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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Reassembling Society in a Nation-State: History, Language, and Identity Discourses of Belarus

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Abstract

The article examines the political and cultural processes of nation-building over thirty years of independence in Belarus. It argues that in becoming a nation-state Belarus has faced challenges similar to the other post-Soviet nations but has proved an exception in the choice of strategies it used to address them. The paper examines how, on the eve of independence, the nationalist elites devised policies aimed at consolidating statehood around the national revival in opposition to the Soviet past. It explores the role played by linguistic policy and historical memory as the two main arenas for implementing their visions of Belarusian identity. The paper then maps a shift in this trajectory from Lukashenka's rise to power to a national project based on reappropriation of Soviet legacy. Up until 2020, the state effectively navigated a geopolitical environment and adjusted its sociocultural parameters to preempt the society's shifting expectations. Finally, the paper reflects on how protests in 2020 demonstrated both the lack of support for Lukashenka and his reliance on the violent repression and external support for remaining in power. The war in Ukraine revealed limits of Belarus's sovereignty, while the society's ability to consolidate for its defense has been seriously undermined by the repression.

Keywords: Eastern Europe; memory politics; national identity; language policy; post-Soviet

The changes in social and political order in post-Soviet countries over 30 years of independence have been affected by two parallel processes: rebuilding the community of now sovereign nations while socializing their citizenry within each country to the institutional framework of the newly established nation-states. The abrupt collapse of the Soviet Union created favorable conditions for giving the state an enhanced role – now seen as a genuine and legitimate "national" actor – in managing public life during the transformation. Independent statehood had long been a strategic goal of nation-minded elites in some of the former Soviet republics. In the Baltic states as well as the south Caucasus states, it was ethnic nationalism that became the major ideological underpinning of post-Soviet regime changes, leading to the establishment of what Graeme Gill called "ethnic democracies" (2002, 82). In other countries, national statehood was seen by ruling elites as a valuable resource that had fallen into their hands. As the example of countries like Belarus demonstrate, even if state rulers coming to power did not originate in the nationalist opposition to the Soviet Union, with the establishment of independence they developed increasingly state-minded discourses asserting their nation-states' sovereignty. Differences in the composition of the ruling elites can explain a variety of combinations of two processes – re-statization and nationalization – across the post-Soviet countries, with new imagined collective identity being redefined and determined by social practices and relations, which now serve for reinforcement of the symbolic presence of state.

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This articles looks into dynamics of the Belarusian development in its venture of becoming a nation-state in which it faced challenges similar to the other post-Soviet countries but has proved an exception in the choice of strategies to address them. The paper first examines how, at the eve of state independence, the national revival was imagined in opposition to the Soviet past. It explores the role played by the linguistic policy and the historical memory as two main arenas chosen by the newly emerged anti-communist political forces to pitch their vision of the Belarusian national identity. The paper then proceeds to map a shift in this trajectory with Lukashenka's rise to power, which resulted in a switch from estrangement of the Soviet legacy to a project built on its reappropriation and nationalization within the framework of the Belarusian national statehood. The paper demonstrates that up until 2020, the political regime crafted by Aleksander Lukashenka proved able to preempt social mobilization and institutionalization of the political opposition (Bedford 2021). The policy of what some scholars described as "soft Belarusization" over the 2010s demonstrated the regime's ideological flexibility that it was willing to demonstrate as long as it helped to preserve the political status quo. The paper finally reflects on how the mass protests against the rigged presidential election in 2020 unveiled the transformed reality of the Belarusian society, which showed the ability of unprecedented horizontal mobilization in its strive to challenge the autocratic rule. The protests also created a new performative reality in which the historical ideas and symbols previously ascribed to conflicting ideological discourses have been reappropriated for articulating the demand for a change.

The National Self and the Paradigm of "Othering" Reconsidered

In the context of post-Soviet transformation, the state needs to be viewed as a product of multiple dynamics, among which the consolidation of national statehood and the search for geopolitical framing of this statehood becomes crucial. As Mark Bassin has noted, the nationalist ideologies of post-communist states frame their visions of nationhood in terms of a model of "supranations," which can be defined as "ideologized visions of multi-national agglomerations […] bound together into a single cohesive supra-national 'community' by a set of shared cultural, religious, moral, and social values, as well as a sense of common historical origins and experience" (2012, 554). In Belarus, belonging to a larger supra-national community, often defined as a nation's "civilizational identity," became one of the most contested issues in the politics of nation-building. The European identity of Belarus advocated by some political and cultural actors was challenged by the idea of Belarus as belonging to an East Slavic civilizational space, a stance that came to be promoted by the Belarusian state.

Between 1991 and 1994, Belarus became a "nationalizing state" as defined by Rogers Brubaker as a polity of and for a "particular ethnocultural 'core nation' whose language, culture, demographic position, economic welfare, and political hegemony must be protected and promoted by the state" (1996, 10). The introduction of national ideology as a leading principle of political, social, and cultural life in the new post-Soviet states was considered a natural reaction to the failure of the Soviet Union and an apt means of "Othering" the previous system's experience. While the process of Othering is traditionally analyzed as both a contrasting and constitutive mode of building relations with outside players in the international arena (Neumann, 1996; Diez, 2004; Gibbins, 2014), it can also be traced to the way in which post-Soviet states have rethought their nation-state identity vis-à-vis their own Soviet past, as well as their conceptualization of present-day post-Soviet (or Eurasian) space.

The logic of temporal Othering implies constituting sovereign subjectivity by excluding certain tradition(s) and recasting certain periods of the past as the past of an Other. Territorial Othering, on the other hand, implies self-definition via the exclusion from a corresponding cultural or political center of gravity. Among various types of Othering, Thomas Diez distinguished various modes of radical and non-radical Othering, such as the representation of the other as an existential threat, as inferior, as violating universal principles, and, finally, as the less radical type of representation as

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mere difference (Diez, 2005, 628). Temporal and territorial modes of Othering commonly complement each other and often derive their efficiency from mutual conditioning: what is Othered temporally must be assigned a spatial locus in the present, while the territorial other must be denied legitimacy in the present by its relations with the past (Prozorov 2009, 157).

