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## **European Belarus versus State Ideology: Construction of the Nation in the Belarusian Political Discourses**

*Abstract:* Public space of the post-communist Belarus can be viewed as a public and cultural space, where the “struggle over identity” between the official and the oppositional political discourses takes place and where both discourses claim their right to be the only voice of genuine Belarusianness. Articles presents the study of the definitions of the political identity of major “collective actor” of the Belarusian political sphere—“Belarusian nation.” The image of “Belarusianness,” on which an appropriate political ideology is built upon, was obtained from the official Belarusian ideology and the oppositional political ideologies. For analytical purposes texts were selected which deal with defining the Belarusian nation, describing the national idea, designating Belarus’ civilizational orientation.

*Keywords:* political discourse, nation, national identity, Belarus, postcommunism.

As Pierre Bourdieu noted, in mediatised democracies, political action became the means of public struggles for the power of definition of the “vision and division” of a society (Bourdieu 2005: 29–47). Articulation of a political project, which implies a certain organization of society and tends to mobilize public support, involves defining the ideological position of the collective actor in whose name the project is formulated (Laclau & Mouffe 2001 [1985]). Thus, the existence of a collective political actor depends upon the ability of its representatives to launch and preserve a hegemonic public discourse, a “nodal point” that puts different problems of a given social reality into meaningful perspective (Laclau & Mouffe 2001 [1985]: 111). As Ruth Wodak suggests, discursive struggles aiming at the establishment of such a nodal point usually involve a re-definition of national identity and exploit powerful discursive formations like liberalism or socialism (Wodak 2002: 143–170).

In studying the struggles over the definition of the political identity of the major collective actor of the Belarusian political sphere—the “Belarusian nation”—it is useful to employ the concept of “discursive strategies” (Wodak 2001). This concept designates the strategic application of language that has political and ideological implications. These implications can be analyzed by evaluating the representation of objects and actors—what features are fore-grounded or back-grounded, to what, to whom, and how are certain things referred and appointed. Studying the application of these discursive-strategic means in political discourse, one can see how different political actors articulate ideas that perpetuate, transform, or destroy the state of the

Belarusian people's political identity, backed by a certain concept of the national idea. Programs, articles and public presentations of Belarusian opposition politicians, as well as publications of political analysts, have been used as the basic material for the analysis of the political discourse of an alternative Belarusianness... Remarkably, this alternative Belarusianness does not exist as a single concept like the one made by the official ideology. One can speak of the alternative *discourses* of Belarusianness that breaks down into many images of a potentially different Belarus. Some authors see alternative Belarusianness in Europe, others see it at the meeting point of civilizations and consider Belarus to be a neutral and self-sufficient country. They are united by the renunciation of the Russian vector of the Belarusian idea cultivated by the authorities, and a consequent denial of the national status of the existing Belarusian state. In practice, the two alternative concepts of Belarusianness not only do not contradict each other, but often unite in their opposition to the pro-Russianness that dominates official culture and politics. To realize the idea of Belarus as a cultural bridge between Russia and the West it, first, has to move from Russia towards Europe to reach neutrality. Thus, "Europe," becomes a symbol of the Belarusian alternative anyway.

### **"Belarus is Europe"**

The articulation of the European idea of Belarusianness is based on a number of principles. First, it is a liberal democratic interpretation of the nation, as such. It means that "the nation" as a phenomenon, including the Belarusian one, can be realized only under a definite state structure. Andrey Suzdaltsev writes: "the present Republic of Belarus cannot be considered a national state of the Belarusian people... as only a state with a democratic state and political regimes can be called "national" (Suzdaltsev 2005). Stanislav Bogdankevich<sup>1</sup> gives a similar formulation of the national idea. He incorporates "the European political idea" into the content of Belarusianness:

"We are convinced that the essence of the Belarusian national idea consists in the consolidation of complete sovereignty of the state and the right of our people to manage our own destiny, in the revival of its moral and spiritual formations, in the flourishing of national culture, in the formation of a prosperous civil society and a democratic rule-of-law state, with its ultimate aim to provide citizens with rights and liberties as well as a worthy level of life" (Bogdankevich 1999).

The main hindrance in realizing this national idea is the incumbent authorities who tear Belarus away from the West and bring it to the East. "The Lukashenka's socio-economic realities of Belarus are more pertaining to the Asiatic model production based on the predominant administration power and its inseparability with property, on the economic and political dominion of bureaucracy" (Bogdankevich 1999). In this manner, the genuine European idea of Belarusianness is sullied by the Asiatic formula of power. Like Stanislav Bogdankevich, the majority of the political opposition's authors proclaim liberal and democratic values as the basis for national Belarusian

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<sup>1</sup> The chief of Belarusian National Bank in 1991–1995, currently the Head of United Civicparty.

development, in contrast to the current regime. The basic thesis of this approach is that a nation cannot exist outside of, or without, liberal democracy, which is why Belarusians have to replace the political system of power in the country in order to become a “nation.” Adherents of this approach work in the sphere of political declaration and base their arguments on comparison with European countries, their primary goal being Belarus’ inclusion in the European context.

Another source of “European Belarusianness” is built on the revival of Belarus’ European past. In this context, the Belarusian nation is considered to be European, not because it claims for itself the category of nation in general, but because its tradition of shared political and moral values. One of the goals of the Belarusian People’s Front is the “renewal of the Belarusian cultural tradition on the basis of European moral values,” while the Europeanness and the general civilizational perspective of Belarus is provided by the Belarusian historical memory (Political program of the Civil Association Belarusian People’s Front “Adradzenie”). The Belarusian political scientist Vladimir Rovdo writes that “from the moment of emergence of statehood on Belarusian lands in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and till the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Belarus had belonged to the Western or, rather, to European civilization” (Rovdo 2004). The Western format of the Belarusian national idea is verified by pages of Belarusian history, and practically all the features of the Western civilizational scale can be applied to Belarus or, more precisely, to its past. As if leafing the pages of Belarusian history, Vladimir Rovdo observes on them multiple signs of Europeanness. Examples are the “classical cultural legacy” that penetrated into the territory of Belarus from both the Byzantine and Roman Empires; the development of Catholicism and Calvinism; and the separation of the Church and secular power, which was the standard in Belarus until its incorporation into the Russian Empire. The idea of legal supremacy, of everyone’s submission to a single body of law runs through the 1588 Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Remarkably, Rovdo writes, “some Articles of the Statute, for instance, the death penalty for homicide of common people, the presumption of innocence, the limitation of serfdom, the declaration of religious tolerance, exceeded the codes of law of the Western European states of the time” (Rovdo 2004). Medieval Belarus enjoyed developed social pluralism, and in this respect the country was not inferior to Western Europe. When concluding his historical review Rovdo writes,

