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NATIONAL IDENTITY AS A NECESSITY FOR DEMOCRACY

In the whole context of the Belarusian issue, the question of national identity is sometimes forgotten. Sociological researches show that 75 percent of Belarusians geopolitically gravitate towards Russia, 80 percent do not see Russia as the foreign state and only one fifth of them in cultural terms see Russia as "the other". Thus, the main question arises – what are the main reasons for this situation? Most experts argue that this is the achievement of the regime because Lukashenka successfully managed to transform the quite weak Belarusian national identity into a constructed post-Soviet pseudo-identity substitute. But is it really just so?

In the first article Andrei Kazakevich tries to show that the problem of identity in Belarus is not unique in the CEE region if one agreed that the identity as such is not a constant. However, the influence of the regime makes the Belarus case different from the others. Author states that there are two main factors in the issue of

Belarusian identity: strong layer of Sovietism, supported by the government and a huge cultural and political influence of Russia. Showing the link between identity and democratization the author shows that de-Sovietization and de-Russification of Belarus culture and politics are necessary.

The second article by Vadim Vileita also links the process of democratization to the identity issue. However, the author argues that popular division between pro-European and pro-Russian Belarusians does not show the whole picture. He uses the concept of "threefold identity" and briefly describes all of them: ethno-centric, soviet and pragmatic Belarusians. The alliance of the latter two has been ruling the country since the beginning of the regime. So we may only speculate if the current minority with a strong national identity will grow or shrink in the near future and what will it mean to the future of Belarus.

Vytautas Keršanskas, Editor

THE BELARUSIAN IDENTITY AND THE PROBLEM OF DEMOCRACY

Andrei Kazakevich

In discussions about the problems of democracy, many theorists frequently refer to the concept of identity and its influence on societal development, with considerable amount of approaches and theories available in this field. Despite a significant reevaluation of the key terms and categories during the last century, as nearly-racial concepts of the "national spirit" and "mentality" have been replaced by flexible and constructible ideas of "identity", the issue of measuring impacts of cultural and historical factors on the political development is persisting.

Given the potential of identity discussions for rapid politicization and integration into political strategies, even examination of simple cases

provide grounds for multiple interpretations, with often mutually exclusive conclusions. Rather than an exception, the situation in Belarus is actually a prominent illustration of how stereotypes and short-term political goals influence the identity problems.

Stereotypes are really abundant in this sphere. Peculiarities of the Belarusian identity and its implications for the political development are mentioned by a majority of authors; however, they end up with antipodal explanations. To complicate the situation even more, discussions are frequently dominated by a mixture of research findings, ideological writings, opinions of individuals and extravagancies of some intellectuals, something often resulting in comic situations.

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E.g., it came into fashion in mid-2000s to discuss “the nonexistence of the Belarusian nation” in the Belarusian public space. This discussion was used by different actors for different goals, with Belarusian intellectuals seeking to find a new topic for theoretical provocation / contemplation, political forces trying to mobilize their supporters or call for action, while pro-Russian players picked up the idea to prove the pointlessness of the Belarusian statehood. However, it was no-one’s objective to reflect the actual situation in the country. Any sociological research, including the population census, has never proved the idea of the “non-existent” Belarusian nation; on the contrary, they documented a sustainable growth of the Belarusian identity.

Ironically, some foreign researchers believed these extravagancies actually meant business, took them seriously and reproduced in their publications. One should admit that Belarus is not a well-known country for English-speaking scholars, leaving lots of unrestricted space for speculations and inventions. However, they are often groundless, especially if we approach Belarus in the comparative perspective of the region of the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Discussions on the “incomplete”, “non-consolidated” and “fragmentary” Belarusian national identity are taking the same track, with the abovementioned reasons often used as an explanation of the authoritarian model and the rejection of democracy. Naturally, accuracy of concepts is crucial for the discussion. What is “incomplete”? If by this we mean an ongoing alteration of the concept of their history and national culture, then this is typical for all the CEE nations. Almost all nations here have reinterpreted their national identity during the last twenty years in a certain degree, as the political elements were strengthened and the ethnic ones downplayed. The identity was re-articulated significantly in Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovakia, Ukraine, Moldova, etc. Belarus is by far not an exception on this background. Moreover, it is also common for the ‘old’ nations to readdress their identities, especially as a result of changing attitudes towards minorities and migrants, suffice it to recall the changing image of a ‘Frenchman’ since the World War II.

The heterogeneity of the Belarusian identity, e.g., in terms of the “Soviet” vs. “nation-centered” understanding of the history and culture, is far from being exceptional. First, such a heterogeneity is, in a way, normal; the understanding of the ‘U.S.’ by a white Republican and an African American Democrat can differ radically, too. Second, the distance between the competing identities is a way shorter in Belarus than, e.g., in Ukraine. Given the difficulties of shaping the political nation in Latvia, Estonia,

and even Lithuania (the integration of the Polish minority), the heterogeneity of the Belarusian case is neither unique, nor radical.