Othering Sovietness in post-Soviet Belarus implied defining the national Self via confrontation with the Belarusians' Soviet experience presented as a period of anti-national development. Becoming national in this context means becoming anti-Soviet: that is, consolidating the state's Self by means of a differentiation of its new national being from the Soviet past. In this context, forced liquidation of what was perceived as vestiges of the Soviet system became an essential part of nation-state building. This is how various programs of "negative remembrance" that were focused on the Soviet crimes formed the core of state memory politics in the Baltic countries, in Georgia, and, most recently, in Ukraine. In a similar vein, the variety of language politics formulated in the new nation-states by post-Soviet elites exemplify different forms of radical or non-radical temporal Othering of the Soviet past. Post-Soviet nationalist activists were striving to reframe the Soviet Union as a "foreign country" while recasting the Soviet experience as antagonistic to the nations' development.

The first pre-independent oppositional movement created in Belarus in 1988 was the Belarusian People's Front (BPF),[1] which formulated the idea of a Belarusian national revival in opposition to Soviet ideology. Whilst still a minority in the Supreme Soviet of Belarus elected in 1992, the Belarusian People's Front, led by Zianon Pazniak, gained the support of the Democratic Bloc and managed to become the leading political force that defined the nationalizing strategy for the country's development (Feduta, Bogutskij, and Matsinovitch 2003, 14). This paradox was explained by Lucan Way as the result of "disorientation and the persistence of outdated leadership norms in the face of rapid regime change" that allowed a radical nationalization strategy to change into state policy regardless of societal attitudes" (Way 2012, 622).

To endorse the agenda of Othering the Soviet past, the adherents of the new Belarusian idea based on the BPF employed several nation reprogramming projects. One was related to language identity, which was set to be recast in terms of the "one nation – one language" mode that would have made Belarusian an official language of the country, limiting the official use of Russian. The paradigm of Othering Soviet experience also implied rewriting national history from a non-Soviet perspective: Belarus culturally and politically belonged to Europe rather than being Russian civilizational space. To strengthen these claims, promotion of the remembrance of the Soviet past as marked by sufferings and traumas and therefore alien to Belarusians became essential (Bekus 2019, 1611). The program of the Belarusian People's Front, the most important political oppositional movement in the early 1990s, stated that "Belarusian historical memory and the Belarusian language are values which unite our people and ensure our civilizational perspective" (Prahrama Partyi BNF).[2]

Building Linguistic Commonality

The main factors that influenced the development of Belarusian language identity over the 30 years of independence form a triangle: the sociolinguistic reality in which the prevailing majority of Belarusians use Russian in their daily life, while claiming Belarusian to be their native language; various representations of language in political discourse, which reflect contested ideas about the role of Russian and Belarusian in the formation of the Belarusian nation; and the strategy of standardization employed by the state to coordinate the linguistic situation in accordance with the dominant ideology. Each of these three elements of the Belarusian linguistic puzzle is driven by certain logic of "rationalization," which aims to achieve certain goals by affecting changes in the languages used in society.

As a lingua franca in the Soviet Union, the Russian language came to be associated with progressive ideas, modernization, and urbanization; while national languages were perceived as

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languages of tradition, often tied to a rural culture, which indeed often remained the only domain where they continued to be used on a daily basis. The degree of Russification of the Union republics could be used to measure the extent to which the Soviet developmental project had become embedded in the fabric of the republics' cultural, social, and political life (Lewis 1973). Belarusians were thus most advanced in the realization of the "Soviet imagined community," but when this project failed, they turned out to be the least (and worst) prepared for switching to the alternative project of nation-state building.

According to the 1989 Soviet census, Belarus represented one of the most ethnically homogenous Soviet republics with 78 percent of its population being ethnic Belarusians (*Naselenie* 1990, 37). And yet, Belarus was featured by exceptionally high level of Russification. While over 70 percent of Belarusians named Belarusian as their native language, over 60 percent acknowledged using Russian in their daily life and clearly preferred bilingualism to a Belarusian monolingual society (Mechkovskaia 1994, 311). In the middle of the 1980s, only approximately 5 percent of journals in circulation were in Belarusian, and the one-third of the total population who spoke Belarusian on a daily basis were concentrated among rural inhabitants (Marples 1999, 50).

There was a range of ways in which the Soviet linguistic legacy – that is, official bilingualism combined with the strong, prestigious status of Russian – was managed in the former Soviet republics, now independent states. Most states resorted to the policy of "minorization" of Russian and "majorization" of national languages, which switched the position of Russian and the national language in order to grant the national language the social mobility and prestige that was formerly associated with Russian. According to Gumperz, minorization occurs in situations where "one or more participants' verbal performance is interpreted or evaluated in terms of other participants' standards, and where this difference in evaluative criteria has a pejorative effect on the outcome of the interaction" (1989, 21). In societies that have been undergoing post-Soviet nationalization of all spheres of social, cultural, and political life, the policy of linguistic majorization was intended to switch the position of Russian and the national language in order to grant the national language the social mobility and higher cultural prestige formerly associated with Russian. The policies of unconditional majorization were introduced in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine. In these states, the legal status of Russian was defined as a "foreign," "regional," or "minority" language. Other countries introduced policies of conditional majorization that reserved some legitimate space for the use of Russian in public life as a language of international communication (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Moldova). Belarus is the only post-Soviet state where Russian was ultimately given the status of a state language and where it retains its importance as a language of national development. This exceptional status became a product of the contorted nationalization project in Belarus, the effect of the rise and fall of the project of Othering Sovietness endorsed by the BPF before it was abandoned in 1994. Since the late 1980s, national activists considered forcing Belarusization to be a major pillar of the Belarusians' nation-building. In June 1989, the Fratsishak Skaryna Society of the Belarusian language was founded in Minsk. It was a time of intense public discussions in newspapers, journals, and the electronic media, which raised the level of popular awareness of the language issue in cultural life. The Belarusian language appeared in educational institutions, on television. and on the radio – all this was taking shape of a common process of "the return to everything Belarusian." As Curt Woolhiser writes, the ideological trope of "one nation – one language" remains powerful in the modern world, and even more so in the context of Eastern Europe (2014, 113). For Belarusian nation-minded elites of the early 1990s, this "ideal" served as a powerful inspiration in their striving to become just another European nation.

