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MAIDAN IN BELARUS: UNWANTED BY ALL SIDES

There is general consensus that the success of the so-called 'little green men' in eastern Ukraine significantly depended on how strong the identity of the local population was. The region, which has been torn by complex historical events over the past decades, lived in the mode of a post-Soviet, but undecided national identity. The Kremlin took advantage of it causing unrests and facing no resistance from the local population.

Although there have been a lot of discussions concerning the Belarusian national identity, so far this topic has been associated with the opposition forces or individual interests of certain groups. Therefore, the annual speech of Aliaksandr Lukashenka at the end of last year surprised many, because for the first time in a long time it was made in Belarusian rather than in Russian. Does this mean that the Belarusian language, culture and national identity are making a comeback in public life? Could this help to prevent from similar unrests in Belarus?

This topic will be explored in this issue of the Bell.

In the first article Vadzim Mazheika provides sociological figures, which demonstrate that the Belarusian society does not want unrests in the country, therefore it has a negative view of the Maidan. He distinguishes two directions of 'Belarusianisation': traditional bottom-up and intensifying government approach in order to promote top-down formation of one's own unique identity, distinct from the Russian identity.

In the second article Yauhen Krasulin claims that Lukashenka reflects the Soviet identity profile, therefore he has rejected the need to restore the Belarusian identity. Realising that currently the nation must be united to help protect against external forces, he is strengthening the nationalist component. However, the author questions whether in an emergency situation this would help him retain power.

Vytautas Keršanskas, Editor

POST-MAIDAN BELARUS: DEMAND FOR STABILITY AND MORE BELARUSIANNES

Vadim Mojeiko

The sociological background: a demand for stability and the influence of the Russian propaganda

Findings of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) confirm that Belarusians tend to share Russian views on events in Ukraine. The fact that Russian TVs broadcast throughout Belarus while there is no Ukrainian TV seen in Belarus is probably one of key reasons.

Statistics of the Belarusian public opinion about Euromaidan and the resignation of Yanukovich are very illustrative. According to the poll in June, only 23.2 per cent of Belarusians were positive about it against 63.2 per cent negative. 50.9 per cent consider the new Ukrainian government 'fascist', and 15 per cent do not think that Petro Poroshenko is a legitimate president of Ukraine.

Opinions about Crimea demonstrate a similar trend, with 62.2 per cent seeing the situation as a "regain of old Russian territories to reestablish the historical justice" and just 26.9 per cent as an "imperialistic annexation or occupation". The same applies to developments in southeast of Ukraine: 65.5 per cent of Belarusians call them "a popular uprising against the illegitimate government", 54.1 per cent do not agree with labelling protesters as "terrorists".

Geopolitical preferences followed suit: asked about their choice at a hypothetical referendum between integration with Russia or the EU, Belarusians used to be more pro-EU since September 2012, but Russia took a broad lead in March 2014, as shown on the chart (page 2).

The situation became more balanced in the end of 2014, but Russia still prevailed with 44.9 vs. 34.2 per cent. Other indicators also saw a certain

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decline of pro-Russian views, but the overall attitude of Belarusians stays unchanged.

With these opinions about Euromaidan and its aftermath prevailing, it is logical that Belarusians are not in a mood for protests. The survey in December indicated that “this understanding of change has resulted in the lowest level of participation in public protests in almost 15 years: while almost 16.7 per cent participated in meetings and pickets in August 2001, 12.9 per cent in strikes, and 4 per cent in hunger strikes, the same indicators constituted 9.3, 1.6 and 0.8 per cent, respectively, in December 2014”.

The Belarusian public is not going to protest after the presidential elections in 2015, either. Even if elections are rigged, 61.7 per cent believe that the opposition should not call for people to come to the Square for mass protests; 80 per cent say they are not up for participation in such protests. Though passive and hardly inspiring for radical change supporters, this is a rather logical attitude: if Belarusians are negative about Maidan in Ukraine and think that it has resulted in ‘fascists’ taking over the power, they do not want it in Belarus. Unfortunately, the Belarusian proponents of change and fair elections do not look so consistent: 23.9 per cent think that the opposition still should call people to the Square in a case of electoral fraud, but only 13.9 per cent are ready to join the protests.

