

POST-SOVIET BELARUS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the formation of a new national identity in Belarus under conditions of post-Soviet transformation. Under the term of “national identity” the author means the identity of the population of the Republic of Belarus that will be adequate to its status of a newly independent state acquired after 1991. Special attention is paid to the existing major research approaches to the problem of constructing this national identity. According to the author’s view, both major approaches are inadequate; the author puts forward a new (third) approach that goes beyond discussions on language and national culture, and corresponds to the concept of plurality of identities. The author describes some paradoxes of national identity based on the opposition of “nation” and “people”. These correspond to the Western model of the “creation of modern nations”, which is not fully applicable to post-Soviet Belarus. All attempts to apply this model to contemporary Belarus lead scholars to several “cultural paradoxes” that can, however, be explained within a new approach.

KEY WORDS: post-Soviet Belarus – national identity – nation – systemic transformation – pluralism

Introduction

The breakdown of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the following systemic transformation of the USSR initiated substantial changes on the institutional level and in the mass consciousness of the former Soviet people. Each post-Soviet state started managing these changes on the basis of its own historical legacy, cultural traditions, and new external

conditions of its existence. One of the most contested issues is the construction (or reconstruction) of new collective identities. These kinds of identities can be relevant for the whole nation or some ethnic groups within it, depending on the situation in a particular country. In Belarus, even the idea of a national identity was not elaborated during the Soviet time, because the “title” (dominant) nation (ethnic Belarusians) did not develop its national consciousness to a level that is usually considered as “appropriate” for putting forward any nationalistic ideas and constructing the nation as an “imagined community”¹. Nevertheless, during the period of Perestrojka in Belarus some nationalistic movements were formed².

Western social sciences have highlighted several models of nation-building that resonate in the post-communist states. Ewa Thompson points to the relevance of post-colonial theory for post-communist states. In some countries, these models fitted the local cases. In other countries the Western theoretical concepts of the state, nation, democracy, market, etc. have not worked and have been significantly transformed in order to correspond to the changes in the geopolitical situation, the new mosaic of nation-states, and the new vision of the future of each nation (within the EU or out of it).

In post-Soviet countries (mainly, in Russia) scholars identified “special features” that have to be taken into account. These scholars elaborated the main types of identities, showed divergent trends in their formation in different regions of the former Soviet state, and explained the mechanisms of construction of some particular types of identity – gender, ethnic, territorial³. In the case of Ukraine, authors focused on the necessity to keep deep ties with the historical past of a nation in order to distinguish one nation from others⁴. Overall, the problems of the construction of post-Soviet national identity have been fixed in post-Soviet states within a discourse of the “struggle against the Soviet legacy”, “national oppression” and ‘returning to historical roots’ (although the process of reconstruction of post-Soviet identities is still under way).

The situation in Belarus is not similar. As measured by the typical criteria of post-communist transition, this country differs greatly from others and demonstrates several “paradoxes of democratization” – mainly, as Korosteleva and Hutcheson⁵ have noted, a very slow pace of social and economic changes and a low level of mass support for the nationalistic opposition. In regards to national identity in particular, several papers have

1 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1991.

2 E. Gapova, *O natsii bednoy zamolvite slovo*, „Topos” 2005, no. 1 (10).

3 E. Danilova, *Kto my, Rossiyane?* [in:] *Rossiya: Transformirujusheesja obshestvo*, V. Yadov (ed.), Moscow 2001; L. Gudkov, *Struktura i character natsionalnoy identichnosti v Rossii* [in:] *Geopoliticheskoe polozenie Rossii*, Moscow 1999; J. Katchanov, N. Shmatko, *Semanticheskie prostranstva sotcialnoy identichnosti*. [in:] *Sotsialnaya identifikatsiya lichnosti*, V. Yadov (ed.), Moscow 1993, vol. 1; A. Malinkin, *Novaya rossiyskaya identichnost: issledovanie po sotciologii znaniya*, “Journal of Sociology” 2001, no 4; *Sotcialnaya...*

4 Z. Kogut, *Roots of Identity. Studies of early modern and modern history of Ukraine*, Kiev 2004.

5 *The Quality of Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, E. Korosteleva, D. Hutcheson (eds.), London 2006, p. 14.

been published (abroad and in Belarus) to describe the “paradoxes” of Belarusian identity. Ya. Shimov⁶ explained these paradoxes as follows: instead of fighting for liberal freedoms, Belarusians prefer social and economic stability in the country, instead of developing nationalism Belarusians are almost indifferent to ethnic-national discourses, and they identify themselves as Belarusians while mostly speaking Russian.

