Belarus
Research
Network
on Neighborhood
Policy

Belarus. Language, identity, the state, and a farewell to illusions

Interview of Pavel Tereshkovich
by Lizaveta Dubinka-Hushcha

Analytical Article
2022

Belarus belongs to a region of Eastern Europe that has historically been the place of origin of a particular type of nationalism: there is a kind of rule for the region that the basic foundation for the legitimization of the establishment of a separate state is the existence of a particular language and culture. This so-called “ethnolinguistic nationalism” has been successfully transformed into civic nationalism in a number of countries, but the rule stays the same.

At the same time, Belarus has historically belonged to the multicultural “borderland”, where for a long period of time hybridization and flexible identities were the key elements of successful social adaptation, strategies of existence, and survival. The inhabitants of the borderlands should permanently determine the extent to which they identify with their own culture or with another external culture.

Belarus is probably the last pure example of an Eastern European borderland. It has, officially, two Easters and two Christmases (“Catholic” and “Orthodox”), two official languages, and two Independence Days (one official, the other not, both only slightly relevant to the country’s true independence).

Adam Kirkor, a famous historian and ethnographer of the 19th century, noted: «When I asked a Belarusian peasant near Minsk about the confession he belonged to, he answered: ‘Previously I was of the Polish one, and now, probably, of the Russian’.»

This “probably” is the key to the understanding of the “borderness” of Belarusian identity. Belarus was Christianized in the late 10th century. Christianity came from Byzantium through Kyiv[1]. Later, in the 14th century, a major portion of the nobility turned to Catholicism. Then, in the 16th century, the country turned to Calvinism, and

[1] According to a Belarusian-Swedish historian Andrej Kotljarchuk, the Belarusian Princedom of Polatsk was Christenized by Thorvald the Wanderer, who came from Iceland. His travels are described in the Icelandic "Strand of Thorvald the Traveler", which is contained in the "Baptismal Saga", "Olav Tryggvason's Saga" and "The Book from the Flat Island". Historians are not unanimous about the exact date when Thorvald Christenized Polatsk. Thus, according to A. Kotljarchuk’s version it happened in 986, two years before Kyiv. According to sagas, Thorvald arrived in Polatsk together with his friend Stevnir Thorgilsson, moving through Kenugard (Kyiv) along the Nepra (Dnieper). They built a church on "Mount Drofne" and opened the monastery of St. John the Baptist. Some historians believe that Thorvald did not Christianize Polatsk in his first visit between 985-986, but all acknowledge the fact that Thorvald died in Polatsk around 1002. According to the skald Brand the Traveler, who visited Polatsk, Thorvald was buried “in the mountain near the Church of John” and was revered as a saint. (L. D-H.)

in the 17th century it went back to Catholicism. To accommodate the lower classes' typical borderland hybrid outlook, the Uniate church was invented, and the majority of Belarusians, up to 80%, adopted it by the end of the 18th century. But then in the 19th century, Russian authorities converted Uniates to Orthodox and pressured Catholics. In the interwar period, Polish authorities did the same towards the Orthodox[2], and later, the Soviets almost eliminated both.

Belarus was an essential part of what Timothy Snyder labelled the "blood lands". This is mainly, but not only, because of Hitler and Stalin. This is also because of the experience of existing and living on the border. A "border" is something that has less value than a "core" – especially if the population at the border differs from the core in terms of culture, religion, language, and ethnicity. Before WWII, Belarus suffered from the Soviet-Polish war, WWI, Napoleon's invasion, the Nordic war at the beginning of the 18th century, and a terrible war in the middle of the 17th century: "*On the one side were Russians, on the other Swedes, with no escape from the great trouble*". This Belarusian proverb was recorded two centuries after the period labelled by Henryk Sienkiewicz as "the Great Flood". It is estimated that half of the population was killed. This war is now forgotten and is almost excluded from the public historical discourse. But knowledge of the war could help to frame the peasant's "probably" mentioned above. He said this not because he was not confident about his beliefs, but ~~it was~~ because he was not confident about what answer would serve him best when he met a stranger who could be dangerous.

The roots of the Belarusian national movement could be traced at least to the 1810s. Russian imperial authorities did not recognize Belarusians as a separate people, but only as a branch of Russians polluted by Polish influence. That is why several attempts to start national movements were persecuted. But the main obstacle for Belarus was general backwardness, which slowed down social mobility: at the end of the 19th century, 96% of Belarusians were peasants and 87% were illiterate. The national movement becomes quite vibrant after 1905, and especially in 1918 when on March

[2] It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the truth and the Russian, later Soviet propaganda regarding the activities of the Polish authorities and the Catholic church whom they traditionally regarded an enemy.

25th the independent Belarusian People's Republic was proclaimed[3] and the first steps towards the establishment of a nation-state were made.

The Bolsheviks fought back and established the BSSR – the Belarusian administrative autonomy within the Soviet Union, which during the short period of so-called "Belarusization"[4] gained some traits of a true nation-state: a government, parliament, university, national academy of science, national library, and national archive. The Belarusian language achieved dominant status in the public sphere, alongside Russian, Polish, and Yiddish. By the end of the 1920s, a core national identity narrative was constructed. It was focused on the language, the early medieval kingdoms of Polatsk and Turau, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and such heroes as the East Slavic pioneer of book printing Francysk Skaryna and the leader of the 19th century uprising Kastus Kalinouski.

But this national identity was not sufficiently rooted in the general population. This is mainly because of the massive repressions of the 1930s, which were targeted at the national political elite, intellectuals, the national historical narrative, and the Belarusian language. In a single night, on 29 October 1937, 132 writers were exterminated. WWII intensified the negative effect of repressions due to dramatic population losses (city dwellers were the first victims) and the destruction of cultural heritage. After the war, Belarus was a devastated, depopulated area and an intellectual desert.