Challenges and prospects for political actors

Political players have to take the updated public demand into consideration. All stakeholders face both new challenges and new opportunities.

The increased demand for stability is an advantage for the government and a disadvantage for its opponents. Amid the chaos in Ukraine, people are keener to preserve their normal life, peace and security; even if their life is far from perfect, it is still better than the horror of life in the area of military operations in southeastern Ukraine (yet exaggerated by the Russian propaganda). Old slogans of “stability” and “everything is better than a war” are getting a second birth, while opposition’s traditional calls for a post-electoral Square do not sound appealing for people: “come on, do you want a Maidan here?”. Even many opponents of the current government are sharing an opinion that it is a bad time for the Square now. In theory, if the Square were a success (a highly unlikely scenario in today’s situation), Belarus would risk its territorial integrity with a chance for newly emerging “people’s republics” in e.g. Viciebsk and Mahiliou, supported by Moscow. Pro-democratic voters would prefer the familiar status quo under Lukashenka to such a scenario.

Nevertheless, Ukraine is offering a new



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opportunity for change supporters, too. The occupation of Crimea and following events have shown the danger of the pro-“Russian world”, “Slavic friendship” and “brotherhood of nations” rhetoric, and an importance of national identity-building. The current regime cannot boast any success in this field. Lukashenka has a long record of opposing “nationalists” and playing a role of the Russia’s closest ally in favor of the “integration of brotherly nations”. His rhetoric changed significantly after March 2014, but it is always hard to change your image. On the other hand, regime opponents were always associated with pro-national identity forces, Belarusian language, historical heritage and culture. With demand for these values growing, it gives the opposition and the civil society a chance to expand their influence.

New agenda: bottom-up and top-down Belarusization

All attributes of the Belarusian national otherness, such as traditional ethnic clothes or the language, are on demand now. Consciously or not, the trend has affected both common people and the government, including Lukashenka personally.

The President’s rhetoric has changed a lot, with his traditional sayings “Belarusians and Russians are the same nation” or “Belarusians are better-quality Russians” losing in intensity after spring’2014. Now, he prefers to stress the independence, uniqueness and self-sufficiency of Belarusians. This is Lukashenka’s quotation from his traditional annual speech in October 2014: “We are three brotherly, but distinctive nations, each one constructing its own state... We are not Russians, we are Belarusians”.

Many noted that Lukashenka unexpectedly chose Belarusian for his speech on the Independence Day. He also stated a need for more lessons of Belarusian in schools.

These are not first or unique cases, however: though the authorities often associated the Belarusian language with the opposition, some also stated a need to support it. Given the growing demand for “Belarusianness”, Lukashenka is in

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the best position to realize the Russian threat and a need to reinforce the national identity, the language being its key component. Lukashenka always has to balance between two options. On one hand, he needs to adopt brotherly rhetoric and sign union treaties with Russia, because Belarus is in need for Russian loans and energy benefits. On the other hand, he needs some distance from Russia to minimize threats to the independence and his personal power, and so he might apply soft re-Belarusization or unfreeze ties with the West.

As for the popular interest in Belarusian national identity, there are several factors here. On one hand, Ukrainian developments provoked a growing need of many Belarusians to stress their distinctions from Russians, something that helped many patriots to expand the field of the Belarusian national awareness. Actually, many are joining without any deliberate reflections just to be “trendy”. On the other hand, active efforts to promote the national language and culture have a history before the events in Ukraine, too.

For example, Art Siadziba, an independent cultural initiative, launched activities as early as in 2011 to promote Belarusian culture and use of language. LSTR, an independent brand of contemporary Belarusian clothes with national symbols and history-related pictures, emerged in the beginning of 2012. Super-popular courses of Belarusian language “Mova ci kava” started in early 2013. By the way, the courses were initiated by Katsiaryna Kibalchych, a journalist of the Russian TV; her openly pro-Russian stories and viewpoints on Ukraine resulted in a conflict with co-trainers of the courses and the

eventual closure of the training courses.

