to Russian or Polish national causes, whereas the members of that demotic group itself used to identify as *tutejshiya*, that is, locals. Within the contested borderland, frequent changes in religious affiliation reflected the ebbs and flows of the perennial tug of culture war between Poland and Russia whereby Polish influence sustained itself even without a Polish state, non-existent from 1795 to 1919. Thus, from 1596 to 1838, most, up to 70%, of locals belonged to the Uniate or Greek Catholic Church that combined Orthodox liturgy with subordination to the Vatican – the consequence of the 1596 Union of Brest that itself resulted from political authority of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and from weakened ties with Muscovy. At the same time, landlords on Belarusian lands were for the most part Roman Catholics. Following the 1838 reunification of the Uniates with their parental Orthodox Church – as a result of renewed subordination to Moscow and ensuing Russia’s attempts to root out Polish influence in the wake of three uprisings (1794, 1830, and 1863), quite a few local Catholics switched to Orthodoxy. But during subsequent liberalization in the Russian Empire,

1 Smith 1999; Hroch 2000.

2 A theory, according to which Belarusians may be looked at as a separate ethnicity but only within the confines of the Russian world. One of the founders of this influential theory was Mikhail Koyalovich (1828 – 1891).

3 Smith 1999, 83.

following the 1905 Religious Tolerance Manifesto, many of those converts reverted to Catholicism.¹

It looks like up until the late 1920s, a niche for Belarusian nationalism that emerged at the very end of the 1800s was minuscule and fragile as “anything that used to be elevated above the illiterate peasant existence, be that church, school, or officialdom, automatically became either ‘Russian’ (and Orthodox) or ‘Polish’ (and Catholic).”² And that is despite the fact that folklore expeditions organized by the ideologues of West-Rusism had described what they saw as Belarusian ethnicity as early as the 1860s.³

In his 1922 tragicomedy *Tutejshiya* (Locals), the Belarusian poet and playwright Yanka Kupala ridiculed his main character Mikita Znosak for his proclivity to change his identity to adjust to whoever takes control of his homeland. When the Poles did, he would become Nikitsiusz Znosilowski, but when Russians did he would become Nikitii Znosilov. Two important characters of the play are two “scientists,” the Western one and the Eastern one. Both have local roots. But whereas the Western Scientist sees his native land as imperfect Poland, speaks Polish, and wants it to become impeccably Polish, the Eastern Scientist believes that Belarus is imperfect Russia and wants it to become impeccably Russian. The vicissitudes of Belarusian 20th century history, almost entirely shaped by forces external to Belarus, provided that “Western scientists” did not prevail.

The Belarusian Westernizers first caused a stir in 1918 and 1919 when the Belarusian People’s Republic (BPR) claimed limited sovereignty under the German military occupation. However, after the Bolsheviks rejected the BPR, Poland reemerged on the political map of Europe (1919), and the war broke out between it and Soviet Russia. The areas populated by Belarusians were then (in 1921) divided between Poland and Russia in the wake of that war. The BSSR was proclaimed in the eastern section of the “ethnographic Belarus.” In Poland, Belarusians were looked at as a nuisance possessing weak national feeling and destined to be Polonized within a couple of decades. A bitter legacy of Polish-Belarusian class antagonisms whereby Belarusians used to be peasants and Poles landlords exacerbated this attitude with a lasting memory of hurt feelings on the part of Belarusians.

Within the BSSR, the Belarusian Westernizers (a.k.a., nationalists) and the de facto followers of West-Rusism represented two mutually hostile groups. Both with local roots, they were trying to curry favor with the communist regime. Initially, the regime favored the nationalists. Three reasons seem to explain that counterintuitive and short-lived preference. First, Great Russian chauvinism had been given a bad name by Vladimir Lenin himself, and in the early 1920s, fighting it was still on the communist agenda. Second, in order to undo territorial losses, Moscow decided to cast the BSSR as the “true” Belarusian home (as opposed to western Belarus, where Belarusians suffered discrimination by the Poles). Last, but not least, religion was now considered the “opium of the people,” and West-Rusism had been leavened by the Russian Orthodox teachings. As a result, the Westernizers (a.k.a., nationalists) received official support and obtained leverage out of proportion to the size and grassroots influence of their

1 Терешкович 2009, 191–225.

2 Меёковская 2003, 28.

3 Булгаков 2006.

group. They even attracted their ideological brethren from Poland, who relocated to the BSSR, and together they launched the linguistic Belarusianization campaign as part of the Soviet *Korenizatsiya* (Indigenization) policy (1922-28) designed to nurture a bond between indigenous population of every Soviet republic and the Bolsheviks. So aggressively did local bureaucrats begin to implant the Belarusian language into public domain that the locals, on whose behalf this effort was ostensibly made, launched a grassroots resistance to it, especially in Mogilev and Gomel oblasts.¹

By the late 1920s, however, the backers of West-Rusism had regrouped. They could no longer appeal to the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church. Instead, they appealed to the Soviet state, this bastion of “proletarian internationalism,” and labeled Belarusian nationalists Polish spies. Although nationalists themselves had some success in casting their more numerous opponents as Russian chauvinists and closet Orthodox Church supporters,² the Soviet reincarnation of West-Rusism gained the upper hand. Many proponents of the Belarusian national idea were condemned as *natsdems* (national democrats, a code word for an ideological corruption of true Leninism) and were then exiled to the deep interior of Russia. Those arrested or exiled in 1930 and 1931 were, for the most part, subsequently released, but many were imprisoned yet again in 1937 and 1938. This time, Stalinist repressions were more ruthless, and most prisoners labeled as *natsdems* lost their lives.

