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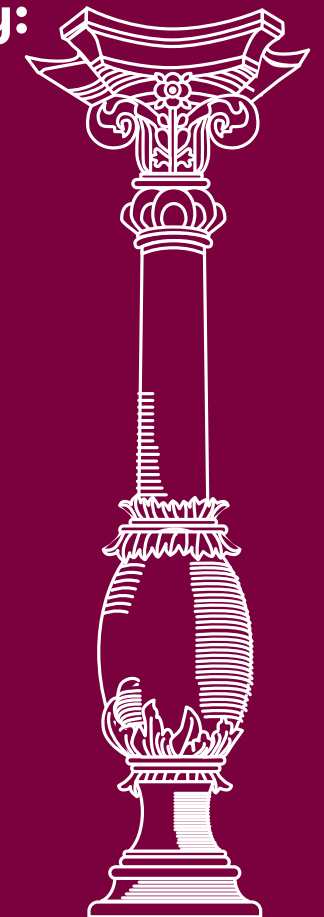
The Reconstruction of Belarusian National Identity: Discourses and Processes, 2014–2019

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION
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ABBREVIATIONS

BelTA – Belarusian Telegraph Agency

BAW – Belarusian Analytical Workroom

BISS – Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies

BNR – Belarusian People's Republic

BPF – Belarus Popular Front

BSSR – Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic

CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States

EU – European Union

FSU – Former Soviet Union

GDL – Grand Duchy of Lithuania

GPW – Great Patriotic War

GONGO – Governmental "non-governmental organization"

GULAG – Chief administration of the camps

IISEPS – Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies

KGB – Committee for State Security

NAS – National Academy of Sciences of Belarus

NKVD – People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs

OST – Ontological security theory

OSS – Ontological security studies

PLC – Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

RFE/RL – Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

WW1 – World War 1

WW2 – World War 2

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INTRODUCTION

Research Problem and Research Question

Recent outbursts of Russian aggression against Ukraine, Georgia and other sovereign nations have greatly increased anxieties in the whole eastern part of the European continent. Belarus, which has been asymmetrically interconnected with the Russian Federation in terms of energy, economy, and even the military field, has always faced heightened risks to its sovereignty and independence. Over the course of the last decade, before the significant deterioration of its relations with Western countries in 2020, Belarus' authorities, in order to minimize energy and economic dependencies on Russia, attempted to diversify the country's exports and energy supplies and to seek new financing opportunities, including in China. In the military field, in 2016, Belarus adopted the new defense doctrine, officially introducing the concept of "hybrid warfare".[1] However, breaking the ties relating to identity became the greatest remaining challenge and at the same time concern from the "hybrid threats" perspective. The extremely close cultural and identity ties with Russia had been cultivated by the country's authorities themselves. To address this situation in the light of new risks, the authorities turned to practices that were building greater identity distinctiveness from Russia, namely changing historical and cultural identity elements, such as the Belarusian language. The role of the latter was elevated in official discourse from the symbol of political opposition to a major element distinguishing Belarusians from Russians, and eventually it even formally became the "guarantor of the humanitarian security of the state"[2] in the new Concept of Informational Security of the authorities.

In contemporary world politics, physical security, that is, the protection of territory and political sovereignty, remains without any doubt one of the most important aspirations for every sovereign nation. Few would argue that independent and sovereign states can effectively function without preserving the state's "body". However, in the context of the emergence of "hybrid threats", another basic need of any sovereign state (as ontological security

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[1] БелаПАН, "Новая Военная доктрина Беларуси учитывает расширение спектра источников военных угроз." *Naviny.by*, 2016, <http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2016/04/04/ic_news_112_472931> [2017-06-18]

[2] Национальный правовой Интернет-портал Республики Беларусь, "О Концепции информационной безопасности Республики Беларусь." 2019, <https://pravo.by/upload/docs/op/P219s0001_1553029200.pdf> [2020-11-22]

theorists (OST) argue) is ontological security, or in simpler terms – the security of national identity. According to the premises of OST, the striving for ontological security, that is, the preservation by the state's members of their state's distinctiveness, respecting national group identity,[3] becomes as important as physical security, particularly because of the existence of "hybrid warfare", which targets and exploits identity cleavages in society. Russia, in particular, is known for weaponizing language and other elements of identity in Ukraine,[4] and in other countries of the region that have Russian speaking groups in the population, to destabilize societies by spreading pro-Russian sentiments or otherwise threatening national security of those countries, that is, using the language issue to intrude into these countries, claiming the need to protect the rights of Russian speakers, or so-called compatriots.[5]

Soon after the 1994 election, the government of Alyaksandr Lukashenka[6] did not see any ontological security threats and was not concerned with constructing a nationally oriented Belarusian identity. On the contrary, Lukashenka rolled back the national revival movement, also known as the second Belarusization wave, and launched ideological developments in the country that facilitated de-Belarusification, and consequently the Russification, of the nation. In 1995, Lukashenka organized a referendum through which state language status was granted to the Russian language. This resulted in a decrease of the number of schoolchildren studying in the Belarusian language: from 40 percent in 1994–1995, the number declined to 26 percent in just ten years.[7] Under Lukashenka, the Belarusian language has not for a long time played any specific role – the Russian language was

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[3] Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma." *European Journal of International Relations*, 2006, Vol. 12(3), 352-353.

[4] Iryna Matviyishyn, "How Russia weaponizes the language issue in Ukraine." *Atlantic Council*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-is-the-only-winner-of-ukraines-language-wars> [2022-09-18]

[5] The International Peace Institute, "Grigas: Putin Uses "Compatriot Protection" Plan to Restore Russia's Clout." 2016, <https://www.ipinst.org/2016/06/beyond-crimea-the-new-russian-empire> [2022-09-18]

[6] Throughout the dissertation I use the English transliteration of Belarusian names and surnames from the Belarusian language as it is commonly featured in the English versions of Belarusian media outlets, e.g., Belsat (https://belsat.eu/)

[7] Елена Спасюк, "Национальное сознание белорусов крепят на советском фундаменте." *Naviny.by*, 2015, <http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2015/02/20/ic_articles_112_188282/> [2017-06-18]

perceived as the official political and cultural language, while Belarusian was perceived as the language of the political opposition, and bilingualism was promoted by the authorities as "part of his [Lukashenka's] general strategy to return to the 'good old Soviet times'."[8] Once in power, he also replaced the Belarusian coat of arms (*Pahonia*) and the white-red-white flag, and referred to the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) and to modified Soviet-era symbols. Independence Day was shifted to July 3, the day of the "liberation of Minsk by the Soviets," establishing a Soviet-centric narrative as the key to the country's interpretation of statehood.

Following the 1995 referendum, which was not recognized as free and fair,[9] Lukashenka initiated a series of reforms drawing Belarus further away from so-called ethno-national identity elements. The authorities' ideological efforts in the 1990s can be summarized as a series of actions aimed at building a model of national identity which diminished the national language and other "ethno-national" elements of nationhood as attributes of identity, located the origin of statehood in the Soviet past, emphasized ties with Russia, and later also placed emphasis on citizenship and affiliation with the state as a political entity. This policy of identity strongly affected Belarusian society's self-identification and facilitated a weakening of the role assigned to other elements of ethno-national identity,[10] which for decades remained endorsed mainly by the opposition and civil society activists, for whom, it was widely known, these were the key elements of Belarusian national identity.

In 2014 Lukashenka delivered part of his official Independence Day speech in the Belarusian language. In the context of the occupation by Russia of Ukraine's Crimea in the same year, analysts and scholars analyzing Belarus began speaking of a new wave of Belarusization, calling it *soft-Belarusization*[11] (alluding to surgical and careful moves of the authorities in the direction of reconstructing a narrative of identity). Political analysts connected this change of discourse with the rising tensions in the region,

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[8] Nelly Bekus, "'Hybrid' Linguistic Identity of Post-Soviet Belarus." *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 13 (4), 2014, 26-27, 34.

[9] OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, "Report on Parliamentary Elections in Belarus." 1995, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/election-observation/election-observation-statements/belarus/statements-4/2009-1995-parliamentary-first-a-second-round/> [2022-09-18]

[10] Vadzim Smok, "Belarusian Identity: The Impact of Lukashenka's Rule." *Ostrogorski Centre*, Minsk-London, 2013, 19.

[11] Андрей Тимаров, "Белорусизация: миф или реальность?" *Deutsche Welle*, 2014, <https://dw.com/ru/белорусизация-миф-или-реальность/a-17791982> [2022-09-18]

believing the occupation of Crimea,[12] which took place months before Lukashenka's speech in early 2014, was the decisive trigger, which demonstrated the need to strengthen the nation's identity. In other words, the occupation of Crimea became the catalyst for a new chapter in the development of Belarusian identity. From the beginning of 2014 through early 2020 (the period extending from the annexation of Crimea to the 2020 election campaign and protests), the Belarus state authorities propagated a modified discourse on some of the elements constituting identity, with a particular focus on reshaping the presentation of the role of the Belarusian language. Simultaneously with the changing discursive practices, a series of social practices focusing on the Belarusian language and particular historical narratives were rolled out by civil society actors, private businesses and individual activists, all of whom used soft-Belarusization as a window of opportunity for their independent activism and nationally oriented identity construction.

The first discussion point addressed in this dissertation is related to scholars seeing Belarusian national identity and nationhood as the dominance of a so-called civic nationhood built around shared citizenship, common territory, state borders and sovereignty,[13] rather than ethnic elements (2011)[14] such as the Belarusian language. Whether this conclusion and similar conclusions found in the academic literature remain relevant today is the subject of the first debate which I discuss in this dissertation. Arguably, the soft-Belarusization, and the subsequent developments in the country that took place consistently over a period of more than six years, resulted in a substantial reconstruction of identity narratives and a shift from the dominance of the constructed civic nationhood referenced above.

The second discussion point I address in this dissertation is the question how much the new identity building processes reshaped the co-existence of the so-called "official" and, in Nelly Bekus' (2010) words, "alternative" Belarusianness,[15] that is, the two different identity variants promoted respectively by state and non-governmental actors that can be found in the

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[12] Vadim Mojeiko, "Soft Belarusization: A New Shift in Lukashenka's Domestic Policy?" *Belarus Digest*, 2015, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/soft-belarusization-a-new-shift-in-lukashenkas-domestic-policy> [2022-09-18]

[13] Alena Marková, "Language, Identity, and Nation: Special Case of Belarusian State- and Nation Formation." *The Journal of Belarusian Studies*, Vol. 8, issue 3, 2018, 35-37.

[14] Renee L. Buhr, Victor Shadurski and Steven Hoffman, "Belarus: An emerging civic nation?" *Nationalities Papers*, 39(3), 2011, 425-440.

[15] Nelly Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity: The Official and the Alternative "Belarusianness"* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010).

academic literature. Between 2014 and early 2020, the country's authorities were changing their official discourse, trying to assign new meanings to Belarusianness. At the same time, different types of non-governmental initiatives aimed at strengthening and popularizing elements of Belarusian identity (the Belarusian language and non-Soviet historical statehood, in particular) were particularly active and found relatively high support within society, which potentially had an impact on the building of a more distinct identity model. Several Belarusian analysts and political observers attributed these changes to the impact of the authorities, while others argued that the time had come to bolster Belarusian identity and that the changes took place regardless of the authorities' actions.[16] As discussed later in this dissertation, regardless of which standpoint is taken, changes in the domain of identity building were taking place in a consistent manner. In this regard, what is important is the question what identity elements were subject to reform attempts during that period (since clearly the previous identity policy undertaken by the authorities was disrupted), together with an analysis of how these changing narratives and practices around different identity elements changed the previous understanding of Belarusian identity, particularly with regard to the new role of civic and ethnic national identity elements.

The third discussion point in relation to the formation of Belarusian national identity, which I touch on in this dissertation, pertains to the most recent discussions about the emergence of a "new" or "reborn" Belarusian nation and national identity, which, as some argue, began only in 2020. Indeed, in 2020 Belarus attracted worldwide attention with unprecedented large-scale protests against the falsified presidential election and a similarly unprecedented violent response from the authorities, who sought to deter the accelerating opposition movement. Within a few weeks, the protests got fully identified with the white-red colors of the historical national flag which decades ago was replaced by Lukashenka, and which in the period 2014–2020 could have been easily purchased at souvenir shops, among many other products featuring the national white-red colors. The historical white-red-white flag was reinstated again as a political symbol, uniting the hundreds of thousands of Belarusians from diverse backgrounds[17] who were protesting against Lukashenka's regime and violence.

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[16] Павел Свердлов, "Мягкая белорусизация или русификация: что происходит в Беларуси?" *Еўрарадыё*, 2019, <https://euroradio.fm/ru/myagkaya-belorusizaciya-ili-rusifikaciya-chto-proishodit-v-belarusi> [2022-09-18]

[17] Samuel A. Greene, "You are what you read: media, identity, and community in the 2020 Belarusian uprising." *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38:1-2, 2022, 88-106.

Many of those observing events in Belarus were genuinely struck, at first sight, by the spontaneous and unanticipated appearance of the protests, and subsequently by the unity and peacefulness of Belarusian protesters, as well as by the chosen symbol of their struggle. While some of those observing the events of 2020 drew the conclusion that in 2020 Belarus was "reinvented"[18] or was "born" as a nation,[19] others focused on researching the immediate impact the protest had on the national consciousness of Belarusians.[20] The claims of the former are largely opposed by this dissertation and the empirical data of this research. I argue that, while the events of 2020 obviously had an impact on the further development of Belarusian national identity, they should be seen as a continuation of the previous processes, and as a new chapter in the transformation of Belarusian identity, rather than as a starting point of the development of national identity. As mentioned above, and as will be shown in this dissertation, Belarus society, before 2020, witnessed six years of change in the elements of identity on different levels, including the transformation of narratives on the Belarusian language and history, both in discourse and practice, facilitated by both the authorities and non-governmental actors. It is essential to study this period, as the lead-up to the events of 2020, to have a complete picture of the continuous development of contemporary identity, as well as the origins and the reverberations of the 2020 events. The events that occurred in 2020 can be considered as one of the critical points for further identity formation, but the prior identity-forging processes that took place between 2014 and the summer of 2020 require deeper analysis and assessment to form an understanding of contemporary national identity and of the events that followed.

To pave the way for the academic and analytical discussions around the three points referenced above (namely, re-assessing the previously formed understanding that Belarusian identity is dominated primarily by elements of civic identity, that is, affiliation through territory, citizenship, etc., in light of the new regional context and the trend of soft-Belarusization; re-conceptualizing official and so-called "alternative" elements of identity

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[18] Ryhor Astapenia, "Amid the Crisis, Belarusian Identity is Changing." *Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/amid-crisis-belarusian-identity-changing> [2022-09-18]

[19] Павел Казарин, "Беларусь. Рождение нации." *Украинская правда*, 2020, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2020/09/19/7266922/> [2022-09-18]

[20] Генадзь Коршунаў, "Какое значение имеет 2020 год для беларусов?" *Цэнтр новых ідэй*, <https://newbelarus.vision/2020-god-dlya-belarusov/> [2022-09-18]

constructed in the discourse by the authorities and non-governmental actors; and demonstrating whether the events of 2020 were the spontaneous emergence of national consciousness or the continuation of the previous process), I raise the following **research question**: what were the contemporary models of Belarusian national identity constructed by the authorities and non-governmental actors in the period 2014–2019 in the light of ontological security challenges, and how were these models constructed?

The analysis of these changes in the period following the occupation of Crimea, from 2014 to 2019, leading up to the 2020 protests, requires an examination of each specific element of identity, to draw a conclusion on the overall level of change of the model of national identity. Such an approach entails two levels of analysis. First, an assessment of what elements are changing and how; in relation to the previous established understanding, what is the scope of this change to, and impact on, the overall identity model; and how crucial is their change? This level of analysis entails the research of both the communications discourse and the identity-building social practices that were equally as significant as the changing communications, with which they had reinforcing and complementary relationship. The second level of analysis focuses on the context of these changes, which is primarily built on the Ontological Security Theory. At this level, the focus on the coexistence of constructed models by non-governmental and governmental actors is of particular importance as the differences in these actors' anxieties and motivations for change can be revealed through it.

The dissertation seeks to meet the following objectives:

Objective 1.   Identify how elements of identity are changing in the period 2014–2019, researching changes of narratives in official and unofficial[21] discourses (as compared to the previous understanding found in the literature), and the ontological security context of these changing narratives.

Objective 2.   Identify new identity-building social practices, exploring the coexistence of changed identity narratives in public discourse and changing social practices.

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[21] I use the term *official* as a technical term to refer to the Belarusian authorities' discourse and communications, while the term *unofficial* is used to refer to discourses and communications of Belarusian non-governmental actors, also described in the existing literature as "alternative." Both terms are of a technical nature and should not be associated with the question of the legitimacy of the actors.

Objective 3.   Assess changes in the models of identity by comparing narrative changes of particular elements of identity with the overall set of identity elements maintained by actors.

Objective 4.   Mapping the recent changes in the narratives on elements of identity, conceptualize, and compare contemporary unofficial and official identity models, revealing how official and unofficial models coexist.

Theoretical Approach and Thesis Statement

National identity, as the central research object, is viewed through a modernist-constructivist lens and conceptualized using the five-dimensional national identity concept of Montserrat Guibernau, breaking the phenomenon into five distinct groups of elements related to history, politics, culture, territory, and the psychological dimension of national identity. The model is adapted to the Belarusian context in order to analyze discourses and practices. Each of the elements of identity has a group of narratives that infuse it with meaning. The compilation of these elements, constructed by narratives and practices, is what creates the national identity model. In the meantime, the insights of ontological security theory help to better understand and interpret how different official and unofficial identity construction narratives and practices help different actors to introduce both differing and common changes to each of these dimensions of identity to cope with different levels of ontological anxiety and insecurity.

The main thesis statement derives from the theoretical framework of OST, the central argument of which claims that, besides physical security, countries, as well as individual actors, seek ontological security – that is, securing the meaning and identity of oneself. As a result of Russia's aggressive behavior in the region and Ukraine in particular, although Belarus did not face direct physical security threats at that time, both official and unofficial political and civic actors in Belarus faced an increased level of ontological anxiety and the emergence of ontological insecurity in view of Russia's hybrid warfare.

The main **thesis statement** of this dissertation states that after 2014, the Belarusian authorities and non-governmental actors experienced an increased sense of ontological insecurity, and this resulted in the transformation of the Belarusian national identity narratives constructed by these actors. After this transformation, identity elements of official and unofficial identity models were reshaped, changing the prioritization of elements and assigning new

meanings to elements of identity to establish a greater distinctiveness of the Belarusian identity. Differences concerning a set of identity elements related to the longevity of the Belarusian nationhood, the role of language, and state became less overt between the models at the national level. However, the official and unofficial identity models overall still maintained notable differences in relation to other elements across all five identity dimensions, particularly the Soviet and BNR narratives. In addition, the nature of changes of narratives, particularly in the cultural domain, and their prioritization in both contemporary official and unofficial models and different variants of the latter, challenge the previously made assumptions claiming the dominance of civic nationhood, especially in the discourse. The conceptualized contemporary models of identity and the analyzed processes of their construction also dismiss the dichotomous view of Belarusian national identity and show a consistent and continuous, rather than steep, development of national identity over the last decade.