So, today’s Belarusization is both a bottom-up and a top-down trend for the government, change supporters and rather neutral and passive common voters. Launched well before the Ukrainian events by civil activists and initiatives, the efforts to promote the Belarusian cultural distinctiveness were reinforced by events in Ukraine.

Conclusions:

- The Belarusian society is under a strong influence of the Russian propaganda with prevailing pro-Russian attitudes toward developments in Ukraine. The combination of traditional Belarusian passiveness and the common sense results in unwillingness of the public for any open protests, leave alone joining Ploshcha (the Belarusian version of Maidan, or the Square).
- The trend toward Belarusization, or strengthening the Belarusian national identity, will grow in the nearest years. Both the authorities and the opposition will try to use it for their own needs and for the good of the Belarusian independence and statehood.
- Neither bottom-up, nor top-down Belarusization came as a mere reaction to events in Ukraine. In both cases, its reasons are deeper. The Ukrainian crisis served as a catalyst, though very strong, of this trend and previous efforts to promote the national identity of Belarusians.

IS BELARUSIAN CULTURE BACK IN PUBLIC LIFE?

Yauhen Krasulin

Developments in Ukraine have shown that the national cause and the language serve as powerful factors for consolidation at the stage of creating a nation-state. They help to define “us and them”, motivate to radical actions and promote nation’s self-organization even for a militant struggle. The Right Sector came as an obvious example, with its well-motivated armed groups capable to undertake responsibility for the country’s future.

On the other hand, the national identity’s opportunities for mobilization create problems for governments that ignore or underestimate this factor. Elites of a range of post-Soviet republics, including Ukraine and Belarus, embraced USSR-style approach to national identity issues, though in different degrees.

The approach reflected a long-time desire to replace national cultures by a single “Soviet” one, easily recognizable as Russian. The same was done to the history; Russia-centered “USSR history since the oldest times” (sic) was offered as a basis for historical memories. The history of e.g. the Belarusian nation was downplayed. The goal was to create an image for Soviet citizens of Russia and Russians as a civilizational and cultural engine helping the rest of less capable nations out. Born in 19th century, the idea of a civilizational messianic role of a certain nation survived the 20th century under the Soviet rule. The post-Soviet period has inherited the concept, something resulting primarily in Russia-focused elites in former Soviet republics supported by segments of citizens who shared this view.

As a genuine bearer of the Soviet identity, Lukashenka neglected a clear need for the nation-rebuilding (“national renaissance”) in Belarus after the Soviet rule.

However, the time has showed that the ideological monopoly did not help this concept to completely suppress the national awareness-restoration processes and subsequent nationalist moods. Despite the broadly used Soviet regime’s practices of ethno-mixing by promoting purposeful and massive migration of various ethnicities around the country, not always it led to a complete loss of a national identity. Even in a case of an identity-change, a Russian and his or her descendants who travelled to live in Belarus or Ukraine could successfully embrace a Belarusian or Ukrainian national identity, just like a Belarusian or a Ukrainian in Russia could embrace a Russian one.

The collapse of the USSR aggravated the identity clashes, primarily the clash between national identities and the Russia-centered Soviet one. Russia-focused elites achieved or retained power in some post-Soviet republics. Notably, these elites’ worldview is very conservative and immune to almost any transformation. On the other hand, their identity is an identity of Russia’s periphery with no firm national feeling beneath, something that deprives them of a strong factor for mobilization. If the government is able to control manifestations of national feelings, it gets an opportunity to consolidate the nation and channel its energy.

Lukashenka’s regime is a typical “Russia-centered” one. The presence of a single strong leader with a monopoly for decision-making is its second specific feature.