When in 1941 Germany invaded the Soviet Union, they perceived Belarus as “nothing more than a vague geographical term.”³ By 1943, however, due to success of Moscow-led underground partisan movement, Germans decided to exploit Belarusian patriotism. After the war, precious little was heard about Belarusian Westernizers – up until Gorbachev’s Perestroika. The manuscript by Mikola Yarmalovich “In the Wake of a Myth,”⁴ maintaining that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was in fact a Belarusian State, circulated among Belarusian intellectuals since as early as the late 1960s⁵ but was published only in 1989.

The Westernizing impulses did not vanish, however, and the allure of high living standards in the “more civilized” West explains their tenacity, if only in part. Consequently, Belarus entered the 21st Century with two “national projects,” i.e., blueprints of Belarusian nation-building. The Westernizing project aims at (eventually) successful introduction of the Belarusian language into public domain and making it the only official language of Belarus. The project envisages Belarus as part of the collective West, with well-functioning market economy and social welfare state.

The Russo-centric project sees Belarus as a close ally of Russia and as a part of the Eurasian Union. It insists on Belarus’s belonging to the same “civilization” as its eastern neighbor. It recognizes Belarusian as a native language of Belarus but alongside Russian and does not seek enforced or consistent replacement of the latter by the former. Although each project is primarily about the future, it derives from and

1 Rudling 2014.

2 The ideological attack on Yevfimii Karski orchestrated by the editor of the Minsk-based daily *Zviazda* in 1927 is just one example of this “success.” Рублевская, Л., Скалабан, В. Околонаучный спор // Беларусь сегодня. 20 января 2006. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.sb.by/articles/okolonauchnyy-spor.html> (дата обращения: 21.02.2021).

3 Vakar 1956, 263.

4 Ермолович 1989.

5 20 лет назад погиб создатель романтического мифа о ВКЛ Микола Ермолович. Вспоминают друзья // Наша Ніва. 5 марта 2020. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=247225&lang=ru> (дата обращения: 21.02.2021).

is packaged with a corresponding version of national memory as a prerequisite for shaping that future.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Two National Projects

In today's Belarus, more than one-quarter of the population has lived their entire life under one and the same political leader, A. Lukashenka. He proved to be a divisive character. Attitudes toward him polarized Belarusians even more than the availability of two national projects. Minsk-based intellectuals never stopped passing caustic judgments about him. The gist of the matter is not just extraordinary longevity of his leadership but also his state farm (sovkhoz) origins and an autocratic style. Most middle-aged and elderly Belarusians, however, do remember what they voted for in the 1995 and 1996 referendums, held early on during A. Lukashenka's tenure.

A strength of the Russo-Centric project is its use of and commitment to the language of the staggering majority of Belarusians. In Belarus, most interpersonal, bureaucratic, scientific, and technological communication is in Russian, which effectively presents itself as a cultural norm. The Russo-Centric project is not nearly as elitist as the Westernizing/nativist one and is not detached from the larger society. A weakness of the project is a lack of its own consistent historical narrative going beyond 1917 and of a detailed blueprint for the future that would transcend the statement that Belarus should be a close ally of Russia but maintain its own statehood. Also missing is a convincing explanation of Belarusians' differences from Russians. In 2018, one of the public intellectuals of the Russo-centric project averred that "Belarus and Belarusian culture are simply a sustained regional version of Russian culture."¹ In many ways, the Russo-Centric national project remains a work in progress. Its activists seem to form a community when there is a shared sense of danger, but they become atomized when it recedes.

The most frequent criticisms levelled against the neo-Soviet strain of collective memory are that it is a product of indoctrination and that it pays inadequate attention to pre-Soviet history – as if Belarus did not exist before 1917. To some extent, both criticisms are valid. Secondary schooling in history is subject to government control. At the same time, though, that Belarus's pre-Soviet history is not easy to imagine and canonize has to do with the fact that ethnic-Belarusian self-awareness itself is a product of the 20th century. Even the self-name – Belarusians – was internalized by ordinary people of the area during the Soviet period. Therefore, if that time frame is seen as foundational by quite a few members of the national community, this is because it is. Moreover, the neo-Soviet strain of national memory does not dismiss the pre-Soviet history in principle. Rather, it gives little weight to it.

The Westernizing version is no younger than the neo-Soviet one. It can be traced to the survey of Belarusian history authored by Vatslav Lastouski's and published in 1910. By his own assertion, his survey was meant to help set Belarusians free from Russian oppression.² Later on, however, Westernizing narratives of Belarusian history were dealt a blow on two aforementioned occasions: in the 1930s and during the war.

¹ Шевцов 2018, 148.