In this dissertation, I do not challenge or test the core assumption of OST that ontological security is the basic need of sovereign states, and is of the same importance as the state's physical security, even though most of the research findings may be perceived as confirming this assumption. Instead, OST is used as a framework to analyze the changes in identity narratives and practices undertaken by the Belarusian authorities and non-governmental actors, and as a prism to understand the differences in perceptions and motivations of the different actors in respect of the identity element changes observed. OST, when matched with the changing narratives of different actors, helps to demonstrate how the ontological insecurities of the authorities and non-governmental actors appear and change when faced with a new context.

Three insights of OST were applied to the case of Belarus for an analysis of the national identity processes in the country. The following OST insights were explored as the theory was applied to the relatively uncommon case of a national identity in flux.

- First, I explored whether, in the case of Belarus, there is a direct tradeoff and conflict between ontological and physical security, or whether this relationship is complementary given the nature of events in Crimea and Donbas. The latter events demonstrated that a weak national identity can be utilized by malicious forces for hybrid warfare, ultimately leading to physical security gaps.
- Second, OST scholars commonly put emphasis on stability and continuity of identity and of everyday practices as the condition for

ontological security. In applying this theory to Belarus, I explore how not fully formed identity is transformed when seeking ontological security and further stability.

- Third, while OST in international relations commonly focuses on the state level, I explore the distinction between individual-group and state levels when there are competing identity narratives, and the difference between the actors forming these narratives within a single state. Moreover, while the motivations for changes on the part of the non-governmental groups and the authorities' groups may match on the state level (to secure the continuity of the independent state), there may be important differences at the individual-group level.

Literature Review

Belarusian identity has been researched predominantly from the historical perspective. A lot of academic work has been dedicated to an in-depth study of specific historical periods, personalities and events. These works contribute to the understanding of the historical formation of Belarusian nationhood and identity, including the analysis of the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR), and the different waves of Belarusization of the 1920s and the 1990s. Alena Markava (2016)[22], in "The Path to a Soviet Nation: The Policy of Belarusization", analyzed the policy and outcomes of the policy of Belarusization, primarily focusing on the promotion of the Belarusian language implemented in the 1920s in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). Aleh Latyshonak (2007)[23], a Belarusian historian from Poland, is known for his research of Belarus from its ancient history, with an emphasis on the formation of the Belarusian national idea. Per Anders Rudling (2014)[24], in "The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906–1931", analyzed the formation of Belarusian nationalism from its beginning in the movement of the 19th century and the organized nationalism of the 20th century, continuing through the Soviet terror and the dismantling of

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[22] Alena Marková, *The Path to a Soviet Nation: The Policy of Belarusization* (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2021).

[23] Алег Латышонак, *Нацыянальнасьць — Беларус*. (Смаленск: Інбелкульт, 2017).

[24] Per Anders Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906 – 1931* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014).

korenizatsiia in the 1930s. Timothy Snyder (1999)[25], in "The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999", devotes the first of three chapters of the book to the establishment of Belarusian and Lithuanian nationhood, starting with the legacy of the GDL and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (PLC).

The common history of the latter political historical formations for Lithuania and Belarus has been the subject of focus of Lithuanian researchers. One of the recent publications analyzing the historical formation of Belarus comes from the Lithuanian historian Rūstis Kamuntavičius[26], who, according to Belarusians reviewers, made a "grounded attempt to compare and explain the differences in viewing our common past, which do not allow two neighboring nations to find a path to agreement".[27] Earlier, the relationship of the two nations, and that of Poland and Ukraine, with the PLC and GDL, was analyzed by another Lithuanian author, Alvydas Nikžentaitis, who pointed out that the period of the GDL played an important role for Belarusians, and that the role was revived by pro-regime historians after 2002, by adapting the GDL for the purpose of the "Slavic unity myth" and by reinforcing the official narrative of resistance to the Germans.[28] This literature, focusing on the historical aspect of identity formation, undoubtedly covers an extremely important aspect of Belarusian national identity studies, particularly in terms of analyzing the historical identity domain. However, at the same time, in view of the multi-dimensional concept of the phenomenon under study, additional literature and research is required to cover the other four dimensions of identity mentioned above.

There are a few prominent books in English that tend to adopt a more holistic approach to analyzing the path of development of Belarus as a nation. One of the most cited foreign authors studying Belarus is Andrew Wilson (2011)[29] and his famous "Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship", in which Wilson starts as early as the historical foundation of Polatsk. In the latest

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[25] Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003).

[26] Rūstis Kamuntavičius, *Gudijos istorija. Baltarusijos istorija* (Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos centras, 2021).

[27] Юрый Внуковіч, "Першая гісторыя Беларусі па-літоўску як крок да суладдзя нацыянальных наратываў." *Беларускі Гістарычны Агляд*, Т. 28 Сш. 1-2, 2021.

[28] Alvydas Nikžentaitis, "Abiejų Tautų Respublikos ir Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės praeitis lietuvių, lenkų, baltarusių ir ukrainiečių atminties kultūroje po 1990 metų." *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis*, 2016, 2016/1, 62.

[29] Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021).

edition published in 2021, Wilson also introduced new chapters which, along with the 2020 protests, also briefly discuss the soft-Belarusization trend.[30] David Marples (1999), in the book "Belarus: Denationalized Nation", also gives an overview of Belarus' development, very briefly covering the nation's development from ancient times to the consolidation of Lukashenka's regime. As the title of the book suggests, Marples implies that Belarus has a weak identity, placing a significant focus on the language element, arguing that, without the national language, the national development of Belarus located next to imperialist Russia is "virtually impossible."[31]

One of the most comprehensive and at the same time most cited publications on Belarusian identity available in the English language is that of Nelly Bekus. In the book titled "Struggle Over Identity: The Official and the Alternative "Belarusianness" (2010), Bekus asserted, and thoroughly analyzed, the existence of two competing identity models and their particularities.[32] The author devoted a couple of chapters to the analysis of discursive construction of these models. In particular, Bekus analyzed the historical narratives, distinguishing the interpretations of different identity periods among official and alternative historians. Significantly, Bekus also included an analysis of political discourses, pointing to the absence of the existence of a common alternative discourse on Belarusianness, particularly in the political identity dimension, as some "see alternative Belarusianness in Europe, others see it at the meeting point of civilizations." However, according to Bekus, these models do not contradict each other, as they are united by their dismissal of pro-Russianness.[33] In a later publication (2014), Bekus focused on the much-debated linguistic element of identity. Bekus stated that Belarusian linguistic identity is defined either within a framework of seeing Belarus as an integral part of the Russian civilizational universe or as a part of Europe, which corresponds to official and alternative discourses respectively.

In the first discourse, the Russian language is not a foreign language but a part of Belarusian cultural tradition.[34] The important aspect of this publication is analysis of the linguistic debate seen through the lens of human rights. According to Bekus, both the authorities and the oppositional forces, back then, heavily politicized the choice of language, and notably both used

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[30] Wilson, 271-274.
[31] David R. Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* (Harvard Academic Publishers, 1999), 52.
[32] Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity*.
[33] Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity*, 179-220.
[34] Bekus, *'Hybrid' Linguistic Identity*, 37-38.

human rights arguments to support their vision of linguistic identity. The Belarusian authorities used the argument of "not intervening" in the existing language situation and stressing bilingualism, while the opposition discourse focused on symbolizing the function of the language.[35] The language aspect covered by Bekus, as well as the research defining the official and alternative visions, is of particular importance for this dissertation, as it creates an important point for further comparison of the evolution and change of the different variants of Belarusian identity researched in this dissertation.

There is also a group of studies focusing on Belarusian national identity from a focused sociological perspective. A few notable publications should be emphasized. First of all, there is a series of publications based on quantitative approaches. Larissa Titarenko (2007) used survey and statistical data to research national identity construction processes, aiming at revealing the post-Soviet model of Belarusian identity prevailing in the 00s. The author employed statistical data for comparison of ethno-cultural and official pluralist-civic identity models and the problems raised within each, including bilingualism, the relationship with Russia, and the Europeanness of the country. The empirical part of this research was based on the Belarusian State University survey[36], as well as independent institute data, namely the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), which was no longer operating.

Titarenko's key conclusions stated that Belarus fits neither Western nor post-communist country models of building national identity. Speaking of the dichotomy of "ideal identity models", Titarenko's analysis suggests that, despite being narrow and politically biased, the official identity model based primarily on Soviet history was prevalent in the society of that time. In conclusion, Titarenko dismisses the dichotomy of models mentioned above, pointing to the absence of a single dominant set of values that the Belarusian population shared, and thus to a "cultural mixture of traditional and modern identities" and the "coexistence of several types of identities, without a dominant one."[37]

Other sociological data-based research, with its primary focus on demographic analysis and analysis of differences within different demographic groups, includes the works of Naumenko, who analyzed surveys conducted in 2000, 2002, and 2004 by the authorities – the Belarusian

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[35] *Ibid.*, 41-43.

[36] Larissa Titarenko, "Post-soviet national identity: Belarusian approaches and paradoxes", *Filosofija. Sociologija,* 18 (4), 79-90.

[37] *Ibid.*, 85-89.

National Academy of Sciences. The researcher analyzed a range of variables within different demographics, including ethnicity, culture, citizenship, and religion, to answer the question of what constitutes Belarusian identity. Drawing on these surveys, the author argued that a consistent strengthening of citizenship-based and ethnic identification was taking place.[38] The sociological data and identity-element testing in the surveys, especially that drawn independently from state conducted polls, which will be referenced in later chapters of this dissertation, help one to understand the actual effects of the constructed identity. However, the issue with this approach lies in the fact that there is a certain time lapse between reconstructed identity elements and their penetration into the broader public. At the same time, even though we study identity construction under authoritarian rule, sociological data may help to disclose certain pressure and weak points which the regime can experience, and which can be impacted when reconstructing narratives on specific identity elements (that is, language, religion).

In terms of research putting emphasis on the process of identity formation, which is also one of the areas of focus of this dissertation, research focusing on material and non-material factors influencing the formation of Belarusian national identity was conducted by Jovita Pranevičiūtė-Neliupšienė, who in her doctoral dissertation (2009) concluded that Belarusian national identity had been primarily impacted by economic, political, and military factors, followed by geographic, cultural and legal factors. The author also highlighted that at that time the constructed national identity was based on the Soviet rhetoric and economy, which the author perceived as a particular risk because of the failure to integrate cultural factors and affiliation with the wellbeing provided by the state.[39]

In later research, a prominent Belarusian researcher Vadzim Smok (2013) analyzed Belarusian identity formation processes since the restitution of independence, supporting his insights with data of public opinion drawn from independent research centers and national census data.[40] Smok's publication pointed to three critical conclusions that impact the development of Belarusian national identity: he argues that the rather weak national identity is the result of the Belarusian authorities' policy, namely halting Belarusian

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[38] Людмила Науменко, "Этническая идентичность белорусов: содержание, динамика, региональная и социально-демографическая специфика." 126-132, <http://www.isprras.ru/pics/File/Rus_Bel/br-111-132.pdf> [2018-05-19]

[39] Jovita Pranevičiūtė, "Nacionalinės tapatybės formavimosi veiksniai NVS erdvėje: Baltarusijos ir Ukrainos atvejų analizė" (Doctoral Dissertation, Vilnius University, 2009), 144-148.

[40] Smok, *Belarusian Identity: The Impact of Lukashenka's Rule*.

language development and focusing on two elements of identification: the state itself and its territory.[41] Smok also concluded that civil society, along with independent media outlets, was the only actor that had made attempts to revive the Belarusian language.[42] The third conclusion reached by Smok, citing the research of the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies (BISS) (2013), was that Belarusians do not have "any particular cultural or political sentiment" in terms of views of foreign affairs, as they are largely utilitarian.[43] The second conclusion reached by Smok requires revision, when compared with the situation today. In view of the rise of soft-Belarusization, the pool of actors has certainly increased beyond the civil society groups, which, arguably, has also changed in light of the changing context and the development of civil society in the last decade.

Recent studies on Belarus identity not only point to the fact of the existence of differently built identity models, as Bekus concluded, but also, similarly to Marples, assert a weak national identity, claiming the dominance of importance of civic identity elements. Markava (2018), after an analysis of the second Belarusization wave of 1990-1995, called "Neo-Belarusization", which arose after the dissolution of the USSR, reached the conclusion that the second wave of Belarusization failed to create Belarus as an ethnic and cultural nation defined by language or history, resulting instead in the dominance of civic nationhood built around shared citizenship, common territory, and state sovereignty.[44] The authors of the article entitled "Belarus: an emerging civic nation?", published by Renee L. Buhr, Victor Shudurksi and Steven Hoffman (2011), also argued that, "although Belarusian identity is obviously in flux and subject to heavy debate, it is currently demonstrating more civic aspects than ethnic ones."[45] Certainly, the arguments made by Markava regarding the dominance of civic nationhood, as well as the thesis of the latter article, were likely to be true, given the analyzed periods of Belarusian national identity formation. However, the soft-Belarusization trend ongoing from 2014 can to some extent be perceived as a third wave of Belarusization. In addition, this third wave may have reshaped the situation, challenging the conclusions stating the dominance of the civic elements.

When speaking about the research of the identity and identity building processes after 2014 and the appearance of the "soft-Belarusization" trend described in the problem statement, it is worth mentioning the Belarusian

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[41] *Ibid,* 19.
[42] *Ibid,* 15.
[43] *Ibid,* 17-18.
[44] Marková, *Language, Identity, and Nation*, 35-37.
[45] Renee L. Buhr, Victor Shadurski and Steven Hoffman, 425-440.

Institute for Strategic Studies in Minsk led by Piotr Rudkouski, who is one of the few researchers who has consistently analyzed the most recent processes affecting Belarusian national identity, particularly the trend of soft-Belarusization. In 2017, Rudkouski concluded that there were no "genuine breakthroughs in the ideological discourse." However, he stated that there were visible moves towards emphasizing the Belarusian language and historical memory, while maintaining the focus on the role of the state in terms of nation building.[46] One of the most recent approaches to studying Belarusianness (and at the same time rather unique in the field) belongs to Simon Lewis and "Belarus – Alternative Visions Nation, Memory and Cosmopolitanism", in which the author analyzes "important examples of writing in and about Belarus, in Belarusian, Polish and Russian, revealing how different modes of rooted cosmopolitanism have been articulated."[47] Lewis analyzes Belarus "as an object of memory", which includes the analysis of writings of Belarusians writers, such as Uladzimir Karatkevich and Vasil Bykau.

Contribution and Relevance of Dissertation

The existing literature on Belarusian identity, excluding historical studies, subject to this overview, demonstrated that there is a clear lack of available research that focuses on contemporary Belarusian identity, particularly the processes and content following the discursive and practical changes that Belarusian witnessed after the occupation of Crimea in 2014, not to speak of the changes that Belarusians demonstrated in 2020.

I would, therefore, first of all, like to introduce into the debate the conclusions reached by scholars researching Belarus identity, who primarily focused on the first decade of identity formation after regaining independence, ending in (to use Marples's words) denationalized national identity, and on the further failure of Belarusization in the 1990s that resulted in the prevailing civic nationhood[48] pushed by Lukashenka's regime. But recently the country has witnessed at least half a decade of a new type and wave of Belarusization, so-called soft-Belarusization, which emerged in a very different context and circumstances and has taken place under Lukashenka, who reinstated "civic"

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[46] Piotr Rudkouski, "Soft Belarusianisation. The ideology of Belarus in the era of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict." Centre for Eastern Studies, *OSW Commentary*, 2017.

[47] Simon Lewis, *Belarus – Alternative Visions Nation, Memory and Cosmopolitanism* (Routledge, 2019)

[48] Marková, *Language, Identity, and Nation*, 35-37.

nationhood. The impact of these processes on the formation of identity narratives, particularly narratives that target non-civic elements, such as language and culture, remains to be researched. In this dissertation, I seek to restart the discussion regarding this aspect, reviewing whether civic elements still remain the core of the identity constructed in discourse and practice following the emergence of soft-Belarusization.

Second, previous research has heavily focused on statistical analysis and historical analysis of identity formation during different historical periods. While such research is a crucial step for robust analysis of contemporary identity, there is a clear lack of research focused on the discursive construction of identity undertaken by different actors in Belarus. The existing quantitative approach does not address the complexity of national identity, including the coexistence of many different discourses, narratives, and identity variants reconstructed within different actors. Therefore, instead of testing the perception of narratives that have been already formulated by researchers, the qualitative approach of this dissertation reveals, first of all, the content of changing narratives, including their meaning, and discloses the potential politically driven motivations of their constructors. The research focusing on qualitative data analysis reveals existing patterns, disclosing the complexity of the phenomena and the existence of different conjunctions of narratives, and importantly, captures narratives and practices that are being formed, which are not yet necessarily recreated by society as a whole.

Third, complementing the previous studies described in this section, the qualitative research conducted in this dissertation contributes to Belarus identity studies in several respects. As outlined in the theoretical section, it applies and modifies OST theoretical premises by adapting OST to the case of Belarus, an Eastern European country with an unconsolidated identity. During this adaptation, at the stage of analysis, this research looks into both state and individual-group levels instead of focusing, as is commonly done, on the state as a whole. This dissertation also provides an important empirical contribution to the Belarus identity literature by collecting data to analyze identity comprehensively via a relatively uncommon approach, which simultaneously focuses on multiple dimensions and elements of identity, thus covering different types of empirical data, including communications and social practices, instead of focusing on a specific single method and analyzing certain specific individual identity elements or aspects of their formation. The pros of such an approach lie in creating an understanding of what multi-element identity variants are being consumed by contemporary Belarusians. Ultimately, the present dissertation checks if, and how, the newest wave of the Belarusization has reshaped the identity narratives, and provides an

important snapshot of the identity models and existing variants that prevailed right before the 2020 protests and paved the way to further identity development.

Research Methodology and Structure

To address the complexity of the concept of identity and the co-existence of competing identity narratives promoted by different actors, the research design combines qualitative approaches analyzing both the official and non-official identity discourses, as well as social practices in the period between 2014 (the year of the annexation of Crimea) and 2019 (the year preceding the 2020 election campaign that took place in the summer).

First, since the most overt change was observed in the authorities' discourse in relation to the Belarusian language, the empirical part of this dissertation starts with an analysis of the communications of government officials led by Lukashenka. The communications analysis is supplemented by a content analysis of governmental media discourse, researching how "opinion" section columnists of the Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BelTA) reinforce and/or complement the narratives constructed and changed by the Belarusian authorities. Second, to analyze the unofficial identity discourse, a content analysis of two Belarusian non-governmental media outlets is conducted, comparing identity narratives formed by messengers and columnists of these outlets in similar "Opinion"/"Blogs" sections. The change of narratives in both official and unofficial discourses is identified by matching the new empirical data with previous literature on similar identity elements.

The analysis of unofficial discourse is supplemented by 11 semi-structured interviews with non-governmental experts and politicians in 2019 and early 2020. Interviews included discussions on identity elements constructed and shared by respondents and their recent transformations in Belarus, disclosing the complexity and variation of narratives prevailing in the unofficial identity discourse, as well as referencing the level of the analysis problem. The interviews also serve as a tool to advance the analysis of social practices constituting identity and surrounding the changing official and unofficial discourses.

The dissertation begins with a presentation of the theoretical approach and theoretical concepts used in this work, showing how changes in the discourse and the practical domain are aimed at reducing ontological anxieties. A constructivist approach is followed in order to analyze identity as a dynamic and modern concept. The five-dimensional identity model of

Montserrat Guibernau is utilized as the key theoretical framework for analyzing discursive and practical changes in identity building, reviewing the following elements of identity: political, territorial, psychological, historical, and cultural.