The objective of this research is to examine the construction of a new Belarusian identity under the conditions of post-communist transformation. The goals of the paper are to analyze the approaches (foreign and domestic) of new models of post-Soviet Belarusian identity; to compare the previous dominant theoretical model of identity with the newly constructed models; and to explain the existence of some paradoxes of Belarusian identity (as they are presented in public, in scientific literature, and in politically oriented papers on the Internet).

This research is based on several theories. Firstly, transitional theory: I consider Belarus as a typical post-Soviet country in the process of transition from the Soviet past (i.e. from state socialism) to a new state (there is no certainty about this new state, but from the beginning it was indicated as transition to the market and democracy, so that we have to place discussions about identity within this context). Secondly, theories related to social (in particular, historical) memory: how people build their present on the basis of their past, or, more precisely, on the images of their past on the basis of their knowledge, perception of history, practices, etc.

This subject inevitably presupposes a comparative method. On the basis of comparison, the differences between the previous (Soviet) and current (post-Soviet) models of Belarusian identity, as well as between several post-Soviet models, will be shown. The empirical analysis is based on the national survey data (N=1000 respondents over 18 years old, face-to-face interviews, limiting accuracy 0,05), conducted in 2000 within the framework of the European Values Study, using Western methodology, as described by L. Halman⁷. Additionally, the author uses data from the national monitoring survey run by the Institute of Sociology, National Academy of Sciences (2005, 2008)⁸, and the empirical data of the IISEPS (2004, 2009).

The major hypothesis is based on the selected theoretical approach to the subject: contemporary Belarusian national identity has not yet been completely constructed, as there is no “dominant” view shared by the majority of the population on their national identity. The current situation is characterized by a plurality of identities, and the whole notion of „Belarusian national identity“ can be explained in a different way depending on the theoretical framework of the scholar as „totally negative“ or „normal“ or even „positive“. However, given that the political isolation of Belarus has been overcome, the Belarusian population feels more “involved” in the European milieu and therefore the mosaic of identities is increasing. Belarus is following the tendencies that are common in other

6 Ja. Shimov, Belarus: Eastern-European Paradox, www.belaruspartisan.org [30.10.2006].

7 L. Halman, *The European Values Study: A Third Wave*, Tilburg 2001.

8 National Surveys, www.iiseps.org [28.12.2008].

European nations, including the adoption of multiculturalism (sharing different modern and traditional values), combining local-national-European types of identity, and ethnic and religious tolerance⁹.

From this point of view, Belarusian identity must be constructed as a civic one – like in the Czech Republic, as described by Hroch¹⁰. Only this kind of national identity corresponds to the modernity challenges facing Belarus. It can be constructed on the basis of civic consciousness without direct connection to any language or ethnicity. Actually, as Minenkov¹¹ showed, such a plural national identity has been under construction since the „revolutionary events“ of March 2006. Some representatives of the Belarusian intellectual elite (sociologist Babosov, political scientist Abramova) support this approach, which rejects an ethnic basis for contemporary identity¹².

This approach is based on the following assumption: the combination of components of national consciousness that are sufficient for the construction of a new national identity and acceptable for the majority of people in Belarus, would not include “purely” anti-communist or nationalistic ideas. On the contrary, the new national identity must provide a strong basis for the consolidation of people of different ethnic backgrounds and therefore include some basic values shared by the population, including tolerance of pluralism and bilingualism. In other words, they have to be oriented to the European future of the country.

A framework for the analysis of contemporary Belarusian identity

In the transitional period, most post-Soviet countries faced some common problems. The problems of rethinking their place in the world and the construction (reconstruction) of their national identity were among the primary tasks. Analysis of numerous texts on construction/reconstruction of national identity in post-Communist countries (including post-Soviet Belarus) shows that research mostly concentrates on four key theses. As for Belarus, two major theoretical approaches and two antagonistic political projects have been developed: nationalistic, associated with Belarusian intellectuals, and pro-regime, developed by the official ideologists.

