

Post-soviet national identity: Belarusian approaches and paradoxes

LARISSA TITARENKO

Belarus State University, Minsk, Belarus.

E-mail: larisa166@mail.ru

The paper deals with the issues of formation of the new national identity in Belarus under conditions of post-soviet transformation. Under the term of “post-soviet 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 construction of Belarusian national identity. According to the author’s view, both existing approaches are not adequate, therefore the author put forward a new approach that goes beyond the discussions on language and national culture and corresponds to the concept of plurality of identities.

The author describes the so-called “Belarusian paradoxes” of national identity as being based on the opposition of “nation” and “people” and corresponding to the western model of “creation of modern nations” within the post-colonial theory that is not applicable to the post-soviet Belarus. All the attempts to apply this model to contemporary Belarus have lead the scholars to several “cultural paradoxes” that, however, can be explained within a new approach.

Key words: Belarus, national identity, nation, post-soviet transformation, social construction of identity

INTRODUCTION

The breakdown of the Soviet Union unavoidably provoked lots of substantial changes on the institutional level as well as in the mass consciousness of the former soviet citizens. As fifteen the so-called “newly independent states” appeared on the map, each state started managing these changes on the basis of its own historical legacy, cultural traditions of its population (ethnic groups, nations), and new external conditions of their existence (for example, financial support from the West).

One of the most disputable issues within the net of the new theoretical and practical problems is an issue of constructing (or reconstructing in some states) the new collective identities. These kinds of identity can be relevant to the whole nation or some ethnic groups within it as well, depending on the situation in a particular country. In Belarus, even the idea of national identity was not elaborated during the soviet time, as the so-called “titul” (dominant) nation (ethnic Belarusians) did not develop its national consciousness to a level that is usually considered as the “necessary” one for putting forward any nationalistic ideas and constructing a nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991). Nevertheless, during the period of *Perestroika* in Belarus as well as in other the-then Soviet republics some nationalistic movements have started (Тарова 2005a).

Western social sciences have elaborated several models of how the process of creating national identity in post-communist states could be developed. They imposed the post-colonial theory as relevant to post-communist states. In some countries these models fitted the local cases. In some 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 with the changes of the geopolitical situation, new mosaic of nation-states, and new vision of the future of each nation (within the EU or out of it).

In the post-soviet countries (mainly, in Russia) the scholars found out some “special features” 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, territorial (Данилова 2001, Гудков 1999, Качанов 1993, Малинкин 2001, Ядов 1993). The Ukrainian authors focused on the necessity to keep deep ties with the historical past of a nation in order to distinguish one nation among others (Корут 2004). Overall, the problems of constructing post-soviet national identity have been somehow fixed in post-soviet states within a discourse of struggle “against the Soviet legacy”, “national oppression” and “returning to historical roots” (although the process of reconstructing post-soviet identities is still under way).

The situation with Belarus is a bit different. Measured by many typical criteria of post-communist transition, this country differs greatly from others and demonstrates several “paradoxes of democratization”, mainly, as Korosteleva and Hutcheson (2006: 14) explained, a very slow speed of social and economic changes, and low level of mass support for nationalistic opposition. As for the national identity issue in particular, several papers have been published (both abroad and in Belarus) to describe the so-called “paradoxes” of Belarusian identity. For example, Shimov (2006) explained these paradoxes as follows: instead of fighting for liberal freedom, the Belarusians prefer social and economic stability in the country, instead of developing nationalism the Belarusians are almost indifferent to ethnic-national discourses, at last, they identify themselves as the Belarusians while mostly speaking Russian.

The objective of this research is the post-soviet identity of the population of the contemporary Republic of Belarus. The subject of research is the process of construction of this identity, as it is described in the mainstream literature in the field.

The goals of this paper are to analyse the existing approaches (abroad and in the domestic science) to the issues of construction of post-soviet Belarusian national identity; to compare the previous dominant theoretical model of identity, *Homo Sovieticus*, to the newly constructed models; and to explain the existence of the above mentioned “paradoxes of Belarusian identity” (as they are presented in the public, scientific literature, and politically oriented papers on the Internet).

