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## Reinforcing the National Identity: Belarusian Identity-Building Social Practices

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**Abstract:** Since the 1990s, the Belarusian identity has undergone several notable transformations. One of the most recent transformative periods took place from 2014 to 2020, when Belarus' state authorities revisited official discourse on national identity elements, particularly the Belarusian language following the rise of new hybrid challenges. By changing their discursive practices, state officials, civil society, and private business simultaneously undertook a series of practical processes targeting Belarusian language and statehood narratives. The mass protests of 2020, followed by unprecedented repression, not only altered the preceding processes, but also signalled the start of a new stage in Belarusian identity development, with the shifting tempo and transformation of identity narratives and practices. From the perspective of ontological security, this article has identified and assessed the contemporary identity-building processes in the domains of language and history, arguing that past and current identity-building practices allowed by the authorities have been primarily driven by ontological anxiety.

**Keywords:** Belarusian identity, national identity construction, ontological security, Belarusian statehood, Belarusian language, soft-Belarusisation.

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## Introduction

On 7 May 2015, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's plane touched down in Moscow. On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of Victory Day, he was expected to attend an informal meeting of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) heads and lay a wreath to Kremlin walls on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the 'Victory Day'. When Lukashenka was walking out the plane, the reporters' attention was caught by the ribbon he had pinned into his jacket. Lukashenka was wearing a previously unseen hybrid ribbon, which combined the orange and black ribbon colours of the Saint George's ribbon, which has become a symbol of Russian aggression against Ukraine, and the state flag colours of Belarus', with the centre decorated with a white apple tree blossom. A gradual replacement of pro-Russian historical symbols and customs with Belarusian alternatives was only one of the few new social practices that emerged after the 2014 occupation of Ukraine's Crimea.

After the occupation of Crimea, Belarusian authorities changed their official discourses, centring a distinct Belarusian identity by changing narratives on certain elements of identity and assigning new meanings to Belarusianness, particularly the Belarusian language, which before 2014 was either ignored or even negatively portrayed by the authorities, as it was considered a symbol of political opposition. Belarusian political observers labelled these changes as tendency of 'soft-Belarussification', as a 'means of countering Russian influence' (Mojeiko, 2015). When analysing Lukashenka's evolving communication from 2014-2019, I uncovered that Belarusian authorities primarily attempted to depoliticise the element of the Belarusian language in the discourse by deconstructing the old meaning of Belarusian language as political signification, and then they sought to construct the new narrative, which presents the Belarusian language as one of the primary identity attributes in the official identity discourse that distinguishes Belarusians as a nation (Jachovič, 2019). Considering the previous narratives and preferential treatment of Russian language, this discursive shift was a significant move for the authorities. In addition to discourse, the authorities additionally allowed numerous practical changes in cultural and historical realms of identity construction between 2014 and 2019. Different types of initiatives aimed at

strengthening and popularising elements of Belarusian identity, the Belarusian language, and the pre-Soviet historical period in particular were undertaken by domestic actors, including civil society, businesses, and political groups. Notably, these measures found widespread support and demand from the public. It is debatable whether these changes occurred as a result of the efforts of the authorities and the aforementioned ‘soft-Belarusisation’, or whether these changes would have taken place regardless of their objectives, given the changing society. As presented later in this article, changing social practices in the identity-building domain were consistently taking place between 2014 and 2019, resulting in evolving national identity elements, regardless of whichever view is taken.

In 2020, mass protests followed the massively falsified election and Lukashenka’s unprecedented state violence against peaceful protesters. This not just drastically changed the political situation in the country and Minsk’s relations with the West, but it also disrupted the post-2014 identity processes, changing numerous elements of the identity narratives and impacting further identity-building practices in society and the trajectory of the identity consolidation. The authorities refocused on building identity cleavages in society, constructing new narratives to address greater than ever faced personal power preservation and ontological threats. The occupation of Crimea, which was thought to be a catalyst for Lukashenka’s government effort to build a more resilient national identity narratives a few years ago, was pronounced by Lukashenka as ‘legitimate de jure and de facto’ in December 2021 (Reuters, 2021), fully confirming another shift in the regime’s self-preservation strategy.

In this article, I seek to reconstruct the flow of identity-building processes and their changes that occurred in the country from 2014 to 2021, dividing the period before and after the events of 2020, in regard to two vulnerable to Russian influence identity domains, where practical changes were the most overt: the Belarusian language and the Belarusian history. In analysing changing identity practices, I argue that contemporary Belarusian national

identity is in the making, and contemporary social practices have been driven by concerns of ontological security. This argument is supported by empirical data analysis, which examines and assesses the recent initiatives undertaken by the authorities, civil society, and private business, as well as by an analysis of the changing social and political landscape of Belarus. This article assesses whether these the social practices that took place before 2020 contributed to building more resilient identity narratives and addressed the ontological anxiety in terms of the continuity of the current self that transformed into an insecurity after Russia's military intervention in Ukraine in 2014. The article also covers the 2020-2021 events that arguably resulted in new practices that have further consolidated the self-consciousness of Belarusians, changing the trajectory and pace of the preceding identity-building practices.

This article additionally seeks to re-examine the theoretical insights of Ontological Security Theory (OST) after applying this theoretical framework to case of Belarus. First, the Belarusian case demonstrates that countries with unconsolidated identity cannot and do not seek ontological security by maintaining identity-related stability, as commonly argued by scholars, but on the contrary – countries like Belarus seek to increase their security by opting in for changes of certain elements of identity. I contend that after 2014, the Belarusian authorities sought to increase the country's ontological security (and simultaneously their own rule) to confront potential hybrid threats by adjusting identity processes, instead of sustaining previous identity practices. However, after the regime had been challenged by a consolidated society in 2020, these practices have shifted, but the partial rationale behind this shift – securing personal rule – was sustained, forcing the authorities to adapt to new, group-level ontological challenges. Second, while OST is commonly applied on the state level, the Belarusian case provides a situation in which multiple identity narratives are competing, which points to the rationale – even necessity – of analysing actor anxieties and motivations at both state and individual-group levels, realising that while motivations and anxieties at the state level may overlap, that overlap would be only partial given the differences in the overall identity models, such as other identity narratives, pursued by the governmental and non-governmental actors within Belarus.