The first thesis deals with the revitalization of nations, or an increase in the social influence of nation and nationalism in the new political situation. The question is: what is the definition of the nation that all the people (or at least the majority of people) could accept? Traditional ethno-nationalism, developed in Central Europe, emphasized the “title” (dominant) nation, or ethnicity as the core for contemporary nationalism. Within the

9 See: National and European Identities Are Compatible, www.iue.it/RSCAS/Research/EURONAT/Index.shtml [06.09.2004], C. Grant, What are European Values? “Guardian” 25.03.2007, p. 3.

10 M. Hroch, Language as an Instrument of Civic Equality, “Ab Imperio” 2005, no 3.

11 G. Minenkov, K novoy oppositsii, www.belintellectual.com/discussions, 2006 [18.09.2006].

12 Belarus: ni Europa ni Rossija. Mnenija belorusskih elit, www.arche.bymedia.net/2007-knihi/zmi-est01_ru.htm, 2007 [16.12.2008].

context of two national projects in Belarus, the concept of a “nation” was introduced by Belarusian intellectuals: only those who have national consciousness and speak the native language represent a “nation”¹³. Otherwise, nation refers only to intellectuals. In contrast, the concept of nation in the official discourse was substituted by the concept of “the population of Belarus,” or “people of Belarus”¹⁴: it meant all citizens regardless of their level of consciousness or their language.

The second thesis highlights the enormous differences in criteria of national identity considered as necessary and sufficient by different authors. These differences have mainly concerned the native language that in Belarus has actually become a means of division of the nation rather than of the nation’s consolidation. Also, as Gapova¹⁵ explained, the “national language debates” were actually shifted into a corporative political project connected with the class interests of new emerging social groups fighting for redistribution of power in the country. The view that the native language is a core criterion for national identity is present in several theories of nationalism¹⁶. Similar views are expressed by Belarusian nationalists: Belarusian as a core indicator of identity. For the official state ideologists, Belarusian is primarily a means of communication, as well as Russian.

The third thesis refers to contemporary attitudes to the Soviet period. On the one hand, the nationalists rejected the Soviet period as totally belonging to the “era of national oppression and Soviet colonization”¹⁷; on the other, the pro-regime authors have tried to absorb the “best” of the socialist past and incorporate it into the present life, i.e. they consider the Soviet past as an appropriate source of positive ideas to be adopted for the future national project¹⁸.

The fourth thesis concerns many controversies regarding the methods of constructing national identity and the terms for this process. The first party (nationalists) tried to impose a new national identity quickly, by the so-called “Bolshevik method” of coercion (by introducing Belarusian language in all schooling systems, official documents, and public life as obligatory within a very short period of time). In this way they wanted to transform „Archipelago Belarus“ into a real country, i.e. impose their own criteria of nation to „all people“. The second party, on the contrary, did not determine any specific dates for the shift from Russian to Belarusian: it allowed for the spontaneous dynamics of this process. In practice, this approach stimulates the younger generation to use Belarusian and can bring better results for the nation than the harsh methods.

The main approaches to the problem of constructing Belarusian identity, presented in the social sciences and in the public realm, can be roughly divided in two mainstreams. The first represents the official “patriotic” position: it is well-supported by state media and state-subsided journals, and incorporated into contemporary (recently approved) school

13 V. Akudovich, Archipelago Belarus, www.txt.knihi/frahmenty, 2003 [18.9.2006].

14 Belarus...

15 E. Gapova, O politicheskoy ekonomii “natsionalnogo yazyka” v Belarusi, “Ab Imperio” 2005, no. 3.

16 Nationalism in Eastern Europe, P. Sugar, I. Lederer (eds.), Seattle 1994, p. 4.

17 V. Orlov, Destruction of Identity, www.belaruspartisan.org, 2006 [3.11.2006].

18 I. Levyash, Belorusskaya ideya: v poiskah identichnosti. “Belorusskaya Dumka” 2003, no. 11.

and university history textbooks. According to this approach, Belarusian national identity is characterized by patriotism. It combines some traditional features of Belarusian character (tolerance, hospitality) and some features that originated in the Soviet past (love of the country, pride in its past and present, internationalism). It is based on the concept of the „people of Belarus“: all of them personify the new national identity. As a result, a Belarusian is depicted as a patriotic person who is devoted to hard work and proud of living in Belarus¹⁹.