² Ластоўскі 1993.

Although younger people and residents of Minsk are more avid Westernizers than the rest of Belarus's population, O. Manaev, the founder and head of Belarus's most reputable polling firm, ISEPS, has long noticed that growing older spells transition to more Russo-centric beliefs. Apparently, as Belarusian age, these beliefs come across to them as more organic and germane to everyday life in Belarus; so, they face a dilemma – “either adapt to them or leave the country.”¹

The principal components of the Westernizing version of Belarusian historical memory are as follows. Relations between Belarus and Russia are those between a colony and the metropolis; by all means, it is necessary to break the umbilical cord, which still connects Belarus with Russia. Belarus is a European community that should return to Europe. During the Second World War, two equally alien forces fought each other on the territory of Belarus – Nazism and Stalinism – and Belarusians fell victim to this clash. Post-war material progress tied Belarus to Russia even more. Meanwhile, Belarusians should shake off the layers of Soviet history and recall their European roots.

The strengths of the Westernizing project are its close-knit community united by commitment to the Belarusian language and an anticolonial liberation philosophy, including resistance to Russian cultural domination. In such a way, the community in question positions itself as nativist. Given the overall shortage of traits by which to distinguish Belarusians from Russians, language may indeed be seen as the most important agent of nation-building.

Some of the weaknesses of the Westernizing project are the extensions of its strengths. The project's community bears a resemblance to a sect detached from the country's mainstream society. If “nationalism is essentially the general imposition of high culture on society,”² then one may claim that the project executes this function well, considering the unfriendly political climate. Such media outlets as the *Arche* magazine, the *Nasha Niva* online newspaper, the *Belsat* digital TV channel, and especially the Belarusian Service of Radio Liberty set standards of high culture, Belarusian style. The problem of the nativist cultural elite, however, is that it is still deficient in terms of sheer numbers. To some extent, this is the case because the members of the elite are often perceived as arrogant; they demand an uncontested monopoly on Belarusian patriotism and tend to accuse all those who speak Russian or disagree with their perspective on history of having ulterior motives.

The legacy of unsuccessful Belarusianization campaigns also does not help the project, nor does the Westernizing community's blanket negativism toward the Soviet period, which is the longest period of Belarusians' nationally conscious existence to date.

Creole Nationalism as the Cheshire Cat

Two national projects are far apart and their sustained mutual detachment implies existence of two different communities albeit under a single collective name, Belarusians. But their equally mutual excommunication from Belarussianness risks undermining even a nominal unity, reflected by that name. Indeed, in most European countries, be that Poland, Russia, Germany or France, domestic political

1 Manaev 2011, 15–18. Manaev (Манаев) reiterated the same observation at the November 2019 convention of the Association for the Advancement of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, in San Francisco, while responding to a question by George Krol, the US ambassador to Belarus in 2003–2006.

2 Gellner 1983, 57.

arguments rarely, if ever, lead to casting doubt about someone's belonging to the same national community. "You are no Russian if you disagree with me," is not a commonly used formula. In Belarus, it is a norm, much like in neighboring Ukraine. If you feel a closeness to Russia, you are a sellout. Likewise, if you feel part of (Western) Europe, you are a sellout in the eyes of the people on the other side of the "barricade."

It is then nothing short of a paradox that in Belarus, elements of national consolidation (i.e., bridging the gap between two national projects and between two versions of collective memory) have been provided by the authoritarian political regime of A. Lukashenka. This is a paradox because this regime is as close to the Soviet incarnation of West-Rusism as it could be, sustaining domination of Russian in public domain and insisting on a neo-Soviet version of historical memory.

However, A. Lukashenka's regular squabbles with the Kremlin required some distancing from Russia. Going back to the September 2002 V. Putin's groundbreaking suggestion that for Belarus to enjoy domestic Russian oil prices, it ought to let its regions join Russia one by one, these squabbles took place on multiple occasions. Each time mutual tensions were on the rise, some rhetorical confirmation that though close to Russia, Belarus is no Russia at all was called for; and each time it was borrowed from the Westernizers' memory cache.

In such a way, the official version of Belarusian nationalism came to deviate from the purest brand of the neo-Soviet memorial cult. During the early years of the 21st Century, this deviation was for the time being bestowed its idiosyncratic name, "Creole nationalism." That label was borrowed from M. Ryabchuk, a Ukrainian philosopher who spent about ten years calling into question dichotomies like Russians/Ukrainians, Ukrainian speakers/Russian speakers, and nationally conscious/mankurty.¹ For M. Ryabchuk, Creoles were those Ukrainians who enthusiastically support Ukrainian statehood, yet speak Russian as their primary language and distance themselves from other sociocultural aspects of Ukrainianness.²

Arguably, the manifestations of official, a.k.a. Creole, nationalism culminated in the following three episodes.