on the balance of Belarusian history there are nine centuries of European history on the one hand, and two centuries of ‘Asianness’ on the other hand” (Rovdo 2004), and that is why, for Belarus, “the development of national self-consciousness means the revival of the very European tradition that underlies contemporary democracy in the West (Rovdo 2004).

Many reputable members of the Belarusian elite share this orientation of the Belarusian national idea. Intellectual and politician Yuri Khadyka writes,

I think in today’s Belarus there is no real choice. In the conditions of a tense intercivilizational conflict, we have just one way—to the West, to Europe, that is where our legitimate place has been since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The last two centuries, the hardest time for Belarusian independence, have only tempered the basic features of the national character... In other words, Belarusians are Europeans by their mentality. We have to hurry up in order to really join European civilization (Khadyka 2003).

Writer Uladimir Arlou calls Belarus “an outpost of the Enlightenment era,” (1995: 3) which was as irrelevant to Russia as the Reformation and the Counter-reformation. As he put it, Belarus in all times has found itself “in the sphere of European history and European cultural values” (1995: 5). Political activist Ales Antsipenka also writes that Belarusianness connected the country with old Europe as long ago as in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania time. In this manner, the way to Europe today is just a way back home. In his opinion Belarus is “a miniature model of Europe” (1992: 259). In this context the accentuation of Europeanness means that Belarusians are a nation among many others, whose formation has undergone all the stages of nation-building in Europe. Writer and philosopher Valentin Akudovich says that Belarusians have always been within the same ideological concept of the nation as all the other nations. The phenomenon of “homo national” displaced “homo religious” as a result of the radical modernization process, and this change is a universal cultural, even civilizational, factor. “That is why it is strange to hear about ‘old’ and ‘young’ nations, namely in the historical respect, we, let us say, and Germans can be considered as siblings born at a year’s interval” (Questionnaire ARCHE 2003).

Remarkably, even “the most difficult issue” of Belarusian national consciousness—Russification and the abandonment of the Belarusian language—is viewed here in the context of the European analogy:

The state of the national language which may seem peculiar from the standpoint of standard nation-building models, is not unique on the universal background: all America speaks the language of former colonizers, in Ireland and Belgium the language of former occupants exists along with the vernaculars” (Questionnaire ARCHE 2003).

The history of Belarus, being European in its typological standards, naturally leads to its European present, i.e. to the European idea of Belarusianness. Akinchyts writes, “The Golden Age of Belarus, the 16<sup>th</sup> century show us the proper way to be taken in order for Belarus to occupy its honourable [sic] place among peoples” (2002). The project of Belarusianness is built on the foundation of European history, according to the principle that Belarusians are a nation just like Poles, Slovaks, and Czechs. This synonymic series is opposed to the Russian—and, broader, to the pan-Slav—context of official Belarusianness.

The retrospective formula of Belarusianness, as Petra Sadouski writes, has all the grounds for the claim to be European. The factual material of the Belarusian past provides wide possibilities for this. In his opinion, the founders of the Belarusian idea even insufficiently make use of the pages of their history in basing the national myths. As an example he mentions the victory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania’s troops over Muscovy in 1514 in the battle of Orsha, or the participation of the Belarusians in the battle of Grunwald, the battle between joint forces of the Polish Kingdom and Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and Allies of the Teutons. Sadouski himself, however, arrives at the conclusion on the basis of the historical legacy, not about the Europeanness of Belarusians, but about the fact that “according to a great deal of cultural and historical evidence Europe ‘was present’ in Belarus in the era

of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania” (2004). This presence of Europe in Belarusian history can become a basis for a nation-forming myth. However, just efforts of the national cultural intelligentsia are not sufficient, even if it is grouped into political parties.

Indeed, a strong side of the European version of Belarusianness is its historical basis. The alternative vision of history is aimed at a purposeful re-orientation of Belarusianness to the West, and the return of the Belarusian nation to Europe. But behind this return, so much spoken about by the adherents of this European Belarusianness, there is, in fact, a practically complete re-formation of the Belarusian nation that had been formed in a different civilizational context. This leads to a strange precedent: European Belarus is represented by a convincing historical projection, with nevertheless weak correlations with the political and cultural present. History essentially remains the major, if not the sole, instrument of manifestation of this version of Belarusianness. However, during the first years of independence there were many reasons for optimism: when adopted as a state idea, the concept of European Belarus received institutional support. In the early 1990s instead of the terms “Western Rus” or “west Russian Lands,” in relation to the pre-revolutionary history of Belarusians, it was officially recommended to use “Belarus,” or “the Belarusian people” (Bich 1993: 19). At this time, the official historiography legalized a new view on the origin of Belarusians, “the Belarusians were viewed no longer as a branch of the nationality of ‘ancient Rus’, but as a Slavicised [sic] mixture of Slavic and Baltic tribes” (Zaprudnik 2003: 120). This change of policy in relation to the ethnogenesis of Belarusians had a symbolic meaning. As Rainer Lindner writes, “The road from the myth about the ‘purest’ East-Slavic people to the myth ‘Slavicised Balts’ was a road to the West” (2001).