This kind of identity also stresses the legacy of the Great Patriotic War: Belarusians are represented as partisans fighting against the German aggressors. They suffered a lot but they won the war and therefore they are heroes. Regardless of the real history of the nation, contemporary Belarusians are depicted as a heroic nation, working hard to build a prosperous country. In this way, a strong basis for the high self-esteem of the common people is constructed. Within this ideal model (the opponents usually call it “neo-Soviet”), the Belarusian people are conceived as a homogeneous unit, within which all members (regardless of their ethnic identity, their language, or religious identity) are equally good workers and law-abiding citizens of Belarus, who respect the Soviet past of the country. Overall, this new Belarusian identity combines several features of the previous Soviet identity (internationalism, stability, hard work), some traditional values of Belarusians (safety and tolerance), and some new features characteristic of the independence period (Belarusian patriotism). This political project is well represented in many papers published in the journal “Belaruskaya Dumka”, in which the official state views always dominate. For example, Krishtapovich stressed that Belarusians are part of the Slavic brotherhood and directly contrasted Belarusian identity to the values of the West, and focused on the heroic war past of the nation²⁰.

The opposite position is presented in the nationalistic media, originally associated with the movement Adradzenne and the Belarus National Front. This approach expresses the views of Belarusian intellectuals – a group that considers its members to be the only legitimate representatives of the Belarus nation. These intellectuals feel that they represent the “genuine Belarus”, the “real Belarus” – but they in fact constitute a tiny minority of Belarusians (“the whole Belarus”). Their definition of Belarusian identity is based on ethnicity, associated with the Belarusian language and culture. As Akudovich explained, “the whole Belarus” and “real Belarus” were two different concepts or two different parts existing in the same geographical space but constructed in a totally different spiritual space²¹. They did not accept each other. Although “the whole Belarus” embraced the majority of the people, the “real Belarus” (or Belarusian intellectuals, members of the “Adradzenne” movement) discredited this majority and refused to call it a nation because this majority did not have a developed national consciousness. In short, Belarusian intellectuals constructed an imagined (ideal) model of the Belarusian nation, as Gapova argued²², while

19 S. Byko, Belarus – strana druzby i natsionalnogo soglasiya, „Belaruskaya Dumka” 2005, no. 10.

20 L. Krishtapovich, *Mozno li zit' kak na Zapade?*, „Belarusskaya Dumka” 2006, no. 9, p. 39.

21 V. Akudovich, *Archipelago Belarus...*

22 E. Gapova, *O politicheskoy ekonomii...*

the population was refused the status of a nation. This position was represented in the Belarusian media (“Nasha Niva”, “Svaboda” newspapers), national history books, and some political intellectual circles. It was supported by the opposition leaders abroad and those who emigrated decades ago²³. National consciousness represented in Belarusian language and Belarusian ethnicity represented in cultural symbols (folklore), were the core characteristics of this model of national identity. According to Dubavec, this political project included three elements of “nationalistic myth”: language, village, and Vilnia, i.e. it stressed an image of the nation as related to native Belarusians speaking “authentic language”, living in the countryside (“less Russified”), and being historically related to Belarusian intellectuals living in Vilnius before World War II²⁴.

This approach and political project were based on clearly articulated political views: anti-communist, anti-colonialism, and nationalism. All three features were closely inter-related, so that it was necessary to be anti-communist and blame the “Soviet past of Belarusians” to become a “good Belarusian nationalist”, as Akudovich wrote²⁵. Those who could not speak “real Belarusian” (Tarashkevica), who did not know (or did not appreciate) works by nationalist historians Vladimir Orlov or Mikola Ermalovich, who did not blame the “colonial Soviet past”, were called “Belarusian plebs”, “social provincials” – i.e. underdeveloped people.