This article begins with introduction of theoretical arguments and suggested revisions that stem from empirical data observed after having analysed the Belarusian case through the lenses of the OST. The empirical section of this article focuses on two domains: the Belarusian language and historiography of statehood, as most of the dynamics have been observed in these two domains and these two domains could be seen as weak points to hybrid or any other form of aggression that exploits pro-Russian sentiment, considering the built by the authorities ties with Russia. The empirical part of this article examines the most recent changes in terms of identity practices, distinguishing two time periods: 2014-2019 and 2020-2021. It is primarily based on media articles about social practices related to identity formation that were collected while monitoring Belarusian independent and official media. This data is augmented with available public opinion surveys, census data, and fragments of interview data that was collected for the author's dissertation research, which consists of 11 interviews with Belarusian politicians and experts performed in spring 2020 (interviews were conducted remotely and anonymised given the potential security concerns of the informants).

## **1. The Rise of Ontological Insecurity in 2014**

In contemporary world politics, physical security remains without any doubt one of the most important aspirations for every sovereign nation. Few would argue that independent and sovereign states could effectively function without preserving what OST scholars call the state's body. However, widely cited contemporary OST scholars, Brent J. Steele and Jennifer Mitzen, argue that besides physical security, i.e., the protection of territory and political sovereignty, states seek for another basic need – ontological security. Both theorists refer to Anthony Giddens's definition of ontological security as the 'need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time' (Mitzen 2006, p. 342). Mitzen adapted the concept of ontological security to states, justifying that 'ontological and physical security-seeking alike can be theoretically productive', explaining that states seek ontological security for

their members to preserve state distinctiveness, respecting the national group identity (Mitzen 2006, pp. 352-353). In a similar vein, Steele and other scholars argue that a state itself is an actor that strives to maintain its own ontological security, relying on a biographical narrative (Innes & Steele 2013, p. 17). In this article, ontological security is seen as the security of the identity, while the latter is seen through constructivist lenses, as described by Guibernau – a modern and dynamic phenomenon, wherein members of a single community share the subjective belief that they are bound together by a common history, culture, language, territory, religion, kinship, statehood, or other elements (Guibernau 2004, pp. 134-135.). Respectively, the identity is a constructed phenomenon, and that construction (or reconstruction) occurs primarily through the changing narratives in the discourse and through changing social practices that are analysed in this paper.

To apply OST framework to the Belarusian case, a few elaborations are necessary to be made. The first requires returning to the problem of applying Giddens's definition, which is also one of the areas of the criticism of OST that stems from debating the application of the psychological concept of ontological security to collective actors – states (Choi, 2021, p. 10). OST scholars state that ontological security can be scaled to the state level using a variety of arguments, including that states are source of security for individuals or that states are represented by individuals (Ejdus & Rečević, 2021, p. 30). In this article, I neither oppose this view nor argue that the originally psychological concept cannot be scaled up to the state level. However, I do argue that, it is necessary to look at two levels of analysis for the Belarusian case, the state level, the group-individual level, and the interconnection of these levels, given the nature of the contemporary Belarusian regime, whereby different groups and actors promote different identity narratives given the existence of competing identity models (Bekus, 2010). Respectively, it would be reasonable to assume that different groups pursuing different identity narratives experience different level of ontological anxiety, shared by them as individuals or group members, which may or may not intersect with state-level. It is also essential to note that when I speak about pursued identity narratives or models at a different group level, I do not imply or assume that these groups

genuinely apply these models to themselves, which means that different actors, such as Lukashenka's group, driven by ontological anxiety and insecurity, may change a particular element promoted for public identity construction instrumentally, not necessarily making it a part of their own personally perceived 'self'.

The theory includes a revised understanding of actor rationality. Steele's (2008) main argument is that 'states pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence'. States often seek moral, humanitarian and honour-driven actions that do not necessarily correspond to seemingly rational (in realist terms) interests because these actions satisfy their self-identity demands, and their ontological security becomes as important as important physical integrity (Steele, 2008, pp. 2-3). Mitzen also argues that concerns regarding ontological security could lead to irrational conflicts and attachment to them, the conclusion of which could mean the appearance of ontological insecurity (Mitzen, 2006, pp. 342-343). However, ontological security-driven behaviour does necessitate a trade-off of decrease in physical security when seeking an increase in ontological security. The two basic needs of each state have a complementary relationship and ontological security-seeking behaviour may increase the state's national security. The emergence of new types of threats in this decade allows us to argue that self-identity threats can lead to a state's gap in its physical security in relation to increased vulnerability vis-a-vis hybrid threats. In Eastern Europe and former Soviet countries especially, this complementary relation between ontological and physical security is particularly visible, as after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, countries like Ukraine and Baltic states were challenged to preserve their independence not only in terms of securing their borders but also strengthening their distinct identities. The threat to ontological security has not vanished although some countries have joined military alliances or adopted other measures making the direct military intervention rather unthinkable. On the contrary, with Russia's growing ambitions and increased use of hybrid approaches, including both the

propaganda machine inherited from the Soviet Union and new tactics such as disinformation aimed at undermining the countries' sense of self, the need for preservation and strengthening the identity has become even more pressing.

Another feature of OST theory that deserves further elaboration is the concept of identity stability as a source of security. OST scholars generally place emphasis on maintaining a stable and continuous identity rather than embracing change, and changes in identity could be perceived as rather harmful from an ontological security perspective. Christopher Browning and Pertti Joenniemi (2017) have also addressed this component of change, and their critique of this general presupposition as a premised and restrictive understanding of OST. I follow their suggestion to emphasize adaptability rather than stability. According to Browning and Joenniemi, 'ontological security is not just a question of stability, but also adaptability', including ability to deal with change (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017, pp. 2-4). The scholars dismiss the notion that change is viewed as destabilising, pointing out that identities are always in the making and never fully stable, and that seeking ontological security might actually involve coping with uncertainty and change, such as by developing and changing identity narratives or even shifting to a completely new identity (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017, pp. 3-4, 9-10). This is exactly how the Belarusian case is described. Though opting for change might be seen as threatening to the authorities, maintaining the status quo in the light of the fact that Belarus does not have a consolidated single identity shared by the majority of the population is perilous, as its identity is still in the making, no change and action was actually riskier in introducing new narratives. It is important to note that I do not refer here to a full shift of the whole set of identity narratives, but to targeted modifications that do not contradict the broad set of previously created autobiography narratives.