In 1993, in the atmosphere of general enthusiasm about Belarusian state independence, Prime-Minister Viacheslav Kebich spoke about the necessity of giving shape to the new self-consciousness of Belarusians: “It is not easy for us to shape our national self-awareness with national heritage we have received, not easy to re-convince our contemporaries and successors that we have a history of our statehood... That is why any efforts, state and public initiatives, to revive our national history are so necessary and valuable” (*Zwiazda*, 23 December 1993 quoted after Zaprudnik 2003: 120). All these events displayed the beginning of a new epoch in the state understanding of history and an actualization of the new idea of the Belarusianness. Many had the feeling that the new time was final and that “the ruinous for the historical education of Belarusians, the unnatural imperialistic, Russia-centered direction in teaching history will be displaced by a different one, which is useful to its people” (Hrytskevich 1998). This did not take place, as already in 1995 in the historiography of Belarus, a campaign had begun, which Lindner called “denationalization of the Belarusian past” (2001). This campaign could be more exactly called a reversion to the idea of Belarusianness internalized in the Belarusian self-awareness in the Soviet time. Devoid of institutional support or further representation in the official cultural and public sphere, the idea of European Belarus was relegated to the margins of cultural and political life.

### **Belarusians as “an in-between Nation”**

Another version of the alternative Belarusianness actively developed by the oppositional political discourse can be conventionally signified as “an in-between nation.” The central premise being that Belarus belongs to neither the West nor the East. Only on this principle of non-alignment will it be possible to build the Belarusian nation-state, according to Vasily Leonov, the organizer of the social movement “For a new Belarus” (2003). In his public lecture titled “A new Belarus: how are we going to build the Belarusian state?,” Leonov denies the existence of Belarus’ own political national history: “Belarus has never been, and today is not, a national state” (2003). However, this lack of canonical history of a Belarusian national state in by no means a disadvantage, on the contrary, “it is our major advantage... In the upshot, history of the Belarusian national state begins today” (2003). The idea of state building from scratch makes it possible to think freely about the future national state. The historical experience of Belarusians being part of different state unions had become a kind of political norm, which is why the disintegration of the USSR offered the unusual possibility of Belarusian state independence. In Leonov’s opinion, the project of a new union with Russia, or the idea of Belarus joining the European Union, prevents true national development, as either option would deprive Belarusians of a national initiative: in either case, someone else would shape Belarusian destiny. As an alternative, he suggests the idea of a national state of Belarus as a state “in itself and for itself.” Leonov proposes the following image of the Belarusian future on the European analogy—“the role of Eastern Slavic Switzerland is our national role and mission. We should always be a little in front, should be in eternal search. We have such potential, if you like, this is where our national idea lies” (2003). In Leonov’s view, the image of Switzerland connotes neutrality and keeping distance in relations to both Russia and Europe, creating a non-aligned Belarusian nation-state. This project became the foundation of the public movement, “For a new Belarus,” supported by a number of oppositional politicians and economists.

Similar ideas are presented in the book, whose title speaks for itself: *Belarus: neither Europe, nor Russia. Reflections of Belarusian elites*, published by ARCHE in 2007 (Bulgakau 2007). About 30 representatives of both oppositional and official elites expressed their view concerning the status of the country in the world’s geopolitical landscape, and the role of Europe and Russia in the national self-perception of Belarusians. Also an opinion poll, conducted among members of the Belarusian elite, by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic Study in December 2006, shows that the idea of joining either the West or the East, indeed, is not supported by Belarusian elite, as the elite sees the major national interest in state independence itself.

At first glance, this contradicts the world practice: small political subjects, to which Belarus can be ascribed, traditionally experience lack of internal resources to develop and assert “one’s own way.” Successful survival strategies in case of small countries, as a rule, are connected with the selection of the most advantageous ally. Nevertheless, the idea of Belarus as belonging to neither the East nor the West is deeply implanted in the consciousness of the Belarusian elite.

Table 1

**“What are, in your opinion, national interests of the Republic of Belarus?,” per cent  
(not more than 3 answers)**

Variants	All the answers	Employed in State sector	Employed in non state sector
Independence, Sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus	80	90	70
Democratization of society	50	37	63
Observance of human rights	42	47	37
Increased level of life of the population	37	50	23
Integration into Europe	27	23	30
Economic reforms	27	13	40
Development of the national culture	10	10	10
Improvement of the demographic situation	8	13	3
Unification with Russia	7	13	—

Source: the opinion poll of leaders and experts (above 60 policy-makers, media leaders, scientists and businessmen, equally representing state-run and non-state run sector) conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economical and Political Studies (IISEPS) sociologists. Available on-line: <http://www.iiseps.org>

One of the explanations of this phenomenon can be found in the historical experience of Belarusians. The idea of Belarusian cultural territory as neutral, belonging neither entirely to the West nor to the East, but at the same time connected with both, was formulated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The poet and thinker Ignat Abdziralovich wrote in 1921: “Belarus since the 10<sup>th</sup> century has actually been a battlefield of the two directions of European or, rather, Aryan culture—western and eastern” (1993). It means that neither side has complete power over Belarus, and Belarus is characterized by neither open resistance nor complete submission.

Up until present moment the Belarusian people do not support either the Eastern or the Western waves; and they freely roll over its head... Fluctuation between the West and the East and lack of genuine inclination to either side is the main attribute of the Belarusian people’s history” (Abdziralovich 1993).

In Belarusianness we can find a “mild” combination of separate features of the two opposites. As Ignat Abdziralovich writes, the Belarusian national idea, is based on the rejection of the two extreme, “messianic” forms of either Eastern Byzantism or the Western individualism. The former contains the idea of absolute and unified power, the unification of public life, collectivism, and usurping ambitions. The latter connotes the fragmentation of public life in which no authority has real power, leading to an endless search for an often unattainable compromise amongst parties that possess equal rights. As Abdziralovich writes, in Belarus the better aspects of the two cultural and historical types are synthetically combined on the basis of original forms of public life and culture (1993).