The theoretical part of this thesis is followed by a presentation of the research design and a detailed description of the qualitative methods, including the principles of sampling and analysis.

The empirical part of this dissertation reflects the sequence of the empirical approach described above, starting from the changes in the authorities' and state media discourse. After analysis of the official discourse, the unofficial discourse is analyzed using qualitative interviews, and a similar approach of content analysis is adopted in respect of two independent media outlets. Then, the social practices aimed at identity construction are analyzed, distinguishing two identity domains where the most notable practical changes took place, as well as elements which were likely to change given their change in discourse, in view of the shifts in discourse and the objective of addressing ontological insecurities. The last section of this dissertation contains an overview of the overall results and conclusions related to discursive and practical changes, and compares the different identity models prevailing in the period 2014–2019.

The dissertation also includes additional conclusive remarks reflecting on the events of 2020, briefly outlining the further possible trajectory of identity development after the protests, unprecedented in the country's history, in the years 2020–2021, a period outside the scope of the primary research.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This research perceives identity through a modernist/constructivist lens, focusing on the changing understanding of Belarusianness following the events of 2014 and the respective changes in the identity discourse, including narratives reconstructed by the incumbent authorities and actors not affiliated with the government, such as non-governmental media and civil society. To conceptualize and structure the empirical analysis, I draw on the theoretical insights of Guibernau and his five-dimension model of identity, presented in the first section of this Chapter.

In order to contextualize and better understand the different actors' rationale behind the reconstruction and practical changes of the identity narrative undertaken, and which, in many cases, might appear to an observer as irrational, particularly from the Belarusian government perspective, this research is built on the theoretical framework of OST presented in the second section of this Chapter. The concept of ontological security can help to explain the nature and tensions of identity construction and coexistence of a varying narrative among different governmental and non-governmental actors.

1.1. Conceptualizing Nation and National Identity

There is no commonly accepted understanding of the concepts of *nation* and *national identity* in the academic literature. Overall, there are several theoretical directions as to how this phenomenon can be approached. A popular direction in contemporary nationalism studies is the modernist/constructivist view,[49] which serves as the major theoretical framework for the understanding of identity as the object of this research. This approach is built on two major theoretical assumptions: first, nations as well as national identity are social constructs, and second, these constructs appeared only in the 18th century with the transformation of traditional states into modern states, and the appearance of capitalism and industrial transition.[50]

The primary objective and question of this dissertation is empirical rather than theoretical. I do not, therefore, engage in debates with nationalism theories, but there are some notable differences among the theorists of this modernist approach and alternative views of nation and national identity which I shall introduce before I present the theoretical lens and concepts on

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[49] Atsuko Ichijo, Gordana Uzelac (ed.), *When is the Nation?: Towards an Understanding of Theories of Nationalism*. (Routledge, 2005), 9.
[50] Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Polity Press, 1992).

which this research is based. One of the most cited scholars of modernism, Benedict Anderson, argues that nations are the products of modernization[51] that can be conceptualized as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[52] Anderson associated the transition to modern societies with secularization, standardization and commercial print, as these processes arguably resulted in the creation of "an imagined political community."[53] Meanwhile, Ernest Gellner explains nationalism in economic terms, primarily connecting the phenomenon of nationalism with industrialization, arguing that it leads to nationalism because of the new needs of modernization. Gellner defines modern states as the institution capable of performing industrialization through compulsory education and nationalist ideology; this is done so that industry has cultural standardization to operate smoothly.[54] Gellner believed that a homogenous culture with decreased risks of specialization and increased mobility across occupations, and national solidarity within the "imagined community", can contribute to the wealth of nations.[55] In other words, a core thesis of Gellner's theory is that nationalism is an essential component of modernization and transition to an industrial society, which requires "high culture" (a single common culture),[56] which is a standardized literacy and education-based system of communication. According to Gellner, the new education system erases regional differences and transforms the population into a community of co-nationals. [57]

Another prominent modernism scholar, Eric Hobsbawm, unlike Gellner, puts emphasis on the political nature of nationalism and sees it as a created "political program." It is distinct from ethnicity and means having control over continuous territory and the totality of a homogeneous population.[58] For

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[51] Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (Routledge, 2009), 6.

[52] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Revised edition* (New York: Verso, 2006), 6-7.

[53] Ichijo, Uzelac (ed.), 12.

[54] Daniele Conversi, "Homogenisation, nationalism and war: should we still read Ernest Gellner?" *Nations and Nationalism,* 13 (3), 2007, 371-373.

[55] Ugo Pagano, "Nationalism, development and integration: the political economy of Ernest Gellner." *Cambridge Journal of Economics,* 2003, 27, No. 5, 630-635, 642.

[56] Brendan O'Leary, "On the Nature of Nationalism: An Appraisal of Ernest Gellner's Writings on Nationalism." *Political Economy Research Group. Papers in Political Economy*, 47. London, 1994, 198.

[57] Ichijo, Uzelac (ed.), 10.

[58] Eric. J. Hobsbawm, David J. Kertzer, "Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today." *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 8, No. 1. (Feb., 1992), 3-5.

Hobsbawm, the nation is a new purposeful socio-cultural integration of modern societies.[59] Hobsbawm, characterized by Wade Matthews as a "rootless cosmopolitan,"[60] dismisses the idea of single or unchanging identity, calling it a "dangerous piece of brainwashing", and argues that a person may have multiple identities at a time.[61] For Hobsbawm, any identity is a "sentiment of belonging to a primary group", and in case of national identity, it is viewed as a result of the political socialization practices undertaken by the state. He makes four important points about collective identities: first, they are defined negatively (in contrast to "them") and most identities are not based on objective similarities or differences. Second, identities are interchangeable and can be combined rather than unique. Third, identities shift and change. And fourth, identities are subject to the context which may change.[62]

What unites all these scholars and their approaches is that representatives of modernism view nations as subjective constructs, unlike other groups, for instance, primordialists, who argue the opposite – that nations existed "from the first time", in other words – throughout all historical periods, and therefore national attachments are inherited.[63] For primordialists, the nation is a natural grouping, marked by a shared language, religion, customs and traditions, and history. Primordialists maintain the view that we can find nations in any epoch of history.[64] In this case, identity becomes a static, also inherited, thing,[65] which is assigned when born on a particular territory, in a particular nation.

Another competing school – the ethno-symbolist approach, as the name of the theory suggests, argues that nations originate from ethnic groups.[66] Ethno-symbolists define a state as a community that has a common name, a historical territory, myths and memory, and a public culture, customs and laws.[67] Although this definition contains rather subjective elements such as culture and myths, they tend to see them as elements which become

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[59] Ichijo, Uzelac (ed.), 11-12.
[60] Wade Matthews, "Class, Nation, and Capitalist Globalization: Eric Hobsbawm and the National Question." *International Review of Social History*, Volume 53, Issue 1, April 2008, 66.
[61] Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Language, Culture, and National Identity." *Social Research*, Vol 63, No. 4, 1996, 1067-1068.
[62] Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Identity politics and the left." *New Left Review*, 1996 May, 40-42.
[63] Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism,* 8.
[64] Ichijo, Uzelac (ed.), 51.
[65] Viera Bačova, "The Construction of National Identity on Primordialism and Instrumentalism." *Human Affairs*, 8, 1998, 1, 32-36.
[66] Ichijo, Uzelac (ed.), 89.
[67] Anthony D. Smith, "When is a Nation." *Geopolitics*, 7:2, 2002, 15.

institutionalized within society after a certain period of time and become objectively observable.[68] Unlike the modernist scholars mentioned above, who view ethnicity as a construct, ethno-symbolists define ethnicity as the core element of the nation.[69] One of the key scholars of this school, Anthony Smith, also contradicts the common modernist view by stating that national identity already existed in pre-modern times, at least within the elites of certain states.[70] Smith, and the ethno-symbolism he advanced, is heavily criticized by the modernist school, including Montserrat Guibernau, primarily because of the excessive focus on structural elements, such as common laws, as well as the rather vague differentiation of the concepts of nation and state.[71]

Guibernau draws a clear line between these two concepts, stating that being a nation is sufficient to express a claim for self-rule, while the nation state is perceived as a contemporary political institution with attributes of power, including physical power, and seeking cultural homogeneity.[72] One of the important implications of such a view is the acknowledgement of the existence of national identities outside the modern nation state. This also allows one to argue that multiple national identities may exist within a single state if the cultural homogeneity mentioned above has not yet been achieved. As is demonstrated in this research, Belarus can be seen as an example of such a modern state, the society of which does not have a single consolidated national identity, as different actors promote different identity narratives.

Despite the fact that the modernist approach lays the ground for this dissertation's theoretical framework and appeals to intersubjective identity elements, it does not map the existence of potentially important psychological elements, such as emotional bonds of individuals with a certain community, which can play a major role in the perception of national identity. This theoretical gap does not allow one to explain certain, at first glance – irrational, behavior of individuals that perceive themselves as members of certain nations. This gap is addressed by Guibernau, who refers not only to social but also psychological elements, arguing that the nation as a community has an emotional bond and "felt" closeness, and this feeling might greatly increase in the light of external threats.[73] Precisely such a development

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[68] Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity,* 16.

[69] Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism,* 20-21.

[70] Smith, *When is a Nation*, 16.

[71] Montserrat Guibernau, "Anthony D. Smith on nations and national identity: a critical assessment." *Nations and Nationalism* 10 (1/2), 2004, 125-141.

[72] Montserrat Guibernau, "Nation Formation and National Identity." *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 2004:4, 658.

[73] Guibernau, *Anthony D. Smith on nations and national identity*, 134-135.

recently occurred in other countries of the region, particularly Ukraine and Georgia, when those nations faced direct Russian military aggression before or during the period analyzed in this dissertation.

According to Guibernau, all identities are built in a system of social relations and representation.[74] Guibernau describes *national identity* as a modern and dynamic phenomenon, when members of a single community share a subjective belief that they are bound together by a common history, culture, language, territory, religion, kinship, and statehood.[75] National identity is conceptualized by Guibernau through a psychological lens, as the *nation* is seen as an object based on the sentiment of belonging to a certain group that shares distinctive symbols, traditions, ceremonies, culture, territory, and other attributes.[76] Besides the psychological dimension with subjective closeness, the author also includes four other dimensions in this concept, including a cultural dimension consisting of language, customs, etc., and historical (statehood, events), territorial, and political (relation to the state) dimensions.[77] This concept of Guibernau not only fills the psychological gap but also provides a structured framework for analyzing such a complex and dynamic phenomenon as national identity. In this dissertation, this definition of national identity is utilized. The phenomenon is broken down into, and analyzed in, the five dimensions discussed below, with each containing a set of dimension-specific identity elements and narratives constructing them in discourse (which is mainly understood as communications) and social practices.

The psychological dimension of Guibernau's definition entails the "felt" closeness of the group attributing to itself a single nation. According to Guibernau, this closeness may be fostered in the light of a specific event, including confrontation with an internal or external enemy, real or imagined.[78] As this is a relatively fluid description of the dimension, I have modified this dimension of identity to fit the context and the case of Belarus by breaking it into two more narrow variables/attributes of national identity: first, the dissertation's empirical part will focus on how certain events, values, or activities are used by different actors aiming to build the sentiment of subjective closeness; and second, I analyze the phenomenon which Guibernau calls "national stereotyping", stressing and exaggerating some real or alleged

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[74] Montserrat Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations* (Polity Press, 2007), 10.
[75] Guibernau, *Anthony D. Smith on nations and national identity*, 134-135.
[76] Guibernau, *Nation Formation and National Identity*, 658.
[77] Guibernau, *Anthony D. Smith on nations and national identity*, 135-140.
[78] Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations*, 11-12.

features[79] or character traits of nationals. In addition, the psychological dimension, as the analysis stage demonstrates, is cross-cutting through dimensions, meaning that the "felt" closeness referred to can and has been built by reinforcing other dimensions of identity.

The cultural dimension, Guibernau argues, facilitates the creation of bonds of solidarity of the nation by allowing them to recognize members of the community, stress their distinctiveness, and internalize their culture forming "a part of themselves."[80] While culture is a broad concept, which includes values, customs, languages, and other elements, in Belarus' case a few elements seemingly play a central role in identity formation, given the level of their discussion in the discourse.

The first of such elements is the Belarusian language, which is used by different actors to extremely varying extents, and the Russian language, which became the second official language under Lukashenka's rule. Less prominent elements of cultural identity, but still worth analyzing, include the perception of Russian culture by Belarusians, in light of the Soviet legacy and influence of Russification in the education and public communication fields. Similarly, Belarusian culture has been included in the analysis as a separate element, exploring which of its elements is stressed by different actors. The last element included under Belarus' cultural dimension is religion and its role in identity construction through shaping certain beliefs, on the assumption that certain confessions, and their practices and customs can be also perceived as elements of Belarusian national identity.

The historical dimension is important for identity formation as the real or invented history creates a desired image of the nation and stresses the ancient roots of the nation, which can be perceived by some as a sign of superiority compared to other nations.[81] The latter aspect of the role which history can play in identity formation makes the case of Belarus particularly complex due to the number of varying approaches to the interpretation of Belarusian historical statehood, ranging from the Soviet-centric approach diminishing all other historical formations prior to the Soviet Union, to unofficial historical narratives stressing the medieval past of the nation. To explore the complexity and other variations of interpretation of different historical periods, the following key periods were selected following the literature review and included in the analyzed model: the Polatsk Duchy that emerged in the area corresponding to the territory of modern Belarus, and the

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[79] *Ibid*, 11.
[80] *Ibid*, 13.
[81] Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations*, 19-20.

Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (PLC), Belarusian People's Republic (BNR), and Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). In addition to the perception of different historical formations, the symbols that reflect particular historical formations were also included in the theoretical model, namely the white-red-white flag and *Pahonia* coat of arms associated primarily with the GDL and BNR, as well as the red-green official symbol which mimics the BSSR symbols.

While bonds to the specific territory that people call their homeland have retained significance over time, the territorial dimension with precise territorial boundaries became an extremely important attribute in modern times, as they define the political state. In the adapted model, the territorial dimension is explored from three angles: researching the sentiment of belonging to the modern or historical Belarusian territory; looking for the potential regional differences perceived by respondents or portrayed by the media; and understanding the role of *ethnicity* (understood in this dissertation broadly as the people's self-identification with a group which is believed to have common cultural attributes), as the latter also tends to be associated with a defined territory.

The relationship with the modern *state* (an independent internationally recognized political entity with clear territorial boundaries) is the core of the political dimension.[82] In the identity model used for the analysis in this dissertation, the political dimension seems to be interconnected with the territorial dimension in terms of analysis of the perception of citizenship and the perception of an independent and sovereign political state as a part of national identity, but for structural purposes, the element of independent state, given that it includes much more than boundaries and territory, is attributed to the political dimension. Furthermore, given the unique geopolitical position of the political state of Belarus and the historical, cultural, and other links to neighboring nations, the additional axis exploring the perception of neighboring Eastern and Western neighbors has been included in the analysis to see if the imagined or real familiarity with neighboring nations or political blocs is relevant when defining the path of Belarusian nation.

The five-dimensional model was adjusted and modified throughout the empirical data analysis while maintaining its "core" – the five identity dimensions. In the case of Belarus, the theoretical model adjusted by the author of this thesis consists of the following elements of identity, summarized in Table 1 presented below.

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[82] Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations*, 23.

Table 1. National identity dimensions and their elements

PSYCHOLOGICAL	• Activities, developments, or narratives that foster the feeling of subjective closeness. This is a cross-cutting element that can appear across dimensions. • "National stereotyping" – subjective personal attributes and qualities associated with the people of a certain nation or other group.
CULTURAL	• Perception of the Russian, Belarusian languages; presentation of bilingualism or other forms of coexistence of the languages. • Understanding of the association of Belarusians with Belarusian and Russian cultural elements. • Role of religion, specific confessions, and religious practices.
HISTORICAL	• Interpretation and perception of different historical periods and events with a particular focus on the relationship between a historical period and Belarus' nationhood. Key periods include: o Polatsk Duchy, o Grand Duchy of Lithuania, o Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, o Belarusian People's Republic, and o Soviet period, including WW2. • Role of different symbols associated with certain political formations and periods: white-red-white flag, *Pahonia* coat of arms, red-green colors, etc.
TERRITORIAL	• Territorial belonging as an identity attribute, affiliation of people with a specific territory and land. • Ethnic self-identification, the role of ethnicity in national consciousness. • Regional differences within the country.
POLITICAL	• Identification with a modern political state. • Geopolitical perceptions: o Affiliation or perception of Russia/East, o Affiliation or perception of Europe/West.

1.2. Changing Behavior in Light of Rising Ontological Anxiety

Guibernau's five-dimensional model described above is used in this dissertation as a theoretical construct solely instrumentally, to conceptualize the object under study and inform and structure the empirical part of this work. This research additionally uses an OST approach, which helps to contextualize the rationale of different actors behind new and changing

processes and actions related to identity construction. This section outlines the theoretical insights of OST, which serves as a theoretical framework to interpret the processes and behavior of different actors in the sphere of identity construction, including how the reconstructed narratives and identity-related social practices reflect the ontological insecurities and anxieties of authorities' and non-governmental groups.

Two of the most cited contemporary OST scholars, Steele and Mitzen, argue that, besides physical security (the protection of territory and political sovereignty), states seek another basic need – ontological security. Both theorists refer to Anthony Giddens' definition of ontological security (of humans), which is understood as the "need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time."[83] In order to maintain ontological security, actors, whether individual or states, physically and discursively act in a way which provides them with a sense of stability and continuity of the "self".[84] Mitzen adapted the concept of ontological security to states, justifying this on the basis that "ontological and physical security-seeking alike can be theoretically productive." They explain that states seek ontological security for their members to preserve state distinctiveness and respect national group identity, and argue that the assumption of states seeking ontological security helps to explain why different decision makers act in a similar way[85]. (The adaptation of the original psychological theory to apply at the level of a state aroused some criticism, to which I will return later in this section). In a similar vein, Steele and other scholars argue that the state itself is an actor that strives to maintain ontological security, relying on its biographical narrative.[86] Insecurity, according to Innes and Steele, can be understood not just as the possibility of physical threat, but also developments that call into question a state's or a group's identity. Thus, states have an urge to survive not only as physical entities but also as a "certain sort of (social) being."[87] This dissertation, the core assumption of ontological security theory that, besides physical security, individuals, groups of individuals and states seek to preserve their continuous identity, constitutes the framework in which the

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[83] Mitzen, 342.

[84] Ben Rosher, "And now we're facing that reality too": Brexit, ontological security, and intergenerational anxiety in the Irish border region." *European Security*, 31:1, 2022, 23.

[85] Mitzen, 352-353.

[86] Alexandria J. Innes and Brent J. Steele, "Memory, trauma and ontological security." In *Memory and Trauma in International Relations: Theories, Cases and Debates* (editors: Erica Resende, Dovile Budryte) (Routledge, 2013), 17.

[87] *Ibid*, 16-17.

collected empirical data, including identity narratives and social practices, is analyzed. Though in most cases this data serves as evidence proving this assumption, the scope and nature of this research is not aimed at proving or falsifying this fundamental aspect of the theory but utilizes it as a theoretical construct for interpretation of the collected data and explanation of the results.