With competing identity narratives and no coherent identity, Belarus found itself in a situation in which neither actor, including the authorities, could favour the stability of the current state of affairs. Events in the region acted as a catalyst, compelling both authorities and unofficial actors advocating for alternative identity concepts to reassess ontological security risks and accelerate the process of identity formation in order to change and adapt the



identity, making it more distinct and thus resilient to external influence, particularly the potential exploit of a weak identity's vulnerabilities. Despite the fact that the authorities had overtly pledged loyalty and identity ties with Russia for years, they adopted and allowed independent from state actors to take actions aimed at identity strengthening processes before 2020, analysed in the next section. After the 2020 events, some of these processes were disrupted and transformed, arguably for the same reason of seeking ontological security, but on the individual rather than state level, forcing the authorities revert to their previous strategy and make new changes to identity narratives to adapt to a new context.

## **2. Belarusian Language Practices**

Russia has consistently exploited the language issue in Ukraine and other countries of the region with Russian-speaking populations, using it to disseminate destructive narratives and pro-Russia sentiments while claiming protection for so-called compatriots and their Russian language rights (Matviyishyn, 2020). After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, it became evident that Belarus' was in a particularly dangerous spot due the linguistic policy of the Belarusian authorities. Soon after Lukashenka came to power, he organized a 1995 referendum that granted Russian language state-language status and the Russian language soon after became perceived as the official political and cultural language of Belarus (Bekus, 2014 pp. 26-27, 34). Most officials, including Lukashenka himself, have predominantly used the Russian language in their public communication. However, with the changing connotation of the Belarusian language after 2014, this process has been partially reversed. As mentioned in the introduction of this article, the analysis of the official discourse – Lukashenka's speeches between 2014 and 2019 – led to a conclusion that Lukashenka and other officials began to portray Belarusian language positively as a distinct symbol of Belarusians, assigning to it a meaning of one of the key elements of national identity and depoliticising it (Jachovič, 2019). These discursive changes were accompanied by new social

practices related to the perception of the Belarusian language, including more widespread use of the language in public communication and spaces, as well as language popularisation and protection efforts. In this section, I will analyse the mentioned changes alongside the dynamics of statistics on Belarusian language education and print, assessing, primarily, whether they indicate policy shifts and if and how they helped to address ontological anxiety.

The first and the most overt practical change in linguistic practice was related to the comparatively more widespread use and display of the Belarusian language in communications of government officials. One of early prominent speech acts was performed by Lukashenka in 2014, when he delivered a part of his official Independence Day speech in Belarusian. There were several other instances of Lukashenka speaking in Belarusian, particularly during the events during which Belarusian national identity had to be stressed, such as the awarding ceremony 'For Spiritual Revival' (Нанна Ніва, 2020a), or when paying a visit to Austria in 2019, Lukashenka left a note in the Book of Honourable Austrian Parliament in the Belarusian language (БелТА, 2019a). Following the new practice of Belarusian language demonstration in public communication set by Lukashenka, other public officials followed the same path. A number of high-ranking officials up to the Prime Minister level (Нанна Ніва, 2018a; Tribuna, 2018; Нанна Ніва, 2019a) spoke Belarusian during the public events and interviews, stressing the importance of preserving Belarusian language and culture.

The increased demonstration of Belarusian language in official communication was coupled with the appointment of Belarusian-speaking government officials, which eventually increased the pool of government representatives that could speak Belarusian in public, simultaneously serving the purpose of demonstrating that the Belarusian language is an attribute of the authorities, not the political opposition. In 2014-2019, several high-ranking officials were appointed from the pool of Belarusian speaking public servants. In 2017, Lukashenka appointed Alyaksandr Karlyukevich as Information Minister, who was known as a Belarusian-language fiction writer (Мицкевич, 2017). There were several remarkable appointments to the country's universities. Dzyanis Duk, described by Lukashenka as a 'healthy nationalist',

became a rector of Lukashenka's alma mater Mahilyow State University, and Belarusian speaking historian Iryna Kiturka became Rector of Hrodna University. Appointments were made and to positions in the Presidential Administration in 2019, with historian Alyaksandr Kanoyka, who defended his Ph.D. in Belarusian language, becoming a chief specialist on ideology management (Нампа Ніва, 2017a; Нампа Ніва, 2017b; Радыё Свабода, 2018a; Нампа Ніва 2019b). Lukashenka also appointed a new Deputy Head of his administration to manage ideology and mass media work – a young regional official and Belarusian poet from Mahilyow, Andrey Kuntsevich. Belarusian analysts immediately concluded that the appointment of Kuntsevich was made in line with the trend of 'soft-Belarusisation' (Рудковскі, 2019).

At the same time, Minsk and other Belarusian cities witnessed a growth in public signs and directions in the Belarusian language, such as street names, schedules, banners, and advertisements. For instance, in the past, the Minsk Airport used to display flight schedules in Russian, English and even Chinese, but since 2018, the Belarusian language has been included (Нампа Ніва, 2018b). The names of geographic locations have also been transliterated to English from Belarusian standards (Дроб, 2020) in contrast to the previous practice of using transliteration from Russian. In terms of the online space, in order to react to opposition inquiry (Радыё Свабода, 2018b), the state entities were legally obliged to publish certain parts of information on their websites in the Belarusian language starting from January 2019, including information about the entities, appeals, services, and contact forms (National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus, 2017). The growing public display of the Belarusian language served the same purpose of the wider use of language by the officials. It detached the linguistic concerns from the opposition, and, importantly, it routinised the use of this identity element, making this rather new for the authorities (and their followers) as a part of their existing model.

