



THE BALTIC SEA REGION

Cultures, Politics, Societies

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1 The development of the concept of a national identity in Belarus

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To my father

But who's tramping there, but who's tramping there, Such a tremendous throng in despair?
— Byelorussians.
But what are they carrying, through dirt and mud, In their arms, on their shoulders sweated to blood?
— Their unjust lot.
But whom do they want to show the load They carry, flocking along the road?
— To the wide world.
But what made these millions awake and arise, What taught them to be so daring and wise?
— Want and grief.
But what is it they now wish they could find, They, for ages oppressed and for centuries blind?
Their human lot.

Yanka Kupala 1907 *But Who's Tramping There?*
(after the anthology published 1982)

“...Belarus was known for its traditional calmness, tolerance and neutrality...”
“The Belarusians have a great desire for independence and autonomy, but they are steeped in tradition, and tend to follow powerful leaders without question”
Morrison T., Conaway, W., Border G., 1997

Identity

Identity is a primary mental construct. Identity is both a reflexive relation, defining an individual (“Who I am”) and a relation of belonging to (/being part of) a group. The set of identity characteristics is culture-specific and practically unlimited. Most salient components of **ethnic identity** are related to the native language, outward appearance, spiritual qualities (such as religion, beliefs concerning origin and kinship) and traits discriminating ego from alter.



Traditionally ethnic (and often social) identity is understood as an objective legacy, given from outside (“by god, sucked in with mother’s milk”, determined by kinship, origin, territory, or even biology, as encapsulated in the German expression *Blut und Boden*). An opposite point of view stresses an individual’s right to determine one’s identity by voluntary acts of access to an ethnic, religious or, for instance political or sexual group (“I am who I concern myself to be”, “I am a Swede/German/Russian... by my choice”).

The following articles are case studies on identity of two Baltic peoples, lesser known outside the region.

Map 12. Belarus. Ill.: Radosław Przebitkowski



Figure 26. Belarusian border post. Is the Polish-Belarusian border going to be a border of the European Union in future? Photo: Alfred Majewicz

I would like to start this survey with a disclaimer. The present paper is a personal view of a historically minded psycholinguist engaged in the analysis of intercultural communication issues. This view has formed as a result of putting together a whole range of works by representatives of various fields of science.

1. The territory and kinship

As with most nations, the boundaries of the territory inhabited by the Belarusian people are hardly ever stable, however, the Belarusians have always lived between the Western Dvina, Pripyat', Sozh, Niemen, and Dnieper rivers (see Burbis, 1999; Philipenko 1991).

There is a generally accepted view stating that there was an unknown ancient Finno-Ugric tribe, a Baltic substrate and three East Slavonic tribes—Dregovichich, Radzimich, Krivich, who had considerable influence over West Slavs and other East Slavs who contributed to the formation of the Belarusian nation.

Belarus has traditionally been an agricultural country despite its harsh climate and poor soil. The land ownership differed from

the communal one, typical for the Russians (see Burbis 1999).

Due to its advantageous – in this respect – geographical position, Belarus has always been a trading centre. Even the name of the capital, Minsk (*Men'sk*, *Menesk*) comes from the verb *meniat'*, to barter.

However, one can hardly think of it as a major trading centre as no major investments have ever been made into the development of this land and its potential with the exception of Soviet times. In the years following the October 1917 Revolution, and especially after the World War II, the centralised planned economy has turned Belarus, not very rich in natural resources, into a large assembly plant for the entire Soviet Union. For instance, it was only Minsk that produced the big road truck-refrigerators. One of the effects of this economic development was a large influx of people from other parts of the USSR who came to Belarus to work at these heavy industry enterprises and thus influenced some demography and linguistic processes.

The most unpredictable part of the objective factors shaping the national identity of Belarusians is the history of the nation. The general feeling of the process is probably best expressed by one of the most outstanding 20th century Belarusian poets, the ardent advocate of the Belarusian language and culture, Yakub Kolas, in his 1917 epic poem “Simon-Musician”.

My dear brothers, Byelorussians!
 In this book of human deeds
 Fate itself, perhaps as temptation,
 Has given us these fair meads.
 For here the tribes have gathered
 To decide their disputes by force
 To win our well-endowed country
 By conquest, all in due course,
 To deal us here a heart-wound,
 And to clamp on us their yoke,
 To defile our sacred treasure,
 To deride the soul of our folk,
 And in the slough of deception
 To leave of us not a trace,
 So that grandsons will not fathom
 Who were grandsires of their race.