The core of the subject

Coming back to the issue of the link between the identity and the political development in Belarus, one cannot find strong arguments for a lack of a consolidated nation as a reason behind the dictatorship. It is true that some identity problems exist. However, rather than a lack, completeness or consolidation of the identity, which is, in our opinion, not an issue since long ago, these are the problems of the identity content and meanings. The problem is that, constantly re-vitalized, stimulated and promoted by the authorities, certain aspects of the identity are playing against the democratic and European trends. In most cases, it is done by the government on purpose.

The history offers numerous ways to manipulate identities. It is also true that the history of any nation contains both democratic and non-democratic elements. What are the elements of the identity that play against the democratization in Belarus? There are two major problems behind it: first, a very strong layer of Sovietism which is being supported and cultivated by the Belarusian government since mid-90s (and also by Russia, since 2000s); second, the factor of the cultural and political influence of Russia, something that neutralizes the main motivation for democratization in our region: the Eurointegration and the geopolitical balancing.

These aspects are what really makes Belarus very different from other countries; the abovementioned specific features can also serve a ground for a long-standing Belarusian authoritarianism.

Contrary to the majority of the neighboring states, the historic and identity policies of the Belarusian government were positive rather than critical about the heritage of the USSR/BSSR. Significant funds and administrative efforts have been and are still invested in it.

The main elements of the Soviet heritage that oppose the democratic trends are: 1) mistrust in democratic procedures, elections and political competition; 2) the justification of the state domination in a range of spheres; 3) suspicious / hostile attitude towards the West.

Elections were a formality rather than a mechanism of government change in Soviet times. The concept is very much in line with the interests of the existing authoritarian system which is doing everything to uphold it. It goes together with a lack of transparency in politics, centralization

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and tough treatment of political rivals. It is also a persistent strategy of the authorities to outline a need for a strong and active government. The image of the Soviet government, as a certain ideal which has been destroyed by domestic and external enemies, is still an important component of the strategy.

The foreign policy connotations of the Soviet heritage serve as a basis for a persistent anti-Western rhetoric of the government. Though the image of the West is non-uniform in Belarus, the government is consistent in stressing the aspects of aggressiveness, interference in domestic affairs, and potential military threat. In general, it looks rather natural, given the political isolation of Belarus after 1996.

All the above-mentioned identity components are quite strongly consolidated in minds of a significant share of the country's population and backed by the state machinery. However, all these mental structures are accompanied by contradicting concepts. Skepticism about democracy is combined with a wish to have "people's power"; the etatism goes hand in hand with a mistrust in state institutions, etc.

Nonetheless, the problem stays there, because, with Soviet elements kept and even reinforced as a part of the national identity by the informational and cultural policies, it becomes harder for the population to embrace democratic and European values.

Russification and the Russian influence

Quite a complicated and complex phenomenon, the Russian factor constitutes a structural problem for democratization.

It has been well described in many books that the main motive of democratization for the CEE countries (and also many other regions) was the Westernization and Europeanization as well as geopolitical balancing, with an attempt to counterbalance Russia for our region. It was a decisive motivation for nearly all countries of the region, be it Turkey or Georgia, Serbia or Ukraine. However, as a result of deep Russification and a foreign policy orientation of the government towards Russia, this key motivation hardly worked for Belarus. The situation in Russia is also an important factor in this regard, since it has digressed from the democratic development after the beginning of 2000s.

Apart from the Russian domination in foreign policies, given the isolation of Belarus, the Russification is overwhelming in culture and language spheres since 1995; only as late as in the end of the last decade have some signs of changing policies appeared in this field. Rus-

sia is maintaining control over the mainstream mass culture and information flows in Belarus. The preservation of Russification in the Belarusian identity is strengthening anti-Western aspirations. It also discourages Belarus from geopolitical balancing and a need to consistently articulate its national interests.

Some conclusions

Regardless of numerous speculations about the Belarusian national identity and their popularity in the intellectual and analytical community, there are no empirical data to claim for its fragmented or non-consolidated nature. Naturally, the national identity is heterogeneous and changing. However, the degree of its heterogeneity and variability is hardly a factor for the population's political preferences. It is not likely that the heterogeneity in itself is a reason behind the existence of the authoritarian regime, as in other countries, like Ukraine or Latvia, such a heterogeneity results in a totally different outcome.

The essence of the identity is much more important, as a system of perceptions, images, values and understandings about the national history and culture. During the last 18 years, the Belarusian authorities pursued their own political interests by stimulating anti-democratic and anti-European components of the Belarusian identity.

Investing considerable funds and administrative resources into the promotion of a positive attitude towards the Soviet experience is an outstanding example. In particular, suspiciousness on Western democracy and political competition has been consistently stimulated, as well as a decisive role of government in many spheres of the society and mistrust in the Western community and its requirements, often in a form of persistent anti-Western rhetoric.

The above-noted effect is also enhanced by all forms of Russification. Along with the Russification of language, it applies to the dominance of the Russian mass culture, informational resources, political ideas etc., though this process was not unidirectional. As a whole, the Russification has contributed to the reinforcement of mistrust in the West and the loss of a need for geopolitical balancing or cooperation with the West as a democratization stimulus.