The theory comes with a reshaped understanding of the rationality of actors. Steele's central argument is that "states pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence."[88] According to Steele, states often seek moral, humanitarian and honor-driven actions that do not necessarily correspond to seemingly rational (in realist terms) interests, because these actions satisfy their self-identity needs. Their ontological security becomes as important as physical integrity.[89] Mitzen also argues that the search for ontological security can lead to irrational conflicts.[90] Prominent ontological security scholars have used this theoretical approach as a powerful tool to explain the attachment of states to conflicts and behavior that could be seen as irrational from a realist perspective, due to the way this might harm or compromise physical security.[91] I would argue that behavior driven by ontological security does not always imply a tradeoff with physical security, since the two basic needs of each state can have a complementary relationship, and ontological security-seeking behavior 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, or "critical situations",[92] can lead to a gap in a state's physical security, as it increases its vulnerability to hybrid threats. In the region of Eastern Europe, and especially in the former Soviet countries, this complementary relationship between ontological and physical security is particularly visible, because, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, countries like Ukraine and the Baltic states were challenged to preserve their independence not only in terms of securing their borders but also in terms of strengthening their distinct identities. The threat to their ontological security has not disappeared, even though some countries have joined military alliances or adopted other measures making direct military intervention difficult. On the contrary, with growing threats from Russia and intensified utilization of hybrid warfare, including techniques mastered over decades by the Soviet propaganda

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[88] Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (Routledge 2008), 2.
[89] Steele, 2-3.
[90] Mitzen, 342-343.
[91] *Ibid.*
[92] Steele, 12-13.

machine and new tactics such as disinformation damaging the countries' sense of self, the need to preserve and strengthen identity has become even more acute.

While the state of ontological security is clearly defined, the definition of what it means to be ontologically insecure requires explanation. Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi point out the need to distinguish between ontological insecurity and anxiety. Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, drawing on the work of the existentialist Rollo May, advocate a distinction between normal and neurotic anxiety. The authors suggest treating actors, regardless whether they are states or individuals, as "anxious in a normal" way when they cope in a constructive way with the uncertainties of everyday life, such as dissatisfaction with their perceived ranking in the international arena. On the other hand, authors suggest treating neurotic anxiety, which is primarily different in terms of how individuals/state respond to it (the creation of a defense mechanism in order to manage this anxiety), and the corresponding forms of behavior, as ontological insecurity, and thus propose not to conflate normal anxiety on the one hand with neurotic anxiety or ontological insecurity on the other.[93] Further in this work, the terms *ontological anxiety* and *ontological insecurity* will be used to stress the different level of anxiety, with *ontological anxiety* referring to challenges that Belarus has been facing "normally" (or constantly) like any other state in the region, while *ontological insecurity* will refer to the state when anxiety critically threatens the being of the self, in response to the emergence of certain developments, such as war in the neighboring country.

The differentiation of these two concepts helps to address a couple of important areas of criticism of OST, including the uncritical application of the theory, which was originally a psychological concept developed for individuals suffering from a pathological condition, to the level of a state, as well as the theorists' excessive focus on the continuity of an identity narrative and their view of change as something negative (OST scholars generally place emphasis on maintaining a stable, continuous and safe identity rather than embracing change; moreover, a change in identity tends to be perceived as harmful from an ontological security perspective.). Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi conclude that anxiety can be a catalyst for change,[94] which is what has been observed in Belarus after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Belarus as a

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[93] Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi, "Returning to the roots of ontological security: insights from the existentialist anxiety literature", *European Journal of International Relations,* 2020, Vol. 26(3), 886-887.
[94] *Ibid*, 876, 881, 890.

state and society has been used to coping with various normal anxieties for decades, including the cultural and informational influence of Russia on Belarus as an independent state. However, with the new level of risk of an actual existential threat, these normal anxieties of the past have transformed into neurotic anxiety, or ontological insecurity, forcing the state, society, and individuals to cope with it in new ways.

The aspect of change has also been addressed by Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi and their critique of this general presupposition as a restrictive understanding of OST, and I follow their suggestion of emphasizing adaptability rather than stability. According to Browning and Joenniemi, "ontological security is not just a question of stability, but also adaptability", including the ability to deal with change.[95] Browning and Joenniemi dismiss the notion that change is to be viewed as destabilizing, pointing out that identities are always in the making and never fully stable. The authors point that seeking ontological security might actually involve coping with uncertainty and change, including via developing and changing identity narratives, or even shifting to a completely new identity.[96] This is precisely what describes the Belarusian case. Opening up to change might be seen as threatening the authorities, but, if they had maintained the status quo in light of the fact that Belarus does not have a stable identity and its identity is still "in the making", no change might have been perceived as even more harmful. As discussed in the literature review in earlier sections, research on Belarusian national identity tends to reach a single conclusion that there is no strong Belarusian identity. This led to the situation when neither actor, including the official Minsk authorities, favored the stability of the current state of affairs with regard to identity. Furthermore, the recent events in the region, particularly the occupation of Crimea, became a catalyst forcing both the authorities and unofficial (non-governmental) actors advocating different identity concepts to reassess ontological security risks and expedite the process of identity formation, trying to change and adapt the identity, to make it more distinct and thus resilient to Russia. The identity changes allowed by the authorities, as the further empirical analysis will show, introduced change to certain narratives while maintaining the overall line of Belarus' "autobiography" promoted by the government's group.

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[95] Christopher S. Browning, and Pertti Joenniemi, "Ontological Security, Self-Articulation and the Securitization of Identity." Author's manuscript accepted by *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2017, 2-4.
[96] Browning and Joenniemi, 3-4, 9-10.

While the presupposition of change has been challenged in the OST framework, if one accepts that it can happen, the question then arises how and what change can be made, while not deviating too far from the original premises of OST. Subotić also argues in favor of the idea of change, suggesting that one looks first into the change in narratives, and that, if we see states as existing through narratives, this explains the autobiographical changes they make. As they enter new relationships with other states, and face new events, they change their narratives and include new elements, not necessarily fundamentally changing the state's autobiography.[97] The important point made by Subotić is that, since narratives are social constructs, they can be activated and deactivated based on political actors' needs to justify policy shifts.[98] Subotić concludes that, during periods of crises, political actors do not create narratives from scratch. They still draw on existing dominant narratives to maintain the sense of ontological peace.[99] This is what has been observed in Belarus for several decades. While maintaining the overall autobiography built around the so-called "brotherhood" with Russia, the authorities pick and choose specific narrative elements, and activate and deactivate certain narratives depending on the changing foreign policy vectors and the state of affairs in bilateral relations with Russia and the EU. Within the framework of the soft-Belarusization process, in this dissertation I seek to look at what narratives are being activated and deactivated when faced with the new context, and whether these processes stick to the previous larger biographical narrative maintained by the authorities or add fundamental changes to it, meaning that certain narratives are not deactivated, but actually fully eliminated from the identity discourse and practice.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, another area of OST debate, and subsequently criticism, is related to the problem of the level of analysis, which stems from applying the psychological concept of ontological security to a collective actor – a state.[100] There is a view among the scholars of ontological security studies (OSS) that only individuals can be perceived as seekers of ontological security, who experience ontological anxiety, while

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[97] Jelena Subotić, "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change." *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2016, 12, 614.
[98] *Ibid*, 616.
[99] *Ibid*, 624.
[100] Nina C. Krickel-Choi, "Rethinking Ontological Security Theory Conceptual Investigations into 'Self' and 'Anxiety'" (Doctoral Thesis. Stockholm Studies in International Relations, 2021), 10.

the state is only a framework to stabilize self-identities.[101] Edjus and other scholars state that ontological security can be scaled up to the state level using a variety of arguments, including that states are a source of security for individuals or that states are represented by individuals.[102] Krickel-Choi summarizes existing arguments in the literature as to why self can be attributed on the state level in the following concise way: "the crux of the argument linking political leaders or citizens to the state is that individuals are attached to the identity of the state in complicated ways, which generates the need for the state to maintain that identity."[103] One of the possible ways of analyzing ontological insecurity at both levels is demonstrated by Edjus and Rečević, who make an important argument that ontologically insecure individuals may raise fundamental (existential) questions which might lead to collective anxiety and insecurity on a wider scale.[104] Is it possible to analyze ontological anxiety and insecurity in a similar way in Belarus? In other words, is there a bottom-up anxiety in Belarus? As the data collected for this research shows, the short answer is that it is rather necessary, given that the greater part of the soft-Belarusization initiative came from grassroots initiatives.

I neither oppose the view, nor argue, that this originally psychological concept cannot be scaled up to the state level. However, I do argue that it is necessary to examine at least two levels of analysis in the Belarusian case – the state level, the group-individual level, and the interconnection of these levels – not only because of the top-down and bottom-up character of the identity processes observed in the country but also because of the nature of the contemporary Belarusian regime, whereby different groups and actors promote different identity narratives in light of the existence of competing identity models.[105] It would be reasonable to assume that different groups pursuing different identity narratives experience different levels of ontological anxiety, shared by them as individuals or as group members, which may or may not intersect with state-level ontology. It is also essential to note that, when I speak about identity narratives or models pursued 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 which they have promoted for public identity

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[101] Filip Ejdus, Tijana Rečević, "Ontological Insecurity as an Emergent Phenomenon." *European Psychologist*, 26:1, 2021, 30.
[102] *Ibid.*
[103] Choi, 11.
[104] Ejdus, Rečević, 31-32
[105] Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity.*

construction, not necessarily making it a part of their own personally perceived "self".

At the same time, the analysis of Lukashenka's group is also valid if we take into consideration the broader socio-political context in which the changes of identity elements discussed in this dissertation arise. When speaking about Lukashenka's regime, the argument of the "state as individual" seems of great importance, given the results of the analysis of the official identity model, which has shown particularly a disciplined and consolidated single model. Arguably, the increasing personal ontological anxiety transformed into insecurity within Lukashenka's regime when he had to reestablish his "self" and continuous being in contemporary society amid Russia's aggression, which might threaten his personal rule.

Despite the authorities overtly pledging loyalty to Russia, and asserting identity ties with it, Belarus is not an exception in the region. Like other countries, it is seeking additional security by adopting measures to strengthen its national identity and make it distinct from Russian identity. The aspect of identity distinctiveness is key when analyzing the empirical data collected for this research. The importance of distinctiveness stems from the theoretical argument that losing state distinctiveness threatens the ontological security of its members, and, therefore, that states are as motivated to preserve their national identity, and not only their "body".[106] When, therefore, I analyze the processes and constructed narratives, particularly when assessing whether the nature of change is driven by ontological security or not, I look into the aspect of distinctiveness – particularly the question whether a newly forged narrative builds towards a greater distinctiveness of Belarusian national identity or not.

At the state level, and especially at the individual level, routines are of high importance for the sense of continuity, and thus ontological security, even (especially) when they embrace the possibility of identity change. According to OST, routinized relations with others stabilize identities, especially when those relationships are routinized with significant others.[107] In the case of Belarus, based on the empirical data collected, the practice of routinizing was applied in such a way that the distinctiveness from Russia was constantly shaped when reconstructing or maintaining specific identity elements. Moreover, as further demonstrated in this thesis, in the case of conflicting narratives on specific identity elements within the country, routinization of reconstructed meanings was particularly important for governmental actors, especially in relation to identity elements that previously

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[106] Mitzen, 352.
[107] *Ibid*, 342, 347.

were seen as political attributes, such as the Belarusian language, which was perceived as a sign of opposition that had to be incorporated into public and official political life and then constantly reinforced until it became routine.

To sum up the theoretical section, two key theoretical constructs are employed in this dissertation. First, Guibernau's five-dimensional model, which includes political, historical, territorial, cultural, and psychological dimensions, is used as a construct to solve the issue of a fluid and complex definition of identity and to structure the empirical analysis in accordance with representations of identity elements corresponding to the model's dimensions. Second, while the first theoretical construct is used instrumentally to structure the analysis of identity by breaking it down into specific elements, OST is used throughout the dissertation as the theoretical approach to interpret the empirical data and observations and to provide greater explanatory power when explaining the drivers for changes within different actors, and how these changes address ontological insecurities and decrease the level of ontological anxiety of these actors at the group and state level. OST is employed in a non-standard way, by adding three major modifications: asserting a complementary relationship between physical and ontological security; rethinking the identity change as a possible driver of ontological security rather than insecurity; and showing that it is possible to use the argument based on the search for ontological security at individual-group and national-state levels.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

To study Belarusian national identity and answer the question how Belarusian identity has changed in light of the emerging ontological insecurity, and subsequently what contemporary identity models have been constructed, requires a complex methodological approach, because this question is constituted in a way that strives to answer not only what has happened but also what is happening today to bolster the ontological security of different actors, including the authorities and non-governmental actors in discursive communication and social practices. Different actors in the country, including the authorities on one side and the civil society, political opposition and independent media on the other, are striving to create and compete with their narratives and construction of different identity elements. In this case, each of the identity elements identified in Chapter 1.1 is constructed through communication that (re)creates a set of narratives to form this element, and this compilation of different elements is what I call identity discourses. Following this logic, the identification and conceptualization of narratives and their change is central to the research design. At the stage of content analysis, not all articles or speeches contained full narratives on specific identity elements. Some contained only limited ideas, which I call messages, that reflected a part of the narrative and the narrative had to be identified via analysis of a group of these messages. Analysis of social practices is also essential if one assumes a co-constitutive relationship between practice and discourse. The selected research design, therefore, places great emphasis on researching not only narratives, but also practices.

The dynamic process of identity construction can be captured through combining methods aiming at analysis not only of the most recent empirical data related to communications, but also of social practices that re-constitute communication narratives. My research is aimed at studying the newest communication narratives and social practices that constitute official and unofficial discourses, as they target the primary recipients, that is, Belarusian citizens. Therefore, content analysis of the different media discourses, which is holistic in terms of the number of narratives, together with analysis of social practices, were chosen in preference to historical analysis or another type of analysis that would place emphasis on a single identity domain.

The review of academic literature and preliminary analysis of non-governmental media has demonstrated that there are different understandings of the same identity elements in unofficial discourses formed by the political opposition, civil society, and non-governmental media outlets. For this reason, individual interviews with political activists and experts, as

supplementary to the content analysis method, were employed to reveal those differences and to design the codebook for media content analysis, as well as to collect additional data for the analysis of social practices. In addition, the interview data helped one to understand deviations and discrepancies between the constructed public identity narratives on the state level, and narratives that are part of the informants' "self", and how their sense of ontological security does or does not differ in this regard.

The phenomenon of soft-Belarusization and transformation of narratives on the Belarusian language began with changes in Lukashenka's official communications. Therefore, the research begins with analysis of Lukashenka's communications, aiming at revealing how the language discourse is changing, and whether the presentation of other identity elements is changing and how. To explore the discursive changes in official discourse further and more coherently, a content analysis of the collected sample of articles of one of the major outlets for the authorities – the BelTA outlet – was performed (introduced in more detail later in this Chapter). As for the discourse constructed by non-governmental actors, the content analysis of two major media outlets (*Nasha Niva* and RFE/RL) is conducted along with interviews with experts and democratically minded opposition politicians who are in a sense identity-builders themselves.

Overall, as summarized in Table 2, the empirical research of this dissertation includes two layers of analysis: (1) analysis of discourse, and (2) social practice analysis. These two layers of analysis include analysis of changes of both official and unofficial actors. The research of official discourse features a combination of content analysis of authorities' and state media communications, while the research of unofficial discourse is based on content analysis of non-governmental media outlets and collected semi-structured interview data. The social practice analysis, which includes practices undertaken and/or facilitated by the authorities, civil society actors, and society, is also partially based on semi-structured interview data and is supplemented with the analysis of available official documents and data, as well as media reports on practices that were collected as a result of monitoring media articles referencing identity-building activities, and, where applicable, available polling data.

Table 2. Summary of methods and data sources.

Empirical part		Data/method of analysis
1. Discursive construction of identity narratives	*Authorities' discourse*	Data: communicative events of Lukashenka featuring identity elements Method of analysis: communication analysis
	Governmental media discourse	Data: "Opinion" articles on BelTA outlet Method of analysis: content analysis
	Non-governmental media discourse	Data: "Opinion" articles on *Nasha Niva* "Blogs" section articles on RFE/RL Method of analysis: content analysis
	Public opinion leader discourse	Data: semi-structured interviews with politicians and independent experts Method of analysis: content analysis of interview transcripts
2. New and changing identity-building social practices	*Social practices of non-governmental initiatives*	Data: semi-structured interviews, mass media reports
	Social practices of authorities' group	Data: official documents and press releases, available open data, mass media reports
	Changes in public opinion	Data: official statistics, census data, independent survey data

2.1. Communication Analysis of the Changing Official Discourse

Since the most overt discursive change was observed in relation to the Belarusian language, the empirical part of this dissertation starts with the analysis of these changing official discourse communications. Throughout the analyzed period, Lukashenka's words served as guidance for the entire power vertical and were transmitted widely using conventional media channels owned by the state to build a new representation of this identity element. Therefore, this part of the analysis is designed primarily around Lukashenka's

discourse. This analysis of the authorities' communications includes the categorization of the main narratives and their subsequent analysis in light of their past record and context in terms of the political particularities and social developments of that time, including the interrelation with other narratives both within the same communicative event and the whole sample of communicative events. In other words, when analyzing the sampled texts, great attention was paid to the textual context of the whole communicative event, as well as the socio-political and economic developments that were taking place in the country and region around the time of the appearance of this communication.

The sample of analysis of authorities' communications included 30 communicative events of Lukashenka (annual appeals, press conferences, meetings with media, media reports: see Annex 1 for the complete list), which either mentioned the topic of the Belarusian language or addressed the change in another identity narrative from January 2014 to December 2019. Due to the large number of Lukashenka's communications on other potential identity dimensions, communicative events on non-changing identity elements were not collected for separate analysis. Instead, the analysis of the state media was used to expose those. Priority was given to written texts in the Russian or Belarusian language to capture narratives and ideas that the authorities addressed to the domestic public rather than the foreign audience. Not all of the speeches included are from official sources, as for some of Lukashenka's communicative events independent media coverage was preferred due to the particular emphasis on the identity aspect of the communication. In some cases, the analysis draws on a transcription of quotes from Lukashenka's speeches provided by non-governmental media as they provided less edited transcripts than official sources.

Segments of each text (sentences and/or entire paragraphs) were analyzed thematically and coded (traced) using MAXQDA software. First of all, the sampled texts were separated into general categories-codes in line with the five-dimensional model presented above. The repetitive and more granular narratives within these categories were distinguished and added as subcodes: messages that convey specific ideas about the general code (see Annex 2 for Codebook with code and subcode frequencies). In total, 377 general codes and subcodes were assigned to the analyzed sample of texts. After the entire sample was coded into general codes and subcodes, they were reanalyzed using software, researching the proximity between the specific codes corresponding to different identity elements, as well as analyzing these codes qualitatively by comparing them to the overall social, historical, and, where applicable, situational context.

2.2. Content Analysis of Mass Media Outlets

Content analysis was used as a complementary method to research both official and unofficial identity discourses. In view of the wide range of articles covered, the content analysis was particularly useful as a tool to distinguish the trends and spread of different identity dimensions and elements within the overall identity discourse. This type of analysis allowed one not only to identify and conceptualize narratives prevailing in the discourses to which the average citizen was exposed, but also to assess their frequency quantitatively and to make a comparison between different outlets.

Three prominent media outlets were selected for the content media analysis: two non-governmental media outlets (one in-country and one with headquarters abroad) and one governmental news agency. In total, over 7,500 articles were screened on these outlet Blogs/Opinions sections (see Table 3), with over 1,400 of them selected for further analysis. After two rounds of screening, 806 articles were sampled and coded (see Annex 5).

Table 3. Media outlets included in the content analysis.