.....
 And so have we not the right, then,
 By force to blaze our trail,
 And our own beloved country
 As our motherland to hail?
 (Yakub Kolas, 1982)



Figure 27. A drawing inspired by Chagall. Ill.: Małgorzata Sheiki-Binkowska

2. The memories

To cut a very long (hi)story short, let us say, that through the centuries Belarusian lands and its people made a part of a number of states (e.g. Kievan Rus, Great Lithuanian Principality, Rzeczpospolita, Russian Empire, etc.). Due to its geographical position it has suffered from all wars waged from North to South, from South to North, from West to East, from East to West. As an outcome of these historical events, Belarusians learnt to live side by side with people of different national and religious backgrounds.

At the dawn of the communist era in the history of Belarus, A. Burbis wrote that “the Belarusian national movement is deeply rooted in the unique past history of Belarus, in its economic, ethnographic and linguistic peculiarities”. In the 11-16th centuries the Belarusians experienced the golden age of its statehood, society, national culture, built on elements of democracy. In the long centuries of its life that merged together with Poland (16th-18th centuries) and later with Russia (18th-20th centuries) it could hardly put up with what was brought to Belarus by Poland “in the form of a gentry-aristocracy republic, and by Moscow in the form of a boyar oligarchy and absolute monarchy” (Burbis 1999).

As a result of national-religious antagonism and a whole number of social factors, class and social layer contradictions in Belarusian history, the Belarusians did not manage to preserve their state and social independence through the course of history.

Burbis also claims that the gradual loss of the socially privileged strata of society who were becoming alienated from the Belarusian popular masses in their language, life style, ways of thinking and feelings, made the people devote all their strength, active force, and creativity to build up the statehood and culture of the neighboring peoples. However, they still retain their national customs, which differentiate them from other peoples. Left on its own in its original primitive forms of life, the nation preserved both its mother tongue, its beliefs, its customs, its general cultural and its economic way of life (Burbis 1999).

The first attempts of a national movement in Belarus in the form of literary activities date back to the 1830s-1840s, and in the second half of the 19th century they took the form of more varied activities (e.g. the ‘*Narodniki*’ student group “Gomon” in St Petersburg in the 1880s) aimed at the restoration of the Belarusian culture, at building up national pride and awareness of the people. The basis for the idea of human and social rights was set in this manner, according to Burbis (1999). Whatever the expectations and aspirations of the well-to-do Poland-oriented landlords or of the mighty bureaucratic authorities, who considered Belarus and the Belarusians part and parcel of Russia, in an 1897 census quite a large proportion of the population of the so-called “North-Western Region” named Belarusian as their native tongue.

Leaving history aside, I would like to point out once again that it is the objective migration processes rather than only the political events concerning language and culture that have to be taken into account while thinking of the Belarusian identity.

Speaking of material culture it will be enough to remember the Belarusian architectural styles which reflect the history of the country (e.g. fortified monasteries), a whole series of unique arts and crafts (Slutsk belts, tapestries, straw and flax dolls, etc.), a school of painting that gave the world such a prominent figure as Marc Chagall, great Enlightenment personalities like St. Euphrosinia of Polotsk, Francisk Skaryna, etc., the first brotherhood schools of the 16th century, national Belarusian poets, novelists, playwrights.

As we can see, all the material prerequisites are here. Belarusians have their land, their history, their economy and their language.



Figure 28. The grave of Francišak Alachnovič (Frantsishak Alakhnovitsh), Belarusian playwright, in Vilnius. Photo: Alfred F. Majewicz

3. The little brother

Going back to the relations with a “Big Brother” there is no doubt that the other East Slavic nations, Russians and Ukrainians have no doubts in identifying a Belarusian even if the in-group feelings prevail. Belarusians are regarded as a little brother, and are called, most lovingly, “*bulbashi*” (potato people).

Though similar in many respects, Belarusians differ from the “Big Russian brother” in many culture-defining aspects, e.g. in attitudes to nature, to time, to activity and to each other.

Thus, relations with nature are closer, more of the harmonious living versus the conquering type. According to Russian tradition one is supposed to kill the Snake Queen should she cross your path in early spring, whereas the Belarusian way is to bow low and plead for a good year. This tradition is easily accounted for by the amount of wetlands (hence, snakes and the necessity to live with them) in Belarus.

Both nations are known for their hospitality, however it is only in Belarus that a guest is not supposed to taste food unless the host has asked him to do so at least...five times (the famous Belarusian “*prymus*”).

Belarusians have a reputation of being more diligent workers than some other nations (and of being stubborn).

“Belarusians’ concerns are for the immediate, particular situation” (Morrison, Conaway, Border 1997). Is this, as well as the primary value given by Belarusians to peace, not quite understandable for a nation torn by wars in which it had no interest whatsoever?