In the Supreme Soviet of Belarus (elected in 1990), the oppositional coalition built on the platform of the BPF counted up to 40 members (out of 360) (Feduta, Bogutskij, and Matsinovitch 2003, 14). With the support of members of the Supreme Soviet elected from various registered non-governmental organizations representing the Democratic Bloc (such as the Belarusian Language Society, the Belarusian Ecological Union, the Workers' Union of Belarus), the Belarusian People's

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Front managed to become the leading political force in defining a strategy for the country's development.

In January 1990, the Supreme Soviet adopted the law "On languages in the BSSR," which envisaged a broader use of Belarusian to enable it to become a majority language rather than a minority one, as was the case under previous Soviet rule. According to this law, the implementation of changes in the linguistic design of Belarusian society was supposed to be a gradual process over the course of the 1990s. It was anticipated that Belarusian would become the language of science, culture, and the media within three years; the language of congresses, conferences, and state decrees within three to five years; of business within five years; and for legal matters within a decade (Ulasiuk 2011, 4). In 1992, Deputy Minister of Education Vasil Strazhaŭ announced that the language to be in all pedagogical schools would be Belarusian and that 55 percent of first graders would be taught in Belarusian. Notably, he forecasted that in ten years the entire Belarusian system of education would shift to the Belarusian language.

Several political parties that entered the political arena when Belarus adopted the multiparty system criticized the 1990 language law. The Movement for Democratic Reform (MDF), founded in 1991, described this law as "undemocratic" and accused the BPF, which remained the major oppositional force in Belarus, of Russophobia and isolationism. The left also opposed the model of a mono-ethnic and mono-linguistic Belarusian nation. It proposed the idea of a two-language state model, which was an unconditional demand in the programs of the Movement for Democracy, Social Progress, and Justice (MDSPJ), founded in 1991. For most politicians of newly established political parties, stressing their disagreement with the nationalizing language policy was one of the easiest ways to demonstrate their closeness to the people. The language policy aimed at majorization of Belarusian was therefore perceived as "undemocratic" by Belarusian society, which had just been liberated from the ideological dogma of Soviet rule. The new national ideology was viewed by people as a different mode of repressive state policy (Zaprudski 2002).

Public discontent with the nationalization project based on radical Othering of the Soviet past, the new linguistic policy, as well as public grievances directed at the political elites who stayed in power in independent Belarus resulted in the election of Aleksandr Lukashenka as President in 1994. In contrast to nationalist politicians, he proposed a nation-state idea that, in many respects, represented a continuation of Soviet development. The policy of majorization ultimately ended with the May 1995 referendum in which Russian was granted the status of a second official language.

The new constitution adopted in March 1994 affirmed the official state of the Belarusian language although, according to the constitution, Russian was given the status of a language of inter-ethnic communication. This new status of Russian, however, had an important symbolic meaning: it indicated a move from the initial strategy of a radical Othering of the Soviet past of the early 1990s to a non-radical Othering that allowed a measure of accommodating the Soviet inheritance within the new state.

In practice, this meant that all achievements in majorization of Belarusian were reversed. Deprived of legislative support, Belarusian returned to the margins of public life while the linguistic design of Belarusian society became voluntary. The equal status of Russian and Belarusian introduced by the 1995 referendum led to predictable shifts back to Russian-language education. Parents now had a right to choose the language of their children's schooling. The results of this shift in language policy were, predictably, unfavorable for Belarusian: the number of first-grade students learning in Russian rose dramatically from 25 percent in 1994 to 62 percent in 1995. Lukashenka's language policy made Belarus a unique post-Soviet republic where political independence led towards further Russification.

For Lukashenka's political plan, language policy was not assigned a specific role; a return to official bilingualism was part of his general strategy to obtain a positive evaluation of the Soviet period of Belarusian history. The collapse of the USSR left former Soviet citizens socially disoriented. As Eric Hobsbawm and David Kertzer write, when both the material framework and the

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routines of everyday life have broken down and all the established values are suddenly repudiated, language and ethnicity naturally come to act as a substitute for factors of integration in a disintegrating society. This rise of ethnic nationalism, however, was inescapable only if the recently lost past appears to be irrecoverable (Hobsbawm and Kertzer 1992, 6). What Lukashenka proposed to Belarusian society appeared contentious but attractive: instead of ethnolinguistic nationalism, he offered to build Belarusians' commonality on the reappropriation of the Soviet past.

Bilingualism constituted the core of the state's rationalization of Soviet linguistic practice. This Soviet linguistic policy reproduced "the general phenomenon of central rulers seeking to pressure peripheral peoples into learning the language of the center" (Laitin, Petersen, and Slocum 1992, 130). In the situation of ethnic diversity of the Soviet territories, this pressure often derived from the pragmatic logic of the intra-Soviet communicational network. The USSR's modernization and development model relied, among other things, on extensive mobility of both professionals and workers moving between republics. Educational opportunities and professional development in the Soviet Union involved extensive exchange between Soviet republics and with the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic.