There are several theories the research is based on. First of all, this is a transitional theory: we consider Belarus to be a typical post-soviet country in the process of transition from the soviet past (i. e. from state socialism) to the 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 the discussions about identity within this context). Another set of theories is related to social (in particular, historical) memory: how people build their present on the basis of their past, actually, the images of their past on the basis of their knowledge, perception of history, practices etc.

This subject inevitably presupposes a comparative method to be used: on the basis of comparison we will show the differences between the previous (soviet) and current (post-soviet) models of Belarusian identity as well as between several post-soviet models.

As for empirical part of the paper, it is based on the national survey data (N = 1000 respondents over 18 years old, face-to-face interviews, limiting accuracy 0.05). This survey was done by BSU scholars in 2000 within the framework of the European Value Study, its methodology and design were developed by the Western scholars in order to make information from all the European countries comparable, as described by Halman (2001).

Our major hypothesis is based on the selected theoretical approach to the subject: contemporary national identity of the population of Belarus has not yet been completely constructed, as there is no “dominant” view on their national identity shared by the majority of the people. The current situation is characterised by the plurality of identities, and the whole notion of “Belarusian national identity” can be explained in different ways, depending on the theoretical framework of the scholar: as “totally negative”, “normal” or even “positive”.

From this point of view, contemporary national identity must be constructed in Belarus as a civic one, for example like in the Czech Republic, as described by Hroch (2005). Only this kind of national identity corresponds to the modernity challenges facing Belarus. However, it can be constructed on the basis of civic consciousness without direct connection to any language or ethnicity. Actually, as Minenkov (2006) explained, such plural national identity is under construction since the “revolutionary events” of 19–25 March, 2006.

This approach is based on certain assumptions; the most central of which is that the combination of components of national consciousness that are sufficient for the construction of a new national identity and acceptable for the majority of the people in Belarus would not include “purely” anti-communist or nationalistic ideas. On the contrary, they must provide strong basis for the consolidation of people of different ethnic background and, therefore, include some basic values shared by the population, including pluralism and self-esteem. In other words, they have to be oriented to the future of the country rather than to its past.

FRAMEWORK FOR THE ANALYSIS OF POST-SOVIET BELARUSIAN IDENTITY

In general, in the transitional period, most post-soviet countries faced some common problems (despite various significant differences between them). The problems of rethinking of their place on the Earth and the necessity of construction (or reconstruction) of their post-soviet national identity were among the primary tasks. Analysis of numerous texts on constructing (or reconstructing) the national identity related to the post-communist (including post-soviet Belarus) countries 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 rather with an increased social influence of nation and nationalism in the new political situation (Beissinger 2002). The question is what is the definition of the nation that all people (or at least the majority of people) could accept? Traditional ethno-nationalism that has been well developed in Central Europe emphasized the “titul” (dominant) nation, or ethnicity as the core for the contemporary nationalism. Within the context of two national projects in Belarus, the concept of “nation” was described by the Belarusian intellectuals as only those who have national consciousness and speak the native language, so that the “nation” primarily meant those intellectuals themselves

(Акудович 2003). On the contrary, in the official discourse the concept of a nation was substituted by the concept of “all the people of Belarus” (Ротман 1994) and meant all its population (all citizens) regardless of any level of consciousness or languages.

The second thesis is based on enormous differences in criteria of national identity considered as necessary and sufficient by different authors. These differences have been mainly concerned with the native language that in Belarus actually has become a means of division of the nation rather than that of nation's consolidation. Also, as Gapova explained (2005b), “national language debates” were actually shifted into corporative political project connected with class interests of new emerging social groups fighting for redistribution of power in the country. The major view on a native language as the core criteria for national identity was represented in several theories of nationalism (Sugar, Lederer 1994: 4). The similar views were represented by Belarusian nationalists: from their view, Belarusian was the core indicator of identity. From the point of view of the official state ideologists, Belarusian was a means of communication as well as Russian.