Analyzed Outlet	Articles in Category	Articles Sampled	Codes assigned (incl. meta)
Nasha Niva (nn.by)	2,137	253	621
RFE/RL (svaboda.org)	3,328	369	984
BelTA (belta.by)	2,007	184	513

The content analysis of the selected mass media outlets was challenging first of all because of the scope, including the high number of mentions of different identity elements which were blended into both opinion sections and news reports. Therefore, to structure the analysis and keep the comparative aspect, the following guidelines were employed, and the following selection criteria applied, to structure and standardize the content analysis of the three different media outlets.

- The frequency of general mentions of different identity elements, such as language, culture, and different historical periods, certainly has an indirect effect on shaping identity, as the readership is getting reminders about certain identity elements. However, while the frequency of topics reported as news can raise the readers' awareness of certain identity elements in comparison with opinion pieces, where different actors shape and promote narratives, their effect on identity construction is certainly less significant. Therefore, the media

analysis focused solely on the online outlets' "Opinion" and equivalent sections, where the newspapers either publish their own editorial pieces or serve as a platform for different actors to promote their points of view.

- The "Opinion", or in the case of some outlets "Blogs", section of each analyzed outlet contained a mix of authors and opinions. Therefore, only identity-related articles corresponding to the dissertation research period of 2014–2019 (January-December) were selected. After initial screening and selection, the articles went through a second round of screening at the stage of coding. Articles that included only mentions of identity elements, without directly or indirectly constructing any meaning of them, were excluded, as well as analytical pieces analyzing overall processes relating to identity or narrative construction rather than attempting to construct them. Video materials and images were not coded either. The analysis was limited to the analysis of texts. Articles republished from other media sources were included. If sampled outlets republished each other's articles, these articles were duplicated and included in each outlet's sample.

- Human-based coding was employed, using MAXQDA software. The nuanced political communication, the mix of genres and styles, as well as the plurality of terms relating to different identity elements, did not allow the use of automated or semi-automated coding techniques to accurately screen out articles and identify the presence, and then the meaning, of identity narratives.

At the analysis stage which followed the coding, directly identity elements addressing articles were grouped and analyzed with consideration of the contextual developments, while from non-explicit articles (texts that indirectly referenced a certain element of national identity) the meaning was extracted through grouping, and through individual and contextual analysis, involving both the context of an article and the political and social developments of that time. For the purposes of contextual analysis, each sample of articles was also coded and clustered by year.

To better reflect the overall discourses on each media outlet, the analysis of co-occurrence of codes was performed on each outlet when applicable. This helped to cross-check the co-occurrence of certain groups of codes within a single document-article. This type of analysis captured more nuanced messages and the interconnection of different identity narratives, elements, and dimensions. At the final stage of analysis, visual analysis of co-occurrence and clustering of codes was performed to visually compare media outlet

discourses against key identity dimensions and dominant groups of identity narratives.

The Codebook (see Annex 3) used for media content analysis consisted of two categories. The first category included codes aimed at capturing meta-data useful primarily for contextual analysis, including messenger and message classification, and examining whether the message directly addressed an identity element, or the meaning required readers' interpretation. The second category included five collections of codes and sub-codes related to each of the five identity dimensions: cultural, territorial, political, psychological, and historical. There were slight variations in the Codebook for each media outlet because of the varying sub-codes in state-owned and governmental media outlets.

2.2.1. Analyzed outlets

The **Belarusian Telegraph Agency** (BelTA) is the largest state-owned information agency in the country, positioning itself as the major source for official information. Being the largest state agency, BelTA often serves as the primary and only source of information on government and public officials' activities.

The media outlet contains an "Opinions" section, which in total contained 2,007 articles published between 2014 and 2019. Only 183 articles, or 9.1 percent, matched the criteria and were included in the analysis sample.

BelTA's "Opinions" section frequently includes national and regional level Belarusian public officials as messengers (people referenced in the articles and authors of the articles, or the outlet's columnists), including ministers and governors of *voblasts*. Lukashenka's opinions are not included in this section (the outlet has a separate "President" section dedicated to his activities and communications) but some of the messengers tend to react to (usually just echo) Lukashenka's communications and messages, particularly those made during his appeals to the nation. Besides public officials and cultural figures, the Orthodox and Catholic Church were also among the messengers. Additionally, there are several articles citing Russian Federation or Union State or CIS representatives-officials or well-known cultural figures.

Although it is the "Opinions" section, all the content is curated and actually written by BelTA journalists rephrasing and directly citing statements of the messengers mentioned above. Most of the articles have a similar reporting style, with a short headline framing the main message, an introductory paragraph more explicitly describing the headline, then direct

quotes, followed by a closing paragraph with contextual information about the messenger or event.

Overall, the "Opinions" section of BelTA is very cyclical and reactive. The cyclical nature of the publications appears in the form of a recurring series of articles dedicated to certain annual occasions, such as "Victory Day" or "Independence Day". Some of the articles included in the sample react to/follow/justify contemporary events and clearly supplement the state-level discourse, including the promotion of certain legislative changes planned by high-level officials, the formation of election narratives, and the addressing of tensions in the society.

Of the 183 articles, the vast majority of them (161) contained non-explicit identity messages, and only 18 articles directly discussed identity elements. Only one article was classified as response-based (reacting to someone else's public communication), potentially showing the absence of the slightest discussion or debate among the messengers. Excluding meta codes, 322 segments of 183 articles were assigned, meaning that articles comparatively rarely mixed codes related to different identity dimensions. This was partially determined by the specific style of the articles described above, and the relatively short texts used in these articles. The largest identity dimension related to history – 124 coded segments, followed by cultural and political – 66 and 65 segments, psychological – 53, and territorial – 14.

One of the oldest Belarusian newspapers, *Nasha Niva*, reestablished after Belarus restored its independence in the 1990s, was among the most popular online news outlets during the research period. The outlet is non-governmental and operated inside the country with Belarusian as its primary language of publication. It is generally known as a news portal with a heavy focus on pro-Belarusian and anti-government news reporting. This was very easy to observe also in the analyzed "Opinions" section.

Between 2014 and 2019, the outlet published 2,137 stories in the "Opinions" section. After screening and coding, 253 articles (or 12 percent of the total selection) were classified as materials that contained messages (sub-codes) directly or indirectly featuring different identity elements and forming certain identity narratives.

The outlet messengers formed particular identity narratives mainly through non-explicit messages. The majority of articles did not feature identity elements directly. In 122 cases, articles contained naturally occurring messages that were not directly discussing or attempting to form identity narratives; however, these articles featured specific identity elements and constructed their meanings. The dominance of non-explicit identity-related messages could also be rooted in the fact that the outlet has a unique very

committed pro-Belarusian audience, which does not require much explanation or persuasion over particular identity elements, such as the Belarusian language. Thus, these elements could be discussed in a more nuanced and detailed way. Only 38 articles were written to address identity issues specifically. Much more than on BelTA, 75 articles on *Nasha Niva* were response-based, meaning that they contained texts where actors were prompted to talk about identity or where actors reacted to events that threatened their identities and thus formed counternarratives.

As for the messengers, authors of the articles and primarily cited actors in these articles, the most frequent messengers were from the pool that can be classified as non-governmental influencers, which includes well-known people from different spheres, most frequently bloggers, artists, athletes and writers. This group of messengers can be considered as the most impactful, as these were the people who were admired by thousands of readers regardless of their political views. In 30 cases, ordinary citizens/readers were referenced, which framed these articles in *vox populi* style. In 31 cases, experts were key messengers, predominantly experts not affiliated with the government and incumbent authorities. Only in 12 instances were opposition politicians mentioned.

The content analysis revealed that the cultural identity dimension was that which featured most frequently in the articles (197 coded segments). The cultural dimension was followed by the historical dimension (96), which was twice as rarely featured as the cultural. The political and psychological identity dimensions were featured 49 and 32 times respectively, while the territorial dimension contained only 3 codes. The number of articles was relatively evenly distributed throughout the period of analysis, ranging from 35 to 52 articles per year. However, as demonstrated in the analysis section later in this dissertation, the spread of the topics of articles was uneven and reflected contextual developments.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) is one of the major online media outlets in the Belarusian media space operating outside Belarus, with its headquarters in the Czech Republic. The outlet is non-profit and positions itself as an alternative media source. Among the objectives declared by RFE/RL are aims to "broaden democratic values" and "fight against ethnic and religious hatred", which might influence the editorial policy of the outlet.

Another particularity of this media source is that it is fully Belarusian language based. Unlike *Nasha Niva*, the Belarusian site of RFE/RL does not have a fully working Russian-language version of the site (readers are offered a Google Translate in the header of the site as the only option). Therefore, all the analyzed articles were in the Belarusian language, with most of the authors

Belarusian speakers (with a few exceptions in the case of translated/republished articles).

The outlet does not have an "Opinions" section, but it contains an analogous section titled "Blogs", which are claimed to reflect authors' opinions without the editorial interference of the outlet. From 2014 to 2019, 3,328 stories were published in the "Blogs" section; 369 articles, or 11.1 percent of the total – almost an identical proportion to that on *Nasha Niva*, met the criteria and were included in the sample after two rounds of screening.

The diversity of messengers in the RFE/RL "Blogs" section was not very broad (or not as broad as on *Nasha Niva*), as many of the featured columnists were journalists and analysts well-known in the Belarusian journalist community. The proportion of politicians or other types of messengers in the sample was marginal.

Slightly more than half of the analyzed articles contained non-explicit messages from which identity-constituting messages had to be extracted and interpreted. Every single article, and all of them collectively as a group, were analyzed to extract a comprehensive narrative. Around 20 percent of the messages were perceived as messages that directly focused on identity building discussions or the role of certain identity elements. Seven percent of articles were response-based. The remaining articles were unclassified, since they mentioned the identity element/term but did not fit any of the categories mentioned above, but their contents could still be interpreted as somewhat related to one identity element or model or another.

Excluding meta-data codes, 638 segments of 369 documents were coded, ranging from 38 to 82 documents per year. The historical dimension was the most frequently referenced with 306 codes, the political dimension included 88 codes, the cultural dimension contained 175, the psychological 55, and the territorial 19.

Overall, on all three outlets, historical and cultural dimensions were dominant in terms of the ratio of the number of codes in these dimensions and the total number of codes (see Chart 1 below for proportional distribution).
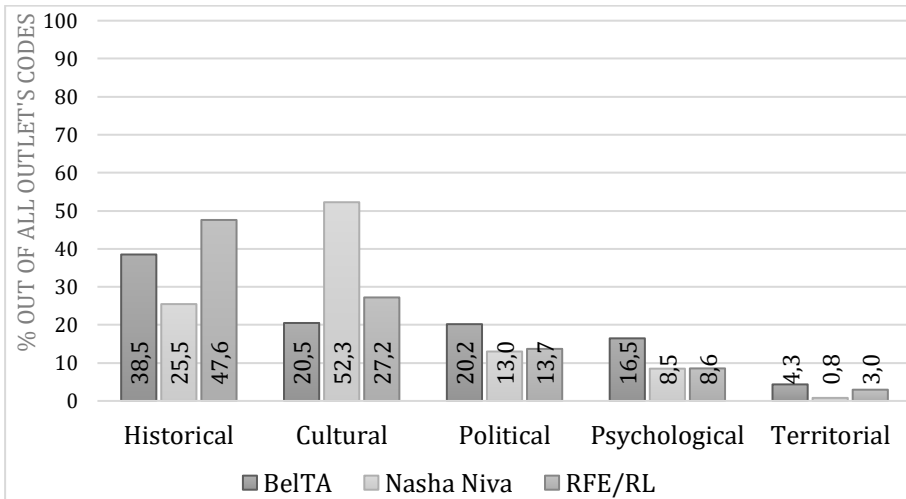
Chart 1. Proportional distribution of codes within each media outlet.

2.3. Semi-Structured Interviews with Opinion Leaders

There was a twofold purpose for conducting interviews. Interviews were designed with a view to revealing respondents' perceptions of different identity elements and their patterns (see Annex 4). Following the theoretical insights and five-dimensional definition of identity by Montserrat Guibernau,[108] respondents were prompted to describe the meanings of varying identity elements, including languages, historical narratives, symbols, and the Belarusian "character," and to assess their importance for them personally and for society (based on their professional observations) in terms of constructing Belarusian identity. It is assumed that their perceptions and the ideas they articulated spilled over into their communications with citizens and had an influence on their future actions. At the same time, when informants were sharing their personal perceptions and beliefs, it allowed a comparison of how their individual "self" was different from the constructed national "self" and to draw out the respective differences when analyzing the nature of constructed and shared identities driven by ontological security. In addition, the interviews provided examples of experience and insider information on changing social practices. While most of the cases mentioned by interviewees had been covered by social and mass media, the respondents helped to expand the media reports collected with additional information, guiding what was potentially missing from the monitoring. Also, importantly, informants

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[108] Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations*.

provided insights on the reasoning behind certain activities conducted by civil and political actors, and the authorities.

This dissertation includes analysis of 11 interviews conducted between August 2019 and April 2020. Four informants were prominent Belarusian experts, and seven were political activists engaged to different degrees in identity-building activities. When building a sample of activists, the analysis aimed to include representatives of a variety of political organizations operating in the country, representing different ideological positions. The primary invitees were party leaders and their deputies, who could be considered public opinion leaders. In consideration of possible age and regional differences, leaders of *voblast* party chapters and party youth wings were included in the interview sample.

Table 4. Interview composition.

#	Respondent	Age Group	*Voblast*	Duration (min:sec)
1	Politician #1	30-39	Regions	44:37
2	Politician #2	40-49	Exile	57:30
3	Politician #3	20-29	Regions	42:45
4	Politician #4	40-49	Minsk	61:02
5	Politician #5	40-49	Regions	54:30
6	Politician #6	40-49	Minsk	47:46
7	Politician #7	40-49	Regions	57:25
8	Expert #1	50-59	Minsk	71:30
9	Expert #2	30-39	Minsk	57:22
10	Expert #3	40-49	Minsk	54:37
11	Expert #4	40-49	Minsk	56:34

All interviews were semi-structured and composed of open-ended questions aimed at understanding the personal views and perceptions of the informant and encouraging them to disclose their worldview,[109] in addition to collecting expert-type of data. Interviews involved moderation that allowed elite-type interviewees to elaborate on the question of particular identity

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[109] Beth L. Leech, "Asking Questions: Techniques for Semistructured Interviews." *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2002, 665.

elements which they deemed to be of highest importance to them or of which they had the most knowledge. For example, if an informant saw language as the primary identity-building attribute, the discussion around the set of questions on language perception was the longest, and other questionnaire sections were touched on to a lesser extent. The duration of the interviews ranged between 40 and 70 minutes (see Table 4 for full composition and duration details). Ten interviews were conducted online, one in-person.

The majority of informants who participated in the interviews were recognizable figures. Since all of them revealed their personal attitudes on sensitive political and social topics and shared their views on issues that they might rarely touch on in their public communications, their data has been anonymized. As the vast majority of the interviews were conducted remotely, only verbal consents for recording and data use were collected, informing the informants about the conditions of anonymity and the purpose of this research. While I asked all the questions in Russian, participants were free to answer in either Belarusian or Russian language based on their preference and comfort.

2.4. Analysis of Social Practices

As mentioned above, the interviews also helped to generate and verify additional empirical data related to the social practices that took place in parallel with the discourse. The analysis of social practices is equally important because of the co-constitutive relationship between the discourse and the practices, particularly when we speak about the formation and reconstruction of identity elements and related narratives, as the latter not only influence individual behavior but are also constructed and reinforced in this behavior, and vice versa.

Since the interviews provided rather limited data on examples of changing practices and tended to lean towards the reasons behind the soft-Belarusization process, additional empirical data was collected and analyzed. It included documents, statistics, and written materials, as well as available polling data conducted by institutes not affiliated with the government. A key source of data was numerous reports related to identity practices in the mass media in the period between January 2014 and the spring of 2020 (prior to the 2020 campaign). These reports-examples of practices were saved and grouped regularly and systematically while monitoring the Belarusian media space after 2015. In a similar way, analytical articles and commentaries by Belarusian experts were monitored. Chapter 5, which analyzes social practices, focuses exclusively either on those social practices that have been changing, and where that change was discussed in mass media outlets, or on

those that concern areas which were referred to by experts during the interviews.

The preliminary analysis of the collected data on practices suggested that the most meaningful practical changes implying a direct impact on identity formation took place only with respect to two domains: cultural and historical, while the identity elements constituted by the territorial, political, and psychological dimensions either were not referenced in significant activities or were somewhat related and/or interconnected with practices in the cultural and historical domains. For these reasons, the analysis focused on more granular research of social practices in these two domains only, trying to cover existing and anticipated changes in the wide range of identity elements attributed to culture and history.

3. OFFICIAL IDENTITY DISCOURSE

This first empirical part of the dissertation focuses on discursive construction of national identity by the authorities' group, or on the so-called official discourse. In line with Guibernau's assumption that the "elites play an irreplaceable role in the construction of national identity", as their position ensures them greater access to the media (in Belarus' case, the monopoly of conventional media, such as television, which in Belarus is exclusively state-owned) and influence over political institutions.[110] This empirical part analyzes communications of the authorities and state media. The analysis is designed so as to lead with Lukashenka's narratives on different identity elements, since, as will be demonstrated later in this dissertation, Lukashenka's discourse basically served within the Belarusian authoritarian regime as a role model and behavioral instruction for other state officials. Furthermore, in view of the nature of his regime, Lukashenka's anxieties, including ontological anxiety, certainly spills over into other state institutions as a result of his hands-on state management model.

This empirical part covers all five identity dimensions and analyzes a combination of the two samples of communications collected: Lukashenka's speeches that contained references to reconstructed identity elements, which are then coupled with a content analysis of the larger sample of articles on BelTA. I begin with analysis of the cultural identity dimension, focusing primarily on the language element, as the most overt discursive change in Lukashenka's discourse took place there, particularly those changes that redefine the Belarusianness constructed by the authorities' group. These have the potential to reflect this group's growing ontological anxieties and insecurities, as well as their nature.

After the cultural dimension, the political identity dimension in the authorities' discourse is analyzed, since, as the further analysis will show, it is very densely interconnected with the cultural dimension in Lukashenka's discourse. For these two parts, communication analysis of the sample of Lukashenka's identity-related speeches was primarily employed, supplementing it with content analysis of governmental media, to see if a change similar to that in Lukashenka's discourse was perceptible. The historical, psychological, and territorial identity dimensions are primarily analyzed in the sample of state media articles, in view of the fewer discrepancies and changes in Lukashenka's communication taking place in

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[110] Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations*, 18.

these domains as compared to his earlier communication and state media narratives.

3.1. Cultural Identity Dimension

The language question traditionally has been one of the most discussed national identity elements in the context of Belarusian nation formation. In the 1990s, the country regained its independence with the Belarusian language in a particularly weak position, as Stalin's Russification policy and decades of Soviet rule resulted in the fact that, by the mid-1970s, not a single Belarusian school remained in 95 cities in the country.[111] Therefore, the political elites approaching the 1990s and shortly afterwards focused on national revival, termed by Alena Markava as "Neo-Belarusization" (in view of the similarities to the Belarusization in the 1920s), and included a plan to reestablish the Belarusian language as the only state language, coupled with a cultural revival emphasizing the distinctiveness of Belarus.[112] Lukashenka's coming to power almost immediately halted the second wave of Belarusization, and then only made the situation worse with respect to the Belarusian language and culture revival and their role in nationhood, as he basically launched the process of de-Belarusification when he began elevating the status of the Russian language. When Lukashenka took office, he was the main driving force initiating the referendum which facilitated growth in the use of the Russian language in public and most importantly education. Lukashenka also made Russian the primary language in official politics, while the Belarusian language began to be perceived almost exclusively as the attribute of the political opposition. Lukashenka even directly diminished the importance of the Belarusian language, including insulting the Belarusian language and Belarusian speakers in a public discourse in 2006,[113] in addition to prosecuting the Belarusian-speaking intelligentsia.[114]

After the events of 2014, the language element underwent the most overt changes in Lukashenka's discourse. Lukashenka not just began praising the Belarusian language in public, but he himself began speaking in Belarusian language on official occasions. All of this took place in the context of the

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[111] Marples, 50.