1) March 25, 2018, public concert devoted to the centennial of the Belarusian People's Republic. While the open-air concert in the park attached to Minsk's Opera House was organized exclusively by the Belarusian Westernizers, a.k.a. opposition, the fact that the event was allowed by the authorities was a major deviation from the mantras held dear on the Russo-Centric side of the divide and in Russia itself.³

2) May 12, 2018, opening of the monument to Tadeusz Kosciuszko in Merechiovshchina, Brest Oblast, the place of his birth. Symbolically, both the official green-red and the now unofficial white-red-white flags of Belarus were fluttering next to each other at that ceremony.⁴

1 These are creatures whose historical memory was surgically removed from their brain; they are pictured by Chingiz Aitmatov in his 1980 hallmark novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*.

2 Рябчук 2000.

3 Grigory Ioffe, "Belarus's Freedom Day: Post-Celebration Anxieties," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 15, Issue: 56, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-freedom-day-post-celebration-anxieties/>.

4 Касперович, Л. «Асоба, якая аб'яднала ўсіх». В Беларусі открыли первый памятник Тадеушу Костюшко // Tut.by. 12 мая 2018. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://news.tut.by/culture/592411.html> (дата обращения: 21.02.2021).

3) November 22, 2019, reburial of the remains of Konstanty Kalinovsky in Vilnius, Lithuania, with the official Belarusian delegation headed by a vice-premier present at the event and delivering public remarks in honor of Kalinovsky.¹

Yet, there have always been some red lines that the so-called Creole nationalism never crossed. It seems that A. Lukashenka's 2004 speech at Brest University, though more than 16 years old, still provides good guidance in this regard.

"In contrast to Poland and the Baltic States, Belarus never – I dare say, never ever – has been part of Western culture and the Western way of life. Yes, we were subjected to the influence of Western culture within Rzeczpospolita and the GDL. That influence, however, was short-lived. They did not succeed in implanting the Western ways then, and they probably cannot succeed today... Yes, we were, are, and will be an inalienable part of pan-European civilization, which is a mosaic of different cultures. But to the Catholic-and-Protestant... civilization, Belarus and Belarusians, who are predominantly Orthodox and for centuries coexisted in the same political setting with Russia and Russians, are alien."²

It would then be safe to say that Creole nationalism has never risen to the level of two blueprints of Belarusian nation-building, i.e., Russo-Centric and Westernizing. Moreover, like the Cheshire cat, Creole nationalism suffers from a periodic disappearance of its body. In other words, its consolidating function has been in retreat each time the Westernizers managed to seriously challenge the Lukashenka regime.

The Lukashenka Regime and the Current Political Crisis

This author devoted a book-length monograph to the understanding of the A. Lukashenka regime in cultural and geopolitical context.³ Short of immersing into the particulars of that expose, it is worth mentioning that as time went by, however, the social compact between A. Lukashenka and a critical mass of Belarusians has waned. First, horizontal ties and self-organization have developed in society, in part due to its resistance to Lukashenka's autocratic style. Second, the social group demanding rational-legal legitimacy of leadership has grown in size. It has expanded due to three major reasons. By 2020, the proportion of Belarusians with higher education had almost doubled over the course of twenty years whereas the proportion of those with elementary education had reduced sevenfold.⁴ The proportion of the private sector in Belarusian labor force has been growing slowly but by now it has exceeded 45%. Finally, Belarusians have long been the world leaders in the number of Schengen

1 Касперович, Л. Тысячи людей, БЧБ-флаги, экс-глава Беларуси и президенты. Как прошло перезахоронение Калиновского // Tut.by. 22 ноября 2019. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://news.tut.by/culture/661979.html> (дата обращения: 21.02.2021).

2 Ioffe 2008, 92.

3 Ioffe 2014.

4 Юры Дракахруст, "Як змяніліся беларусы за 20 гадоў," Радыё Свабода, лістапад 27, 2020, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30972617.html>.

visas they received per 1000 population¹ and they have travelled to the countries of the European Union more frequently than citizens of any other post-Soviet state and thus exposed themselves to Western social practices.

These changes contributed to what most observers saw as the unusual scale of the protest movement that engulfed the country in 2020. Obviously, the movement was a response to domestic challenges such as A. Lukashenka's initial complacency about COVID-19 revealed in his several pronouncements, his sheer longevity at the helm of power, and all too glaring electoral fraud. However, except for COVID, which is just a recent phenomenon, similar challenges did not trigger this scale of public reaction in the past and therefore the significance of societal change cannot be overestimated.

For example, by most accounts, electoral outcomes were falsified on previous occasions, too, including in 2006, 2010, and 2015. Admittedly reliable surveys, however, suggested that in those years A. Lukashenka did win more than half of the vote anyway, but some 20% or so used to be added to his victorious outcome to create the impression of a landslide victory. Unlike on previous occasions, however, in 2020, A. Lukashenka's victory was in doubt, and available estimates do not dispel that doubt. This was A. Lukashenka's 26th year at the helm of power, and the societal change had reached a critical mass. Four months before the election, a survey by the Sociology Institute of the National Academy of Sciences revealed that in Minsk, A. Lukashenka's rating was 24%² and in Belarus at large 33%. The fact that two serious presidential hopefuls (V. Babariko and S. Tikhanovsky) were jailed and the third one (V. Tsepkalo) was forced to leave the country was difficult to put up with even for those politically passive. A primitive misogynist calculation that registering a housewife S. Tikhanovskaya instead of her jailed husband would both calm passions and not present any danger to the incumbent did misfire royally.