The official stance on language policy proceeds from the idea that the Belarusians have developed into a nation with a bilingual community. According to official discourse, Belarusians' common "linguistic repertoire" consists of Russian and Belarusian. Both languages are part of Belarusian identity on an equal footing. This policy, in fact, is based on a strategy of not intervening in existing language practices and allowing the linguistic "design" of Belarusian society to develop randomly. As a populist and pragmatic politician whose major aspiration was to stay in power, the Belarusian president demonstrated a high degree of liberalism in language matters. At a meeting with representatives of the Belarusian mass media in 2009, Lukashenka explained his understanding of language politics: "Language is a sphere of life which does not tolerate coercion and dictatorship and therefore there will be no forced Belarusization or Russification in the country" (Press-conference of the President 2009). In Lukashenka's view, the recognition of Belarusian and Russian as state languages corresponds to the historical tradition of Belarusians and to the contemporary language situation in the country. In another speech, the Belarusian president said: "Bilingualism is one of our greatest assets and achievements. We will never allow discrimination in this sphere of life; there will be no forced Belarusization at the expense of Russian. In Belarus, where the majority speaks this language as their mother tongue, artificially removing it from use would be at the least stupid" (Lukashenka 2010). Official discourse stresses the naturalness of the presence of the Russian language in Belarusian life without mentioning that the actual linguistic design of Belarusian society is the result of a long-term policy that started to be implemented in the Russian empire in the 19th century and continued under Soviet ideological auspices in the 20th century.[3]

The idea of Belarusians' "ordinary bilingualism" became an integral part of post-Soviet consolidation of nation-state. It was promoted by the state (involving institutional resources and ideological propaganda via state-owned media and education), while the idea of an ethnolinguistic project with the goal of creating one language for the Belarusian nation remained sheltered in an oppositional social sphere. In this way, the politics of language came to be a means to control not only linguistic practice but also public discourse and the public fate of the national project, based on a particular vision of the ethnolinguistic identity of Belarusians. Behind the struggle over language identity, one can discern a far more significant disparity between two different ways of assessing Belarusians' commonality, which could serve as a foundation for reassembling society. Ethnolinguistic nationalism aspired to advance the Belarusian language as a clearly stated value underlying Belarusian development. The weakness of this project was not in the inadequacy of the national language per se but in what it negated.

Today, only the BPF unconditionally supports the idea of a one-language state model on the Belarusian political scene. The party itself, however, underwent significant transformations, including several splits between the hardliners and those willing to compromise on the issue of language policy in favor of more pragmatic stance and entering into alliances with other political

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forces (Pikulik and Bedford 2018). Many other oppositional actors have taken a more reserved approach to the prospect of Belarusization. Thus, in the presidential elections of 2010, among ten candidates only three of them – Ryhor Kastusioŭ (BPF), Uladzimier Niakliajeŭ ("Tell the Truth" movement), and Mikola Statkievič (Belarusian Social Democratic Party) advocated a policy of a one-language nation in the election campaign. Other candidates, while recognizing the value of the Belarusian language as a national legacy and the need for state support to ensure its return to public life, avoided promises of a one-language policy in their programs (Prudnikava, Kopal' 2010). In the 2015 presidential election, none of the candidates supported one national language policy and the most Belarusian-minded candidate, Tatsiana Karatkevich, promised support for the Belarusian language through such measures as opening up a National University and in every regional town having at least one school teaching all subjects in Belarusian (Vybory 2016). This gradual fading of language policy from the stage of the Belarusian politics indicates an important shift towards the recognition of Russian speaking Belarusian national identity (Fabrykant 2019).

Uniting the Nation by Emancipation

In the initial 1991–1994 phase, fostering a new national identity through the Othering of Soviet experience required a new version of national history written from a non-Soviet Belarusian perspective. This new version was meant to supply Belarusian state independence and its European civilizational identity with a historical grounding. The first version of the new Belarusian history that essentially diverted from Soviet historiography was the *Study of the History of Belarus* in two volumes edited by M. P. Kastiuk (1994–1995). In a similar vein, the first history textbooks for schools were written by M. Bich, G. Stykhau, and so on (Shybeka 2004, 6). Official historiography also legitimized a new idea on the origin of Belarusians according to which "Belarusians were no longer viewed as a branch of the nationality of 'ancient Rus,' as had been asserted by Soviet historiography, but as a Slavicised mixture of Slavic and Baltic tribes" (Zaprudnik 2003, 120). This change of policy in relation to the ethnogenesis of Belarusians had a profound symbolic meaning as "the road from the myth about the 'purest' East-Slavic people to the myth 'Slavicized Balts' was a road to the West" (Lindner 2001, 201).

Thus, a fundamental revision was made in the civilizational framing of the Belarusian past. The periods of Belarusian history within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were reinterpreted as conducive to Belarusian national development. The Grand Duchy became viewed as "our country," while the conquest of Belarusian lands by the Russian Empire was presented as an occupation. Authors of the alternative textbook on Belarusian history, *Ten Centuries of Belarusian History, 862–1918* (Arloŭ and Sahanovich 1999), stressed the difference between the political systems of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Moscow state as the difference between progressive European self-governance and backward tsarism.

While retelling the entire Belarusian past from the perspective of Belarusian sovereignty was important, the mode of retelling the Soviet experience itself played a crucial role in writing a new version of national history. A major role in advancing radical Othering of Sovietness was assigned to specific mnemonic practices of negative remembrance employed by nation-minded Belarusian elites (Bekus 2019). The agenda of Stalinist repressions and Belarusian suffering under the Soviet regime entered public debates in Belarus after the mass grave at Kurapaty, located on the outskirts of Minsk, was made public in 1988. Zianon Pazniak and Yauhenii Shmyhalioŭ published an article, "Kurapaty – the Road of Death," in which they reported the discovery of a burial site at Kurapaty (Pazniak, Shmyhalioŭ 1988). In July 1988, the Council of Ministers of the Belarusian SSR created a government commission to investigate the claims. The report produced by the commission concluded that "in 1937–1941 in the wooded area of Kurapaty, mass shootings of Soviet citizens were conducted by agencies of the NKVD." The commission resolved to commemorate the victims of Stalinist repressions with a monument at the burial site itself. Such a monument was ultimately

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built in November 2018, when it became an attempt to stifle a wider public debate on the political crimes committed in Belarus under Stalin, which waited for historical redress since the late 1980s.