The third thesis refers to the contemporary attitude and evaluation of the Soviet legacy. On the one hand, the nationalists rejected the Soviet legacy as totally belonging to the “era of national oppression and Soviet colonization” (Орлов 2006), whereas the pro-regime authors tried to absorb the “best advantages” of socialist past and incorporate them into the present life i.e. consider the Soviet past as the appropriate source of positive ideas to be taken for the future national project (Левяш 2003).

The fourth thesis concerns many controversies regarding the methods of construction of the new national identity and terms for this process. The first party (nationalists) tried to impose new national identity quite quickly, by the so-called “bolshevik methods” of coercion (for example, by introducing Belarusian language in all the schooling system, 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, or impose their own criteria of nation to “all the people”. The second party, on the contrary, did not determine any specific dates for the shift from Russian to Belarusian; it provided more free space for spontaneous path of this process. In practice, this approach stimulated the younger generation to use Belarusian and, therefore, in the perspective it will bring better results for the nation than harsh methods.

The main approaches to the problem of construction of Belarusian identity, as they are presented in social sciences and the public, can be roughly divided into two mainstreams. The first represents the so-called official “patriotic” position: it is well-supported by the official media, state-subsidised journals, and incorporated into contemporary historical school and university textbooks approved within the last few years. According to this approach, Belarusian national identity is characterized first of all by patriotism. It combines some traditional features of Belarus character (tolerance, hospitality) and some features originated in the Soviet past (love for the country, pride in its past and present, internationalism). It is based on the concept of “people of Belarus”: all of them personify new national identity. As a result, a Belarusian is depicted as a patriotic person who is devoted to hard work and who is proud of living in Belarus (Буко 2005). This kind of identity is also stressing the legacy of the Great Patriotic War: Belarusians are seen as partisans fighting against the German aggressors, they suffered a lot but they won this war and, therefore, they are heroes. Actually, regardless of the real history of the nation, contemporary Belarusians are depicted as a heroic nation working hard and building a nice country, so that a strong basis for high self-esteem of the common people is being constructed. Within this ideal model (the opponents usually

call it “neo-soviet”), the Belarusian people looks as a homogeneous unit all representatives of which (regardless of their ethnic identity, language, or religious identity) are equally good workers and law-obedient citizens of Belarus, its patriots respecting the Soviet past of Belarus. 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 reflecting the period of an independent country (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, Krish-tapovich (2006: 39) stressed that Belarusians are part of the Slavic brotherhood, he directly opposed Belarus identity to the West and focused on their heroic war past.

The opposite position is presented in the nationalistic media originally associated with the movement “Adradzenne” and the political party the Belarus National Front. This approach represented the views of Belarusian intellectuals, a group that considered itself as the only legitimate representative of the Belarus nation. Actually, they felt that they represented “exactly Belarus”, “real Belarus”, and a tiny minority of the contemporary Belarusians (“the whole Belarus”). Their definition of Belarus identity was based on the ethnicity and associated with the Belarus language, Belarus culture. As Akudovich later (2003) explained, “the whole Belarus” and “real Belarus” were two different concepts or two different parts existing in the same spatial space but constructed themselves in a totally different spiritual space. They did not accept each other. Although “the whole Belarus” embraced the majority of the people, the “real Belarus” (or Belarusian intellectuals, members of Adradzenne) diminished this majority and rejected 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 Belarusian nation, as Gapova (2005b) disclosed, while the real population was refused to be called a nation and, therefore, they were pushed to intellectual genocide. This position was represented in Belarusian media (*Наша Ніва, Свабода*), national history books and some political intellectual circles. It was supported by the opposition leaders abroad and those who emigrated decades ago (Zaprudnik 2003). National consciousness represented in the Belarus language, and Belarus ethnicity represented in cultural symbols (folklore) were the core issues of this model of national identity. As Dubavec later (2005) defined, this political project included three elements of “nationalistic myth”: language, village, and Vilnia i. e. it stressed an image of nation as related to native Belarusians speaking “authentic language”, living in the countryside (“less russified”), and being historically related to the Belarusian intellectuals living in Vilnius before World War Two.