Just like on previous occasions, in 2020, the protest movement resorted to symbols associated with the Westernizing national project. Earlier, following the March 2006 presidential election, white-red-white flags were abundantly used; also, the entire October Square, where a short-lived tent camp was set up by the protesters, was referred to as Kalinovsky Square. In December 2010, when the crackdown on a protest rally was severe but the post-election rally itself was a one-time and one-place event, its participants used both white-red-white flags and the flags of the European Union.

In 2020, the white-red-white flag, however, gained significance beyond being just a Westernizing symbol. It became the number one symbol of protest against the Lukashenka regime so the major and heretofore unbeatable argument against this flag – that it was used by the Belarusian Nazi collaborators during World War 2 – faded into the background, at least in the opinion of the protesters themselves. It appeared that the flag in question was designed by the civil engineer Claudy Duzh-Doushevsky back in 1917 that is, long before the advent of Nazism, and became the official flag of the Belarusian People's Republic so as such the white-red-white flag is seemingly beyond reproach. Such a transformative change in the flag's meaning reflects the fact that the dichotomy 'protest movement – regime loyalists' does not quite coincide

1 Grigory Ioffe, "Making Sense of News Coming out of Belarus," Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume: 15, Issue: 124, September 7, 2018, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/making-sense-of-news-coming-out-of-belarus/>.

2 Институт социологии НАН: В апреле уровень доверия Лукашенко в Минске составлял 24% // Tut.by. 19 июня 2020. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://news.tut.by/economics/689489.html> (дата обращения: 21.02.2021).

with the dichotomy of the national projects. We will return to this growing mismatch in what follows.

In any case, the brutality of the August 2020 post-election crackdown on the post-election rally and utter mutual demonization of the regime-friendly and protest-prone parts of society implied a new and most consistent retreat of Creole nationalism and fading hope for consolidation of the Belarusian society.

Appeals to Consolidation and Divisions in Belarusian Society

Even before August 9 and its immediate aftermath, appeals to extend an olive branch to the "other side" fell on deaf ears. The "regime" or those acting on its behalf evidently believed that coopting some elements of the Westernizers' collective memory, appointing economic liberals to positions of power, and improving relationships with the West were more than enough to satisfy domestic critics. All the more so that the social base of the "regime" appeared to be alarmed even by the concessions of that magnitude. On the Westernizers' side, a suggestion that the schism in Belarusian society was dangerous, especially against the backdrop of Belarus-Russia integration roadmaps, was rejected apparently because of unrealistic assessment of the Westernizers' own strength, resolve, and social base.

Not to say that there were many attempts at reconciliation. The most consistent attempt of this kind was undertaken by Y. Preiherman who heads the Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations, a structure which is sustained simultaneously by Western, primarily German funding, active cooperation with Russian think tanks, and closeness to Belarus's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Y. Preiherman called upon the Belarusian opposition to cut back on acrimony toward the government and evince more tolerance and restraint.¹ Y. Preiherman's appeal elicited unusual resonance with the opposition-minded Belarusians. Almost all of them rejected that appeal.

If Y. Preiherman's appeal did not succeed, then the attempt by Y. Voskresensky fared even worse. It was undertaken in October 2020, following two months of street protests, more specifically, after A. Lukashenka paid an unexpected visit to the KGB detention center. Y. Voskresensky who was under arrest since August 14 as an active member of V. Babariko's electoral campaign, was released immediately following Lukashenka's October 11 visit and began to organize roundtable debates about changes in the Constitution. Almost nobody joined his initiative and he was branded a traitor to the protest movement.

Besides the aforementioned Y. Preiherman and Y. Voskresensky, there are precious few neutral observers of the showdown in Belarusian society. According to one of them, philosopher V. Bobrovich, associate professor at the Belarusian State University, "if everything that Voskresensky is doing and saying now is caused solely by fear and a desire to adapt to the situation, then I can only express compassion. But if he does all of this consciously and out of conviction, then it is admirable. Not everyone is able to go against their milieu and not everyone is able to understand the significance of a dialogue with the authorities during this period."²

1 "Прэйгерман: Беларуская дзяржаўнасць стаіць перад сур'ёзным выпрабаваннем," Наша Ніва, April 14, 2020, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=249952>.

2 Бобровиц, В. Как я отношусь к Воскресенскому // Facebook. 21 октября 2020. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://m.facebook.com/groups/1518200798509629/permalink/2694343197562044> (дата обращения: 21.02.2021).