Until the end of the 1950s, Belarus persisted in its backwardness as an agrarian republic due to the domination of the rural population (71%). A rapid and large-scale modernization from the 1960s to 1980s turned it into one of the most advanced republics of the Soviet Union. A wave of the rural migrants escaping from the "serfdom" of collective farms moved to cities to embrace the 8-hour working day, guaranteed salaries, modern apartments with cold and hot water, refrigerators, and televisions, and they appreciated these as a miracle. The Belarusian language became

[3] It was a protest to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, concluded without a presence of Belarusian representatives

[4] Bolsheviks' Belarusization was designed to deface the deep connection with the Polish language and culture, often exaggerating the time of the Union with Poland as the period of oppression of the Belarusian peasants by the Polish landlords.

the mark of backwardness, while Russian was the language of progress. The large-scale Russification was intensified by ideology, which promised the construction of nationless Communism in the near future. By the middle of the 1980s, there was not a single school with Belarusian as the language of instruction left in Belarusian cities.

Russification coincided with the large-scale memorialization of the Great Patriotic War and the construction of an image of Belarus as "the Partisan Republic". Wartime heroism and suffering became the core of the historical narrative, while all other events were portrayed in the shadow of the war.

The modern Belarusian national movement unexpectedly awakened in the early 1980s; it became the main rival of the Belarusian Communists by the time of Perestroika and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It provided an alternative vision of history, and the traditional national narrative was subject to harsh rhetorical attacks regarding the entirety of the Soviet period. The discovery of Kurapaty – the site of a massacre of civilians by the NKVD – become a powerful tool of anti-Communist mobilization. The relatively small-scale national movement played an enormous role in gaining independence, the democratization of political life, and the reconstruction of the position of the national culture, language, and identity.

Those changes coincided with an economic crisis, hyperinflation, social disorder, and the collapse of the Soviet-era welfare system. Acquiring national independence was seen as a trick of fortune rather than the result of a determined fight, and many did not appreciate its value. Lukashenka promised a return to the Soviet Golden Age, and he won. He restored Soviet-style state symbols, the domination of the Russian language, and the glorification of the Soviet past, centred on the Great Patriotic War. The memorialization of the war was marked by the construction of the modern War Museum (2014) and the so-called "Stalin's Line" (2005) – a kind of militaristic Disneyland. Within this context, places such as Kurapaty become a kind of unwanted heritage, and, alongside the Belarusian language and national identity, discussion about it became a symbol of opposition and a mark of political enemies of the regime.

Since 2002 – which saw the first open conflict between Lukashenka and Putin – identity discourse has begun to change. This was accelerated by the annexation of Crimea, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Donbas, and especially by the end of 2016 Kremlin political course of "deepening integration within the union state of Russia and Belarus".

These changes can be seen in the appropriation of additional historical symbols like the carefully reconstructed castles of Mir (2010), Niasvizh (2012), and Hrodna (2021), in the new official concept of the history of Belarusian statehood (2019), and in the elaboration of symbols and manifestations of Victory Day that are distinct from Russia's (such as the apple blossom ribbon instead of the Georgian one, or the phrase "Belarus remembers" (the Victory Day. – L. D.-H.) instead the "Immortal regiment" used in Russia). It also opened the way to a European model of understanding and memorializing Holocaust sites, including the memorials in Trostenets (2015) and Blagovshchina (2018). In 2018, authorities allowed the opposition to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the proclamation of independence of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, and it also allowed the registration of Nil Hilievich University – the first higher education institution with Belarusian as the language of instruction.

It has been a highly controversial and inconsistent process. The authorities have tolerated civic activities rather than actually supporting them. There has been no substantial progress in the protection of the Belarusian language. The Belarusian-speaking population was (and is) the most populous discriminated-against minority.

Belarus was (and is) the only state in Eastern Europe where the language and culture that legitimize its creation and existence are in a subordinate, discriminatory position. This violation of the unwritten rules of the region is a challenge and direct danger to its very existence as a sovereign state.

In 2020, for first time in its history, the people of Belarus showed that they were not simply a passive population, but an independent force. Belarusians proved that they

were not “probably” but “definitely” Belarusians, not manipulated objects that were the victims of a number of Polish uprisings, Russian revolutions, and world wars, but the nation itself. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians crowded the streets in the capital, other cities, and villages to show that they wanted to live in freedom, in an independent European state. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians decided that protests against an illegitimate power should be peaceful. This is because of our historical, almost genetic memory of being a borderland. This was probably our mistake.

The year 2020 brought the bitter taste of defeat. This was the year of a farewell to illusions. Illusions that criminal authorities can be defeated with flowers and clean streets after demonstrations. We were beaten, tortured, imprisoned, and killed. We asked, we screamed, we begged the whole world for help. And what did we get? An endless number of “deep concerns” and sanctions, after which Belarusian exports to the European Union increased by 60%. We now know that “deep concerns” are only building materials – the road to hell is paved with “deep concerns”. And the names of hell on Earth are Akrescina prison, Mariupol, Gastomel, and Bucha. I do believe that if Lukashenka had been stopped in 2020, then today there would be no invasion of Ukraine.

I do believe, as a historian, that regimes such as those of Lukashenka have no future. But as a historian, I also know that the road to a new Belarus will be hard and long. And I would like to say thank you to all who support us now and will support us in the future.

This interview was recorded during Dr. Pavel Tereshkovich’s visit to Copenhagen for taking part in the conference organized by the Danish Helsinki Committee in the Danish Parliament to mark the 30th anniversary since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The interview took place at the University of Copenhagen and Copenhagen Business School.