The same year, the Belarusian association "Martyraloh Belarus" was established. It declared that its purpose was to disclose information on mass repressions from 1920 to 1950 in order to commemorate the memory of victims. The association actively engaged in various mnemonic practices, making documentaries, publishing the bulletin "Martyraloh Belarus," and organizing conferences on the memory of Soviet repression in Belarus. Members of Martyraloh took an active part in the establishment of the Belarusian Association of the Victims of the Soviet Repressions in 1992. These cultural and political groups actively advocated de-communization in Belarus by the radical Othering of the Soviet system. By nurturing anti-Soviet and anti-Russian sentiments, they sought to achieve national awareness in Belarusian society. The Kurapaty site became a major *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1989) of the Belarusian nation imagined in a new anti-Soviet way.

> We can never escape from our history. Living and dead, we are all one. We are the nation. And although we cannot help the dead, the dead can help us. They can illuminate our path, bless our souls with their sufferings, stir up our minds, hearts, and spirits, provided that we wish it. (Pazniak 1992, 36)

This narrative's major goal, however, is not prosecution and justice, for which, as Zoe Crossland writes, "testifying corpses" are usually key proxies (2017, 187). The dead are called on to become "negative emancipators" of the Belarusians from the spell of the positive affirmation of the Soviet past that became a crucial component of the Belarusian official identity narrative. National framing of the victims of the Kurapaty executions plays a crucial role in the formation of a specific post-Soviet logic of postcolonial Othering. The essence of this operation, however, is not to delineate a subject position of the victim devoid of agency to resist or evade the regime as Oushakine suggests (2013, 305). The victims, on the contrary, have been assigned a crucial agentive role: they are called on to unite living humans in order to redefine their Belarusian identity. For the nationalist political parties, such as BPF, the Young Front, and Belarusian Christian Democracy (BCD), the mass grave of Kurapaty is a litmus test of the national awareness of Belarusians, a place to start reclaiming Belarusianness and building a genuine Belarusian state (Bekus 2019).

The BPF and the adherents of their ideology have advanced highly ethnocentric arguments, transforming political injustices of the Communist era into a nationalist agenda. By focusing on the national character of the mass killings at Kurapaty and other places of Soviet executions, negative remembrance is invoked to raise issues of alienation and Othering – both of the Soviet past and of Russian political and cultural influence in the present. The patterns of retelling the Soviet past as well as "mnemonic templates" had been borrowed from the Baltic states and other Eastern European socialist societies where sites of communist violence became a transformative element. A new narrative of national histories seen through the recovery of the remains of terror was created (Mark 2010, 278). In Belarus, however, this language proved to be ineffective in the context of political competition of the early 1990s. Zianon Pazniak, the major candidate from the Belarusian People's Front in the first presidential election in 1994, received just 13 percent of the votes. The winning candidate, Lukashenka, endorsed a different mode of national remembrance. It revived the Soviet policy that focused on selective and strategic memory commemorating the sacrifices made by Soviet citizens during World War II. In turn, it suppressed the memory of individuals who had been executed during Stalin's rule (Lindner 2001; Sahanovich 2001; Lewis 2012). After 1994, all state initiatives for coming to terms with the repressive aspects of the Soviet past were ceased.

Under Lukashenka, therefore, the strategy of radical Othering of the Soviet past was replaced by its recapturing and recycling (Bekus 2017). Barry Schwartz has shown that social change brings about new social and symbolic structures that overlay old ones without replacing them (1996). As the Belarusian development case demonstrates, in some situations these old structures can be recreated, especially if the political will matches societal anticipations.

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In 2009, the newspaper *Belarus Segodnia*, the mouthpiece of the Belarusian government, published an editorial on Kurapaty, in which the political meaning of the repressions and the question of responsibility were further downplayed:

> Kurapaty is a cemetery, and a cemetery, so to speak, on a national scale. Here, under the pine trees, lie the remains of very different people, including children, and the great tragedy of the 20th century. Peasants and security officers, priests and poets, atheists and believers, Belarusians, Jews, Poles, Russians and Ukrainians found their last refuge at Kurapaty… . The cruel fate of this terrible century, the century of the rise and fall of political doctrines, has united destinies at Kurapaty.˙ (*Belarus Segodnia* 2009)

While not denying the historical fact of the Stalinist terror in Belarus, official discourse frames it as a non-political story of "unjustified repressions." This concept, as Alexander Etkind writes, is a formula for senseless acts of violence, which do not specify agency and therefore elude responsibility (2009, 184–189).

After the state memory paradigm changed in 1994, political parties, civil society groups, and other non-state actors carried out negative remembrance projects aimed at Othering the Soviet past. In 2007, the Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions in Belarus was created. In 2014, the publishing project *Black Book of Stalinism: Belarus, Crime, Terror*, *Repressions* was launched. In 2015, a symbolic "citizen's tribunal" took place in Minsk, organized jointly by "International Tribunal," "For Saving Kurapaty" associations, and the non-registered Association for the Victims of Political Repression.

The goal of these mnemonic practices is to contain and distance the Soviet past, revealing its traumatic effects on the development of the Belarusian nation. Pursuing the logic of postcolonial estrangement (Oushakine 2013), they form the memory narrative that counterbalances the positive account of the Soviet past communicated by the Belarusian state ideology.

