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[Nationalism](#)

National Identity Against External Pressure

Will Belarus Reconcile Its Contradicting Narratives?

Jakob Wöllenstein

Viewed dispassionately, the pro-Russian and pro-European poles of the Belarusian national identity, however much they disagree in questions of content, are both part of Belarus in its modern form. From the identity politics perspective, this realisation represents an opportunity to reconcile internal narratives and resolve internal tensions. This insight can ultimately lead to the heightening of the country's profile at the international level – especially in the West, where Belarus is still often perceived as a mere Russian appendage because of the way it has positioned itself for years.

A Hero's Funeral

22 November 2019 was a cold, windy day in Vilnius, Lithuania. Yet the crowd that had gathered in front of the cathedral welcomed the gusts. They proudly held up their flags and the squared blazed white and red – the most common motif was the old Belarusian flag with its red stripe on a white field. The occasion of the gathering was a historic reburial. In July 2017, during excavations at the legendary Gediminas Hill, workers had discovered human remains from the 19th century, and analysis confirmed that they were the remains of a leader of the 1864 January Uprising and his closest followers who had been executed for their determined but unsuccessful struggle for liberty in the last of three major uprisings against czarist rule. Several countries claim his heritage, as reflected in variations in his name's spelling. The Lithuanians call him “Konstantinas Kalinauskas”, the Poles “Konstanty Kalinowski”, but, born in what today is Belarus, the revolutionary himself used “Kastuś Kalinoŭski”, the Belarusian version. The uprisings shaped the identities of Poland and Lithuania, so it was natural for the presidents of the two countries to take part in the reburial. Belarus was affected equally by the split, and the conflict was even carried out on its territory. However, as an ally of Moscow, the country continues to struggle with honouring an anti-czarist (i.e. anti-Russian) freedom fighter. It was thus all the more remarkable that Belarus was prominently represented by Deputy Prime Minister Ihar Pyatryshenka – but,

demonstratively, not the most senior, since President Aliaksandr Lukashenka was presiding over regional agricultural deliberations at the time.¹ His compatriots, meanwhile, had travelled to Vilnius and consciously assembled not under the official red-green national flag, but under the historical flag from the early 1990s, which in turn refers back to the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) of 1918 and is de facto outlawed in Belarus today. This snapshot highlights the development of Belarusian national identity: a visible gulf remains between the post-Soviet and neo-Soviet pro-Russian view, on the one hand, and the cultural and linguistic view, emphasising European heritage and a “European” future, on the other. Although the state has been prone to a pro-Russian sentiment, there is currently a careful opening to the “other” side of Belarusian identity. This development can only be understood in the context of the growing tensions between Minsk and Moscow.

When Does Belarus Begin?

The formation of Belarusian identity has been actively impeded, and repeatedly set back over the course of the country's eventful history, which was often characterised by foreign rule. The story of its formation is punctuated by multiple breaks, but there are also important continuities. The terms “Belarusian”, “Belarus”, and “Belarusians” (and the outdated term “White Russians”) did not arise until the mid-19th century, when the country was ruled by the Russian

czars. Previously, many had considered themselves “Lithuanians”, a term derived from the early modern Grand Duchy. Its name in English is “Lithuania”, but the modern concept of Lithuania as a nation state within its current borders, its (Baltic) population of the same name, and their Baltic language is a narrowing of the term. Medieval Lithuania, whose eponymous territory (“Litva” in Slavic), stretched beyond Minsk to the East, and was home to many peoples, languages, and religions – the majority of them Slavic. Thus, in the 19th century, the country, people, and language of Belarus experienced a change in designation (including as regards their own usage). This makes it difficult to link their history to previous historical quantities that might provide identity and appears to lend plausibility to the argument that Belarusian national identity rests solely on the modern Republic of Belarus as it has existed for 28 years as well as on its Soviet Russian past. In fact, the Belarusian state dates back to the Middle Ages. The Grand Duchy that in the 13th century unified the region’s Slavic and Baltic tribes stretched in its heyday from the Baltic to the Black Sea. It lasted for over half a millennium. In 1569, in alliance with Poland, the state formed an aristocratic republic that became a haven of relative tolerance and freedom for about 200 years. However, it served primarily as a common defence against external threats – the country waged war twelve times with the Muscovites alone between the 14th and the 17th centuries.² At the same time, the unification resulted in the Polish domination of political and cultural elites and urban centres.