The positive aspect of the Belarusian place between two civilizations is reflected in the idea of Belarusianness as a harmonious conjunction of Eastern and Western values. In its turn, it made some authors formulate a special Belarusian civilizational

mission in late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The philosopher Uladimir Konan, the author of numerous works devoted to the Belarusian national idea, writes: “Probably the historic mission of Belarus is in overcoming the one sided ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ ” poles” (2001: 163); “the historic mission of Belarus is to build a cultural and geopolitical ‘bridge’ between the East and the West, between Russian Eurasia on the one hand and Western and Central Europe on the other hand” (1992: 6). On the one hand, the dependent position of Belarus within state formations in the Middle Ages and modern history has become a reason for the weakness of the national tradition. But this weakness can be interpreted as a virtuous neutrality that has caused Belarusians’ reluctance to take this or that side in the clash of civilizations.

Many political and cultural activists of the alternative Belarus see the source of Belarus’ political potential in Belarusian ambivalence, and its cultural connection with the East and West alike. Genadz Pranevich writes about the intermediary mission of Belarus as the sole true capital—the symbolic capital of the Belarusian state. “...not only by our tractors, potash fertilizers, the intellectual and trained work-force can we attract and interest our Slavic and Baltic neighbours, all Europeans, but first of all by the prospect of building in the centre of Europe a reliable and durable bridge from the West to the East and from the North to the South, by the unique national mentality, the talent to reconcile, unite and bring together individuals, peoples, cultures and religions” (2001).

Pavel Seviarynets the leader of the youth movement Malady Front<sup>2</sup>, and the author of several books about Belarus, described the mission of Belarus as a nation on the bridge: “The concept of Belarus as a gigantic strategic economic and geopolitical bridge between the West and Russia, Europe and Asia, the Baltic and the Black seas regions gives it a unique possibility for a genuine neutrality, a friendly openness to the West and the East, with formation of an axis of our own financial and technological, as well as cultural, interests” (2001). His image of Belarus is of an ambivalent country with a special mission in the East and in the West, “to enlighten and educate huge Russia, to stir up Eastern Europe, to give tolerance and inspiration to the West is on our consciousness” (Seviarynets 2005). In the East, in relations with Russian or rather with the empires that had been built on the territory of the eastern neighbour the mission of Belarus is to facilitate disintegration of empires and to “purify” Russia. “Save Russia!—is the slogan worthy of powerful Belarusian strategy” (Seviarynets 2005). According to Seviarynets, a testament to this special mission of Belarus is the fact that in Belarus there had been many projects that had come to pass, which had been ruinous for the imperial plans of great Russia: the first congress of RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic Labor Party); the abdication Nikolai II; the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk; the Belovezha agreement to dissolve the USSR. All of these events are somehow related to Belarus, and all of them have had a destructive impact on the imperials ambitions of Russia. Precisely they are a manifestation of the Belarusian

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<sup>2</sup> In 1999–2003—deputy chief of BPF party, in 1997–2004—the chief of “Young Front.” Sentenced for two years of correctional labour colony for the organization of street protest actions against falsification of referendum and presidential election results. [how is this germane to the discussion? Or, if it is germane, why isn’t it in the body of the text?]

mission in the east. This mission is stipulated by the “Westernness” of Belarus. At the same time, the destiny of the Western strategy of the post-communist revival in Belarus has also a specific development. This fate is inscribed in the Belarusian national idea. Its “Easternness” prevents it. “Belarus, which is placed between Europe and Russia, is not to become a domestic, decent Central European country” (Seviarynets 2001). The internal conflict of the Belarusian national idea is a result of such a duality. That is why the Belarusian national idea, writes Seviarynets “is the idea of a long-suffering, great country... which is always in pain and which will, most probably, never become a happy one” (2001).

The intermediate position on the civilization divide often becomes a fundamental truth for the Belarusian national idea. It is a cause of the specific Belarusian mentality, which “is to a great extent determined by the universal natural geographical, geopolitical and civilizational-cultural intermediateness” (Pranevich 2001). The intermediate position also determines the specific character of the Belarusian cultural tradition. As Igar Babkou writes, “Belarus of the latest two centuries has appeared and formed just in this dark space between-and-post cultural meeting place...” (Babkou 1999). This in-between position characterizes a specific nature of the transcultural Belarusian tradition which “comprises heterogeneous elements, its texts were written in different languages and belong to different types of civilization... occur in several traditions” (Babkou 1999: 86). In this kind of context a specific effort is required for the preservation or, to be more exact, for the designing of the integrity of culture, tradition and nation. One of the ways to achieve such integrity is to establish a distance in respect to those cultures and traditions in which the transcultural nation appears to be involved. The distance can be either long or short; however, it should exist as a sign of a break between Belarusian and the foreign, or non-Belarusian cultural experience. This distance, as regards the West and East, becomes a peculiar point of reference in the calculation of Belarusianness in alternative political and cultural discourses.

As early as in 1921 Janka Kupala<sup>3</sup> created a literary image of this neutrality of “the border” in his play *Tuteyshya* [The Locals]. This play is frequently perceived as an articulation of Belarusian cultural identity. Belarusian self-determination is achieved by means of de-identifying with the Russian and the Polish context, resulting in the localization of identity outside of any cultural traditions, in the extremely reduced space of “here.”

A similar idea of “being from here, being local and true Belarusian” is reflected in the song called “I was born here” (lyrics by Siargey Sokolov-Voush, sung by Dmitrii Voityushkevich), which became a sort of national youth anthem. This composition, “The Hymn of Belarus,” was mentioned more often than others in Internet youth forums devoted to the discussion of an alternative national anthem of Belarus (the results are available on-line <http://mensk.by/forum>). By referring to “this place,” it demonstrates how young Belarusians identify with Belarus: “Short word ‘here’ unites all us, ‘the locals,’ and for everyone it brings something own, kin.” [Naradzilisia tut. Supolna]. The song was the beginning of a musical project with the same title—a series

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<sup>3</sup> Janka Kupala (1882–1942) was one of the members of Belarusian national revival movement at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, who later became “classic” of national literature in already Soviet Belarus.

of concerts, from which an album of alternative patriotic songs was issued. In 2001 the concert “I was born here” gave rise to the political campaign with the slogan “Make a choice,” aimed at oppositional mobilization of Belarusian youth during the presidential election campaign.