In the context of Belarusian nationalism, perhaps even more suggestive was a replica by the blogger K. Ozimko based in Brest. It was to one of S. Tikhonovskaya's pronouncements at the December 16, 2020, Sakharov Prize award ceremony. A former presidential hopeful exiled to Lithuania, S. Tikhonovskaya became a Cinderella-like darling of European dignitaries who are fond of hobnobbing with her and of professing her moral stature and ostensibly pending leadership of Belarus. As quoted by *Belorusskie Novosti*, S. Tikhonovskaya declared that "we stood for our freedom, dignity and national identity, but we are faced with the brutal nature of the regime."¹

"I have never heard from those of my acquaintances who joined the protests that they went out to fight for 'national identity' wrote K. Ozimko. "Even those with white-red-white flags use them simply as a symbol of protest and not out of national revival motives. People are primarily concerned with issues of political, legal and socio-economic nature. And the fact that 'Belarusians rebelled because of national identity distorts reality. But this is a question for S. Tikhonovskaya's speechwriters, not for herself. The team that works with her is [...] experienced in politics and understands what exactly Europeans might like. Theses about national identity of Belarusians will be highly appreciated there. This is a geopolitical tool to distance the Belarusian population from the Russians as much as possible. In fact, the leaders of the protest movement are guided by their own interests and live in their own reality. Whereas ordinary protesters who sincerely want changes in the country (not towards nationalism, but towards freedom, including freedom of choice of language, identity and views) live – in their own."

The Vitebsk-based ardently Russophile activist E. Mirsalimova observed in her Facebook account that now it is too late to explain to Belarusian college students that "the white-red-white flag is exclusively a symbol of traitors, fascist accomplices who killed and tortured Soviet people during the Great Patriotic War. This explaining was due some ten years ago." Today these people are grownups and they are brought up by the secondary school system that indoctrinated them "on the opposition of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to Moscow, on the myths about the Polish heroes Kosciuszko and Kalinovsky posing as Belarusian, on the distortion of the history of the Great Patriotic War ('this is not our wars'), on the ban of the Immortal Regiment, on the slow and gradual, but total de-Russification and national embroidery, on the 'multi-vector' and in fact, anti-Russian rhetoric, and that was all done under total dominance of pro-Western – 'educational and cultural' and allegedly non-political NGOs and against the backdrop of internal political, social and economic crises, and elections conducted with gross violations."²

A similar framing of the ongoing political crisis in Belarus as a struggle for the soul of Belarusian nation occurs in the West. Here are the musings that *The Economist* posted after interviewing Ms. S. Tikhonovskaya in December 2020.³ A son of V. Viachorka, a former leader of the Belarusian Popular Front, F. Viachorka, mentioned by *The Economist*, is a leading member of S. Tikhonovskaya's team of advisors. This team

1 Коровенкова, Т. Светлана Тихановская: без свободной Беларуси Европа тоже не до конца свободна // Белорусские новости. 16 декабря 2020. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://naviny.media/article/20201216/1608125034-svetlana-tikhonovskaya-bez-svobodnoy-belarusi-evropa-tozhe-ne-do-konca> (дата обращения: 21.02.2021).

2 Elvira Mirsalimova, Facebook, January 3, 2020, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100020986359715>.

3 "An interview with Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, Belarus's leader in exile," *The Economist*, December 3, 2020, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/12/05/an-interview-with-svetlana-tikhonovskaya-belaruss-leader-in-exile>.

consists almost entirely of the old Belarusian opposition. Its Westernizing message never gained popularity in Belarus, in part due to public personae of the messengers engaged in client-patron relations with their European and American sponsors and not accountable to ordinary Belarusians.

Importantly, when the protests just started and for at least three months thereafter, one of the most frequently reported features of the protest movement was a lack of “geopolitical leaning,” that is, leaning to the West at the expense of Russia. Moreover, some Western analysts described all three major contesters of Belarusian presidency (V. Babariko, V. Tsepkalo and S. Tikhanovsky) as Kremlin’s creatures.¹ Some surveys revealed that 60% of Belarus’s urban population want Belarus to be a member of the Russia-centered military alliance, Collective Security Treaty Organization; this willingness is shared by 48% of those sympathetic to the protest movement.²

It is all the more remarkable that by the late autumn of 2020, the procrustean bed of two projects of nation-building and their mutual rivalry had fully reappeared as the lens through which both Russian and Russia-leaning commentators, on the one hand, and Western pundits, on the other, see the political crisis in Belarus. Whereas the exiled part of the protest movement raises the issue of reclaiming true European Belarus, their nemeses with increasing frequency talk about cementing ties with Russia and occasionally even about the unification of two countries.

Predictably, most active on both sides are converts, i.e., those who changed teams either initially supporting A. Lukashenka and then switching to the opposition (like A. Feduta) or vice versa, like A. Dzermant. A convert to the “regime’s” side, A. Dzermant came up with a candid replica to S. Kurginyan who called for the unification of Russia and Belarus at all costs. Whereas to A. Dzermant, this idea is worth discussing, he harbors a suggestive misgiving. To him, a solid part of Russia’s entrepreneurial class, including oligarchs, is wedded to the idea of becoming a part of the collective West. So, in case of unification, two “fifth columns,” that of Russia and that of Belarus, may collude and sell the entire unified Russia-Belarus entity out to the West.