This approach and political project were based on the clearly articulated political views: anti-communist, anti-colonialism, and nationalism. All three features were closely interrelated, so that it was necessary to be anti-communist and blame the “Soviet past of Belarusians” in order to become a “good Belarusian nationalist”, as Akudovich (2004) explained. 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 province”, underdeveloped people.

However, ethno-cultural nationalistic model of identity was not broadly supported: not only “common Belarusians”, but a good deal of educated people who could not accept anti-communism and were afraid of political aggressiveness of BNF, rejected this model as there was no attractive (positive) content in it: the previous history was explained as the epoch of Russian colonialism, Russian and Soviet oppression, so that Belarusians were depicted as

victims, as poor people who had never enjoyed the freedom. Meanwhile, a lot of Belarusian population, especially current urban citizens, moved to the cities after World War Two: they became educated Soviet middle class or qualified working class, improved their standard of living during the Soviet time, so, there were no reasons for them to call the Soviet history the "period of oppression": it was almost "golden age" for many of them. They did not want to "return to Europe" as they felt comfortable with their Soviet past and patriotic presence.

In summary, the Belarusian people is viewed as consisting of two unequal parts: Belarusian intellectuals (a minority called "a nation" by nationalists) who support the ethno-cultural identity, in which the key issues are language, ethnicity, nation, and culture in general, and the rest (called "the whole Belarus" by nationalists, or "the people of Belarus" by the official authors). The majority of Belarusians reject anticommunism and, therefore, this majority can not support the nationalistic view of identity: instead they support the model of identity called "new-soviet" or "Soviet-Belarusian".

The weak points in both approaches from the point of view of the study of constructing the national identity are related to the fact that both take the image of the "pure national identity" for granted. That is why both are unable to deal adequately with the great range of historical and contemporary factors influencing the process of construction of national identity. Both approaches failed to distinguish between the conditions that hinder the growth of national consciousness and the conditions that motivate the growth of national feelings and lead to national self-esteem etc.

The official academic literature does not fully reflect these debates (parts of them are only virtual). Also, by the beginning of the 21st century, the nationalistic model lost a lot of supporters. There is a search for a new model of identity that goes beyond the political interests of the two above-mentioned parties. If we analysed Belarusian identity through the discourse of modernity / post-modernity, we would state the following: while the processes of formation of the nation-state are typical of modernity period (and both official ideologists and Belarusian intellectuals took it for granted), the current period is rather characterized by features that are indicative of post-modernity: fragmentation of identity, free choice of several types of collective identities rather than interiorizing the prescribed socio-cultural identities within the framework of prime socialization. From this aspect, a current Belarusian can easily identify himself (herself), for example, as a representative of religious community, a member of a particular sub-cultural group, as a bi-lingual or even multi-lingual speaker i.e. as a representative of multiple identities, and get rid of all "narrow" identities (social class, nation, or patriot). As Minenkov (2006) also stresses, contemporary Belarus is a complex society in a globalizing world, and in order to find its own space in this global world, Belarus has to accept multicultural pluralistic identity. It has to become a pluralistic cosmopolitan rather than nationalistic society. From his point of view, this emerging identity is represented by the young people (he calls them "new opposition" or "19 25 generation"): they came to the centre of Minsk after the presidential elections in March 2006 to protest against the election fraud and demonstrate their human dignity. These young people showed their willingness to get rid of treatment as an Object: they were ready to become a Subject, a political agent of social changes (Panonopr 2006). This younger generation can be considered as the origin of new national identity, as those who will represent Belarus in the global world in the coming future. They do not need references to "nation" or "people" because they represent Belarus and, therefore, symbolically answer the question about Belarusian identity raised by Janka Kupala: "A hto tam idze?" (Who is walking there?)

As we tried to explain, the so-called “paradoxes” of national identity belong to its interpretation within one of the narrow approaches described that are politically biased and oppose each other. However, if we accept the new approach and get rid of nationalism and narrow linguistic approach (from “playing terminological games”), we may understand that only a pluralistic civic identity can be the key to the construction of new national identity in Belarus.