Naturally, different scenarios are available for the democratization and the Europeanization of Belarus. What we find necessary to ensure the sustainability of this process is the cultural and political de-Sovietization and de-Russification in a broad meaning.

A popular model of “two Belaruses” - the one pro-Western, pro-democratic and Belarussian-speaking, and another one, pro-Russian, pro-autocratic and Russian-speaking - is an oversimplification.

Since the beginning of Lukashenka's rule, he has been constructing the identity of the new Belarus on the old Soviet identity, whereas Belarussians are “the (younger) brothers” of Russians and their language is by far not central for the national self-perception.

THE IDENTITY OF THE BELARUSSIAN STATE: A NEVER-ENDING PROCESS?

Vadim Vileita

To briefly define the range of problems of the Belarussian identity is almost a mission impossible. One can be interested in Belarus for years and decades, but still never find a common language on Belarus with others, just because they can hardly agree *which* Belarus they actually bear in mind when discussing it.

A popular model of “two Belaruses” - the one pro-Western, pro-democratic and Belarussian-speaking, and another one, pro-Russian, pro-autocratic and Russian-speaking - is an oversimplification. Suitable for political manifestos, it fails to explain lots of aspects of the Belarussian self-perception.

The system of “threefold identity” looks like a more realistic alternative¹. It is true that, though being a state with a rather weak ethnic identity, Belarus still has a considerable segment of population which sticks to the ideas of the classical nation-state with Belarussian as the only official language and the symbols of the old Grand Duchy of Lithuania as its state symbols. These are ideas of predominantly well-educated people who, logically, live in cities and use only pure Russian in public, just because Russian is the language of cities in Belarus. People who do not use Russian in Minsk or Hrodna risk becoming targets for permanent attention, either positive or negative one. These people are, as a rule, in the opposition to the existing identity system of Belarus, but they feel a marginal minority, so they opt for mimicry, knowing that minorities are not respected in this country. So, this is the “**hiding ethno-centric Belarus**”, or the “Russian-speaking nationalism of Belarus”, described by some authors.

However, there is another (and bigger) share of Belarussians not attracted by the dream about Belarus as a European nation-state. These can be divided in two groups - ‘pragmatic Belarus’ and Soviet-oriented, predominantly rural ‘Byelorussia’. The alliance of these two groups has actually been ruling the state since 1994, effectively marginalizing the ethno-centrists.

¹ The model of ‘threefold’ Belarussian identity has been in-depth described and justified at the author's bachelor paper (2005), based on the polling data of the Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies (Belarus-Lithuania).

Since the beginning of Lukashenka's rule, he has been constructing the identity of the new Belarus on the old Soviet identity, whereas Belarussians are “the (younger) brothers” of Russians and their language is by far not central for the national self-perception. According to this identity, Belarussians constitute a branch of an older Orthodox Russian nation. The Soviet doctrine formally stresses Belarussians are ‘equal’ to Russians, and this is what serves an argument for their claims for ‘equality’ in integration with Moscow. But Russia is still essential for this kind of identity. Notably, supporters of this theory tend to be people of older age. Many of them live in villages and towns, but even those living in cities are often not very good in Russian pronunciation, just like many Belarussians of older generation, including Lukashenka himself, originating from rural areas or having no higher education. So, this is a paradox of the “**Soviet Belarussians**”: they do not respect their native tongue, but their Russian is also quite poor.

For a share of the population, arguably the largest one, the issues of language and identity are of no interest at all. They tend to live in a situation as it is, with Belarus being quasi-independent on Russia, however, staying deeply integrated with the former imperial power culturally, linguistically and economically. This is how they see their identity: we are very similar to Russians, but we have our own state - so let's get the best out of it. **Pragmatic Belarussians** treat the state as an opportunity for welfare rather than an identity-based entity. Being pragmatic and free of ideologies, they find no problem in being both pro-European and pro-Russian simultaneously. They might consider themselves Belarussians, but they hate the “nationalists”, so when they hear someone speaking Belarussian, they might burst out: “Oh no, Belarussians again. So funny. I hate them” (rather than a personal remark, this is a famous quotation from Viktoryia Papova, the editor of the “Culture” (sic!) section of the leading state newspaper “Belarus Segodnia/Sovetskaya Belorussiya”, recorded on phone by another journalist).

Given the depth of the divisions and a lack of will to bridge the gaps, the Belarussian identity should be considered far from consolidated and highly unlikely to reach the point of consolidation under the current regime, despite

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the dictator's efforts. For this regime, the identity issues proved irresolvable. However, they are crucial to invest in for Belarus to achieve the status of a contemporary European nation. With the age of ethnocentric nationalism over throughout Europe, to be a democracy Belarus still needs a clear identity model of its own

statehood, should it be a nation-state or some more sophisticated consensus models. So far, Belarus is a terra incognita even for its own inhabitants who are lingering in a post-colonial limbo, with numerous conflicts in the society glimmering on and never addressed.



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