Recycling Socialism in Nation-Building

From the beginning of his presidency, Lukashenka made the idea of the continuation of the Soviet project a leading principle of reassembling Belarusian society in the Belarusian nation-state. He effectively capitalized the perception of late socialism in the Soviet Union as a stable, prosperous, and non-violent era reflecting progress and well-being (Klumbyte and Sharafutdinova 2013, 3–5), which had much support in Belarus. Post-war reconstruction has transformed the Republic into a "shop-window" of Soviet lifestyle, and Belarusians themselves often saw it as a "golden age" (Marples 1999). On the eve of the collapse of the USSR, Belarus had one of the better-managed regional economies in the USSR, with an unusually high share of export-oriented enterprises (Ioffe 2008, 108–109).

From the beginning of his political career, Lukashenka's popularity among Belarusians was based on his ability to capture the popular mood and to play the card of dissatisfaction that people might have had in the early 1990s. By electing Lukashenka as president, Belarusian society gave him *carte blanche* to realize his project of Belarusian development, which rejected the logic of forced ethnolinguistic nationalism. It is not surprising that Lukashenka often claims how "blatant nationalism" is alien to internationally minded Belarusians, and this latter feature is one of the assets of Belarusian mentality (Lukashenka 2005). Communist ideology was replaced with praising national traditions, but, instead of Othering the Soviet past, it involved its thorough reappropriation. According to one of the major Belarusian ideologists of 2000s, "today's Belarus has grown up not out of the ideas of nationalists-in-exile, but out of truly brotherly family of the Soviet Republics due to the common efforts of all the people" (Rubinaŭ 2006). Official discourse downplayed and reworked the outdated ideas of Soviet patriotism that used to underpin the ideological upbringing in the USSR by reemphasizing a sense of shared belonging that many people in Belarus have preserved. This sense of a shared past and "the ability to speak in one language" – both literally and metaphorically – "with numerous former Soviet compatriots of different nationalities […] is one

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of the best achievements of Belarusian Soviet development" ("Vybory deputatov v Palatu predstavitelei Natsionalnogo sobraniia").

Instead of the radical Othering advocated by ethno-nationalists, the Belarusian state under Lukashenka's rule launched a process of patrimonialization of the Soviet inheritance. In 2004, the Belarusian authorities nominated Minsk's central avenue, built in 1950 and 1968, for inclusion in the proposed UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List. This emblematic move displayed how Sovietness in Belarus played the functional role of "historical heritage."

As part of a larger project of Belarusization of the Soviet past, the Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic war (as World War II is known) has been significantly reinterpreted from the Belarusian perspective (Marples 2014). Nationalization of the memory of World War II led to several new memorial complexes appearing in Minsk, such as "Belarus Partizanskaya" (Partisan Belarus), erected in 2004; the "Broken Hearth" memorial (2008); and the memorial complex on the site of the former Maly Trastianec extermination camp (2015). Some older monuments were also restored so that their visibility and meaning in the urban landscape were significantly upgraded.

The story of Soviet glorification of victory in the Great Patriotic War was modified to create a narrative of Belarusian national glory; this new narrative was amplified in the new venue housing the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, which opened in 2015. It is not surprising that in a glass dome that surmounts the new museum building there are golden sculptural reliefs with the inscribed names of the Heroes of the USSR Belarusians are listed at the top, separated from the others.

In this nationalized interpretation of the Soviet historical narrative, glorification of the victory in the Great Patriotic War was recast to create an image of Belarusian national triumph. Whereas Ukraine's 2015 decommunization law bans the ribbon of Saint George, associated with a Soviet military decoration, Belarusian authorities created the nationalized version of symbol, the Flower of Victory, an apple blossom on a red and green background. This Belarusian version of the ribbon in the colors of the nation's flag became an example of "curious patchwork of reworked Soviet tropes that simultaneously assert Eurasian civilizational identity – rejecting Western victim-centered narratives and claiming descent from the pan-Soviet Victory – and carve out a separate, non-Russian space of national memory" (Fedor, Lewis, and Zhurzhenko, 2017). Essentially, this symbolic retreat into a non-Russian space of remembering occurred in the context of the Ukrainian crisis and annexation of Crimea in 2014.

A policy designed to entrench the Soviet legacy can be observed in the place names of Minsk. On the eve of state independence, the number of street names related to Belarus (both Soviet and pre-Soviet) stood at less than 20 percent (Kazakevich 2011, 28). The overwhelming majority of street names related to the history of the Great Patriotic War. Few changes occurred in Minsk toponyms during the early years of independence, when the Soviet legacy in Belarus was strongly contested: only 14 streets were renamed, although a number of them were important thoroughfares in the city center. Their renaming thus signaled a shift towards the nationalization of the capital. The central road, Lenin Avenue, was thus renamed after the leading Belarusian Renaissance scholar Francishak Skaryna. Lenin Square became Independence Square, and Gorki Street, named after the celebrated Russian author, became Bagdanovich Street, in honor of the Belarusian poet. Some of these changes were initiated by the Belarusian president in 2004 when he personally made a decision to rename two important thoroughfares, Skaryna Avenue and Praspekt Masherava; they were renamed respectively as Independence Avenue and Avenue of the Victors to bolster the significance of the Great Patriotic War in the master memory narrative of the Belarusian state once again. Gradually, however, the number of national Belarusian toponyms in Minsk has increased through the creation of new micro-districts on the outskirts of the city. Here, new streets are usually named after prominent personalities from (predominantly) pre-Soviet Belarusian culture and history, frequently related to the heyday of the Great Duchy of Lithuania. In this way, the non-Soviet national history of Belarus has been given a place although it is relegated to the margins. The center of the capital continues to be dominated by toponyms associated with Soviet history and culture.