“Locals,” by Janka Kupala, as well as the song “I was born here,” show a peculiar fact: in the Belarusian context, the usual opposition between the national and the local as competing sources of identity ceased to operate. Indeed, the phrase “I was born here,” for Belarusian youth, sounds like a declaration of Belarusian identity, built on the basis of its attribution to territory, despite external cultural and political influences. It is by reducing national Belarusian identity to local Belarussianness, that this identity can distance itself from the Russianness in the East, and Polishness in the West, in order to differentiate its existence in people’s mind.

### **National Ideology of Belarusian state as a Political Articulation of the Official Belarussianness**

In alternative political discourses the existing Belarusian state—the Republic of Belarus governed by Aleksander Lukashenka—is perceived as an anti-Belarusian and anti-national formation. Nevertheless, many authors who observe the developments in the country from the outside note that the process of intense institutionalization and reification of Belarusian nationhood has taken place during the country’s period of independence. There is a national idea behind this process: “in no area Belarus has moved so far during its years of independence as in the mobilization on the ground of the national idea,” writes the Belarusian political scientist Sergey Nikoliuk (2004). On the one hand, one can speak about the development of national self-awareness due to the establishment of a sovereign national state. As the participant of the round-table debate, “Democracy and nationalism as alpha and omega of a political process,” Leonid Zlotnikov noted:

Formation of the Belarusian nation is taking place now, before our eyes, on the territory we have acquired after the disintegration of the USSR. It takes place, first of all, because the people who now live within the boundaries of modern Belarusian state begin to form mutual interests whose realization can be beneficial to all of them, irrespective of their ethnic identity or language they speak. The very fact of the independent Belarusian state existence makes us more and more Belarusians from year to year (Materials of the round-table discussion, 2001).

On the other hand, many authors admit that this is also the result of the policy conducted by the authorities. The particular role of the Belarusian president in “nationalization” of Belarusians, has been commented upon, as he “has made for the consciousness of the independent Belarusian national probably more than any Popular Front or the most convinced nationalists could do” (Lukyanov 2006). Certainly the format of the Belarusian national idea, via official discourse, essentially differs from the Belarussianness conceptualized in alternative discourses. It is based

not on the idea of national revival by which the leaders of the national democratic movements of 1980–1990s were guided, but on the idea of the national exclusiveness of Belarus as a model of a state-society, its unique character which is devoid of any outside influence (Lukyanov 2006).

Some authors recognize the existence of the official national project of the Belarusian authorities, but with the reservation that behind it there is little more than a simple aspiration to preserve its own status and power. The nationalization of Belarusian political life by the authorities is related to the desire “to resort to the national awareness of the population as a sort of barrier against absorption of national sovereignty by Russia, which would unavoidably reduce the status and the role of Belarusian bureaucrats including that of Lukashenka” (Zaprudnik 2003: 122). Russian political scientist Anastasia Mitrofanova also believes that Belarusian official nationalism has a forced character. “Relations with the West are deteriorated, and the integration with Russia is held back. It contributes to the creation of the besieged fortress consciousness.” (Mitrofanova 2006). However, the result is the same, even if the true purpose for strengthening the national feeling of Belarusians by official methods is to make the position of the current regime more secure. Belarusians become stronger as carriers of the Belarusian national idea, and the phrase “our country” which used to mean the Soviet Union, prior to 1991, now means “Belarus” (Zaprudnik 2003: 118).

Program documents and statements of the President of Belarus, in which he sets forth the basic provisions of state ideology, as well as monographs and manuals on ideology, were used as sources for getting a concise image of “official Belarussianness.” In all these texts there is a reference to the Belarusian way of development, Belarusian tradition, and characteristics of the Belarusian mentality. All these are part of the foundation of the official concept of the Belarusian nation.

The ideology of the state itself started to be developed in the 1990s, stimulating academic and scientific exploration of the subject (Ermolitchki, Sapelkin, Sluka, Tur, Yurkeich 1999; *Ideologia belorusskoi gosudarstvennosti: problemy teorii i praktiki* 1998). At the same time, the three basic values of this ideology were formulated: strong presidential power, a socially-oriented economy, and Christian (or, to be more exact, Orthodox) values. In public space, ‘the ideology of the Belarusian state’ emerged in 2003, when it became not only a theoretical, but also a practical, issue.

On March 27, 2003, the President of Belarus spoke at the seminar “On measures to improve the ideological work,” for senior ideological management, where he stated his vision of a new state ideology. The ideology preserved the main theoretical theses, apart from several relatively new ideas (such as Belarus’ messianic role as spiritual leader within the East Slavic civilization). An additional stress was made only on the applied character of the ideology. It should work to educate citizens. The necessity of teaching ideology to students, popularizing its values by means of the state run mass media, was also discussed. And courses at the University level, such as “Ideology of the Belarusian statehood,” was adopted in 2003.

Characterizing the format of the Belarusian state ideology Valery Bobrovich writes, that “in the traditional sense it is not a political ideology. According to its content, it is much closer to such concepts as an ‘ideology of statehood’ or a ‘state idea’ (2003: 58–59). Indeed, constant appeals to the Belarusian people, its traditions and national developments makes conceptual boundaries between the national ideology, the state ideology, and the ideology of the state blurred. For example, the newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussia*, a mouthpiece of the state, uses such concepts as

“ideology of statehood” and “national ideology” as synonyms (See *Belarus Today* 179, 2003; 86, 2004). According to them, state ideology is the way out of the crisis of national identity, in which Belarusians have found themselves since the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Ideological component, 2003). The ideology of the Belarusian state is “called to strengthen the socio-political consolidation of society, to become a national force able to stronger unite citizens of the country to an integrated Belarusian people” (Kniazhev, Reshetnikov, Adulo 2004: 225).