BASIC VALUES OF CONTEMPORARY BELARUSIANS

After a brief discussion of the major theoretical approaches to the construction of new national identity in Belarus, some further empirical examples of how these existing approaches deal with the most important “hot” problems related to the national identity will be presented: the Union of Russia and Belarus, official bilingualism, and the EU enlargement to the very borders of the Republic of Belarus. In particular, the data will show that nationalistic approach based on three major ideas – independence from Russia, Belarusian language, and Belarusian culture (Дубавец 2006) – does not help in solving these problems that have a mixed impact on Belarusian identity and contribute to its uncertainty, fragmentariness, and instability.

When scholars empirically measure the existing types of collective identity, they often use a set of fundamental values shared by the population of a given society (Лалин 2003; Sztompka 2004). Such values are usually called vital, as they determine a world outlook, a person’s approach to a society and personality itself. Under the conditions of systemic transformation it is especially significant to define collective identities by the underlying values, as we can select the most typical types of cultural identity and, therefore, conclude whether the shared collective identities tend to integrate or disintegrate people of different ethnic, social, and religious background in society. That is why it is practically useful to analyze and compare theoretical models of socio-cultural identity that dominated during the previous (Soviet) and current (post-soviet) historical periods of Belarusian development. Although such models are only tools for analysis (so, they are not directly applicable to the reality), they can help select the dominant values underlying each of the types of collective identity and, thus, better understand the epoch they represent. Also, comparison of the dominant types of identity can show the direction of further transformation of Belarusian collective identity that is of great importance within the framework of global influences and European integration.

It is worth mentioning that two-three decades ago Belarusians were considered primarily as an integral part of the so-called “new historical community”, named “the Soviet people”. In other words, the theoretical model of “Sovietskiy chelovek” (Soviet person) was dominant (in the western literature this type was usually called *Homo Sovieticus*). Officially, as Smirnov (1980) defined, this type was characterized by such features (or normative “major values” according to the Soviet propaganda), as communist world-view (atheism, science), materialism, collectivism, readiness to subordinate their private interests to those of the state, and social optimism. Of course, it does not mean that all the people living in the USSR or in BSSR clearly understood themselves in this way or shared all of the above values; rather, these values constituted the positive part of the model of the dominant Soviet identity (the model of “we-group”). This type of identity had been deeply rooted in the Soviet past and “collective sub consciousness” of post-war generations of the Soviet citizens.

In order to prove the fact that this type was really dominating among the population of Belarus we can refer to VTSIOM data, presented by Gudkov (1999): the survey was carried out in March 1991, a few months before the breakdown of the USSR. According to this survey, 69% of Belarusians described their social identity as “Soviet citizens”; and only 24% as “citizens

of their republic". It means that only a quarter of Belarusians gave priority to their national specific culture and mentality that distinguished them from other Soviet people. It is remarkable that Belarusian respondents took the highest position among all the Soviet respondents placing the Soviet identity higher than their national identity (Table 1).

TABLE 1. How would you identify yourself primarily: citizen of the USSR or citizen of the republic where you live? (%)

Ethnicity of respondents	Citizens of the USSR	Citizens of their republic	Difficult to answer
Belarusians	69	24	7
Russians in soviet republics	66	22	12
Russians in Russia	63	25	12
Kyrgyzs	55	39	6
Kazakhs	48	52	0
Ukrainians	42	46	12
Uzbeks	38	53	9
Azeri	28	65	7
Armenians	8	83	9
Estonians	3	97	0

Now, 15–20 years later, the situation in independent Belarus is quite different: instead of dominance of civic identity Belarusians prefer local and regional types of identity.

If we go back to the Soviet identity, we can define "they-group" ("enemies") as referring to the nations belonging to the opposite military block: the values typical for these nations were interpreted as alien, not appropriate for "we-group".

Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka (2004: 14) gave the precise characteristics of the basic values typical of the collective identity of *Homo Sovieticus*, and western European (these values clearly demonstrate the opposite nature of two types of identity): collectivism, safety, social stability, conformity, state social security, personal non-responsibility, egalitarian income equality, dogmatism and intolerance, as features of *Homo Sovieticus*; and individualism, self-confidence, readiness to risk and social changes, high level of mobility, innovation, personal responsibility, civic activity, inequality of income, tolerance and acceptance of people with different mentality, thoughts, values (dissidents) as features of western Europeans.