However, the ethno-cultural nationalistic model of identity was not broadly supported. “Common Belarusians” and many educated people could not accept anticommunism and were afraid of the political aggressiveness of the BNF. They rejected this model as there was no attractive (positive) content in it; previous history was explained as the epoch of Russian colonialism, Russian and Soviet oppression. Belarusians were depicted as victims, as poor people who had never enjoyed freedom. In reality, many Belarusians, especially current urban citizens, moved to the cities after World War II: they became part of the educated Soviet middle class or qualified working class and improved their standard of living during the Soviet time. They had no reasons to call their Soviet history “a period of oppression”: it was almost a “golden age” for many of them. They did not want to “return to Europe” as they felt comfortable with their Soviet past and patriotic present.

To summarize: the Belarusian people are viewed as divided into two unequal parts: (1) Belarusian intellectuals (a minority, which nationalists call “a nation”) who support ethno-cultural identity with the key elements of language, ethnicity, nation, and culture in general; (2) the rest (nationalists call it “the whole Belarus”, official authors – “the people of Belarus”). The weak points in both approaches are similar: both take for granted the image of a “pure national identity”, both are unable to deal adequately with the great range of historical and contemporary factors influencing the process of the construction of national identity. Both approaches fail to distinguish between the conditions that hinder the

23 J. Zaprudnik, *Belarus in search of national identity*. [in:] *Contemporary Belarus. Between democracy and dictatorship*, E. Korosteleva, C. Lawson, R. Marsh (eds.), London 2003.

24 S. Dubavec, *Try skladnika Belaruschyny*, <http://draniki.com/ask/dubavec.asp>, 2005 [15.09.2006].

25 V. Akudovich, *Archipelago Belarus...*

growth of national consciousness and the conditions that motivate growth of national feelings and lead to national self-esteem, etc.

The official academic literature does not fully reflect these debates. Moreover, by the beginning of the 21st century, the nationalistic model lost support. Therefore, a new model of identity is needed that goes beyond the political interests of the two above-mentioned parties²⁶. Such a new model relates to the discourse of modernity–post-modernity. According to this model, the processes of forming the nation-state are typical for modernity (both official ideologists and Belarusian intellectuals took this for granted). However, this period is over. The current period is characterized by features of post-modernity: fragmentation of identity, the free choice of several types of collective identities instead of interiorizing the prescribed socio-cultural identities within the framework of initial socialization. From this model, current Belarusians can easily identify themselves as members of a religious community, a particular sub-cultural group, a political party, i.e. as representatives of multiple identities, and get rid of “old” identities such as social class (workers, clerks, and peasants) or nation. As Minenkov²⁷ stresses, contemporary Belarus is a complex society in a globalizing world; therefore, it needs a multicultural pluralistic identity. Belarus has to become a pluralistic cosmopolitan rather than nationalistic society. From this point of view, the emerging new identity is represented by the young people (“19–25 generation”) who came to the centre of Minsk after the presidential elections in 2006 to protest against election fraud and demonstrate their human dignity. These young people refused to be treated as an Object: they were ready to become the Subject, political agents of social change²⁸. This generation may formulate a new national identity, which does not inherit from the Soviet times. One vivid example of this is the state efforts to embed the notion of the “Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People”), despite which all Soviet history, including the war, is perceived as a history of another state, not Belarus.

To sum up: the “paradoxes” of national identity can be explained by its interpretation within one of the two existing approaches that are politically biased and oppose each other. The third, new approach allows us to get rid of nationalism and the narrow linguistic view on identity. This approach is more relevant to post-Soviet, post-modern reality. Therefore, only a plural civic identity can be the key to the construction of a new model of national identity in Belarus.

Important factors influencing Belarusian identity

Two important factors influencing the construction of a new national identity in Belarus are the Union of Russia and Belarus, connected to the official bilingualism, and EU en-

26 Belarus...

27 G. Minenkov, *K novoy oppositsii...*

28 T. Rapoport, *Politisheskaya modernizatsiya ili politisheskaya emansipatsiya?*, www.belintellectual.com, 2006 [18.11.2006].

largement. The nationalistic approach, based on three major ideas – independence from Russia, Belarusian language, and Belarusian culture²⁹, does not help to resolve these issues. A significant reason is that the majority of Belarusians reject anticommunism and do not support the nationalistic view on identity. Instead, some of them support a model of identity called “new-Soviet” or “Soviet-Belarusian”.