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Symbolic Shifts

In contrast to the polarized approach to national identity of the early 1990s with its rigid division between pro-Soviet, Russian-minded *nomenklatura* and the ethno-cultural nationalist opposition who opted for a one-nation, one-language model, the current political approach to Belarusian national identity has become more nuanced. Twenty-five years of independence have encouraged the Belarusian state to become a melting pot in which previously conflictual ideologies of nation are engaged in a process of reciprocal fusion. The nationalist intelligentsia in the early 1990s aspired to call into being new national community of Belarusians by promoting the set of historical interpretations, cultural values, and political ideologies. The ultimate goals of these national activists have never been achieved: Belarus remains the only post-Soviet country with two state languages and the memory of the victims of political repression that was meant to assist in othering Sovietness lingers on the margins of the public life. And yet, their efforts to summon the ethno-cultural commonality in Belarusian society have not perished in vain. They brought to the front of the Belarusian identity debate the symbolic capital of the Belarusians' pre-Soviet European past and the emphasis on the ethnolinguistic distinctiveness. Their work supplied the official ideology with the cultural and historical resources for further advancement of the nation-building project, and some recent cultural moves display a more assertive perception of ethno-cultural and pre-Soviet history and tradition by state politics of identity.

The return of pre-Soviet history to Belarusian cities became the first indication of such a revision. In July 2004, President Lukashenka signed Decree N330 "On the Development of the Historical Center of Minsk," which was followed by the reconstruction of some destroyed remains of prerevolutionary Minsk: the 19th-century town hall building, the Hotel Europe, and others in the historical district known as the Upper Town ("O razvitii istoricheskogo tsentra goroda Minska"). The memorial composition installed in this area and dedicated to the Magdeburg Rights, which were granted to Minsk in 1499, conveys a vital message about the European legacy in Belarus that has been legitimized by the state. In a similar vein, a monument to the Grand Duke of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Alherd, was opened in Viciebsk in 2014. It could be read as an official recognition of the history of the Grand Duchy as a legitimate part of Belarusian national development.

The course of events in post-Maidan Ukraine has prompted the Lukashenka regime to rethink not only the protest image of ethno-nationalism but also the importance of a delineated boundary between Belarusians and Russians. Formerly oppositional markers of identity have now been used to reinforce the official ideology in the view of the implicit threat that Russia can pose to the Belarusian sovereignty. Following the revival of the interest in national embroidery in Ukraine, where it became one of the symbols of 2014 Maidan revolution, the Belarusian government organized a Day of National Embroidery on July 2, 2016. This celebration, backed by the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Organization,[4] became one more example of an appropriation by the state of markers of ethno-cultural nationalism in the state-nation project. In this way, the political power of this project as a major alternative to the state ideology has been significantly undermined. The events in Ukraine unfolded after 2014; the annexation of Crimea and the war in Luhansk and Donetsk regions caused Belarusian authorities to shift more decisively, even if still rather symbolically, towards the support of Belarusian national distinctiveness. Belarusian officials, including the president, have demonstrated sporadic support for the Belarusian language. They claim that it represents a native language that distinguishes Belarusians from other nations, and the state is expected to encourage use of Belarusian in various spheres of life (Lukashenka 2016).

Finally, one of the most striking symbolic moves on the part of authorities in 2018 was the construction of the monument to the victims of political repression at the Kurapaty burial site, the major point of reference in the political struggle over the Soviet memory since 1988. For over thirty years, it was political opposition and multiple groups of memory activists who engaged in memory work to remember the victims of Stalinist political repression in Belarus, while government upheld

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the policy of oblivion and neglect. The sudden move in Lukashenka's memory policy in 2018, manifested in the new Kurapaty memorial, provides yet another example of how the official ideological discourse appropriates elements of historical memory of political opponents, leaving behind this memory's wider political appeal.

The shift in the politics of Belarusian identity that occurred in recent years became perceived as an indication of "soft Belarusization" (Mojeiko 2015; Frear 2018; Posokhin 2019). It aims at stressing the distinct status of the Belarusian nation without antagonizing the positive image of Soviet past or declaring a course on strategic de-Russification. This ideological hybrid promotes Belarusian nationalism while maintaining positive portrayals of the Soviet Union and its legacy. What is at stake here, however, is not so much the values or the ideas associated with the Soviet ideological project but the role played by Belarusians in the whole course of twentieth-century development. By acknowledging the period of the socialist modernization as a part of Belarusian nation-building, the official narrative affirms that people of Belarus maintained acting agency in the Soviet development rather than being its passive victims. The allegedly unifying idea of the Belarusian nation in the official ideological interpretation does not derive from the memory of victims of Soviet crimes but dwells on remembering its heroes and high achievers. The dominance of such historiographical triumphalism can partly be explained by the ideological contours of the Belarusian authoritarian system. Legitimation claims of the power system built by Lukashenka have been based on promises of development and prosperity. The authorities had been preoccupied with shaping an image of Belarusians as a modern, active, and dynamic society, which they sought to showcase by hosting international sport events, such as the Ice Hockey World Championship in 2014, the European Figure Skating Championship in 2019 as well as a series of sporting events within the 2019 European Games ("International Competitions in Belarus"). An identity narrative revolving around the experience of powerless victimhood under the Soviet regime would hardly be usable for this purpose. Instead, the state discourse features those who fought in the Great Patriotic War or played prominent roles in postwar rebuilding. The major purpose of this ideological setup, however, is not to undermine or deprive the national standing of the Belarusian state, as many political opponents of Lukashenka claim, but, paradoxically, it is a way to reinforce it.

Belarus under Lukashenka's rule has avoided the route of ethno-nationalism, defied a liberal market economy, and escaped democracy. It became, instead, an authoritarian state that maintains a centralized system of power, an economy reliant on large state-owned industrial enterprises, and the promise of maintaining social welfare state as a core of its ideological design. The future of this mode of the Belarusian state existence, however, proves volatile. Belarus experienced several economic crises but recovered and continued to grow, thanks to a combination of Russian support, Western loans, and Chinese investment. Most scholars agree that the country has enjoyed its relatively sustained economic performance due to Russia's indirect subsidies (Balmaceda 2014). This dependency on Russia and other foreign players puts limits to the Belarusization of Lukashenka's regime. As the 2019 mass protests against the prospect of further economic integration with Russia demonstrated, the politics of the Belarusian identity remained a highly contested and valuable political resource, which the authorities, the political opposition, and the civil society groups can use for shaping their political and societal agenda.