Meanwhile, the use of the Belarusian language in parliamentary work, including the issuance of legal acts in the Belarusian language, remained

extremely scarce. The percentage of legislative documents issued in the Belarusian language stayed at roughly three percent (Нанна Ніва, 2018c). Despite this quantity, several important legislation pieces have been translated into Belarusian language. The Expert Council on legislation translation was created, which since 2019 has already approved the translation of large pieces of legislation (БелТА, 2019b), including the Electoral Code, Civic Code, and Labor Code. As of November 2021, out of 26 codes, 11 codes were translated (National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus, 2021). This process of translation of legislation to Belarusian was not terminated even after the 2020 events, with the government planning the continued translation of Codes in 2022. The new role of the language was also recognised in strategic country's documents. In March 2019, Belarus published the Concept of Informational Security, which includes a separate section on values and established practices, where the Belarusian language – along with bilingualism – has been named as a factor facilitating an increase in the national consciousness and spirituality of the Belarusian society, while the development of the Belarusian language has been described as the 'guarantor of the humanitarian security of the state' (National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus, 2019). Following the adoption of the document, the State Secretary of the Security Council Stanislau Zas outlined the government policy position in an interview with TUT.by, stating that the authorities do not aim to enforce the Belarusian language but strive to make it popular, especially among the younger generations (Шрайбман, 2019).

Overall, the Belarusian officials seemed to have carried the new meaning of the Belarusian language as an important characteristic of Belarusian national identity from the discourse to social practices after 2014. This contributed towards even greater significance of the Belarusian language, as well as the routinisation of its use, particularly among within their own group. The routinisation in the form of the public display of the language and in official communication, especially when the language is spoken by high-ranking government officials, removed the 'opposition' label from it, making it a catch-all identity element appealing to all groups in the society. In addition, as pointed out earlier in this article, the context of hybrid threats and fears of a

Crimea scenario, serves as evidence of potential motivation of the authorities to draw a greater distinctiveness for their constructed national identity to minimise Russian influence the society, and importantly, on the Belarusians officials as well, who were influenced by pro-Russian attitudes and views from the regime itself for years.

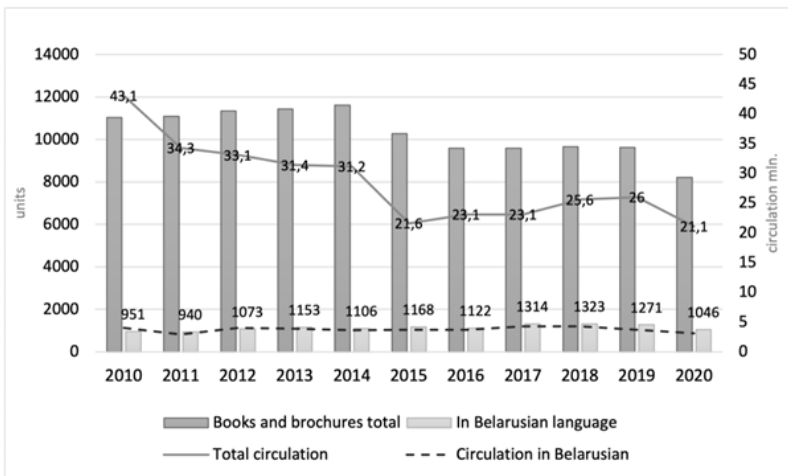
Belarusian speakers and Lukashenka's opponents have frequently indicated the de-belarusification of Belarusian education. The official statistics suggest that this trend of declining Belarusian-language education has continued despite the more overt declarative use of the language by the government. More importantly, socioeconomic processes in the country over the last decade, such as the urbanisation of the population (given that the majority of Belarusian schools are in rural areas), only complicate the situation. For example, Russian language pre-school and secondary school education continues to dominate across all regions of the country, ranging by region from 84.3 to 96.5 percent of the children for pre-school education and from 79.9 to 97.9 percent of children in secondary schools (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2019). The number of schools with Belarusian language education is in a sharp decline and decreased by almost a half of thousand between 2012 and 2018 (from 1,764 to 1,282), and experts believe the situation could be even worse, considering that some schools maintain the language status as a formality (Радыё Свабода, 2020). As for the Belarusian language in higher education, despite pessimistic statistics with only around 300 students studying in Belarusian, an important change in terms of the perception of the Belarusian language has occurred in academia, which was indicated by interviewed experts, who argued that the use of the Belarusian language is much more widespread and common among academic staff currently than it was several years ago when academics were consciously limiting their use of the Belarusian language inside university walls, fearing it could have been interpreted politically.

While the government is largely failing or unwilling to provide access and popularisation of Belarusian-language education, and the primary and

secondary education in Belarusian language became a challenge for parents, who want their children to study in Belarusian but face government's ignorance in response (Hanna Hiba, 2018d), civil society took the lead on providing accessible Belarusian language courses. Unofficial Belarusian language courses called *Mova Nanova* (translated as 'Language Anew'), launched in 2014, became popular among different segments of the population across all regions of Belarus. Before the 2020 events, the organization was expanding, and in February 2020, it launched online classes (KYKY.org, 2020). Belarusian language promotion and advocacy campaigns also spread to the private sector. A few prominent Belarusian companies, such as mobile provider Velcom or gas station network A-100, have increased their efforts to introduce more of Belarusian language into their operations, offer campaigns for Belarusian speakers, and so on. Even state-owned businesses, like watch factory Luch, adjusted their production to meet expectations of Belarusian-speaking customers (Hanna Hiba, 2019c). Some of these business initiatives continued amid unprecedented repression in 2020. In this case, businesses had twofold intentions, as interviewed experts argued, some firms were genuinely interested in the Belarusian language promotion on the value level while others are simply following the recent trend and fulfilling the growing demand for the Belarusian language from their customers. Regardless of the source of such intentions, both private and public initiatives reinforce the growing trend of Belarusian language popularisation and lead to the same conclusion that there is a clear demand for more of the Belarusian language in Belarusian society against which the authorities cannot stand, leaving aside potential overlap of the same as non-governmental actor motivation of strengthening elements of pro-Belarusian identity.