[112] Marková, *Language, Identity, and Nation*, 33-35.

[113] Александра Богуславская, "Как Лукашенко решил хайпануть на белорусском языке." *Deutsche Welle*, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/ru/kak-lukashenko-reshil-haipanut-na-belorusslom-jazyke/a-60661788> [2022-09-18]

[114] Артем Шрайбман, "Почему Лукашенко полюбил белорусский язык и нацстроительство." *Московский Центр Карнеги*, 2016, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/66512> [2022-09-18]

Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, and a growing concern inside Belarus that Russian interference in the form of the hybrid threat might be inevitable too in Belarus in view of the narratives describing the nationhood of Belarus, which were poorly defined by the regime as a result of the promotion of ties with Russia. Lukashenka began raising the issue of the role of the Belarusian language in national identity formation. Most importantly, the overwhelming majority of Lukashenka's messages suddenly became highly supportive of the Belarusian language, portraying it as the primary feature of the distinctiveness of Belarusian nationhood, and including it in the integral narrative describing Belarusian identity in the regime's discourse. Such a position was consistent throughout the period between 2014 and 2020, and it greatly differed from the discourse prevailing before the events of 2014, especially compared to the 1990s and the early 2000s. Among the analyzed sample of Lukashenka's 30 speeches (see Annex 1) that directly addressed the changing national identity elements, 32 messages (general codes) in these speeches were related to the Belarusian language and its role in identity formation. 25 messages of the same sample of communicative events related to the question of the role of the Russian language. This was in total 133 codes and, as demonstrated in Table 5 below, overall made the cultural dimension the most referenced in the selected sample of Lukashenka's speeches.

Table 5. Matrix of general codes and cultural sub-codes in Lukashenka's sample.

Code	Number of general codes	Total number of codes, including sub-codes
Cultural dimension		*133*
Religion	6	6
Perception of the Russian language	25	51
Perception of the Belarusian language	32	76
Political dimension		*127*
Historical dimension		*33*
Psychological dimension		*53*
Territorial dimension		*31*

In 2014, Lukashenka delivered his official Independence Day speech in the Belarusian language, which was seen as an unprecedented political act and sparked political discussion about a "return" to the Belarusian language at the

highest official level.[115] However, a few months before that, when delivering the annual address to the people and the parliament, Lukashenka had begun forming a set of new narratives by introducing the idea that the Belarusian language was one of the major features, as well as an important heritage, of Belarus as a nation, thus suggesting the emerging consistency of this new narrative. This new role assigned to the Belarusian language was consistently maintained and was recorded in 12 instances in the analyzed sample of communicative events. Importantly, as a couple of the selected quotes below illustrate, this distinctiveness, which was directly linked to nationhood through an allusion to the threat of losing this nationhood, meant that the language was perceived as a part of the constructed identity, and, significantly, as touching on the issues of security and nationhood longevity.

> If we forget how to speak the Belarusian language – we will stop being a nation. (Lukashenka, April 2014)

> If you are the nation, you must have a language, your own language. (Lukashenka, March 2019)

Lukashenka also consistently started stressing and routinizing the significance of the Belarusian language for identity formation. It is important to highlight one aspect in particular: Lukashenka began to use the Belarusian language for the purpose of distinguishing Belarusians from Russians, and Belarus from the Russian Federation – the country with which Belarus is so closely associated in many of the spheres crucial for sovereignty, ranging from military cooperation and the location of military facilities on the country's territory, to energy, economic and other asymmetric interdependence.

> And I support the Belarusian language. Why, because this is what distinguishes us, for example, from Russian people, from Russians. This is the sign of a nation: if you do not have these particularities, your Belarusian language, but let's say, have only Russian [language], — this means you do not have this feature, and you are simply a Russian person, you are Russian. But we are Belarusians. (Lukashenka, January 2015)

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[115] БелаПАН/Naviny.by, "Лукашенко заговорил о независимости по-белорусски." Naviny.by, (retrieved from *Delfi)*, 2014, <https://www.delfi.lt/ru/abroad/belorussia/lukashenko-zagovoril-o-nezavisimosti-po-belorusski.d?id=65193119> [2022-0918]

Of course, language – this is the first, perhaps the only thing which distinguishes us from Russians and others. This is the sign of any nation. (Lukashenka, March 2019)

In addition, Lukashenka hinted in his speech that the Belarusian language, which he already made clear is the primary feature of Belarusian identity, cannot be given up in the face of economic pressure from Russia. Such pressure could be imposed, first of all, by the provision or denial of intergovernmental and specifically Eurasian loans, which also became the subject of negotiations in 2016. This, coupled with the previous direct confrontation of Belarusian nationhood against Russian, resulted in a consistent narrative that described the Belarusian language as a countermeasure to a potential threat from Russia, with a clear priority placed on Belarusian nationhood over the economic or other leverage that Russia had on Belarus.

[...] I don't want to lose this treasure [the Belarusian language], this heritage, this is worth much more than any credits or billions. (Lukashenka, January 2015)

Although Lukashenka did not elaborate too much on the new role of the Belarusian language, even these few messages contributed to the spread of a newly formed narrative on the Belarusian language and gave an impetus to its perception in the country, especially among the group Lukashenka belonged to – state officials. To complement Lukashenka and his discourse, a number of high-ranking state officials began to maintain the set of ideas sketched out by Lukashenka. The officials did not hesitate, or even felt incentivized, to speak in the Belarusian language in public. In addition, they reiterated the narrative of the Belarusian language becoming the unique feature of Belarusianness, the element which distinguished Belarusians from Russians, and by doing so, they contributed to the redefinition of national identity.

It would be terrible to lose the Belarusian language. How then would we differ from our neighbors?[116] (Vice Prime Minister Anatoly Tozik, October 2014)

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[116] Наша Ніва, "Тозик: Это будет ужасно, если мы потеряем язык", <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=137241&lang=ru> [2019-05-25]

We have to speak Belarusian more often. [...] If you are Belarusian, if you understand that the country cannot exist without the language [...][117] (Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei, June 2017)

Why should we not wear our national clothes, and should not speak the Belarusian language? These are normal things, and I don't see any problems with that.[118] (Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei, September 2018)

Routinized policy actions and narratives that construct self-concepts is a key factor within the OST framework, as they establish order and reduce anxiety. And these routines can be disrupted, which is what happened in the case of the reformation of the role of the Belarusian language by the authorities. But routines are important for reestablishing an identity element after the dislocation of the narrative takes place.[119] One of the ways in which the Belarusian authorities tried to routinize the Belarusian language after assigning a new role to it related to the attempt to present it as something that had been common for the Belarusian public. To do so, the authorities' representatives tried to use official statistics and present Belarusian language popularity not just as a desire but as a demand from the population which already existed, a natural and common thing for Belarusians, thus making the language a coherent and routinized element of the constructed Belarusian identity.

37 percent of respondents think the number one threat is the decrease of the population – due to a low birth rate. In second place is losing the Belarusian language [...][120] (Presidential Aide Kirill Rudy, October 2014)

[...] we, together with the committee of architecture and urban construction, recommend having signboards and advertisements in the

[117] Радыё Свабода, "«Трэба больш размаўляць на беларускай мове», – міністар замежных справаў Беларусі Ўладзімер Макей." 2017, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/28556732.html> [2019-05-25]

[118] Елена Толкачева, "Владимир Макей об «ужасных» бутербродах во Дворце независимости, России и белорусском языке." *TUT.BY*, 2018, <https://news.tut.by/economics/606523.html> [2019-05-25]

[119] Steele, 3, 23, 61.

[120] Наша Ніва, "Помощник президента: Белорусы считают главной угрозой для страны утрату белорусского языка." 2014, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=137208&lang=ru> [2019-05-25]

Belarusian language when it is possible. This is what our population is asking for.[121] (Local Minsk official Iryna Letnyak, May 2015)

[…] The Belarusian language is perceived as the most important marker; look at the number of Belarusian language advertisements. It is trendy to speak in Belarusian now. […][122] (Parliamentarian Ihar Marzalyuk, April 2018)

One additional and necessary step towards the reconstruction of the perception of Belarusian language was the need to deconstruct previous narratives surrounding the understanding of its role. The Belarusian language used to be generally perceived as a symbol of political opposition, while speaking in Belarusian was considered potentially a sign of political protest. Having regard to that fact that in early 2014 the majority of the Belarusian-speaking opposition still considered *ploshcha* (street protest) as the only way to challenge Lukashenka's rule, Lukashenka put a major focus on the anti-revolutionary manner of the language issue with consistent reference to the 1995 referendum and the "people's will". At the same time, Lukashenka often referred to the war in Ukraine to warn against legal enforcement of the language issue as something threatening. He went so far as to attribute the origin of the crisis to the language policy in Ukraine. Undoubtedly, such an interpretation and frequent reference to the conflict was useful for the authorities. In addition to helping Lukashenka draw a contrast and position himself as the moderate decision maker and guarantor of peace and political stability, such rhetoric attempted to undermine the messaging of the then opposition and more specifically its role as the promoter of the Belarusian language.

We should not do anything artificially. You will push away half of the people. […] Nothing revolutionary. A professional approach and peace are the most important. Mova [the Belarusian language] is not for revolutions. (Lukashenka, January 2014)

At the same time, Lukashenka did not exclude the possibility that the Belarusian language needed more development or support. In order not to

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[121] Кристина Сухаревич, "Мингорисполком рекомендует размещать на исторических зданиях белорусскоязычные вывески и рекламу." 2015, *«Минск-Новости»*, <https://minsknews.by/mingorispolkom-rekomenduet-razmeshhat-na-istoricheskih-zdaniyah-belorusskoyazyichnyie-vyiveski-i-reklamu/> [2019-05-25]

[122] Наша Ніва, "Чиновники и депутаты – участники круглого стола в унисон выступили за белоруссизацию законодательства." 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=207608&lang=ru> [2019-05-25]

contradict his stance against artificiality, Lukashenka made careful, not obligatory proposals, and did not speak about direct language support, but used personal examples and references to his youngest son to hint at the importance of the Belarusian language for future generations of the nation, at the same time implying through a family-member example that the Belarusian language was a coherent element, which allegedly shaped his own perception of the "self".

> Okay, almost all of us speak Russian. But the Belarusian language, let's say openly, at home, daily, we speak less. So, maybe, we should add an extra hour for the Belarusian language, not English, at school? (Lukashenka, September 2014)

> My kid is growing – I want him to know Belarusian as well as Russian. (Lukashenka, January 2015)

The ultimate question that arises when analyzing how Lukashenka reconstructed the narrative on the Belarusian language is, what is the role assigned to the Russian language, then, which was the dominant language before? Analysis of the co-occurrence of the codes (overlap or proximity of the codes at the same segment of text) on perceptions of the Russian and Belarusian language, presented in Table 6, demonstrated that the Russian language messages and Belarusian language messages frequently overlap or were discussed immediately one after another at the same communicative events, suggesting that the construction of the Belarusian language narrative resulted in the simultaneous reconstruction of the Russian language narrative in terms of its role in self-identification.

Table 6. Co-occurrence of Russian and Belarusian language codes.

Code / Perception of Belarusian language	Co-occurrence within five paragraphs (Belarusian language)	Co-occurrence within same paragraph (Belarusian language)
Perception of Russian language	44	13
Perception of Russian language / Russian is the "second" mother language	25	6
Perception of Russian language / Russian language needed for pragmatic reasons	6	0
Perception of Russian language / Russian language is the heritage of three nations	9	3
Perception of Russian language / Belarus contributed to the development of Russian language	8	1
Perception of Russian language / Russian language is not Russia's language alone	12	2

The Russian language did not disappear from Lukashenka's agenda (25 instances of it being referenced in the sample of speeches), but when speaking about the Belarusian language, as against his previous perception, now Lukashenka implied the supremacy and importance of the latter. In one of the speeches, he noted that a clear majority (60 percent) considered Belarusian as their mother language.[123] This figure was also backed up in the media by the Information and Analysis Centre under the Presidential Administration, which reported that 48 percent indicated Belarusian as their mother language, while 43 percent named Russian as their native language.[124] Furthermore, Lukashenka directly compared the "nativeness" of the two languages in terms of importance and clearly ranked the Russian language as the "second" native language (10 instances).

> […] but we will not give away to anyone our second mother language, Russian; this is our language. (Lukashenka, January 2015)

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[123] Официальный интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь, "Интервью негосударственным средствам массовой информации." 2015, <http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/printv/intervjju-negosudarstvennym-sredstvam-massovoj-informatsii-11882/> [2019-05-25]

[124] Наша Ніва, "ІАЦ: Беларускую мову лічаць роднай 48% насельніцтва, рускую – 43%." 2019 <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=224979> [2019-05-24]

The Russian language is our native language. But, maybe, a little bit less native than Belarusian. (Lukashenka, August 2017)

However, such a change in communication did not mean Lukashenka was giving up the narrative of a bilingual nation (observed in 14 instances). Russian continued to be his primary language of communication in public and he constantly promoted the Russian language as the native language even when trying to boost the importance of the Belarusian language. Such a combination of narratives served as a possible means of not excluding from the official "catch-all" identity narrative a large part of the population for which, as for him, Russian was the primary and often the only language spoken in daily life.

[...] especially in Russian, which everyone is using at home, in Russian, our language, not *rossiyskiy*. I insist that this is our language! (Lukashenka, March 2014)

I consider it as a mother tongue, the absolute majority considers it to be a native language, and this is the heritage, the wealth, which we cannot reject. This is our wealth. (Lukashenka, January 2015)

[...] nothing bad if two of our native languages will be close to each other – Russian and Belarusian. We write in this and in that language. (Lukashenka, April 2015)

For me the Belarusian language is my native language. The same as Russian. Maybe I am a bad president in this sense, but the Russian language – it is ours. (Lukashenka, March 2019)

A few important nuances are added by Lukashenka when shaping the role of the Russian language in terms of Belarusians' self-perception. First, Lukashenka implies that the Russian language does not belong exclusively to the Russian Federation. In the quotations above and at other communicative events, it is noticeable that Lukashenka plays with the words *rossiyskiy* and *russkiy*, *rossiyane* and *russkie*, in order to prevent Russianness as a culture from belonging to the Russian Federation. Second, to strengthen the alienation of the Russian language from Russia, Lukashenka adds Ukraine to the list of national communities, which, in his words, contain different identities but simply share, and contribute to the development of, the Russian language as their cultural heritage (eight instances of the two narratives in total).

[…] we believe (and I reiterated this many times) that the Russian language is a common asset of the three brotherly nations – Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians. And also, other peoples that lived within one

country. I want to make it clear once again for those who want to "privatize" the Russian language. The language is ours. It is neither Russia's, nor Ukraine's. It is ours. (Lukashenka, April 2014)

I gave you an example; I replied to Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] when he said: "Thank you for your approach to the Russian language and so on." I said: "Wait, wait, what are you talking about?" "What Russian language in your country" – hold on, the Russian language is our language. [...] (Lukashenka, January 2015)

We have two state languages – Russian and Belarusian. Not Ukrainian, not *rossiyskiy*, but Russian. [...] This [Russian] is our common legacy. If someone wants to lose his mind, he will lose the Russian language! If he wants to lose his own heart, he will lose the Russian language! (Lukashenka, November 2019)

Russia has consistently exploited the language issue in countries that have Russian speaking populations. Such narratives incorporating depoliticizing Russian language and incorporating it in the constructed identity narrative define Russian as part of the Belarusian ontology and help to address potential identity threats, as it builds greater resilience in the segment of the population which speaks only in Russian and is more vulnerable to Russian informational influence.

The Russian informational influence was relatively strong in Belarus over the course of the analyzed period. Some of the malign messages and narratives promoted by Russia successfully penetrated the Belarusian public. An IISEPS poll conducted in 2015, shortly after the annexation of Crimea, indicated that only 18.7 percent would fight against Russia's intention to annex Belarus while 52.8 percent were ready to adjust, and another 12.1 percent would welcome this. Besides, the polls demonstrated that, despite the rather distant position of the Belarus authorities in relation to the war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Belarusians tended to interpret these events as Russian media portrayed them. For instance, in June 2015, only 15.2 percent of Belarusians had a negative perception of the idea of the so-called "Russian World", while 38.9 perceived it positively; a little more than 20 percent perceived Crimea's annexation as an occupation, while a clear majority (62.3) perceived it as the "restitution of historical justice," and only 10.5 percent perceived the war in the Donbas region of Ukraine as Russia's aggression.[125]

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[125] Независимый институт социально-экономических и политических исследований, "Национальный опрос 2-12 июня 2015 г." *IISEPS*, 2015, <http://www.old.iiseps.org/data15-61.html> [2015-12-28]

As the term soft-Belarusization implies, there are no hard lines in the authorities' discourse. The bilingual nation narrative, as well as the importance of preserving the Russian language, is maintained. Two of the top three narratives that create a representation in relation to Belarus' language are built on the idea of a bilingual nation (see Table 7 below). However, as discussed above, the authorities imposed important reservations in respect of the use of the Russian language by Belarusians, to distance themselves from Russia as a political entity and consequently something that defined Belarusian nationhood.

Table 7. Co-occurrence of Russian and Belarusian language codes.

Subcodes	Frequency
Belarus is a bilingual nation	15
Belarusian is a distinctive feature of the Belarusian nation	12
Russian is the "second" mother language	10
Language cannot be enforced	6
The Belarusian language needs development	5
Performance: [Lukashenka speaks in Belarusian]	5
The Russian language is not Russia's language alone	5
The Russian language is the heritage of three nations	4
Belarus contributed to the development of the Russian language	4
The Russian language is needed for pragmatic reasons	3
Belarusian does not require support or protection	1
TOTAL	70

After conducting the analysis of Lukashenka's communicative events in relation to narratives reconstructing meanings of cultural identity elements, it might have been expected that they would be widely reflected in state media among pro-governmental influencers, beyond the articles that republish Lukashenka's statements. However, the content analysis of BelTA articles revealed quite a different spread of narratives, which is demonstrated in Table 8 below. The documents referencing the cultural dimension constituted only 28 percent of the total BelTA sample and primarily consisted of codes related to different fields of art and religion. Compared with the sample of Lukashenka's speeches, the cultural dimension of the BelTA sample stands out in terms of the comparatively very low share of language codes.

Table 8. Culture dimension codes in the BelTA sample.