Choices of Lukashenka clearly show his preference for the Soviet cultural model, with his obvious love to Soviet symbols, Soviet placenames, everything associated with the Soviet past, such as mass congresses and parades, ‘struggle for the harvest’ etc. As a genuine bearer of the Soviet identity, Lukashenka neglected a clear need for the nation-rebuilding (“national renaissance”) in Belarus after the Soviet rule. He denied the importance of the Belarusian language and national identity. As a kid of the Soviet ideology, he stood against the national renaissance and marginalized Belarus-centered political and cultural actors. This is why the today’s relevant issue of defining new policies on the Belarusian language and culture boils down to whether Lukashenka is capable of remaking his worldview radically.

Despite the fact that attempts to rebuild the nation after the USSR collapse were abandoned since mid-90s, the above-mentioned Belarus-centered actors managed to preserve and update the national Belarusian cause. There was a considerable share of Belarusian-language musical content produced in Belarus, something particularly important for shaping youth identities. Previously seen as an obsolete language of

village, Belarusian spread to cities and gained more attractiveness. Researchers and campaigners enabled citizens to know more about the Belarusian history and modified public moods significantly.

People’s attitudes to the Belarusian language, history and culture underwent considerable change. The public came to an understanding of a need for these factors to ensure normal existence of Belarus. The growing public affinity to Belarusian, embracing the history of the Great Duchy of Lithuania with its castles and European architecture as elements of the Belarusian national identity, were in odds with the ideology imposed by the regime. It weakened the regime and gave an important factor for its opponents to join forces.

Developments in Ukraine helped the political regime of Belarus to realize how difficult it is to defeat a nation united by the national identity. It might have become a shifting factor for the regime’s attitudes. The ruler’s repeated statements about a need to expand the usage of Belarusian can be an indication of the leadership’s attempts to be seen by the society as a bastion of the national cause. The same applies to Lukashenka’s last-year idea for Belarus to claim some regions of Russian Federation, as we know that the territorial expansion was the most successful measure to consolidate Putin’s regime in Russia.

These moves reinforce the regime and take away from its opponents. In its turn, this shift reduces chances for Maidan that could confront the regime with the national identity slogans.

Many representatives of intellectual and creative communities notice this change and even think that it shows Lukashenka’s strength. It looks like he has found another tool to yet again outmaneuver his rivals, they say. Some people who can hardly be called Lukashenka’s supporters, label him as a smart politician or even a genius in this context.

Interpreting Lukashenka’s shifts as smartness or brilliance indicates a problem of our society where many people and even intellectuals think it is very smart to cling to power with any means as if it were a goal in itself. Notably, few believe that Lukashenka is sincere.

Apart from these isolated statements, there is almost no indication that his personality has changed a lot, even though some people in Russia started to label him as a nationalist sometimes. This for-show conflict with Russia is too similar to a pre-electoral period in 2010 when many thought that the Belarus-Russia friendship was over, amid a flow of mutual offences and accusations a way worse than now. This is why so

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many observers explain the current misbehavior of the Belarusian leader as an attempt to manipulate the public opinion rather than an actual policy shift.

Having said that, there is still an important point to make: even with his partial and imitative steps toward the national identity, Lukashenka can provoke a real outburst of the Belarusian national feelings in his country. Belarusians have been waiting for such a chance for decades. If it happened, Lukashenka would face a *zugzwang*: should he continue his games at the nationalist field, he can undermine his long-created Russia-centered system. In a likelier scenario he would stand up against the growing nationalism and face this powerful factor he is now trying to tap in. Therefore, there is a big risk for Lukashenka in his flirt with nationalist sentiments.

To address an importance of the nationalist factor in a hypothetical Belarusian Maidan, one should bear in mind that national identity clashes were not the only reason for revolutionary events in Kyiv. It was not a lack of Ukrainian in public sphere that forced people out to the streets. If one day Belarus gets exposed to mass protests comparable to Maidan in Ukraine, the likeliest reason would be the government's failure to uphold its "social contract" obligations. This is why it is a mistake to believe that Lukashenka can avoid a dramatic scenario by merely converting himself to the nationalism, even genuinely. However, the mobilizing factor of the national identity will stay important for such events, including the defense of a right for Belarusians to make their sovereign choice.

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