Unlike in Poland and Lithuania, Belarus’ national movement gathered momentum slowly.

After the violent partition of the *Rzeczpospolita* by Prussia, Russia, and Austria at the end of the 18th century, those who did not accept the new status quo were confronted with the question of which country they would support, with arms if necessary: A restoration of the Pole-centric

aristocratic republic or modern nation states (that were to be homogenised)? The idea of the nation state gained momentum, particularly in Poland and present-day Lithuania. Broad swathes of the mostly Catholic, and Polish- or Lithuanian-speaking population started to develop a national consciousness, which ran counter to the Russian-speaking Orthodoxy. The Belarusian national movement, however, grew slowly. Large parts of the aristocracy remained polonised, and others became impoverished or were exiled within Russia after the January uprising. The majority of the Belarusian people lived in rural structures and, while they felt strong ties to their immediate home, were not necessarily conscious of a national “imagined community”³. The czarist administration, on the other hand, pursued a policy of systematic russification in its new “western territories”. It cast itself as a liberator from the “Polish yoke”, declared the national language – in which Europe’s first written constitution had been published – to be a Russian dialect, and destroyed structures reminiscent of the “golden age” of independent statehood, including all of the country’s town halls.⁴ The Greek Catholic church, to which most Belarusians belonged, was banned, and the faithful were forced to “return” to the Russian Orthodox Church.⁵ These policies were not without success. Nevertheless, a Belarusian nationalist movement formed, primarily in the area of Vilnius, which had a large Belarusian population, and on 25 March 1918, still under German occupation, the All-Belarusian Congress declared the independence of the Belarusian People’s Republic (BNR), which had been formed a short time before. This was the first state to explicitly bear the name “Belarus”, but it was not to last long. The very next year, it was forcibly replaced by the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), and the country’s west became part of Poland for the next two decades.⁶

Tabula Rasa?

If, one hundred years later, the people of Belarus are asked what they think the most important events in their country’s history are, many of them will consider these events much less





In memoriam: The victory in the “Great Patriotic War” is for many Belarusians one of the most relevant events in their history. Source: © Vasily Fedosenko, Reuters.

important than what happened in the 20th century. In a 2016 survey by the National Academy of Sciences, the victory in the “Great Patriotic War” was first in all age groups, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Chernobyl disaster.⁷ The radical upheaval of the bloody 20th century represented formative points in the people’s mentality, values, and identity. After initially benefitting from Lenin’s nationalities policy, which promoted the languages and cultures of the Soviet Union’s peoples, Belarus saw in 1929 the beginning of forced collectivisation, terror, and mass deportations that effectively eradicated the national elites.⁸ The partitioning of Poland, in accordance with the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact, led to the amalgamation of the “Belarusian territories”, but shortly thereafter

the German war of extermination and the Holocaust cost one third of the population their lives. At the same time, the remaining anti-Soviet forces – among them many of Stalin’s victims – discredited themselves by collaborating with the Nazis and were therefore exiled or executed when the war ended. On the other hand, the Second World War became the starting point of the partisan myth, in which some see the “very first expression of a collective Belarusian popular will”.⁹ The victory over Nazi Germany was a new beginning and became a central pillar of the Soviet self-image. In Belarus, this was symbolised by the radical re-design of Minsk as a Soviet ideal city. Reconstruction and industrialisation gave the country an economic boost, expanded education, and provided a relatively

high standard of living. As a result of the murder of the Jews, which in many places had made up about half of the population, along with the expulsion of many Poles, ethnic Belarusians now made up the majority of the population, including in urban centres. Belarus was, however, greatly affected by russification, not least because of the immigration of many Soviet citizens from other republics in the Union.¹⁰ All in all, the Soviet period, especially toward its end, was nevertheless a happy one for many Belarusians.¹¹ In contrast to its neighbouring countries, Belarus had no pronounced anti-Russian sentiment; there were few dissidents, and no strong resistance movement. The country received independence in 1991 “without a fight” – as though the dissolution of the USSR had been decided on Belarusian territory.