Discussion

A bitter societal split is an existential problem of Belarus. Unlike Russia that in Huntington’s terms is a torn country, Belarus is rather cleft than torn. “Torn” is an expression of belonging largely to one civilization whereby a certain group (Russian Westernizers in this case) would like to make the country a part of the other. In contrast, “cleft” is an expression of parts of one country belonging to different civilizations to begin with. While the spatial pattern of ostensibly civilizational divide in Belarus is not nearly as vivid as in Ukraine (as neither the Grodno Oblast nor the former *Wilenski kraj* (now straddling the border between Belarus and Lithuania) are quite equivalent to Ukrainian Galicia, the hotbed of Ukrainian nationalism, the western part of Belarus has contributed tremendously to migration-induced growth of Minsk, of its entrepreneurial class, and therefore indirectly, to the protest potential of the capital

1 Vlad Socor, “A Belarusian Revolution? What Kind?” Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume: 17, Issue: 156, November 4, 2020, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/a-belarusian-revolution-what-kind-part-two/>.

2 Юры Дракахруст, “Навошта беларусам Расея? Тлумачаць Баграцоў, Вячорка, Котаў і Ляшчэня,” Радыё Свабода, сеньжань 28, 2020, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31023245.html>.

city's population. That is primarily because the demographic erosion of west-Belarusian countryside through outmigration occurred more than a couple of decades later than in Belarus's east so until recently the western part of Belarus was still in possession of a large pool of prospective migrants whereas the eastern part was not.

Given Belarus's modest population size of 9.4 million people and the degree of its dependency on Russia, not just economic dependency but also deriving from existence in the Russia-centered information space, Belarus divided against itself appears to be vulnerable as a state. The April 2020 survey conducted by the Belarusian Analytic Workroom headed by A. Vardomatsky exposed one facet of this vulnerability. When asked whether they were ready "to preserve the sovereignty of Belarus even at the cost of lowering the living standards of citizens," only 24.9% of respondents answered positively. However, maintaining the standard of living even at the cost of giving up sovereignty was supported by 51.6%. As such, only a quarter of Belarusians consider sovereignty an unconditional value worthy of defending.¹ This result echoes those drawn from surveys in 2010 and 2013² and flies in the face of claims by the protest movement sympathizers that they represent the entire Belarusian society or much of it.

Belarus's societal split has two dimensions: a mutual opposition of two largely antagonistic projects of Belarusian nationhood, on the one hand, and a conflict between A. Lukashenka loyalists and the middle-class protest movement, on the other. The latter dimension smacks of a broader-based phenomenon whereas the former is a manifestation of high culture, at least nominally. While these aspects of societal division do not exactly match, there is a tendency to couch the political crisis in nationalist terms. As a result, there is currently no shortage of attempts to describe self-organization and coordination of the protest movement as the eventual arrival of the Belarusian nation-building's mature stage.

Thus, the popular blogger I. Tyshkevich observes that the current crisis makes Belarusians face the question, who we are and why we live together on a common land. I. Tyshkevich thinks nation-building implies different social groups finding common language and it is still a work in progress.³

"A nation is sometimes defined as a community of people capable of collective, purposeful, spontaneous action," opines the leading Belarusian ethnographer P. Tereshkovich. "These are actions that do not require a formal leader, management, order or even appeal. The year of 2020 in Belarus gives many corresponding examples, but personally, I was most impressed by the attitude of people to the official celebration of July 3 – almost nobody celebrated... There were no calls for that. It is an image of a common collective feeling and understanding of the moment. For a long time, Belarusians had a negative self-perception, a stable negative auto-stereotype. Such a phenomenon, the so-called stigmatization, is quite widespread among the Balkan peoples, such as 'there has never been happiness on this land and

1 «Оплот независимости – это 25–28% белорусского населения». Социологи провели исследование о суверенитете // Наша Ніва. 24 июля 2020. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=255834&lang=ru> (дата обращения: 21.04.2021).

2 Мельянцева, Д., Артеменко, Е. Геополитические предпочтения белорусов: слишком прагматичная нация? // The Baltic Course. 19 апреля 2013. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: http://www.baltic-course.com/rus/_analytics/?doc=73630 (дата обращения: 21.04.2021).

3 Ihar Tyshkevich, "Навагодняе (разважаньні, віншаваньні з нагоды году Зубра)," Youtube, January 1, 2021, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBH8ENvBp3I>.

there won't be because we are in the Balkans.' The year of 2020 for Belarusians was a step towards overcoming negativism. We even engaged in self-admiration – we are 'incredible.'"¹

A more nationalist-prone historian A. Pashkevich discerns the same phenomenon but bemoans the fact that Belarusian nation-building has rather taken civil than ethnic path. This is because the spread of the Belarusian language leaves much to be desired.²

While these observations are not misplaced, their attendant problem lies in the fact that those not partaking in the protest movement – and they make up a significant part of Belarusians – are not taken into consideration. How significant is their proportion is a matter of debate, particularly in the absence of reliable surveys. But observations of O. Manaev, a reputable sociologist who conducted national surveys in Belarus on a quarterly basis from the early 1990s to the autumn of 2016, when the government effectively eliminated his polling firm, the share of regime loyalists is by no means smaller than one-third of adult Belarusians.³

To be sure, since 2016, A. Lukashenka's base has most probably contracted both at the expense of utmost Russophiles like E. Mirsalimova and of moderate Westernizers, who like the Minsk tour guide S. Kudziakin used to see A. Lukashenka as a "necessary evil," as nobody else, in his opinion, could reliably keep Russia at bay, but who changed his mind following the last elections.⁴ How significant this contraction has been is, again, a moot point. As recently as 2018, when asked to rank the importance of several values, 45.3% of Belarusians assigned priority to maintaining order in the nation; 28.2% emphasized fighting rising prices; whereas only 19.6 % prioritized "giving people more say," and only 6.9 % claimed protecting freedom of speech is most important.⁵ While the events of 2020 may have altered these preferences, their truly revolutionary rearrangement appears unlikely, which suggests that maintaining order may still be the utmost preference of quite a few people.