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
Belarusian culture (arts)	31	16,85	60,78
Religion	14	7,61	27,45
Belarusian language	9	4,89	17,65
Russian language	2	1,09	3,92
Russian culture	1	0,54	1,96
Cultural symbols	0	0,00	0,00
DOCUMENTS with cultural code(s)	51	27,72	100,00
DOCUMENTS without code(s)	133	72,28	-
ANALYZED DOCUMENTS	184	100,00	-

The role of the Belarusian language or Russian language was rarely discussed within the articles in the BelTA sample. Despite that, a couple of important narratives could be extracted from individual articles of 9 codes found in the whole sample of 184 articles. The first narrative was present in several articles and echoed the routinization of the attempt by Lukashenka and other high-ranking government representatives to create a new narrative as discussed above, implying the same idea that the Belarusian language was in demand and its popularity was growing. This narrative is clearly complementary to the previous narratives maintained in Lukashenka's personal discourse, but it can hardly be attributed as a narrative constituting identity, given its rare appearance in the sample and the rather soft formulation. Nonetheless, from the OST perspective, this kind of messaging could serve the purpose of routinizing the meaning of the Belarusian language as a coherent and consistent part of the understanding of the Belarusian "self" constructed by the authorities.

> It is pleasant to note that Belarusian language enjoys popularity among the youth. Today it is trendy and prestigious to use the Belarusian language in business. (Director of the Y. Kolas Institute of Linguistics of the Center for the Study of Belarusian Culture, Language, and Literature of the National Academy of Sciences, Ihar Kapylou, 2017, BelTA sample)

Two articles published in 2015 and 2017 with the Minister of Education and a Member of Parliament as key messengers, went further and presented the Belarusian language as an important identity attribute of the Belarusian people, which was then directly in line with Lukashenka's narrative.

Remarkably, similarly to Lukashenka, they did not rule out the importance of preserving the Russian language as the state language, demonstrating the consistency of messages promoted by officials of different rank.

> It is important that today the Belarusian language is perceived as an identity symbol, as the language of the heart, as a thing that serves as a marker at the emotional level […] There are nations with two languages, there are also those with three. And they still remain nations. (Parliamentarian Ihar Marzalyuk, 2017, BelTA sample)

The other elements of the cultural domain rarely appeared in Lukashenka's communications on identity, but a few prominent messages were observed in the BelTA sample. The first message is built around Belarusian literature and mainly the legacy of Francysk Skaryna, who is presented as an important part of the cultural heritage of the Belarusian nation, and who also plays a consolidating role. Other prominent literary figures, such as Maksim Bahdanovich, were also mentioned in the sample. However, it should be noted that many of these mentions of literary figures, including Skaryna, were usually tied to specific occasions or anniversaries such as the 500-year anniversary of the Francysk Skaryna Bible.

> Francysk Skaryna was not only a pioneer and talented translator, his aspirations and their scope were much wider and more global. He became an educator and spiritual mentor of Belarus and had an unprecedented influence on the formation and development of the language of Belarusian literature. (Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Valentsin Rybakou, 2017, BelTA sample)

Another notable narrative which was evident, though not as frequently, was built around sports as a part of the national culture and also as a field which consolidated the Belarusian people because it instilled national pride. That was not evident in the sample of Lukashenka's communicative events, but it was clearly in line with Lukashenka's personal preferences, considering the extraordinary role he prescribed for sports as a means of patriotism. A few other cultural narratives were built around other arts, particularly music as a separate cultural field. However, through mentioning annual music festivals like Slavianski Bazaar in Viciebsk or Soviet musical bands like Pesniary, messengers (mostly of Russian origin) tried to stress the "closeness of Slavic nations".

In terms of religion as a potential identity element, Belarus has a dominant confession of Orthodox Christianity, with nearly 79 percent assigning themselves to this confession, according to the IMP 2019 survey.

However, the same survey showed that the vast majority, over 85 percent, do not visit religious services regularly.[126] Only 14 articles in the BelTA sample (or 8 percent of the whole sample) related to messages concerning religion. Some of these articles directly cited Belarusian church leaders. The dominant message in this sub-sample argued that Belarusian people are tolerant of all religions and there is peace and accord in the multi-confessional society. However, several of the articles clearly implied that Christianity, particularly "Christian values" that require "preservation", are common to the nation and consolidate it.

In summary, the first and most remarkable change was observed in Lukashenka's discourse on the role of culture in the official discourse on national identity. Lukashenka clearly assigned a new meaning to the Belarusian language, not only implying its significance in terms of its preservation, but also clearly articulating the identity building function which it contains in building a distinct national identity and thereby addressing some of the concerns related to Russian cultural influence. At the same time, while the overall non-Lukashenka state media communications did not contradict and even supported the new narrative, the references were extremely scarce and less focused on cultural elements. And when they featured cultural elements, they focused on the ones that had remained intact for decades. This means that the cultural part of the biographical narrative of the authorities and their group was modified only partially. But that part is of high importance as it introduces a greater and very concrete distinctiveness in relation to Russia. Overall, this change of the definition of Belarusianness in the official discourse and the changes in the narrative on the Russian language and the contextual reference to Russia and events in the region in general, assessed through OST lenses in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the weaponization of the language issue by Russia, suggests that the authorities felt ontologically insecure and saw language as a means of decreasing anxiety and insecurity.

Another important aspect of the cultural identity elements promoted by the authorities was that they represented a relatively weak dimension of identity, with many small messages around sports, arts and music that did not create a bigger narrative that could be regarded as forming a distinct national identity. That situation would have been even worse if the authorities had not leaned towards attributing a more significant role to the Belarusian language.

[126] Дарья Урбан, "Ценности населения Беларуси: Результаты национального опроса населения." *Исследовательский центр ИПМ*, 2019, 51-52.

Without it, there would have been a clear gap and greater ontological anxiety in terms of the cultural domain of national identity overall.

In terms of levels, it is important to highlight the top to bottom approach of change. Ontological insecurity caused change to take place at the individual level. It featured first in Lukashenka's political discourse and only afterwards spread to the group, that is, the authorities' group including local and national officials. This serves as evidence that analysis of ontological insecurity and anxiety requires an approach which includes both individual and group actors, especially when analyzing regimes of an authoritarian nature, where a single person both has direct influence across state ranks and leads the forming of his group's (and if successful, state's) national identity direction.

3.2. Political Identity Dimension

The political national identity dimension in Belarus' case is characterized mainly by the perception of three elements: the independent state, the East (Russia in particular), and the perception of the West or the European past of the country. In the case of Lukashenka's new identity discourse, this was the second largest (see Table 5) dimension after the cultural dimension within the 30 communicative events on identity analyzed. With the exception of the stressing of political independence, which can be interpreted as increasing the significance of affiliation with the state for the purpose of self-identification and at the same time one of the core elements of "civic" nationhood, the political dimension of his discourse during the analyzed period also helped to shape the place which Belarus occupied among other states and political blocs. While the narratives on Belarus' relations with the West and the Belarusian language are not closely interconnected in the sample of Lukashenka's communicative events, the discussion around relations with Russia, and the perception of Russia, is significantly present, primarily due to the interconnection of the Russian language and Belarusian language codes.

It is generally known that Russia frequently accuses the so-called "Near Abroad" (a controversial term used by Russian authorities) countries of discriminating against Russian speakers. Possibly out of fear of these or similar kinds of accusations, a reference to "brotherly" relations is inevitable when promoting the Belarusian language above Russian, particularly taking into consideration the number of accusations and frustrations appearing in imperialistically minded Russian media segments, such as *Regnum* or *Sputnik i Pogrom*, after the emergence of the soft-Belarusization trend and the introduction by the authorities of the new narrative on the Belarusian language. Overall, three well-known narratives on Russia were maintained by

Lukashenka in the selected sample of his speeches: first, Belarus and Russia are brotherly countries (Lukashenka separates *russkie* as an ethnic group from *rossiyane* as citizens of Russia); second, both share a common history and common roots; and third, Russia is Belarus' main strategic partner, despite the several crises in bilateral relations within the time frame of analysis.

Table 9. Perception of Russia in Lukashenka's discourse on national identity.

Subcodes	Frequency	Percentage
Russia and Belarus are brotherly nations	14	30.43
Cooperation with Russia is primarily economic	8	17.39
Belarusians and Russians are different and sovereign	7	15.22
Russia is a strategic partner	5	10.87
Integration projects should be based on equality	5	10.87
Common history with Russia	4	8.70
There is a group in Russia that wants to threaten Belarus	3	6.52
TOTAL	46	100.00

However, similarly to the Russian language perception narratives, there are certain reservations in the description of the ties between the two countries. Despite being "brothers", Lukashenka claims distinct identities by consistently pointing to elements of civic nationhood – Belarus' territorial integrity and sovereignty. After the economic tensions with Russia in 2018–2019, this time marked by a strong political agenda and the Kremlin's pressure for deeper integration in exchange for previous economic benefits, Lukashenka clearly denied any form of political unification or other form of factual unity with the Russian Federation which would entail creation of supra-national political institutions. He claimed that a clear majority of Belarusian society would be against that, which was confirmed by the results of independent polls.[127]

> We should live in our own apartments. […] Although we live in the same building, each is living in their own apartment. (Lukashenka, August 2015)

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[127] БелаПАН/Naviny.by, "Большинство белорусов между союзом с ЕС и РФ выбирают Россию." 2017, <https://naviny.by/new/20170522/1495429692-bolshinstvo-belorusov-mezhdu-soyuzom-s-es-i-rf-vybirayut-rossiyu> [2017-05-22]

If today in Belarus we put on a referendum the question of the unification of two countries, as many in Russia say, incorporation of Belarus into Russia, 98 percent will vote against. […] And Belarusians want to be with Russia but live in their own apartment. (Lukashenka, March 2019)

To match the earlier narrative of "brotherly Russia" and not to contradict the prevailing sentiment in society that Russia is a friendly country,[128] in his new discourse, Lukashenka tried to maintain the countries' relations and to portray those "brotherly" ties as if they were primarily focused on pragmatic aspects – the economic agenda rather than political or military cooperation. In addition, he clearly portrayed the current direction of integration as primarily economically driven, based on the equality of partners, which helped him to reinforce the message of distinctiveness and at the same time continue the larger biographical narrative that he had been relying on for decades.

If we are building the union, the major principle of any union is being on an equal footing. Equal! Russians did not go for it. (Lukashenka, October 2014)

[…] if the priority of the Kremlin is, as you said, the Eurasian Union – this is purely an economic union […] (Lukashenka, January 2015)

The political dimension of the BelTA sample of articles was 34 percent of all publications analyzed. It can be broken down into similar generic codes as in Lukashenka's discourse. However, the sub-codes are less elaborative compared to the ones observed in Lukashenka's communication. The largest code concerned the state's political sovereignty and independence narrative, the second code summarized attempts to build the international identity of Belarus, and the remaining two codes attempted to shape Belarus' geopolitical belonging: its Europeanness and its relation to the Eastern world, particularly Russia. Similarly, as in Lukashenka's communication, the BelTA sample accords much more attention to Russia than the West.

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[128] Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), "Belarusians on Poland, Russia and themselves." *OSW Commentary*, No. 373, 2021, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/Commentary_373_0.pdf> [2021-12-30]

Table 10. Political dimension codes in the BelTA sample.

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
Sovereign/independent state	33	17,93	52,38
International image	15	8,15	23,81
Perception of Russians/Slavs	14	7,61	22,22
Western/European	3	1,63	4,76
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	63	34,24	100,00
ANALYZED DOCUMENTS	184	-	-

In the BelTA sample, the political identity dimension is represented through maintenance of the strong affiliation of the people with the modern state. This is primarily done by constantly stressing the importance of the independence and sovereignty of the state, presenting it as the greatest value that the nation has ever had. Often independence is presented as a stand-alone value that unites the nation and determines its future.

> It (Victory Day) is a glorious holiday. There is nothing more important for the country and people than freedom and independence when there is a state. And we should value it. (Minister of Labor and Social Protection Marianna Shchetkina, 2016, BelTA sample)

There is also a particularly strong correlation between the references to independence and the war (more than half of the articles referencing sovereignty/independence related to the Great Patriotic War (GPW)), including numerous references to independence when discussing the official Independence Day, which is celebrated on the day of the "liberation of Minsk by the Soviet army."

The identity-constructing articles in the BelTA sample also focused on achieving the desired perception of Belarusians by others, which is something each nation state and its leadership strives to achieve – to have widespread support for the constructed identity narratives both within society and among the neighboring states and the international community. Within 15 of the 63 articles that focused on political elements, messengers attempted to present the desired image of Belarus on the international level. Citing both domestic and CIS messengers, BelTA presents a series of statements building the narrative that Belarus is a nation-state characterized by two traits – peace and stability, a country where there are no inner conflicts, and which maintains exclusively peaceful relations with all its neighbors. In a similar vein, to complement the narrative of peace, some messengers implied that Belarus is

a "bridge" between the East and West. In three articles Belarus was portrayed as part of the European continent, without elaborating or creating a more specific narrative. A dozen articles maintained a "brotherly" nation narrative similar to Lukashenka's, which primarily concerns the perception of Russia and Russians. Without much elaboration, these articles stressed the political closeness of the two nations through common cultural, historical and spiritual links but avoided the important reservations that Lukashenka made in his identity discourse.

The political identity dimension in the authorities' overall discourse is mostly reflected through the basic but, in the contemporary context, vital element of the independent state and sovereignty. This is the only identity element of the political dimension which is overtly and clearly expressed in a consistent manner. The representation of other narratives, particularly those related to the West or perception of Russia, are not completely consistent between Lukashenka's statements in his sample of speeches and the BelTA sample of state media articles in terms of the level of elaboration. Lukashenka is the only one who goes beyond the "brotherly" narrative, introducing reservations, important to him, as to how far these "brotherly" ties can go having regard to the level of his ontological anxiety.

Leaving aside the assessment of fluctuations in the perception of East and West (which has always been complicated in view of the swinging nature of Lukashenka's "balancing" policy between the two poles), the consistent reference to the independence of the country, coupled with the broader portrayal of himself as the "guarantor of independence" (the key slogan of his 2015 campaign was "For the Future of Independent Belarus" and the communication was built more on sovereignty than economic delivery[129]), can be perceived as a change of the narrative, particularly compared to his early campaigns, when Lukashenka's primary focus was on the economy, not the independence or sovereignty of the country. The "Quotes" section on Lukashenka's official site[130] features statements primarily on independence and sovereignty. Remarkably, there is only one quote included from the year 2002. The dominant selection consists primarily of independence and sovereignty statements made after 2014.

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[129] The Village Беларусь, "«Очень грустный президент»: Как менялось лицо Лукашенко на предвыборных плакатах." 2020, <https://www.the-village.me/village/city/zabauki/282535-lu-na-plakatah> [2022-09-18]

[130] Пресс-служба Президента Республики Беларусь, "О суверенитете и независимости." <https://president.gov.by/ru/quotes/category/o-suverenitete-i-nezavisimosti> [2022-09-18]

Overall, the political dimension of the official identity discourse points to the following conclusion. First of all, there is a clear quantitative focus on the messages that build the narrative of a distinct, sovereign and independent state – in the sample of Lukashenka's speeches targeting a change of cultural identity elements, the political dimension is almost equally represented as the context of those changes. All his post-Crimea-occupation campaigning communication shifted towards greater articulation of independence, which leads to the conclusion that the changes to the cultural dimension were motivated by ontological anxiety. Similarly, the large proportion of the articles in the BelTA sample referencing sovereignty, and the comparatively much smaller share of communications praising ties with Russia, points to continuity in terms of the importance to the authorities of the civic nationhood elements for self-identification, but at the same time, when this is matched with the particularities of Lukashenka's communication outlined above, this allows one to speculate about the presence of anxiety in terms of defining the "self".

3.3. Territorial Identity Dimension

The territorial dimension by definition is interconnected with the political dimension elements previously covered, particularly the modern state defined by clear territorial borders. In the analysis of Lukashenka's communicative events on identity, the territory and territorial borders in literal terms are primarily very directly referenced when reinforcing the elements relating to the country's independence and sovereignty, which belong to the political dimension. At the same time, territorial (or geographic) belonging is presented as an important factor for self-identification on state media. The Belarusian "soil" ("land") is frequently stressed when discussing other dimensions, particularly historical events, such as World War 2. The keyword "soil" ("land") is mentioned across dimensions in 49 BelTA articles 83 times.

At the same time, Lukashenka does not avoid the aspect of territorial integrity, which became particularly acute after Russian aggressive interference in both Ukraine's Crimea and Donbas, which exploited regional differences in the country. From the historical perspective, focus on the territorial aspect and potential regional differences are likely in Belarus, given that the country's Western and Eastern territories that were divided after World War 1 were reunited only in 1939, with the Western part being under Polish rule for two decades, while the Eastern part was under the Soviets. Furthermore, the Western regions of Belarus border with EU countries, while the Eastern regions with Russia, with a looser border control there.

Arguably, there are some grounds for Lukashenka to be worried about potential regional differences in Belarus, which could either turn against his personal rule or be exploited by Russia. Some differences, for instance, were reflected in the voting behavior of Belarusians in the early 1990s. The results of the only (so far) democratic 1994 election demonstrated a higher support for nationally oriented candidates in Western districts of the country.[131] Ironically, these districts, where the most prominent opponent of Lukashenka, and the leader of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), Zianon Pazniak, was leading in 1994, were chosen by Russia during the "Zapad-2019" military exercises as the territory of a fictional state.[132]

As discussed above, the authorities tend to avoid building any strongly expressed narratives on the element of religion, but regional differences can be considered in the context of the distribution of confessions, as there are more Catholics in the same Western regions of Belarus. This could result in some cultural differences, including the perception of language, as the Catholic church in Belarus is generally known for its support of the Belarusian language. Research into the religious behavior of the population of Belarus published in 2014 demonstrated that the number of religious communities per population was highest in the Brest region, while it was lowest in the Eastern regions.[133] In fact, during the outbreak of state violence in 2020, the Catholic church in Belarus played a greater role in the protests compared with other confessions.[134] Lukashenka, in his discourse, highlighted his anxiety in terms of denial of the potential differences between the different regions of the country.

> We have never drawn this line that in Western Belarus they are bad, not good, alien people, while in the East they are good, kind people. We never say that! […] (Lukashenka, March 2014)

The national censuses conducted in Belarus after the country regained its independence have consistently indicated that Belarus is largely a monoethnic

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[131] Электоральная география 2.0, "Беларусь. Президентские выборы 1994", <https://www.electoralgeography.com/new/ru/countries/b/belarus/belarus-prezidentskie-vybory-1994.html> [2022-09-18]

[132] Ренат Давлетгильдеев, "Вейшнория: что это за "гостеприимная страна", с которой Россия воюет на учениях 'Запад-2017'?" *Настоящее Время*, 2017, <https://www.currenttime.tv/amp/28735662.html> [2022-09-18]

[133] Крыніца.INFO, "Карта религиозности регионов Беларуси." (Retrieved from *Наша Ніва*), 2014, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=131668&lang=ru> [2022-09-18]

[134] Алексей Ластовский, "От молитвы к протесту: католическая церковь в Беларуси." *Неприкосновенный запас*, №138, 2021, 233-252.

society. At the same time, this element of the territorial dimension, that is, belonging to a particular ethnic group, does not play any role in Lukashenka's identity discourse and is dismissed and cautiously addressed as a potential cleavage, by implying that belonging to multiple ethnicities is a Belarusian uniqueness. In the same vein, in the BelTA sample, in terms of content, the role of ethnicity as a means of self-identification is not present. On the contrary, the general message extracted from analyzing other dimensions (for example, claims that multiculturalism is a value, or that the "Great Victory" was achieved by multiethnic forces) implies that ethnicity does not play a role, but suggests rather that citizenship plays the key role in identification as a Belarusian. In a few articles, a passport was described as a direct "connection" with the "motherland".