If we analyze empirical data from surveys, we can understand that the population is very uncertain about its future and its relations with Russia and the EU. However, people are not against bilingualism and the EU. Transitional processes are not finished: for example, the Soviet model of identity, the “Sovietskiy chelovek” (Soviet personality), still exists in Belarus. In the Soviet period, as Smirnov argued³⁰, this personality type was characterized by such features as a communist world-view (atheism, science), materialism, collectivism, readiness to subordinate their private interests to state interests, and social optimism. Of course, not all people living in the USSR or in BSSR actually displayed these features; rather, these features constituted the model of the “we-group” for the Soviet people. This type of identity was deeply rooted in the Soviet past and the “collective unconsciousness” of post-war generations of Soviet citizens. According to the 1991 VTSIOM survey, presented by Gudkov, 69% of Belarusians described their social identity as “Soviet citizens” and only 24% – as “citizens of their republic”³¹. It means that on the eve of independence (1991) only a quarter of Belarusians gave priority to their national culture and mentality that distinguished them from other Soviet people.

Currently, the situation in Belarus is quite different: the Soviet identity still exists; however, Belarusians share many types of identity. Table 1, constructed on empirical data³², shows how Belarusian respondents identified themselves, and how often they selected these types of identification.

Table 1. Main types of identity selected by Belarusians

Type of identity	Often	Rarely	Never
Citizen of Belarus	30	24	14
Nationality (various)	30	24	15
Inhabitant of particular city, village	25	32	20
Resident of Belarus	26	27	17
Soviet person	17	18	26

The social basis for producing and reproducing the model of homo sovieticus disappeared together with the Soviet state. Although, as Jury Levada explained, by the mid-

29 S. Dubavec, Nezaleznost i „nezavisimost“, „Radio Svoboda. Vostraya Brama“ 02.04.2006.

30 G. L. Smirnov, Sovietskiy chelovek. Formirovanie sotsialisticheskogo tipa lichnosti. Moscow 1980.

31 L. Gudkov, Struktura i character natsionalnoy identishnosti v Rossii [in:] Geopoliticheskoe polozhenie Rossii. Moscow 1999.

32 Archive Data of National monitoring of the Institute of Sociology, Minsk 2009.

1990s, this type did not exist according to survey data³³, some features were preserved (the ideas of equality, social stability, personal non-responsibility, hunting for enemies, conformity). These ideas can long continue to guide people.

One of the factors influencing the uncertainty and pluralism of identity is the Union with Russia, signed in 1996. The practical uncertainty of the current status of this Union creates some significant obstacles for the construction of a new model of Belarusian identity: if there will be one state in the future, the unified identity will be necessary; if the union will remain in its current status, a stronger model of pure Belarusian identity should be formed. According to IISEPS³⁴ data, soon after the approval of the Agreement more than half of Belarusians supported the process of unification with Russia, while currently the number of supporters of the full unification (and the formation of one new state) has decreased (see table 2).

Table 2. Responses to the question: „What would you choose for Belarus: unification with Russia or joining the European Union?“ (in %)

Choice	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	03/2009 (March)	12/2009 (Dec.)
Unification with Russia	47.6	47.7	51.6	56.5	47.5	46.0	42.4	42.1
Joining the European Union	36.1	37.6	24.8	29.3	33.3	30.1	35.1	42.3

In total, according to 2009 surveys, approximately four out of ten Belarusians would prefer joining Russia to joining the European Union³⁵. It is quite possible that this number will be less in the coming years because of the “gas war” and economic losses on both sides in the relationship between Russia and Belarus. Anyway, the Union with Russia strengthens types of identity such as Slavic and Soviet, while weakening the European identity of Belarusians. Unification with Russia is still more popular among Belarusians. This attitude cannot influence positively civic and ethno-national identity, but it can increase the local type of identity (*tuteyshie*): in the case of unification this type will be the only basis for keeping the national culture, norms and traditions alive. If unification takes place, ethnic identity will become a more important factor; however, it will divide people rather than unite them (as it is the case now).