The concept “national” is widely used in the official Belarusian discourse, but actually it is used in contradictory ways. On the one hand, imposing signs of the national are brought into public space, where this word occurs in the names of different public institutions and services: the National Library, the National Academy of Sciences, First National (the name of the Belarusian TV channel), the National television and radio broadcasting company, national security and cultural national legacy are constantly present in the media. In 2004 the main avenue in Minsk was reamed by President of Belarus into the Independence Avenue. All these are meant to confirm and emphasize the national status and sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus.

At the same time, the President speaks about the “open nationalism of the Belarusian opposition” as something alien to the Belarusian people (Lukashenka 2005). “Nationalism is absolutely unacceptable for our people. That is because internally we are the most internationally-minded people,” (Laptenok 2005). These statements, however, are combined in the official rhetoric with claims of the national idea as an essential aspect of the state life, because its internalization is a guarantee for a successful development of the country. The same text declares:

The national idea should be based on people’s awareness of statehood and the primacy of national interests. And such awareness is developed throughout the whole life of the individual. Since birth, through a kindergarten, school, university everyone should understand such concepts as the Motherland, patriotism, the people, history, culture not just logically, and to absorb them in the soul. Without it it’s impossible to preserve the state and to build a good life (Laptenok 2005).

A similar passage could be just as easily found in the text of oppositional Belarusian nationalists. However, the official context sets its own parameters in the understanding of the national idea. There is “good” and “bad” nationalism traced in the official rhetoric of Belarusian authorities. Without “good” nationalism it is impossible to build and preserve the state (Mikheyev 2004). Behind the “bad” one there is political opposition, which is influenced and supported by the West (the fact that makes it possible to declare it an external, and therefore alien, notion to the Belarusian nation. When the Belarusian president declares: “This opposition is a pro-Western nationalism opposition,” it sounds like a verdict: it is not Belarusian, as it is created and financed by the West (Lukashenka 2005).

The official Belarusian national idea is based on a few fundamental guidelines. It stresses its own tradition and history; it has a positive philosophy of the Soviet experience on the whole, and a recognition of the necessity to reproduce its components in an independent Belarus; it carries an appeal for Slavic unity, with reliance on Russian culture as a counter balance to Western values; and it refers to the peculiar mentality and special qualities of Belarusian people (such as collectivism), which form the basis

of a Belarus–Europe opposition. The idea of social equality, which according to the official ideology is a truly Belarusian idea, and is the backbone of socialism, plays an important role in the counter-position to the Western civilization and capitalism. This idea is rooted in the symbolic matrix of Belarusianness, which had been solidified as early as the pre-October epoch of Belarusian nationalism. The official discourse makes use of the fact that the Belarusians had never existed as a formal nation within capitalist formation. Thus, if the lack of a capitalist social structure in the post-Soviet period was seen by Miroslav Hroch as a cause and aspiration for Eastern European nationalists to transform society into a capitalist system with a capitalist class (Hroch 1985: 90), for the official Belarusian ideology it becomes the motivation to oppose such transformations.

Stating its Belarusianness, the official ideology widely uses the metaphor of “kinship:”

The ideology of the state should be built on its own foundation. Being in his senses a Frenchman will not want to adopt the American way of life, a German—the Russian one and so on. Each nation grows and develops on its native ideological ground. We will do the same” (Lukashenka 2003).

“The native-ours” is aggressively opposed to the “foreign-western,” it is in this rigid opposition that the independence of the Belarusian state is maintained in the official discourse. A moral reasoning as regards its own country is also introduced. It is an appeal to “the country as a family,” which makes it possible to differentiate its native and foreign values in the most understandable and emotional way. In his report on ideology President says: “It is senseless to copy someone’s values and aims on the basis of the fact, that this or that country is strong and rich at present. In fact, we do not abandon our parents, though they are not millionaires” (Lukashenka 2003).

The thesis of one’s own experience, culture, and the basis of statehood, requires a more solid support and reasoning than that provided by claims to tradition. “One should be careful with such borrowings as ideals, values and aims. Our own traditions, ideas and values, aims and purposes, make the ‘backbone’ of our people. They are not made up, but gained through the suffering of our people; they are result of the natural adaptation of society to the natural and social environment...” (Lukashenka 2003). An appeal to “the natural way” of “our own values” in the discourse of official Belarusianness is necessary for strengthening the effect of alienation from any alternative ways of its definition. Thus, according to the president, the ideology of liberalism is deeply alien to the mentality of Belarusian people. As a counter balance to Western individualism, we should be guided by collectivism and mutual aid, social trust and respectful relations between the state and the people.

The source of these ideological principles, in the view of Evgeni Babosov, the author of the textbook *The Bases of the Ideology of the Belarusian State*, is the mental basis of the Belarusian people, such as patriotism, collectivism, kindness, and also self-esteem and personal independence (Babosov 2004). The author also pays attention to the combination of patience and forbearance, on the one hand, and intolerance to any oppression on the other (Babosov 2004). In the official ideology “the people” and collectivism appear as an integral feature of Belarusianness. “Collectivism is, so to

say, something national, something that is in Belarusians' blood, and it is something that should be kept and strengthened" (Shinkarev & Varganova 2004: 218). It is the collectivist mentality that is viewed as one of the main reasons for the failure of liberal reforms in Belarus. Western strategies of liberal reforms "did not correspond to the collectivist mentality in the post-Soviet space, moral principles and traditions, constant search for the good and justice," (Kazlovich 2000: 276). Western values are alien to "Belarusians—people of community, who do not accept absolutization of private property" (Lukashenka 2003).

The idea of Slav unity also makes a reliable foundation to Belarusian ideology, and in its description the official discourse frequently uses organic metaphors. While nationalists aim at "cutting off the Belarusian branch from the common spiritual Slav tree" (Lukashenka 2003), the Belarusian authorities see their mission in preservation of this tree. In this context, when Belarussianness is placed on the territory of Slav civilization, ideas of the union with other states "inside" this civilization do not contradict, but develop an idea of Belarusian independence.