4. The contemporary views on Belarusian identity

How do the Belarusians see their traits these days? It has to be noted that although it is generally accepted that it is the non-urban population vs. the urban that used to be the carrier of the national type, and it is in the countryside that people speak more Belarusian than Russian, it has always been the city intellectuals who fought for the concepts and ideals of a national identity. A comprehensive sociological research carried out by Nadežda Yefimova in 1992 and 1998 also reflects the views of the intellectuals (men of culture, education, politics) on the issue of national identity. She analysed a whole range of newspapers, from the rightist to the leftist as to how they cover the national identity issue. In most papers, national culture materials ranked first followed by history, ethnography and religion. It was basically the Belarusian language and literature that were covered under “culture”. However, in 1998, the number of articles devoted to language issues diminished (from 28.4% to 13.1% of the publications). Language is no longer considered to be the major element of culture and cultural identity. Forced Belarusisation or Russification or Polonisation has never actually brought good results unless well-grounded in objective reality and economic needs. Both in 1992 and in 1998, it was the creation of an ethnocratic state (a term suggested by Yefimova) and the restoration of statehood that people saw as a way of national revival. National identity is seen as incorporating the following elements: national language (41.5% in 1992, 20.6% in 1998), original culture (27% respectively 15.7%), original history (9.6% respectively 11.8%), religion (4.8% respectively 0%), psychological traits (2.2% respectively 5.9%), ethnic peculiarities (4.1% respectively 0%), statehood (9.6%

respectively 9.8%). As can be seen, more comprehensive elements are coming to the forefront of the understanding of the concept a national identity.

The view on typical Belarusian qualities has also changed in the six years from 1992 to 1998 (to what degree it is the result of media influence on society is a different issue). The ranking of the features are as follows:

Table 2. Belarusian qualities

1992	1998
Tolerance	Persistence, tenaciousness, strong mindedness
Self-esteem	Self-esteem
	Modesty, simplicity Talent
Talent	Decisiveness, audacity
High moral	Being demanding, standards critical, austere
Devotion to the cause	Responsibility, sense of duty

There is a tendency to prefer active features to passive ones. Even if this is the result of media influence on the intellectual audience, I personally see it as positive progress, appropriate for a nation with a significant history, a nation which has its due place in the global village of the 21st century (Yefimova 1998).

5. Conclusion

What then is the driving force, the concept lying behind the national identity of Belarusians? Vyatsheslav Nosevitsh says that “for the mass consciousness to grasp an idea it has to be formulated in a rather simple, unequivocal way, which is a rather hard thing to achieve within the complex historical processes” (Nosevitsh 1998). He also thinks that the formation of the Belarusian nation was based on the principle that it was the people who were NOT Russian, NOT Polish, NOT Lithuanian, etc who founded the Belarusian nation (p.27).

I am inclined to regard this approach as salient to the Belarusian character, the modesty typical of the Belarusians, who do not like to stand out and who do not speak very highly of themselves. It is an issue of formulating the idea whether the glass is half-full or half-empty; is it the OTHERS who are NOT LIKE US or US who ARE NOT LIKE THEM.

Throughout its history, Belarus and Belarusians strove to be recognized as equals, as having “THEIR human lot”, to be left to choose their own way of life for themselves. National identity was mostly identified with national statehood.

The discontent of the intellectual elite has apparently been caused by the fact that there were more elements of assimilation than of integration in the relations with other, mostly dominant, cultures. (Assimilation is a denial of one's own culture in favor of a new, more powerful one, etc.; integration means retaining your own culture and acquiring a new one as well).

What is the future of this nation of SURVIVORS in the third millenium? Will they remain this unknown people who live inconspicuously somewhere in the middle of Europe? Will they stay immune to the avalanche of changes? Will they resist globalisation and stick to their simple peasant survival philosophy? Time will tell. However, there is a good chance that adaptability, tolerance, diligence, hospitality and a respect for other cultures are just the features that will make the transition to globalisation, the integration of Belarusians into the global village quite easy and natural.

We are the people of this land, “*tuteishyia*” (‘locals’), Belarusians, people of the third Millenium.

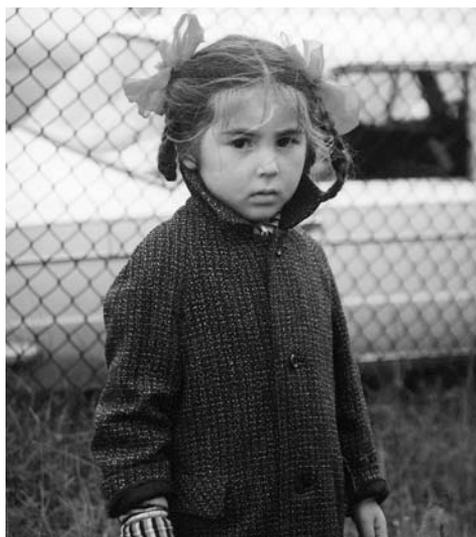


Figure 29. A girl of Tatar origin, Belarusian-Lithuanian border area. Photo: Alfred F. Majewicz

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