Aliaksandr Lukashenka remains the only president of the Republic of Belarus, which was founded in 1994.

Restart 1991?

The majority of Belarusians welcomed the independence of their state, and it was initially accompanied by a national renaissance in the 1990s. Parliament received “tons” of enthusiastic letters during its 1990 deliberations about making Belarusian the only official language, and the white-red-white flag of the Belarusian People’s Republic became the official national flag.¹² However, the election of the first – and to date only – president of the Republic of Belarus in 1994 took things in a different direction. Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who was born near the Russian border, was less than enthusiastic about national Belarusian thought or the Belarusian language. According to his own account, he was the only representative of the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR to vote against independence and, even in 2020, refers to the former USSR as his “fatherland”¹³. In a controversial 1995 referendum, he re-introduced Russian as the second (and de

facto first) official language. He halted the privatisation of the economy, pushed for a union with Moscow, and entered into a confrontation with the West in view of his actions relating to democracy and human rights.¹⁴ A rehabilitation of the Soviet period followed that was not limited to national symbols, the reinstatement of holidays, the retention of a secret service named KGB, and the names of streets and towns.¹⁵ It also encompassed the cultivation of a comprehensive welfare state and historical narratives. Displaying old Belarusian symbols was branded as nationalist, the national flag that had just been re-introduced was placed under a de facto ban, and the Belarusian language was stigmatised as an expression of oppositional attitudes.¹⁶ Lukashenka knew that a significant portion of the population supported this course. He also secured important economic support from the Kremlin, to which he regularly emphasised that he had curbed anti-Russian nationalism in his country.

Instead of reviving old traditions, he created his own version of a republican identity whose foundations were oriented not on ethnic nationality, language, or culture, but on the new state and its presidential axis of power. A corresponding state ideology was developed and, since 2004, has been systematically spread via schools, state and youth organisations, companies, and the media.¹⁷ The values it defines are the “Great Victory” of 1945, (social) peace, independence, and stability.¹⁸ The spread of the Belarusian language has since greatly decreased. Only about one in ten schools today give instruction in Belarusian, and although surveys show that 86 per cent of Belarusians consider the language as the most important component of their culture, only two per cent speak Belarusian at home.¹⁹ This policy is having an effect: to a 2016 survey asking what Belarusians most link to their nationality, 72.5 per cent responded “territory and common place of residence”, and 68.8 per cent cited the state.²⁰ But the concept of a state ideology failed to become deeply rooted in the population, and President Lukashenka has, since 2014, repeatedly acknowledged that the approach was a failure.²¹ The timing appeared anything but coincidental.

Ukraine Crisis: The Shift in Foreign Policy Identity

In the area of foreign policy, too, Belarus had for many years cultivated a post-Soviet identity with preferred contacts to Russia and a chilly relationship to the West, where it was decried as Europe's "last dictatorship". The "Crimea moment" not only jolted political elites in the EU awake, but also sounded the alarm in Minsk. Russia, Belarus' central economic and military partner, had violated the Budapest Memorandum, which also guaranteed Belarus its territorial integrity. Minsk refused to recognise the annexation of the peninsula, instead attempting mediation. This became the starting point for the development of a new self-perception of Belarus' foreign policy role – that of "guarantor of regional stability". Lukashenka invited the conflicting parties and European partners to negotiations, and the Belarusian capital became the eponym for the peace plan that remains in place today. Minsk continues to attach great importance to its special relationships to the East; in addition to its membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Belarus co-founded the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2014. But the declared goal is a "multi-vector" and "situationally neutral" foreign policy with the best possible relations to all sides. The release of political prisoners in 2015 warmed relations to North America and the EU, triggering a rapprochement which has since developed with unprecedented dynamism.²²

Minsk's top priority is preserving national sovereignty, which, today, is challenged more than anything by Russia.