The necessity of national consolidation is occasionally recognized on both sides of the divide as was evidenced by repeated pronouncements by Y. Preiherman and in fact by A. Lukashenka himself who included an appeal to national unity in his most recent New Year address.⁶ None of these appeals, however, has been taken seriously. Especially given that each side of the divide, the A. Lukashenka loyalists and the protest movement, is engaged in what the philosopher V. Bobrovich calls "appropriation of the people,"⁷ implying that it speaks for the entire society and considers its vis-à-vis to be traitors not worthy of taking into consideration.

1 Дзьмітры Гурневіч, "Ці адбылося ў 2020 дафармаваньне беларускай нацыі? Меркаваньні гісторыкаў," Радые Свабода, сеньжань 31, 2020, accessed April 4, 2021, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31028391.html>.

2 Ibid.

3 Социолог: 50% плюс 1 голос могли не набрать и Лукашенко, и Тихановская // Deutsche Welle. 4 октября 2020. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/oleg-manaev-501-golos-mogli-ne-nabrat-ni-lukashenko-ni-tihanovskaja/a-55131952> (дата обращения: 21.04.2021).

4 Siarzhuk Kudziakin, Facebook, January 1, 2021, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/MindouhCahlanski>.

5 Белорусы за 10 лет стали более счастливыми, но менее доверчивыми – социолог о результатах Всемирного исследования ценностей // SmartPress. 14 декабря 2020. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: https://smartpress.by/news/2834/?fbclid=IwAR01PgWj9vwlC60_0ajSaDPjOmyVfUKYQp81YjXsQc5BAdG5Sl3HYVSHqMk (дата обращения: 21.04.2021).

6 Поздравление Александра Лукашенко с Новым годом – 2021 // Sputnik.by. 1 января 2021. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://sputnik.by/society/20210101/1046536310/Pozdravlenie-Aleksandra-Lukashenko-s-Novym-godom-2021.html> (дата обращения: 06.05.2021).

7 Viacheslav Bobrovich, Facebook, January 2, 2021, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://m.facebook.com/vbobrovich>.

Still, recognizing and somehow addressing the problem of split identity cannot be swept under the rug indefinitely. Arguably, it jeopardizes Belarus's existence as a sovereign nation much more than economic and political dependency on external centers of power.

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Author

Grigory Ioffe,

Professor of Human Geography, Radford University,
801, East Main Street, Radford, Virginia, VA 24142, USA.

ORCID: 0000-0002-2455-963X

e-mail: gioffe@radford.edu

Additional information

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Белорусский национализм: проблемы и достижения

АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье рассмотрен феномен белорусского национализма. Белоруссия – страна с размытой национальной идентичностью, которая (возможно только пока) не до конца разорвала родственные связи с Россией. Согласно проведенному в апреле 2020 г. национальному репрезентативному исследованию, лишь 25% белорусов предпочли бы сохранить государственность и национальный суверенитет Белоруссии даже при падении уровня жизни, в то время как 52% согласились бы на ограничение суверенитета в обмен на сохранение или улучшение уровня жизни. Этот «секрет» белорусской государственности имеет далеко идущие последствия, которые не ограничиваются экономической зависимостью от Восточного соседа.

В прошлом Белоруссия была пространством соперничества между русскими и поляками. Сегодня это страна с двумя разными историческими нарративами и планами национального строительства, которые противоречат друг другу с момента зарождения белорусского национального движения. В то время как неосоветский/русоцентричный нарратив стал основной идеей для большинства белорусов, западнцентричный нарратив пережил череду неудач и получил развитие только в постперестроечный период. В статье анализируются преимущества и недостатки двух нарративов, а также попытки преодолеть разрыв между ними. Отмечается, что в белорусском обществе существует два разных раскола: между вышеупомянутыми проектами национального строительства, а также между сторонниками Лукашенко и его критиками. Фракции по разные стороны этих расколов не всегда совпадают, однако в последнее время наблюдается тенденция описывать затянувшийся белорусский политический кризис через призму национализма. В статье подчеркивается, что отсутствие устойчивой белорусской национальной идентичности представляет экзистенциальную угрозу для белорусской государственности.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

белорусский национализм, Лукашенко, национальная идентичность, историческая память

Сведения об авторе

Григорий Иоффе,

профессор социально-экономической географии, Рэдфордский университет,
США, VA 24142, Вирджиния, Рэдфорд, ул. Ист Мэйн, 801.

ORCID: 0000-0002-2455-963X

e-mail: gioffe@radford.edu

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