The situation with Belarusian-language print media is somewhat similar to the situation regarding the Belarusian-language education. Belarusian-language literature used to reach marginal levels compared to the Russian-language literature, at the same time, certain types of print, such as newspapers, are in an overall decline. The annual circulation of newspapers in the Republic decreased from 494.9 million copies in 2010 to 344.1 million copies in 2018. At the same time, Belarusian-language press circulation declined in almost

exactly the same proportion from 130.8 million to 90.3 million. Meanwhile, the situation with book and brochure publishing showed a rather positive trend in terms of the Belarusian language growth, as the number and volume of Belarusian books reached its highest number going back to at least 2010 despite the overall decrease in the number of books and brochures in the country given the digitalisation of media and other factors.



*Chart 1. Circulation of print: total vs. Belarusian language (National Book Chamber of Belarus 2020)*

While the authorities refrained changing negative trends in language education and making significant policy decisions, potentially for fear of undermining the bilingual nation narrative constructed by Lukashenka or fearing direct criticisms and counter-actions from neighbouring Russia, civil society in Belarus played a key role in shaping the national identity through initiatives to popularise the Belarusian language, language protection activities, the organisation of cultural and historical events, and creation of new trends. The soundest campaigns popularising the Belarusian language were initiated by independent groups and associations, musicians, artists, and others.

Interviewed experts unanimously distinguished civil society organisations, such as the aforementioned *Mova Nanova* and *Budźma Belarusami* and *Art Siadziba*, admitting their high contribution in promoting Belarusian culture and language.

Another important trend in terms of linguistic practices relates to the protection of the Belarusian language status and the relative responsiveness of the authorities to activists and initiatives, such as *Umovy dlya Movy* (Conditions for [Belarusian] Language) that protects the rights of the Belarusian language speakers. For instance, a former employee of the Ministry of Defense was brought to administrative responsibility for insulting the Belarusian language on his Facebook account (Намаа Ніва, 2020b). In December 2019, there was a resonant case when a worker reputable IT company was subjected to an administrative case and contract termination (allegedly for violation of company policy) after denigrating the Belarusian language on social media (Карюхіна, 2020). In a similar vein, the authorities took direct actions against the Russian-language resources spreading malicious information about Belarusian identity, for example, by blocking sites like *Sputnik i Pogrom*. (Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus, 2017). A few years ago, a resonant case against Regnum columnists (Мельничук, 2016), accused of inciting hatred towards Belarusian identity, including the language, was opened. In the court hearings, the prosecutor detailed the accusations, which included the denial of the historical heritage of the GDL and diminishing the importance of the Belarusian language, among other things (Smok, 2018).

Given the aforementioned practises, what is the actual perception of the Belarusian language in Belarusian society? According to the 2009 census, 53 percent of Belarusians polled stated that Belarusian was their mother language. Soon after the census ended, before announcing official results, Belarusian officials already revealed that the number of Belarusians who consider their Belarusian to be their mother tongue increased (Намаа Ніва, 2020c). The issue with mother tongue in the census questionnaire – the first language learned in childhood – is its source of contention (BelarusFeed, 2019). At home, the majority of the total Belarusian population (71.4 percent) still speak Russian compared nearly 26 percent speaking Belarusian (2020). At the same time,



54.1 percent identify Belarusian as their mother tongue and 84.9 percent identify as Belarusian (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2020). The slight increase in the citizens indicating Belarusian as their mother language during the new census allows us to claim that Belarusians, while not speaking the language regularly, value the Belarusian language more than in the past. This assumption emerged as a pattern in interviews with Belarusian politicians and experts, who argue that it is primarily about the importance and respect for both Belarusian culture and language, implying that knowing the language is not required but respecting it is an absolute must in order to have a pro-Belarusian consciousness.

The latter argument was also supported by the independent polling data. A survey on Belarusian values conducted in 2018 demonstrated that 65.9 percent of Belarusians would like their children to speak Belarusian as good as they speak Russian, and 86.1 percent consider Belarusian to be the ‘most important part of [Belarusian] culture and must be preserved’ (IPM Research Center, 2018). This data suggests that the aforementioned signification and routinisation of the language was inevitable to some extent. Even though Belarus is an authoritarian regime, which is not accountable to the electorate, contemporary social attitudes are important to consider for the regime, which wants to ensure its own longevity and ontological security in a changing society. From this perspective, the authorities were forced to adapt to contemporary societal demands and demonstrate personal affiliation to this. Essentially, this is what Lukashenka attempted to do when he completed the questionnaire in the Russian language but indicated the Belarusian language as his mother tongue (БеАТА, 2019c), in order to be seen as a part of the larger group and ensure his personal continuity in a changing society where the Belarusian language is treasured and demanded.

After 2014, there were several important that occurred regarding the Belarusian language. The authorities took no policy measures or practical steps to reverse negative trends in Belarusian language education. In the absence of policies, but in line with discursive changes, during 2014-2019, the authorities

signified the role and importance of Belarusian language as an element of identity building by highlighting this attribute in their public communication. Simultaneously, using the same rather symbolic frames, the government officials, at least at certain layers, formerly supported civil society initiatives on Belarusian language protection and did not interfere with the work of initiatives that popularized the Belarusian language and culture before the 2020 mass protests. When looking into these processes through a constructivist lens, the significance of language-related social practises is rather high. Before the 2020 protests, symbolic acts such as Lukashenka speaking Belarusian reversed previously established patterns and assigned new meanings and perceptions to this element of identity for the public. In such a light, the Belarusian language has been portrayed as an important distinct attribute of a distinct Belarusian identity, and such a view resonated with Belarusian society, which subsequently contributed to an increase of ontological security on the state level.

In 2020-2021, many cultural initiatives along with the whole civil society counting hundreds of non-governmental organizations were repressed and liquidated, hindering the further work of pro-Belarusian initiatives. The massive purge of CSOs suggests that the liquidation of the civil society sector was not targeted by a particular activity, as apolitical organizations have been also subjected to government repression. Concurrently, other initiatives that were launched by the government, such as translation of the legislation have been continuing, with the government not seeing the language (unlike other signs of identity, such as the white-red-white flag that was massively used during the protests) as a political sign. Nonetheless, the targeted and mainly declarative nature of official changes, not backed by actual policy or reform, leads to the conclusion that the regime was concerned with securing its own place in society while at the same time weakening Russia's influence by instrumentalising civil society. This means that their implemented changes have had a practical and instrumental motivation, and in the face of changing context or power preservation challenges, further shifts in terms of the Belarusian language perception can be expected.