The driving factor for Minsk is its interest in maintaining national sovereignty. Today this goal is challenged more than anything by Russia.

From the very beginning, Moscow has been very sceptical of its neighbour's apparent overtures to the West and perceived Minsk's refusal to allow a new Russian airbase on Belarusian territory as an unfriendly act. The then Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, presented Minsk with an ultimatum in December 2018, when it was facing the pressure of an ailing economy: under the basis of the almost-forgotten 1999 Union Treaty, Belarus was to commit itself to deeper political integration with Russia if it wished to continue to benefit from the latter's cheap energy supply. This put Belarus into a quandary. Higher oil prices would not only endanger Belarusian export profits from refinery products but cause severe difficulties for the Belarusian welfare state and put Belarusian companies at a severe competitive disadvantage within the EAEU compared to Russian companies. But relinquishing sovereignty was also not an option for Lukashenka, Europe's longest-serving head of state, whose instinct for power is keen. Relations worsened throughout 2019, and despite intensive negotiations, the two sides were unable to come to an agreement on central issues.²³ Belarus' economic situation continued to deteriorate in early 2020 because of the collapse of transit revenues and oil prices, the devaluation of its currency, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Identity Against Outside Pressure?

The pressure from Moscow is not restricted to diplomatic and economic efforts, but also encompasses social networks and the media. Seventy per cent of Belarusians view Russian broadcasts and trust the information they provide.²⁴ Moreover, recent analyses have shown the extent to which Kremlin-friendly networks, such as *Russkij Mir* (Russian world), are attempting to influence Belarusian public opinion in favour of a union with Russia.²⁵ The Belarusian state took countermeasures in the form of an information security concept and announced the creation of a new television channel.²⁶ At the same time, state representatives recognise that, in face of a self-confident Russia or pro-Russian cultural chauvinism, the existence of the Belarusian nation is confronted not only



On a first name basis: Despite recent differences with the big neighbour, a large part of the Belarusian population favours good neighbourly relations. Source: © Sputnik / Mikhail Klimentyev / Kremlin via Reuters.

rhetorically but also and increasingly – given the low profile of the Belarusian identity and language – an existential threat.²⁷

This is how previously unthinkable state concessions to the “other side” of the national identity came about in recent years. A symbolically rich moment was the March 2018

centennial celebrations for the founding of the BNR. Gatherings had previously been subject to severe restrictions on this “opposition anniversary”, but in 2018, the state surprisingly allowed a major event within a limited area in the heart of Minsk.²⁸ The opening ceremony of the 2019 European Games, which the Russian Prime Minister attended, became



a state-organised panorama of symbology, personalities, architecture, and art representing the Belarusian state and Belarusian folklore. History policy, meanwhile, remains careful and sometimes contradictory, as the Vilnius case, described at the beginning of this article, illustrates. While a memorial has been erected to honour Kościuszko, the Belarus-born leader of

a 1794 uprising, the Academy of Sciences de facto advises against naming streets after him.²⁹ Lukashenka has begun referring to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a “Belarusian state”, but refrains from recognising its victories as Belarusian victories, relying exclusively on Soviet history for the traditions of today’s army.³⁰

A survey shows that most Belarusians are not primarily pro- or anti-Russia.

Popular opinion has been affected by the foreign policy developments and by the reporting on the dispute with Russia. A 2019 sociological study by the Belarusian Analytical Workroom posed the hypothetical question of whether Belarusians would rather live in a union with Russia or be part of the EU. Between January 2018 and August 2019, the proportion favouring Russia fell from 64 to 54 per cent, while that for the EU rose from 20 to 25 per cent. When the question was asked again in December, at the height of the Russian-Belarusian dispute, the rates were almost equal (32 to 40 per cent).³¹ There was a pronounced gap between age groups: Two-thirds of those 55 or older favoured Russia, but the EU is the clear winner among those younger than 34, although even in this demographic, it did not reach 50 per cent.

Can the Narratives Be Reconciled?