The ups and downs in the process of Russian-Belarusian unification, and lingering uncertainty as to the final status of the Union with Russia, contribute considerable ambivalence to the understanding of the positive and negative aspects of the new model of Belarusian identity. Thus, if there is a political union with Russia, who are the Russians

33 J. Levada, *Homo Sovieticus: problema rekonstrukcii*. “Monitoring of Public Opinion” 2001, no. 2.

34 National surveys...

35 NISEPI surveys (2009). *Analityka*. www.iiseps.org/index.htm [12.02.2010].

for us – “Others” or “Us”? Probably, those Belarusians who, according to IISEPS (2009) data, hypothetically agree to be unified with the Russian Federation, consider Russians as an “us”-group, while those who prefer to join the European Union hypothetically consider Russians as a “they”-group. Such data clearly manifest the ambivalence of the current understanding of the meanings of “we”- and “they”-groups within the framework of identity construction: for some Belarusians, citizens of a country other than the Republic of Belarus (Russia or EU) belong to the “we-group”, while for other Belarusians all these countries are truly foreign and therefore their citizens are considered as “others” or even “aliens”.

Bilingualism as an indicator of Belarusian identity

One of the major features of the contemporary situation is bilingualism. There are some important historical conditions that predetermined why a good deal of ethnic Belarusians speak Russian either as their mother tongue or as their second major language (together with Belarusian). During the Soviet times, because of the process of Russification, it was not necessary to learn Belarusian for people who were not ethnic Belarusians, even if they were born in Belarus. Also, it was more “prestigious” among the intelligentsia and especially authorities to speak “business Russian” in the office rather than the less developed and less popular Belarusian. As Gapova explained, the shift from Belarusian to Russian was often voluntary, as Russian gave more career chances³⁶. It is worth mentioning that both languages belong to the group of Eastern Slavic languages, they are really close to each other in terms of morphology, alphabet, etc., and people easily understand each other when speaking both languages. The Soviet linguistic policy was more supportive for Russian: every Soviet citizen should know Russian well, especially in case of promotion. As a consequence, the languages of the national republics were alive, but not in use in big cities with an international population, in large factories, or even universities. Members of many ethnic groups in the cities found it more practical to use Russian, which became the lingua franca for the Soviet political and economic space. It is no accident that Belarusian nationalists selected “villages” as the “motherland” for Belarusian identity and “Belaruskasti”³⁷.

As a result of this policy and practice, Belarusians, being a nation with some unique sociocultural features, usually adopted Russian as the language of everyday communication. The contemporary population of Belarus, although consisting primarily of Belarusians (81%) and only in 11% of Russians, practically no longer discuss either a “language issue” or a “religious identity issue”. As Kirienko empirically proved, they are tolerant of any language (and therefore speak Russian, Belarusian and Trasjanka), just as they are

36 E. Gapova, *O politicheskoy ekonomii...*

37 S. Dubavec, *Try skladnika Belaruschyny...*

tolerant of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant religious denominations³⁸.

There is one more historical determinant that contributed to the so called “in-between” status of Belarusian identity throughout the centuries. As Abdziralovich perfectly explained, ethnic Belarusians always lived “on the crossroads” – between West and East, Russia and Poland, being always under the strong cultural and political influence of neighbouring cultures and languages³⁹. Belarus was not only “between” East and West; it also belonged either to Eastern or Western states, so that until now Belarusians have never lived in their own nation-state.

Survey data collected by the independent Institute for social and political studies, II-SEPS (2004), showed that Russian-speaking citizens of the Republic of Belarus more than any other “ethnic communities” supported the national independence of Belarus, together with a free market and liberal democracy. Actually, there is nothing new in such phenomena: as G. Ioffe argued, non-ethnic Belarusians who did not speak Belarusian (Russians, Jews, Ukrainians) were always more “nationalistic” and “pro-Belarus” in their struggle against conservative authorities of all kinds in the region now called the Republic of Belarus⁴⁰ than their ethnic Belarusian counterparts.