### 3. Revisiting Statehood of Belarus

Similarly to how it weaponises the language issue, Russia is also known for propagation of its historical narratives in the region, particularly related to the Soviet Union and Second World War. According to the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 'history is being used by Russia as one of the front lines in the information war and as an instrument for constructing national identity and self-esteem' (NATO StratCom COE, 2018, pp. 9, 44-45). As for the Soviet period, and the 'Great Patriotic War' in particular, this has always been a key theme for the Belarusian state ideology (Rudling, 2008, pp. 52-53). Therefore, the interpretation of Belarusian history, particularly in relation to its statehood, became another area of concern, as it represented a primary vulnerability to Russian informational influence results from that centrality of the Soviet experience in official identity construction efforts.

Scholars researching Belarusian history education identified multiple stages in official history education, from a highly Soviet-centric approach to more moderate stances towards previous periods (Lopata & Vinogradnaitė (eds.), 2016). From 2018 to 2019, a new curriculum for the university course entitled *History of Belarusian Statehood* was developed, with an accompanying textbook (BeATA 2019d). Two important changes stem from this development. These governmental historians claimed, 'For the first time in historiography, Belarusian scholars analysed the first settlements on the Belarusian lands, tribal principalities, the first historical forms of Belarusian statehood' to which these historians attribute Principality of Polotsk and Principality of Turov, Kyivan Rus', the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (BeATA, 2019). Obviously, the analysis of these formations is not as innovative as the authors of the book claim when looking at the work of Belarusian non-governmental historians. Lukashenka's historians have also argued that their concept assumes that Belarusian statehood has remained continuous, and Belarus is a co-owner of each experience and co-founder of these multiple historical formations (National Academy of Sciences of Belarus,

2018, p. 6), which, again, is not innovative for independent historiography but a novelty for official historiography and discourse.

Independent Belarusian scholar Aliaksei Lastouski, who analyzed school textbooks published between 2016 and 2018, concluded ‘an increasing trend to derive the origins of Belarusian statehood from the history of the Principality of Polotsk’, which was also emphasised by Lukashenka in public discourse, and ‘emphasising the Belarusian character of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL)’, which, Lastouski argued, ‘can be considered as part of a larger turn in the historical politics of the Belarusian authorities, the transition to the “long genealogy” of Belarusian statehood’ (Lastouski, 2019, p. 185). While this represents continuation of the trend of attempting to present a greater longevity of Belarusian statehood and demonstrate that Belarus was a part not only of the Soviet Union but also of earlier political formations, which from ontological standpoint, demonstrates that Belarus’s statehood narrative is longer than Russia’s and, given the referenced periods, contains hostile perceptions of Russia as a historical neighbour.

The GDL is one of the periods that was rarely referenced in the official discourse (Jachovič, 2019, p. 254), but the historical formation was ‘boosted’ in contemporary history teaching, and due to this renewed focus, new social practices took place in the country. The GDL narrative appeared in the regarding monuments and the reconstruction of castles. In recent years, it became even stronger, with a series of monuments honoring GDL leaders appearing across the country: for duke Algirdas (Algerd) in Viciebsk, Vytautas (Vitaut) in Hrodna, Gediminas (Gedimin) in Lida (Наша Ніва, 2019d), and Leonas Sapiega (Leu Sapieha) in Slonim (Радзьё Свабода, 2019). In 2020, it was announced that a monument to the GDL Statute will appear in Minsk (Еўпарадыё, 2020). However, initiatives for some of these monuments were backed by civil society and sponsored from non-governmental funds (Дашчынскі, 2019), and the authorities ‘blessed’ their erection. Reference to the medieval past and pre-Soviet statehood of the country was particularly visible during the 2019 European Games hosted by Belarus, which the authorities used not only as an opportunity to promote the country’s image but also to strengthen the new narrative of statehood by staging the opening

show with a particular focus on GDL and other past historical periods (Нама Ніва, 2019e). A 2020 phone survey commissioned by the OSW found out that more Belarusians believe that their statehood narrative should be drawn upon the traditions of the GDL (39.7 percent), while a foundation in the Soviet Union was indicated only by 28 percent of respondents (Centre for Eastern Studies, 2021, p. 10), suggesting that the turn to the legacy of the GDL shapes popular perception of the statehood, but conversely, there is currently a still a low buy-in for the pro-Soviet narrative. Similar societal demands for the Belarusian language, this put additional pressure on the government to adapt to contemporary Belarusian society and its favoured identity elements.

The period of Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) has been the most problematic for the authorities. Lukashenka does not deny the idea of a modern independent state born in that period, but conversely, he accuses the founders of collaborating with hostile regimes (БелТА, 2018). There is no consistency in terms of the policy towards the BNR, as both positive and negative official actions and statements can be cited from before 2020. Amid this indecisiveness, prior to the centennial of the establishment of the BNR (celebrated on 25 March 2018), the Presidential Administration appealed to the Academy of Sciences asking to clarify the role of BNR in the history of Belarus. The Academy of Science did not reveal the details of their response but instead directed journalists to a position outlined in the *History of the Belarusian Statehood*, the authors of which took a so-called nationally oriented position, seeing it as a significant event in attempting to establish an independent Belarusian state (Intex Press, 2018). A couple of notable events took place in Belarus, including the erection of the memorial stone dedicated to the Lutskevich brothers, founders of the national movement of the early 20th century (Нама Ніва, 2018e). A number of actors were involved in this initiative, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the House of Representatives, while the monument itself was financed by the civil authorities in Minsk (АблAMEЙка, 2018). The same year, the National History Museum hosted an exhibition dedicated to the anniversary of the BNR,

showing BNR maps, documents, and a number of other items from that period. A number of governmental bodies, including the Central Archive of KGB, helped to prepare the exhibition project (Шербаков, 2018). Shortly after Freedom Day, the exhibition 'Code 25.03.18' was held in the Republican Arts Gallery of the Belarusian Union of Artists, showcasing the founders of the BNR (Наша Ніва, 2018f). The authorities also allowed a large-scale 100th anniversary rally to take place in Minsk, which was primarily organised and led by civil society and opposition figures and attracted tens of thousands of people (Шукайло, 2018). However, with transformation of the perception of the BNR's white-red-white flag in 2020, a whole new chapter in terms of social practices and symbols in relation to the BNR was opened, which is discussed in the next section.