The geopolitically pre-determined idea of Belarusian tradition is represented in the assessment of the Belarusian past. Those periods of history, when Belarusians together with the Polish people or Lithuanians were members of the same states, are declared to be alien to the Belarusian tradition, which is more linked to the periods of history related to czarist or Soviet Russia. Considering such ideological directives, as Belarusian author Aleksander Feduta notices, it is not surprising that in the official textbooks on history "all fighters against the czarist oppression, including the national hero of Belarus, Kastus Kalinowski,<sup>4</sup> are presented as a 'Poles', and their activities are looked upon as a result of the influence of Catholicism, but the notorious count Michael Muravyov<sup>5</sup> who lives in the people's memory as the 'hanger', was posthumously characterized as a talented administrator" (Feduta 2006). Also, the decision made by the president to withdraw the award named after Kastus Kalinowski from the list of Belarusian state awards, follows the roadmap of the ideological shaping of official Belarussianness, which relies on commonness with Russia and separateness from Europe in the past.

All Belarusian history is the subject of a certain politically determined interpretation within the official historical narration, though the basic source of the Belarusian tradition is considered to be the Soviet era. "[W]e were a part of the great, large state, and all ideology was within that state... That ideology was in fact our Belarusian ideology too" (Laptenok 2005). This formulation, in spite of the obvious conflict of meaning between the notions of "Soviet" and "Belarusian," is in its own way a sensible one. As the Belarusian political scientist Victor Chernov writes,

Sovietness" was for Belarusians an organic form of expression of their ethno-marginality, moreover, a way of their identification with the "the Great Country of Soviets..." One can say that due to such identification

<sup>4</sup> The leader of the rebellion of 1863–1864 against Czarist Russia's rule on the Belarusian-Polish-Lithuanian lands, who is also recognized as a Polish and Lithuanian national hero.

<sup>5</sup> During the Polish-Lithuanian January Uprising of 1863, Muravyov was appointed Governor General of Northwestern Krai (now Belarus, Lithuania). He promptly subdued the rebellion, burning or resettling all Belarusian, Polish and Lithuanian villages to Siberia. About 9000 people were resettled, 127 hanged. Konstanty Kalinowski was also executed on his orders.

an original, Soviet-Belarusian “nationalism” was stimulated,—a truly Soviet Belarusian felt, that he or she was the “most Soviet of the Soviet” (Chernov 2003: 47).

In this sense, the Belarusian nation is a product of Sovietness: “today’s Belarus has grown up not out of the emigrant ideas of nationalist, but out of the truly brotherly family of the Soviet Republic, due to the common efforts of all the peoples, and, first of all, of the Russian one” (Rubinov 2006).

In the official interpretation, all Belarusian tradition is focused on Soviet time, and Belarusian history is focused on the Second World War. S. D. Laptенок, the author of the texts on the president’s website, writes that “in those difficult years Belarusians struggled not only for the common victory, but also for the sovereignty of their country” (Laptенок 2005). It is not clear which country stands behind this concept of “their country,” however, this ambiguity does not contradict the construction of an identity that merges Belarusianness with Sovietness. The people’s memory focused on the Great Patriotic War undergoes a similar reduction. “The state policy is based on its commitment to the historical memory of people—the Victory in the Great Patriotic War. The introduction of the course ‘the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet people’ in the curricula of the educational institutions has been a reflection of this commitment.

There is a discrepancy in the basic guidelines of the Belarusian ideology. Victor Chernov describes it as “an eclectic set of separate elements of Marxism and Keynesianism, the market and feudal socialism, liberalism and conservatism, Pan-Slavism and nationalism, atheism and Orthodoxy” (Chernov 2003: 30). However, as another Belarusian author Yanov Polesky remarked, the Belarusian ideology is “a project which has failed in its theoretical part, but which has been a successful in its practice” (Polesky 2005).

The practice of state ideology like the Belarusian one means its successful internalization by people. An opinion poll conducted by the IISEPS in 2006 demonstrated that 52% of Belarusians consider themselves “Soviet people” (“Where Europe ends,” IISEPS). This striking number speaks in favor of the fact that the reason for the stable character of the Belarusian regime is found not so much in its internal administrative resources, or in mechanisms of suppression of non-conformists with the aid of special services, but rather in the peculiar, and paradoxical, correlation of the Belarusian model of self-identification with the concept of Belarusianness as presented in official discourse. Another IISEPS study points to Belarusian’s self-perception as in favor of integration with Russia on the grounds that Russians and Belarusians are historically one people, they are spiritually close, and have similar languages, cultures, and traditions (data available <http://www.iiseps.org/4-06-2.html>).

At the same time, results of national polls conducted during 2004 and 2005, found that “Belarusians practically in everything manifest greater ‘Europeanness’ than Russians and Ukrainians... Belarusians more frequently consider themselves ‘European’ and refer to ‘Europeanness’ as a variant of their self-identification” (Alisan, Whight, Light, 2006). These polls also show that more Belarusians can define the European Union, and know where the headquarters of the EU are located, as compared to Russians and Ukrainians.

Table 2

**Belarusians, Russians, Ukrainians and “Europe,” 2004–2005**

	Belarus	Russia	Ukraine
Feel themselves considerably/completely Europeans	34	25	26
Seldom /never feel themselves Europeans	54	68	62
Consider themselves Europeans	16	8	10
Support joining the European Union	59	56	54
Can define The European Union	48	39	42
Know where the headquarters of the European Union is based	49	39	36
Believe that the country should join the NATO	22	29	22

Source: Roy Alison, Stephen Wight, Margo Light “Belarus between the West and the East.” (Alisan, R., Whight, S., Light, M. 2006).

Providing that “Europe” is one of the main signifiers of an alternative Belaru-sianness, one can say that in this capacity it also has a great impact on Belarusians’ self-awareness. However, this does not prevent Belarusians from remaining Russian-minded to the utmost. As the IISEPS opinion polls manifest, during the last few years, even in the conditions of a persistently aggravating political and economic crisis in the relations with Russia, in case of a forced choice between the East and the West, the majority of Belarusians decidedly prefer Russia.