Protests 2020 as a Litmus Paper of Societal Transformation

The Belarusian protests in the summer of 2020 in response to electoral fraud and police violence against peaceful protesters revealed the changes that occurred in the society over the decades of state independence. The ideas that instigated the mass mobilization, however, did not originate in the pre-2020 oppositional ideology. As a result of their persistent side-lining by the authorities and the lack of efficient strategy to counteract the official identity among the opposition leaders, the ideas of national revival proved unable to provide a salient frame for mass protest mobilization. The driving force of the protests, instead, derived from the fact that, in this modern, developed, and

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technologically advanced society, people do not want to be governed by overt autocratic means and to have their voices ignored and their opinion suppressed. Due to a broad range of intersecting and distinct social groups that joined the protests – from businessmen, doctors, and students to workers, sportsmen, and pensioners – the protests emerged as a new multidimensional space open for improvisation within the mobilization and demonstration scripts (Bekus 2021). During the protest marches, the ideas previously involved in the symbolic struggles between the official and oppositional national ideologies have been reappropriated and vested with new meanings. This process, however, was detected even before 2020, when, as the studies of public perceptions and attitudes to the official symbols and celebrations demonstrated, people began to attach their own meaning and interpretations to the official identity markers (Rohava 2018).

Some of the cultural symbols and historical references, associated with the official ideology such as the memory of the Great Patriotic War, have now been used by protestors for pitting against the Lukashenka rule alongside nationalist revivalist symbols (Ramanava 2020, Kazharski 2021, Bekus 2021). Protests also revealed the existing demand for a new form of subjectivity (Gapova 2021), which has been counterpoised to the state ideological machine with its reactionary repression against any form of dissent. On the other hand, it also significantly differed from the "national awakening" scenario that had been envisioned by the "old" political opposition. The protests became essentially bilingual, with multiple slogans both in Russian and Belarusian language mixed during the marches. Furthermore, mass mobilization was instigated by the Russian-speaking candidates who became the major opponents of Lukashenka in the presidential election of 2020. One of the potential candidates, Siargei Tsikhanouski is founder of a popular YouTube channel, in which he revealed the struggles of ordinary Belarusians and the authorities' incompetence. Viktar Babaryka, the former head of *Belgazprombank*, one of the largest banks in Belarus, positioned himself as a successful and experienced manager, promising a more efficient way of running the state economy, highlighting the inefficiency of the incumbent ruler. Valery Tsepkala had served as an ambassador to the US and was a founder of Belarus's Hi-Tech Park, which contributed to the flourishing of Belarus' information technology industry over the past decade. He presented himself as a technocrat, well equipped to run the country and to face the upcoming challenges of the twenty-first century. Each of these political Lukashenka's opponents discussed necessity of the country's political and economic modernisation, but avoided any geopolitical agenda, such as the reorientation of Belarus's development towards Europe, one of the key elements of the Belarusian national ideology in its oppositional reading. Paradoxically, in their program promises, Lukashenka's 2020 rivals encroached upon the ground that has traditionally been reserved for building his own legitimacy and justifying his lengthy stay in office.

Ultimately, the protests revealed that, behind the façade of the Belarusian development dominated by an authoritarian system that was continuously confronted by a conservative national opposition, new societal reality has taken shape. Rapid development of horizontal networks during the protests indicated the Belarusians' ability for self-organization and formation of solidarity networks (Gabowitsch 2021). Actions manifesting horizontal mobilisation and solidarity took multiple forms, from human chains organised in support of political prisoners and online fundraising organised to help paying legal fees and charges faced by political prisoners to distributing protective equipment to hospitals and helping the workers that joined the strikes in August 2020 ("Who the Belarusian Solidarity Fund BYSOL helps"). Those who joined the protests and those who tried to manage its evolution, however, had misinterpreted the regime's ideological flexibly that was displayed over 2010s for its softness and preparedness to enter in negotiations with its new political opponents. The increasing level of repression in the country since the summer of 2020 revealed the limits reached by the system designed by Lukashenka in its ability to co-opt the growing dissent and to sustain the legitimacy by old ideological means. Weaponization of the memory of the Great Patriotic war, which has been used by Putin as a "justification" for the war in Ukraine in 2022, with his call for the "de-Nazification" of Ukraine, will further undermine the official ideology advanced by Lukashenka. The history of the victory over the Nazis in the Second

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World War, which had allowed Belarusians to claim their share in the heroic deeds of the Soviet people, has now been rewritten as the story of a new and shameful war, in which no positive value can be found for Belarus.

One of the important consequences of the protest mobilization in 2020 was the realization not only that the majority of Belarusians did not support Lukashenka but also that he was increasingly reliant on political repression and external force, in the guise of the Putin regime, as a source of power. Once Russia's military invasion of Ukraine had begun, this dependence created a new set of problems both for the wider society, which was forced to live in a country allied with the aggressor, and for Lukashenka himself, whose room for political maneuver had become severely constricted. The war ultimately revealed the limits of Belarus's sovereignty in current circumstances – and posed a serious threat to it. Belarusian society's ability to consolidate for its own defense, however, has for its part been seriously undermined by the repressive machine that has been at work since August 2020.

Disclosures. None.

Notes

1 It was transformed into a political party in 1993.
2 The group of BPF's supporters counted for 30–40 members of parliament out of 360 (Vasilevich 2012, 19–20).
3 These ideas can be traced back to the era of Grand Duchy of Lithuania when people in the Belarusian-Lithuanian ethnic and linguistic area never spoke a unified language (Gapova 2008).
4 The Belarusian Republican Youth Union was established in 2002 and claims to be the successor of the Komsomol (Committee of Soviet Youth Union in USSR). http://brsm.by/about/info/.

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