A few important changes have been observed regarding the rituals and symbols of the Soviet period, which continued to remain critical for the regime. The authorities made attempts to 'nationalise' it, presenting this period from a more Belarusian perspective rather than following the broad 'Great Victory' narrative presented by Russia. They also made several steps not only in the discourse but also in practice to transform 9 May, 'Victory Day', to add more of pro-Belarusian consciousness to this event. First, the controversial Saint George's Ribbon was replaced with a Belarusian green and red ribbon. Some of the common Russian customs, such as so-called 'Immortal Regiment' march, a procession where people carry portraits of relatives who participated in World War II, were banned, and then replaced by similar processions called 'Belarus Remembers' (Міраш, 2019) while the original event organised by openly pro-Russian forces has been banned (Наша Ніва, 2018g). As such, these were small adjustments, but conversely, they can be seen as manifestation of a high ontological anxiety in terms of Russia's influence through common narratives and rituals.

As per the Soviet repressions, one of the most critical issues is Kurapaty, a place where, according to historians, over 100,000 NKVD victims are buried (Марціновіч, 2018). Generally, the authorities have avoided this topic, but recently, Lukashenka ordered a monument to be built there, and similar to the opposition, pro-governmental organizations like the Belarusian Republican

Youth Union (BRSM) and Belaya Rus' began to organise *subbotniks* (community volunteer work) at the site (СЮЛЬЖИНА, 2019). Despite these changes, the authorities continued to use repressive mechanisms to hinder the political opposition's presence in Kurapaty. In 2018-2019, a number of activists faced administrative prosecution for picketing a restaurant built near the Kurapaty site. In spring 2020, the authorities dismantled over 70 crosses erected by civil society activists (Богуславская, 2019). Lukashenka continued to speak against 'politicisation of the issue' and did not acknowledge the responsibility of the Soviet Union for the mass killing of Belarusians in Kurapaty (REFORM.by, 2019). While the authorities made targeted changes to some of the social practices to highlight pre-Soviet statehood and adjust Soviet rituals, a full acknowledgement of the Soviet terror or other dark pages of Belarusian history during the Soviet times would be ontologically dangerous for the regime as a group, as it would seriously damage the other pro-Soviet narratives, including the GPW, that they had propagated for years, made central in its constructed statehood narrative.

Whether high-ranking officials dictate the alternation of historical narration described in this section, or whether this process is largely driven by middle-rank officials and official historians, new practises in the historical domain are prominent as education, monument building, and emerging symbols tend to reshape the previously officially prevailing understanding of Belarusian statehood. By broadening the narrative of Belarusian statehood roots in order to emphasise greater longevity of the nation, and by rethinking the Soviet period and its associated customs and symbols by more heavily accenting the role of Belarus, Belarusian authorities attempt to achieve similar objectives as they do in signifying the role of the Belarusian language – to facilitate the construction of distinct national identity, which has less in common (and in some respects is even hostile) to Russia, and thus contributes to addressing ontological insecurities by minimizing Russia's influence over Belarusian society, particularly its Soviet-nostalgic segments. This shift is overtly seen through the change in practices and symbols, such as the Saint George's

ribbon, which came to represent Russian aggression in Ukraine. While minimizing Russia's influences and state-level ontological anxiety, the regime sought to preserve its rule against external threats but also strove to construct ontological continuity internally, adapting to changing societal demands and worldviews.

#### 4. Identity Practices After 2020

The white-red-white flag and *Pabonia* coat of arms – the historical symbols of the BNR – have acted as the distinguishing mark of Lukashenka's opponents long before the 2020 when they became the dominant symbol of the protest. Before dwelling on the regime's crusade against these symbols, it is important to outline how they were previously perceived. Before spring and summer 2020, interviewed politicians, who often displayed white-red-white symbols, argued that society in recent years stopped seeing these symbols as an opposition symbol. At the same time, a number of shops in Minsk and the surrounding began selling products such as cups, t-shirts, flags with the *Pabonia* coat of arms and white-red-white ornaments, which grew into medium-size businesses that generated substantial revenues. Even though the owners of these businesses often were former activists or opposition representatives, the authorities, still allowed these businesses to operate as long as they did not start selling products that could be construed as too political or against the regime. A clear example of a political line that was crossed was by the shop Symbal.by, which produced 'Psycho3%' T-shirts, referencing to one of the memes of the 2020 campaign. Soon after the appearance of such products, the shop was raided, and customers were detained, leading to the closure of the shop. Similarly, nearly all cultural organisations that promoted these symbols, as well as numerous other shops, were closed and liquidated by 2021 (FIDH, 2021).

Post-election protests marked the unprecedented rise of white-red-white symbols, potentially changing the meaning of the symbol back from historical to political. Though protesters initially used various symbols and flags, including the official red-green flag, they gradually began to use primarily white-red-white flags and the accompanying colours. The popularity of this



anti-government symbol took a clear political meaning, with citizens opposing the government manifesting it in different forms and shapes throughout the city. The white-red combination was widely used for ribbons, paintings, and other art, becoming a distinctive symbol of the peaceful protest movement against the fraud and violence of the regime.

The authorities facilitated two processes that ultimately led to the further politicisation of the symbols and emergence of deep societal cleavages. The unprecedented violence and repression, coupled with fierce governmental efforts to display the red-green state flag, resulted in more controversy related to that symbol, including support for Lukashenka becoming associated with the red-green flag. Simultaneously, the government made the white-red-white a target in its disinformation campaign, later labelling this flag as ‘extremist’ or ‘fascist’ (REFORM.by, 2020) and making it a valid reason for the prosecution of individuals and organisations. The Lukashenka government’s war against this symbol reached unprecedented levels, as substantial administrative resources were invested not only to arrest people for wearing or displaying these colours, but also to eliminate any public display of this colour combination, even when they appeared for clearly apolitical reasons, such as markings for industrial objects.