According to the IISEPS data (2004), Belarusian is the only language of communication in the family for 13.7% of the respondents, while for 73.6% it is only Russian, for 6.8% it is both Russian and Belarusian, and for 4.7% it is a language other than Russian or Belarusian. If we compare this linguistic situation with the ethnic composition of the population (81% ethnic Belarusians and 11% Russians), we may conclude that the majority of people prefer Russian for practical reasons, and there are no ethnic conflicts concerning this matter. That is why language is not a political or cultural watershed; it cannot be taken as the major criterion of formation of the new model of Belarusian identity. Belarusian, according to Gapova, is no longer a democratic symbol and means of national mobilization as was the case under Perestroika⁴¹. Even among the group speaking Belarusian at home there are some people supporting bilingualism, while among those who speak another language at home (neither Russian nor Belarusian) there are many supporting only Russian as a legal language. It is evident that a new civic national identity in Belarus can't be constructed in a way similar to the Czech Republic, where language was a central factor.

Conclusion

The analysis of two main theoretical approaches and models of constructing a new Belarusian national identity has clearly showed that the Republic of Belarus does not fit the

38 V. Kirienko, *Mentalnost sovremennyh belorusov*, Gomel 2005.

39 I. Abdziralovich, *Advechnym shljaham*. Minsk 1993, p. 3–4.

40 G. Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus: Questions of Language*, “Europe-Asia Studies” 2003, vol. 55, no. 7, p. 1010.

41 E. Gapova, *O politicheskoy ekonomii...*

dominant western models of national identity construction in post-communist countries. Both of these approaches – supported by Belarusian intellectuals and BNF leaders, on the one hand, and by the official ideologists, on the other – prefer to construct an “ideal model” of nation and national identity to back their own interests. They consider the real people of Belarus as an “underdeveloped population” and an object for manipulation (using the Marxist concept of class consciousness, an object onto which a “proper” national consciousness can be imposed). Both models are closely connected with the different groups of political elites oriented either to change the power structure in the country (opposition) or to preserve the existing structure (official).

Although these two models are narrow and politically biased, the official one is prevailing. This model constructs national identity on the basis of the historical memory of Belarusians referring only to Soviet history, mainly – to the Great Patriotic War. According to this model, Belarusians became free in 1944 when the country was liberated from Nazi troops; so, all talk about any other kind of freedom and liberation is “empty” and inappropriate. Therefore, instead of the opposition’s “myth of Belarusianness”, consisting of language, culture, and independence from Russia, another “myth” has been constructed: “independence from Germans, internationalism, and Belarusian patriotism”. Consequently, the possible space for myths in the construction of a new national identity has been reduced to (a) the historical period of World War II, (b) the Soviet period of successful restoration of the country after this war, and (c) the period of Belarus as an independent country (after 1991). No other history is necessary for this new-Soviet type of Belarusian national identity. However, the new civic model of national identity goes beyond political limits and ethnic frontiers: it is based on the major values shared equally by the population of Belarus regardless of ethnicity: tolerance, multiculturalism, social justice.

All the so-called “cultural” and “political” paradoxes of contemporary Belarusian identity as they are described in the literature (“nation without nationalism”, “independent Belarus without freedom and democracy,” etc.) simply attest to the fact that the real situation in Belarus differs from the above-mentioned models. Only “terminological play” can perfectly explain these paradoxes, which actually show that Belarus needs a new, non-contradictory explanatory theory and a new type of national identity backed by the idea of Belarusians as the subject of their own actions. The events of March 2006 provided hope that this kind of national identity is under construction.

The contemporary process of the construction of Belarusian national identity can be described within a post-Soviet inertial model: it provides a small space for the construction of a truly new national identity that can correspond to the challenges of globalization, external pressures of different kinds, and give the country a chance for its future. Currently, Belarusians do not have one dominant set of values that all the population would prefer, therefore, there are also no universal values shared by all Belarusians as one “we”-group. The modern identity of Belarusians is multifaceted. Our analysis has discovered a cultural mixture of traditional and modern identities among Belarusians, the eclectic nature of mass values, and the coexistence of several types of identities without a dominant one.