Table 3

**Dynamics of the responses to the question “If you were to choose between unification with Russia and joining the European Union, what would be your choice?,” %**

	July 04	March 05	April 06	January 07
Unification with Russia	41.0	51.9	53.9	48.5
Joining the European Union	36.5	31.6	32.6	33.6
No definite response	22.5	16.5	13.5	17.9

Source: nation-wide representative opinion polls conducted by IISEPS in years 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007. Data available on-line: <http://www.iiseps.org/press6.html>

This phenomenon of the considerable presence of “Europeanness” in Belaru-sians’ self-image, against the background of their no less impressive “Sovietness” and persistent pro-Russianness, can be explained by the fact that, though the number of “Europeans” among Belarusians may be higher than among Russians or Ukrainians, the majority (54%) of Belarusians “seldom” or “never” think of themselves in this way.

Several factors determine the ideological conflict between the two political concepts of the Belarusian national idea. In the first years of Belarusian independence in the 1990s, a paradoxical situation had taken shape. There appeared a national movement of Belarusian intelligentsia that appealed to the pre- and extra-Soviet experience of the Belarusian nation. However, the formation of the Belarusian nation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was just at the initial stage of articulating the national idea

within a small circle of national intelligentsia, and did not attain stage of mass mobilization. The real nationalization of the Belarusian people took place during the period of Soviet power, and with the help of its instruments. As Terry Martin writes, the result of the first period of Belarusian nation building within the Soviet state was “the remarkable success of Byelorussization” (Martin, 2001: 261). He also notes that Hroch’s model of three phases of national movement among stateless nations of Eastern Europe ignored the existing multiethnic state, automatically assuming it would oppose these developments. The national policy of the first decade of Soviet history revealed a different picture:

The Soviet state instead literally seized leadership over all the three phases: the articulation of national culture, the formation of national elites, and the propagation of mass national consciousness. It went still further and initiated even “phase D” measures typical of newly formed nation-states, establishing a new language of the state and a new governing elite” (Martin 2001: 15).

Descriptions of nation building in that era fit the scheme of nation formation that was pursued by the state through the practices of standardization, with the help of the education system, and other attributes of modernizing practices, albeit in the socialist mode.

Later on, the Belarusian nation was affected by various experiences within the Soviet Union. The Communist genocide of the 1930s; achieving common victory in the Second World War; and the years of post-war reconstruction realized by joint efforts and resources of different Soviet Republics. David Marples believes that the golden age, the key point in the legacy of the country with the major symbolical meaning of historical positivism in the perception of Belarusians’ majority, is connected with the time of reconstruction after the Second World War. During the period of Piotr Masherau’s government (1965–1980), the Republic not only restored the losses, but occupied a leading place amongst other Soviet republics as to the level of its industrial development and to the standard of population’s living (Marples 2003).

In the first years of independence, the national intelligentsia faced an extremely difficult task—to conduct a complicated surgical separation of Belarusianness and Soviet ideology. This could mean a step-by-step de-identification of Belarusianness and Soviet mass consciousness with its simultaneous saturation with alternative content. As the experience of the Soviet Belarusian nation-building revealed, a success of this kind of work is most probable when the process of installation of the new content of the national idea into mass consciousness is carried out by means of numerous definitional and institutional practices supported by state.

However the new nationalists built the alternative project of Belarusianness out of open confrontation with Sovietness, and with the Soviet, and later Belarusian, independent state. Besides, their project of alternative Belarusianness they expanded mainly in the framework of historical ethno-culturalism. They acted as if prompted by Anthony Smith, like political archeologists rediscovering and reinterpreting the communal past in order to regenerate the community (Smith 1999: 181). The new nationalists’ accent on revival implies an appeal to the restoration in its national rights of the nation that had existed in the pre-Soviet past. Though, as was said above, the

Belarusian nation had not existed—as a community whose formation was complete—prior to the Soviet era.

The official project of the Belarusian nation, initiated by the Belarusian authorities, was built on the principle of succession with the Soviet period of history. In order to promote official Belarusianness, the authorities resort to the tools of social reification borrowed from Soviet practice. The formation of official “Belarusianness” is also implemented with the help of the education system, the correction of history, the press and a large number of social rituals and national projects initiated by the state. This difference in the strategies of actualization of the alternative and the official Belarusianness are been built on different principles of identity formation. Alternative Belarusianness is represented by profound historical and political narratives supported by a number of cultural manifestations. These cultural manifestations provide an access of definite ideas to the public, i.e. to those who are expected to become carriers of articulated and represented ideas. Their status in the public space is reduced to a “counter-culture.” Official Belarusianness is reified by numerous social practices on the micro- and the macro-levels of everyday life, in which the state is involved, both directly and indirectly.

In the specific conditions of a non-democratic regime like Belarus, representation of interests appears subordinate to the logic of open confrontation of two disconnected and, in a way, self-sufficient public spheres. Each of them functions on the basis of its own sources of information (state run and non-state run media), and its own organizations (state institutions, educational establishments, on the one hand and NGOs and different educational centers and institutions on the other). The major problem of the alternative Belarusianness is its opposition to the state, which means lack of access to the institutional resources of the state, that, as modernist theorists of the nation affirm, and as the Soviet experience has demonstrated, are necessary for nation-building and the reification of the nation at the micro- and macro-levels of social life.

From a theoretical perspective, this situation leads to a paradox. Two opposite political discourses implement different political projects in the name of (ostensibly) the same actor: the Belarusian nation. In practice, this leads to the creation of two different actors with the same name. The competing ideas of “Belarusianness” provide their supporters and adherents with different formulas for building their Belarusian identity, but under the conditions of a non-democratic regime, the fact that one of them is a state-run and the other is opposed to the state, necessarily creates unequal conditions in the struggle over identity.

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