It goes without saying that the social basis for producing and reproducing the model *Homo Sovieticus* disappeared together with the Soviet state. As Jury Levada (2001) explained, by the mid-1990s, according to his sociological data, this type did not exist, however, some features were preserved (for example, the idea of equality, dominance of social stability, personal non-responsibility, hunting for enemies, conformity), as they can remain in the mental structure for a long time in the form of prejudices and remnants of the past.

The Belarus national survey (2000) also proved this statement: after a decade of Belarusian independence, one third of respondents still assessed the Soviet system as "bad" and "very bad", while another one third as "good" and "very good". At the same time only one fifth assessed the current system as "effective" (Титаренко 2004: 62).

TRANSITIONAL MODEL OF BELARUSIAN IDENTITY

The empirical investigation of socio-cultural identity of Belarusians once again proved that the basic values of the population can not be substituted by the new set of basic values as quickly as the political changes: it will take several decades before the new values will be adopted by the mass consciousness. Basic values are not under the influence of simple political manipulations: they have their own roots in the habits, traditions, and customs that are invisible for an observer but very real in everyday life. That is why some particular types of cultural identity can survive even being irrelevant to the new situation within the society at large. Thus, in spite of the fact that a new type of national identity is under construction, as has been shown earlier, some out-of-date types relevant to the previous epoch also exist. A brief discussion on how Belarus language is evaluated in empirical surveys follows.

One of the major features of the contemporary situation is bilingualism. There are some important historical conditions predetermining the fact why a good deal of ethnic Belarusians speaks 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 (educated people) and especially authorities to speak “business Russian” in the office rather than less developed and less popular Belarusian. As Gapova (2005b) explained, the shift from Belarusian to Russian was often voluntary, as Russian gave more career chances. It is worth mentioning that both languages belong to the group of Eastern Slavic languages, they are really close to each other in morphology, letters etc., and people easily understand each other when speaking both languages. The Soviet linguistic policy was more supportive of Russian: every Soviet citizen had to know Russian well, especially in case of promotion it was practically important, so the languages of the national republics were alive, but not in use in the big cities with international population, in the big factories, even universities: as representatives of many ethnic groups could be there, it was more practical to speak Russian that became lingua franca for the Soviet political and economic space. It is not by chance that Belarusian nationalists selected “villages” as the “motherland” for Belarusian identity and “Belaruskasti” (Дубавец 2005).

As a result of this policy and practice, Belarusians, being a nation with some unique socio-cultural features, usually adopted Russian as the language of everyday communication. The contemporary population of Belarus, although consisting of primarily Belarusians (81%) and only 11% of Russians, practically do not discuss either a “language issue” or “religious identity issue” any more: as Kirienko (2005) empirically proved, they are tolerant to any language (and, therefore, speak Russian, Belarusian, and Trasjanka), as well as they are tolerant to Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant religious denomination.

There is one more historical determinant that contributed to the so-called “inter-between” status of Belarusian identity throughout the centuries: as Abdziralovich (1993: 3, 4) perfectly explained, ethnic Belarusians always lived “on the cross-road” between the West and the East, Russia and Poland, being always under a strong cultural and political influence of other neighbouring cultures and languages. Belarus was not only “between” the East and the West, it also belonged either to eastern or western states, so that in the New Times Belarusians have never lived in their own nation-state before the very end of the 20th century.

The 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 supported the national independence of Belarus as well as the values of free market and liberal democracy

more than any other “ethnic community”. Actually, there is nothing new in such an approach: as Ioffe (2003: 1010) argued, non-ethnic Belarusians who did not speak Belarusian, – Russians, Jews, and Ukrainians more than others – were always more “nationalistic” and “pro-Belarus” in their struggle against conservative authorities of all kinds in the region now called the Republic of Belarus.