The data described above give the impression of a geopolitically divided country – but such a conclusion would be inadequate. The same survey shows that most Belarusians are not primarily pro- or anti-Russia, since despite Belarus’ recent differences with Russia, three fourths of Belarusians favour good neighbourly relations. The data also show that geopolitical orientation is subject to greater day-to-day political fluctuation than national identity would seem to allow. A look at the qualitative part of the analysis is more informative: those who favoured union with Russia cited, as the most important reasons,

a similar mentality, “Slavic values”, and the common language and history. Those who favoured the EU were concerned with material issues, visa-free movement, and professional opportunities. Items such as common European values and culture achieved an average value of six on a scale of nine but reached only spots twelve to 14 on the “most important concerns” list. Belarusians agree about one thing, however: more than 95 per cent reject the idea of becoming a Russian province. Whether a person derives his Belarusian identity from Soviet heritage or the BNR, whether he feels greater emotional affinity with Russia or with the EU, does not apparently influence the fact that both sides remain clearly committed to the independence of Belarus.

Belarus combines various historical, cultural, sociological, geographical, and economic elements of East and West.

Thus, both poles of the Belarusian national identity, however much they disagree in questions of content, are part of Belarus in its modern form when the situation is viewed dispassionately. But the post-Soviet-statist variant, long promoted by the Belarusian state as the only acceptable one, is reaching its limits today. Author Maryna Rakhlei cites the fact that most Belarusians simply have little knowledge about their national history and culture and thus know of nothing “to be proud of”.³² There is a great deal to be proud of, if one considers pride a desirable sentiment, both in history and in the present, but pride would require anchoring the cultural wealth of the country more firmly in the Belarusian public consciousness and displaying it to the outside world.

In the current situation, in which many questions about the past remain unresolved and old wounds appear to be concealed rather than

healed, a comprehensive dialogue process between the state and various social actors would be beneficial. At the moment, NGOs, political parties, and citizens’ initiatives are primarily responsible for cultivating language and cultural heritage, while the state tends to tolerate rather than promote such activities.³³ But, at best, such a process could contribute to moving existing narratives closer together. The Soviet experience formed the course of many lives and can therefore not be simply jettisoned; instead, it should be integrated into the historical and cultural identity to the extent possible. Belarus’ revival during the Soviet period and its development since the collapse of the USSR, which has been characterised by relative stability, can form inspiring connecting points, despite all the questions that need to be raised with respect to democracy and human rights.

The new foreign policy could even offer an external frame of reference: the country places great importance on not being forced to take sides geopolitically, a situation which is often interpreted as standing “between East and West”. From a historical, cultural, sociological, geographical, and economic point of view, a better interpretation would be that the country, which is situated in the geographical centre of Europe, unites elements from both East and West. In terms of identity politics, this view could provide an opportunity not only to reconcile internal narratives, increasing the resilience of Belarusian society, but also to heighten the country’s profile at the international level – especially in the West, where Belarus is often perceived as a mere Russian appendage because of the way it has positioned itself for years. Belarus’ self-positioning as a bridge-builder, a “situationally neutral country” that is familiar with “both sides” is an identity that is compatible with the way many Belarusians see their country. According to the study cited above, about half of the population would rather live in partnership with Russia and the EU at the same time, or with neither, than decide between the two. Moreover, such an integrative reconciliatory view would pose scarcely any danger of sliding into nationalism.

The extent to which the Belarusian leadership would be prepared to enter a dialogue beyond the steps described remains to be seen. Political leaders remain engaged in a balancing act, since they are greatly dependent on Russia, which will carefully follow any steps the country takes away from the ‘joint narratives’ with suspicion.³⁴ That is one reason why the state strives to keep control of political and social processes at all costs – including the sensitive question of national identity. But the state can count on support from the public if it chooses a path of national self-assertion. The immense challenges associated with the coronavirus have demonstrated the great degree of cohesiveness, dedication, and talent for organisation that Belarusians possess. It should encourage the state to involve the public in other decisions, too, and to place greater trust in them.

–translated from German–

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