Along with stronger consolidation, new bonds and initiatives that unite Belarusians, the protesters, victims of state repression, and other social groups have appeared. White-red-white crowds of hundreds of thousands of Belarusians demonstrating explicit peacefulness against the regime of violence and torture reinforced national stereotyping, namely seeing Belarusians as extremely peaceful people. Most importantly, this national unity created a visual bond of solidarity and pride, along with international solidarity and recognition of Belarusian society’s democratic aspirations. The traumatic experience of tens of thousands of Belarusians (according to available statistics, at least 40,000 people have been subjected to state repression at the time of writing this article) in detention centres, such as Akrestina, and during the marches, became a traumatic focal point in the overall narrative that has

shaped and will shape people's further identity in their relation to the Lukashenka government and official law enforcement. The consolidation that took the form of massive protests that arose as a result of excessive violence and torture used against the protesters has continued to distinguish those who suffered and continue to suffer state repression in various forms of how this trauma manifests, also reaching Belarusians who were not directly affected by the repression through massive imagery recorded by witnesses that spread all over the country. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians had to leave the country after the 2020 events: Poland and Lithuania alone issued more than 110,000 visas to Belarusians in the following year (РАДЫЁ СВАБОДА, 2021), and those who emigrated continue to promote identity narratives and symbols that united them in 2020, continuing the identity narrative construction processes from exile.

The absence of any signs of the authorities' willingness to re-engage and termination of efforts to imitate re-rapprochement or dialogue with the part of the society that has been opposing their rule, combined with massive propaganda campaigns, the official drive to label dissident voices as 'extremist', and a growing list of political prisoners and political verdicts – all creates even deeper divisions in the society. This situation serves as evidence that the regime focused on reassuring its own ontological security exclusively within the group of their supporters, retooling its previous practices and excluding the society groups that the previous identity practices might have appealed to. The continuing repression, coupled with a return to particularly harsh anti-Western rhetoric and full-scale reliance on Russia, suggests that the authorities reversed the course of ensuring their ontological security, focusing on specific groups of their supporters, having lost the hope to construct all-encompassing narratives and practices as they attempted to do before 2020.

## Conclusions

Before delving into the most recent identity practises in Belarus in relation to language and history in years 2020-2021, it is essential to consider the processes that preceded the mass protests of 2020. The analysis of identity-

building social practises in 2014-2019 revealed that the major practical changes in terms of Belarusian identity construction occurred before 2020, rejecting the notion that the Belarusian nation was born 'overnight' in August 2020, and suggesting that current manifestations of national identity are continuations of practises that occurred before 2020.

Along with discursive changes around the presentation of the Belarusian language before 2020, a reshaped understanding of the Belarusian statehood and nation's longevity was observed, with an emphasis on pre-Soviet periods, particularly the GDL, paired with a modification of rituals and practices around the period of the Second World War. Though the status of the Belarusian language in the official discourse was elevated, efforts to broaden its use in practice were limited to rather 'soft' actions, while the central role on this account was taken by civil society. Before 2020, the Belarusian authorities allowed, and in some cases even facilitated, a number of practical developments from the civil society that contributed to building a distinct pro-Belarusian identity. From the perspective of OST, which argues that protecting the identity and the 'self' could be as important as physical security, this policy could be explained by the regime's desire to confront the potential new type of hybrid threats on the state level, and by doing so to secure its own personal rule on the individual-group level.

To increase the distinctiveness of identity by engaging in the reconstruction of elements of Belarusian language and history in how they pertain to identity, the authorities took irrational steps – they modestly irritated their ally, Russia and facilitated a growth of importance of the non-governmental sector. By making these measurable 'sacrifices', the regime hoped to assuage concerns related to ontological security and at the same time to solidify its own rule, as inaction in the face of emerging hybrid threats and regional disturbances could result in greater losses in the form of potential enemies threatening physical security. As a result, the authorities have chosen a 'lesser evil' and attempted to find a win-win situation by doing what they have done for decades – balancing. This approach, coupled with the targeted and 'soft' nature of the

discussed changes, also signals that the government's intentions were driven by rational calculations rather by values. Simultaneously, empirical data show elements of Belarusian national identity have been evolving without government interference, therefore, the authorities were legitimately concerned that their previously promoted narratives and practises may no longer fit contemporary society, and thus they will not ensure their group's ontological continuity.

Within the regime, ontological anxiety transformed into insecurity at least twice between 2014 and 2020. The first time was when the authorities needed to re-establish their ontological being in the contemporary society to appease group anxiety and Russian aggression could have threatened state-level security (including personal rule), and the second time was when the 2020 protests emerged. The authorities' search for the 'self' in a changing society has largely failed, especially in light of the way the authorities reacted to 2020 events. The popularity of identity-building practises facilitated by civil society organisations and private businesses around the popularisation of the Belarusian language and certain historical periods, as well as the rise of the white-red-white symbols even before the 2020 events, shows that these ideas were supported among citizens with an increasing capacity and role for civil society and private initiative in the country. This may have contributed not only to the strengthening of Belarus's distinct identity, but also to the consolidation of Belarusian society prior to 2020 protests. Lukashenka's violent response to the 2020 protests hastened the ongoing identity consolidation processes and alter their trajectory by increasing the subjective closeness and solidarity of the nation.

The 2020 events alter many aspects of identity and had an impact on identity-building practises. First and foremost, the white-red-white symbol became the political symbol uniting and distinguishing the protesters from the government supporters, whom the authorities try to mobilise and distinguish on their end, realising the threat of consolidated society to autocratic rule and re-creating a cleavage in society as their new response to internal insecurity. In terms of the Belarusian language, some of the previous initiatives have continued, but the main drivers of Belarusian language promotion – civil

society groups – have been subjected to repression and liquidation, as have hundreds of other non-governmental organizations in the country. Despite this disruption, Belarusian identity narratives continue to develop, including on the basis of elevated existing and new meanings that emerged in 2020, such as more sound international recognition of Belarusian democratic aspirations, new sources for national pride, shared recent traumas, and ongoing state repression. All of these factors and processes continue to affect societal groups and their identities, with consequences of these processes to come.

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