According to the same ISEPS 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 other than Russian or Belarusian language. If we compare this linguistic situation with the ethnic composition of the population (81% of ethnic Belarusians and 11% Russians), we may conclude that the majority of people of all the ethnicities prefers to speak Russian for practical reasons, and there are no ethnic conflicts on this matter. That is why language is not a political or cultural watershed of the people, therefore, language can not be considered as the major criterion for the formation of a new model of socio-cultural identification of Belarusians. As Gapova added (2005b), Belarusian is no more a democratic symbol and means of national mobilization as it was the case under *Perestroika*. 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. We may conclude that a new civic national identity in Belarus can not be constructed in the same way as it was in the Czech Republic (Hroch 2005) where language was the central factor.

It is important to show how people in Belarus evaluate the Union of Belarus and Russia that was primarily signed in 1996 between the two independent countries with an idea of their full integration (economic, political, military) in the future. The practical uncertainty of the status of this Union poses some significant obstacles for the construction of the new model of Belarusian identity: if there is one state in the future, the unified identity would be necessary, if the Union remains in its current status, a stronger model of pure Belarusian identity should be formed. According to ISEPS (2004b) data, ten years ago almost more than half of Belarusians supported the process of unification with Russia, while in 2004 the number of supporters of the full unification (and the formation of one new state) reduced to 12–14% strong supporters of Russian-Belarusian unification. It is quite possible that, by the end of 2006, this number is even lower because of the “gas war” between Russia and Belarus.

The ups and downs in the process of Russian-Belarusian unification and the remaining uncertainty of the final status of such a union contribute a lot to the ambivalence of the definition of both positive and negative aspects of a new Belarusian identity. Thus, if we take for granted political union with Russia, then the question arises who are Russians for us – “others” or “us”? According to ISEPS (2004b) data, 31.2% citizens of Belarus hypothetically agreed Belarus to be unified with the Russian Federation i. e. considered Russians as “us”-group while another 20.8% preferred to join the European Union, and 18.9% agreed – again, hypothetically – to be part of both Russia and the European Union. 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 other than the Republic of Belarus country (Russia or EU) belong to “we-group”, while for the other part of Belarusians all these countries are real foreigners and, therefore, are considered to be “others” or even “aliens”.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the two main theoretical approaches and political projects of constructing a new Belarusian national identity has clearly shown that the Republic of Belarus does not fit the dominant western models of constructing national identity in post-communist countries. Both of these approaches – supported by Belarusian intellectuals and BNF leaders, on the one hand, and by the official pro-regime ideologists on the other – prefer to construct an “ideal model” of a nation and national identity to back their own interests. They consider the real people of Belarus as an object for influence and manipulation (using the Marxist concept of class consciousness, an object for imposing a “proper” national consciousness to the “underdeveloped population”). 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 one (pro-regime).

Although both above-mentioned models are narrow and politically biased, the official one is prevailing. This model constructs the national identity on the basis of historical memory of Belarusians referring only to the Soviet history, mainly, to the Great Patriotic War. According to this model, Belarusians became free in 1944 when the country was liberated from the German troops, so, all the talks about other kinds of freedom and liberation are “empty” and non-appropriate. Therefore, instead of the oppositional “myth of Belarusianness” consisting of language, culture, and independence from Russia, another “myth” has been constructed: “independence from Germans, internationalism, and Belarusian patriotism”. In this way, the possible space for myths in construction of a new national identity has been reduced to: (a) the historical period of World War Two, (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.

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 prove the fact that the real situation in Belarus differs from the above-mentioned models. Only “terminological play” can perfectly explain these paradoxes that actually show Belarus to need a new, non-contradictory explanatory theory and a new type of national identity backed up by the idea of Belarusians as a Subject of their own actions. The events in March 2006 gave hope that such kind of national identity is under construction.

Contemporary Belarusian developments can be described within post-soviet inert model: it provides a small space for constructing a really new national identity that would meet the challenges of globalization, external pressure of different kinds, and would provide 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 no universal values shared by all Belarusians as one “we”-group either. Modern identity of Belarusians is multi-sided. Our analysis has discovered the cultural mixture of traditional and modern identities among Belarusians, the eclectic nature of mass values, and coexistence of several types of identities without a dominant one.

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