> We are not pro-Russian, pro-Ukrainian, or pro-Poland, we are not Russians, we are Belarusians! Our country is Belaya Rus'. The country, where Russians, I repeat, and Ukrainians and Poles, and Jews, and Tatars, and many others live. They are people of Belaya Rus', citizens of one country – Belarus. (Lukashenka, April 2014)

> […] So, in Belarus, I often tell this as a joke, perhaps with some element of the truth, we Belarusians are intelligent, tolerant and wise because different blood is circulating in our veins, and first of all, we Belarusians have Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Jewish and even Tatar blood. (Lukashenka, January 2015)

Both the analysis of Lukashenka's discourse and the content analysis of BelTA articles lead to the conclusion that, despite the greater focus placed on the Belarusian language, Lukashenka and the state media maintain the core element of the attributes of civic nationhood – the idea that territory and citizenship are one of the major markers of national Belarusian identity, and the territorial dimension is used rather with the aim of strengthening and reinforcing the identification of nationals with the political identity element previously presented – the modern state and sovereign territory.

While, as demonstrated above, the cultural domain was mainly used to build distinctiveness as against neighboring states, the territorial domain is primarily seen as a source of risk of national cleavages and dismissed from the identity-forming discourse. Elements such as ethnicity or regional and cultural differences are pro-actively addressed by turning them into multi-culturalism and multi-ethnicity messages as part of the constructed Belarusianness. In this way, the authorities turn internal differences into a unifying national distinctiveness. By doing so, they preserve ontological security in two ways: by diminishing topics and issues that could be utilized

by malign actors as a source to build cleavages in the nation, and by reinforcing the distinctiveness of Belarusian national identity.

3.4. Historical Identity Dimension

One of the prominent and at the same time controversial historical periods for Belarusian historians and society is the Soviet period. In the early 1990s, Belarusians particularly regretted the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Researchers explained this by using the argument of the so-called "Masherau's Factor"[135] (when citizens associate the Soviet past primarily with the economic revival of the BSSR under the leadership of Piotr Masherau, who was born in Belarus). For others, this period was primarily marked by the Stalinist terror and repressions against the nation. Lukashenka is well known for his retention and promotion of the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War (GPW). The Soviet period, and the GPW in particular, has always been a key theme of Belarusian state ideology.[136] And during the analyzed period, with reference to identity, the Soviet period appears for the authorities to be the most important period of Belarusian statehood, demonstrating the pride, sacrifice and honor of the nation during World War 2, and the GPW.

While the Soviet period overall is seen by Belarusian society in general as both positive and negative, the views on the GPW are more consolidated. According to Lastouski (2013), to Belarusians, the GPW appears as both simultaneously – a tragic and heroic event, while in the mass consciousness of Belarusians the negative aspects of the GPW, such as the huge losses, the occupation period, collaborationism, and other issues, are "virtually non-existent."[137] According to Vadzim Bylina, in the 00s Lukashenka launched a new ideology for the Belarusian state to justify his model, and the GPW "had to serve as the main historical myth and as a cornerstone of the Belarusian state," where Belarus had fought the West.[138]

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[135] Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity,* 77.

[136] Per Anders Rudling "'For a Heroic Belarus!': The Great Patriotic War as Identity Marker in the Lukashenka and Soviet Belarusian Discourses." *Nationalities Affairs*, Issue: 32, 52-53.

[137] Aliaksei Lastouski, "Historical Memory as a Factor of Strengthening Belarusian National Identity." In *Confronting the Past: European Experiences*, Political Science Research Centre Zagreb, 2012, 408-409.

[138] Vadzim Bylina, "Belarus: The Great Patriotic War vs the Second World War." *Belarus Digest*, 2013, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-the-great-patriotic-war-vs-the-second-world-war/> [2022-09-18]

In recent years, Lukashenka has clearly continued the former line and referred to the Soviet times as the major era of statehood, focusing on the GPW. Lukashenka has praised May 9, which he portrays as one of the major events of the nation, and which, at the same time, is one of the most significant events for Russia with its symbols and customs. Understanding that, Belarus' authorities have taken several steps not only in the discourse but also in practice, to adopt May 9 in a way which builds pro-Belarusian consciousness. These new social practices in relation to historical memories are discussed in Chapter 5, when analyzing practical changes. But some of that tension found reflection in the discourse as well, where Lukashenka, when talking about the GPW, particularly highlights Belarus' role and ownership of those events:

> What have we kept from past times? Let's say, celebrating May 9. Why should we give away this celebration to someone? We, the ones who lost every third person, of whom half of the population was crippled, have to perceive this celebration godlessly? Of course not. (Lukashenka, March 2019)

In line with Lukashenka, the content analysis of BelTA articles revealed that there was an outright dominance of this historical period, and of continuation of the line which was exclusively in favor of Soviet rule. Nearly half of all communications in the BelTA sample, and 90 percent of the communications on historical themes overall, related either to World War 2 or other historical developments connected with the Soviet era. At the same time, the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) or other periods are basically non-existent in the BelTA discourse, with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth and Polatsk Duchy being mentioned extremely rarely.

Table 11. Historical dimension codes in BelTA sample.

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
GPW/Victory	74	40,22	77,89
Soviet period	13	7,07	13,68
Kurapaty	5	2,72	5,26
GDL	4	2,17	4,21
Polatsk	4	2,17	4,21
Other	3	1,63	3,16
PLC	3	1,63	3,16
BNR	1	0,54	1,05
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	95	51,63	100,00
DOCUMENTS without code(s)	89	48,37	-

The analysis of BelTA articles basically quantifies Lukashenka's discourse on historical topics. The GPW and "Great Victory" topic was dominant, being present in nearly 80 percent of the BelTA articles referencing the dimension of historical identity. Similarly to Lukashenka's quote above, a series of articles on BelTA create the overarching "Great Victory" narrative, which portrays May 9 as the greatest achievement of the Belarusian people, the most honorable, heroic event and "sacred" treasure of the nation. The contribution of the Belarusian nation, particularly the loss of every third Belarusian citizen in the war, is frequently emphasized. Importantly, this narrative focuses on the sacrifice of Belarusians as a separate individual nation, rather than the "Soviet people" in general. This conjunction of stressing the co-ownership of historical events that can be claimed by Russia and highlighting the Belarusian role in achieving those events point to another attempt to decrease the potential influence of Russia and build distinctiveness, thus creating in the compilation of identity narratives more resilience to ontological threats.

> [...] the greatest sanctity, which only our nation and our land has, is the Great Victory. In those years so much blood was spilled on Belarusian land, as never happened before in history. (Belarusian writer Ales Savitski, 2014, BelTA sample)

> The heroic Belarusian people made an invaluable contribution to achieve the Great Victory. Our land became the single defense line, where Hitler's military machine began to stall once he met the desperate resistance of the Red Army, partisans and underground fighters. (Prime Minister, Andrey Kobyakou, 2015, BelTA sample)

The "Great Victory" narrative is often used in conjunction with the narrative of preserving Belarusian independence and the modern Belarusian state. In at least 20 articles, the "Independence/Sovereignty" code belonging to the political dimension co-occurred in the same documents that referenced the GPW. Some authors go as far as to state that this "Victory" built the national consciousness of the Belarusian people. This frequent intersection of the historical narrative with the political element of the independent state supports the same argument that the authorities' discourse, regardless of dimension, is heavily infused with anxiety around the preservation of sovereignty and independence.

> From this point of view, the Victory in the Great Patriotic War can be perceived as the foundation for building the consciousness of the

nation. (Head of the Center of Political and Economic Sociology of the Institute of NAS, Belarus, Mikalai Shchekin, 2017, BelTA sample)

The "Victory" narrative is also utilized as a historical event to highlight the unity of the nation, as something which creates close bonds between the Belarusian people. In 16 articles the WW2/Victory code co-occurs with the psychological dimension's code of building "subjective closeness." A number of authors claimed that the historical legacy of the war united, and continues to unite, the Belarusian people. A few authors even claim that the "Great Victory" left a footprint in the "genes" of future Belarusian generations.

> We once again have proof that the memory of the war is in the genes of Belarusians. (Olympic athlete Vadzim Dzevyatouski, 2014, BelTA sample)

Another prevailing narrative claims that the "Victory" creates bonds between different FSU nationalities and that it is "co-owned" by all the nations involved. While this narrative implies the unity of the post-Soviet nations, it is not focused on Belarusian and Russian ties as the political agenda might suggest but mentions a number of modern countries as heirs. Such a presentation also asserts there was actual distinctiveness between the nations instead of implying that Soviet nationality was supreme.

The BelTA authors also consistently and pro-actively respond to alleged attempts to "rewrite history". Though not clearly elaborated, it is implied that Western countries are the ones which attempt to "falsify" history. From the gathered sample it is not very clear what exactly the West tries to "falsify". Most likely the authors are just attempting to express a strong anti-West sentiment.

> Moreover, the goal of falsifying the history of the period of the Great Patriotic War is not only the desire to disunite our peoples, but also to destroy and eliminate our mentality, our values, our history, and turn us into an impersonal driven herd, obediently consuming low-grade goods of someone else's production. (Rector of the Academy of Public Administration under the aegis of the President of Belarus, Marat Zhilinsky, 2016)

Recalling the Masherau factor mentioned above, one might expect a sample of the media or Lukashenka's speeches to include a substantial focus on the post-war Soviet era of Belarus. However, Soviet Belarus, outside the framework of World War 2, was mentioned only in 13 out of 95 articles referencing historical identity elements. These articles contained references to the BSSR, certain historical personalities from that period, Communist

ideology, and Soviet organizations such as Komsomol. They generally conveyed a positive, rather general nostalgic image of the Soviet Union.

As for the repressions and that side of Soviet history, in respect of one of the most acute issues – Kurapaty, a place where, according to some historians, over 100,000 NKVD victims are buried,[139] no break from the previously maintained lines was observed in Lukashenka's discourse, as he continued to speak against "politicization of the issue" and did not acknowledge the responsibility of the Soviet Union for the mass killing of Belarusians in Kurapaty.[140] In the BelTA sample, there are literally no narratives on this topic within the collected media sample, while a mention of Kurapaty appeared only in 5 articles. All these articles were published within a very narrow time period – in 2017, after Lukashenka, amid public protests against the construction of a shopping mall on the site belonging to the protected area, instructed the government to build a monument in Kurapaty, prompting a response from the BelTA messengers. These pro-government messengers attempted to construct the message that Kurapaty was a national tragedy which united all Belarusians with different political views. However, neither of the messengers admits the origin of the repressions or makes any reference to the Soviet NKVD or to Stalin.

> Our people are buried there, and today I do not want to stir up their bones to see whether Germans or Stalinists killed them… [...] Are you sure that particularly those who were buried in Kurapaty died in the 1930s? That the fascists did not kill Jews, Belarusians, and Poles at this site? Let's be objective. (Lukashenka, March 2019)

> Kurapaty is a symbol of the tragic events in Belarus, but also a symbol of unification. People of different generations, religions, and different nationalities will come to this place of commemoration. (Director General of National Arts Museum of Belarus, Uladzimir Prakaptsau, 2017, BelTA sample)

The Polatsk Duchy is the earliest period to which only recently Lukashenka began referring to as the "roots of Belarusian statehood".[141]

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[139] Денис Мартинович, "Кто и когда расстреливал людей в Куропатах. 10 вопросов и ответов по материалам следствия." *TUT.BY*, 2018, <https://news.tut.by/culture/606056.html> [2019-05-25]

[140] «Реформация» (REFORM.by), "Лукашенко о Куропатах: 'Крестов навбивали на этом кладбище больше, чем деревьев'." 2019, <https://reform.by/lukashenko-o-kuropatah-krestov-navbivali-na-jetom-kladbishhe-bolshe-chem-derevev [2022-03-27]

[141] Белтелерадиокомпания, "Полоцк - колыбель белорусской государственности." 2017,

However, in the BelTA discourse, this historical era was mentioned in only 4 articles of the sample, and then only briefly. These few articles contained a very short and straightforward narrative echoing Lukashenka's statement, implying that the Polatsk Duchy, and the unification of Belarusians in Viciebsk lands, is the reference point for the beginning of Belarusian statehood, which took place in medieval times.

> The origins of Belarusian statehood are in our land – in ancient Polatsk. It is the beginning of the political and economic unity of Belarusians. (Chair Viciebsk Executive Committee Mikalai Sherstnev, 2019, BelTA sample)

Two other periods important for Belarusian statehood, the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) and the establishment of the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR), were rarely touched on by Lukashenka either in the analyzed sample or in communications overall. Leaving aside social practices, Lukashenka briefly noted the importance of the GDL for the development of Belarus in 2017.[142] Within the state media sample, the GDL was mentioned only in 4 articles. However, unlike Polatsk, there was no clear narrative about the significance of this period for Belarusians. Generally, this period was presented rather neutrally, with the exception of an article covering the academic conference on the GDL held in 2015, during which the National Academy of Sciences representative praised the role of the GDL in the formation of Belarusian statehood:

> This is a huge pleiad of outstanding personalities and events. [...] It was during the existence of the GDL when the Belarusian nationality and mentality developed, and this is a natural reason for a thorough study of the history of the Duchy […]. (Director of the History Institute of the National Academy of Sciences, Vyacheslav Danilovich, 2019, BelTA sample)

The period of the BNR, which was generally dismissed by the state,[143] was presented by Lukashenka controversially. In 2018, during the 100th

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<https://www.tvr.by/news/kultura/polotsk_kolybel_belorusskoy_gosudarstven nosti/> [2022-02-01]

[142] БелТА, "Лукашенко: пройдя сквозь испытания, белорусы заслужили право жить на свободной земле." 2017, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-projdja-skvoz-ispytanija-belorusy-zasluzhili-pravo-zhit-na-svobodnoj-zemle-255445-2017> [2019-05-25]

[143] Татьяна Неведомская, "Год исторической памяти: что хотел бы забыть Лукашенко?" *Deutsche Welle*, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/ru/god-

anniversary of the Republic, on the one hand, Lukashenka embraced the idea of the modern independent state which was born in that period; on the other, he accused the founders of collaborating with the Germans.[144] Within the BelTA sample, the BNR was mentioned in a single article among other historical periods in the context of a statement that different historical periods required further discussion. In another article the First All-Belarusian Congress of 1917 was mentioned as a positive historical event in the formation of statehood.

To summarize the historical dimension elements in the official discourse, the World War 2/GPW theme used to be and remains the dominant narrative in the authorities' discourse. Both Lukashenka and state media discourse overall glorifies the GPW, emphasizing the role that Belarusian people have played and suffered during this period, while acknowledging, but focusing less, on "goods" that Soviet rule brought for the country. However, it is important to note that this period is presented through the lens of national Belarusian statehood rather than as part of the common history of the countries formerly belonging to the Soviet Union, particularly Russia. Arguably, such a presentation of historical statehood reflects the ontological anxiety of the authorities, as it is aimed towards decreasing the role of Russia in this historical period, and at the same time emphasizes and establishes the distinctiveness of Belarusians, setting them apart from other nations that participated in World War 2.

There was no "breakthrough" in terms of the acknowledgement of the Soviet terror and repression. The more visible Kurapaty theme most likely appeared in government communications as a reaction to the ongoing developments at the Kurapaty site, and the authorities attempted to incorporate this period into their general narrative of Belarusian sacrifice during World War 2 rather than break their continuous pattern of Soviet centralism. A similar situation occurs with the BNR, as it is virtually non-existent and even purposefully avoided in the government discourse, with the exception of occasions such as the 100th anniversary of the BNR that forced the government to give its version of the narrative. Overall, the BNR, Kurapaty and similar communicative occasions of the authorities were reactive and attempted to address potential domestic disagreements and

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istoricheskoj-pamjati-chto-hotel-by-zabyt-lukashenko/a-60408384> [2022-09-18]

[144] БелТА, "Лукашенко о БНР: необходимо знать правду о тех событиях, но гордиться ими не стоит." 2018, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-o-bnr-neobhodimo-znat-pravdu-o-teh-sobytijah-no-gorditsja-imi-ne-stoit-294905-2018/> [2019-05-25]

narrative contradistinctions, rather than somehow engaging with external actors. In relation to the GDL period, mention of it in official communications, though prominent, appears, compared to other historical periods, to be too scarce to draw conclusions in terms of identity construction. However, there are numerous practical developments which took place in relation to this period that are discussed in Chapter 5.

3.5. Psychological Identity Dimension

In Lukashenka's speeches on Belarus language and other elements of identity, he consistently attributed to the Belarusian people a set of values and traits allegedly associated with them. Amid the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the organization of "Zapad-2017" military drills, and tensions in bilateral relations with Russia, the peace narrative emerged in Lukashenka's discourse (14 instances in 30 communicative events). This narrative captured both domestic peace (peace and accord within society) and external peacefulness, implying the defense-oriented policy of the country. Within the BelTA sample, the same "peace and stability" conjunction also served as a pattern supplementing other national identity dimensions, particularly political, but, when discussing the traits, was expressed not only in terms of the "state" but also of the citizens of Belarus. To emphasize the domestic peace, some BelTA messengers also added to this bucket "order". Overall, the peacefulness value was dominant, and it addressed both the domestic audience to prevent division and protest, and external actors to portray Minsk's role in the region as a neutral mediator in regional conflict resolution.

> We own ideals and values tested by time; we are distinguished by stability and openness. (Chair of Executive Committee of Hrodna Uladzimir Krautsou, 2014, BelTA sample)

> We Belarusians have a great value – peace, calmness, and accord in society. […] (Lukashenka, July 2014)

In terms of national stereotyping, there is also a series of articles in which officials attempt to shape hard work not just as a "trait" of the Belarusian people but also as a consolidating activity. As an example of such actions, they describe the Soviet legacy – *subbotniks* (a day of "voluntary" public works).

> They [subbotniks] consolidate, they unite the nation, they have huge patriotic meaning, they enhance belief in the state, in Belarus. (Head of Presidential Administration Alyaksandr Kosinets, 2016, BelTA sample)

The psychological dimension of national identity is closely interconnected with the other identity dimensions discussed above. Through the historical, political, and cultural dimensions there is a consistent attempt to build the subjective closeness of the Belarusian people/citizens. The subjective closeness is particularly shaped through the GPW and "Great Victory" as a common legacy. In connection with that, sovereignty and the existence of an independent state is also presented as a factor uniting the Belarusian people. Significantly, there are many declaratory style statements claiming the latter, but not elaborating how and why this unites and builds closeness.

> Freedom, independence and peace link the past and future generations of Belarusians, they unite the people. (Chair of Executive Committee of Viciebsk Alyaksandr Kosinets, 2014, BelTA sample)

To summarize the role of the psychological identity domain, the only repetitive narrative which stands out in the authorities' discourse concerns the issue of national stereotyping. The government purposefully and consistently portrays Belarusians as extremely peaceful and tolerant, seeking stability, which basically reflects their previous narrative and echoes the generally known national stereotype of *pamiarkounasc*[145]. Certainly, such a portrait is also desired by the autocratic government, since Lukashenka is known for this "peace and stability" political messaging, which accompanied his electoral discourse in the context of disturbances in the region, including both the war in Ukraine and the democratic movements in the neighboring countries. Therefore, psychological dimension narratives can also be interpreted as a reflection of the authorities' anxieties, both on the domestic and the external fronts.

The authorities also attempt to instill the idea of unity and subjective closeness of the people. However, they do that in conjunction with other identity elements from other dimensions, particularly the interpretation of the events relating to World War 2, rather than build on distinct psychological elements. It can, therefore, be concluded that the psychological dimension in the authorities' discourse serves as supplementary to other domains, rather than as stand-alone identity dimensions.

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[145] A belief-stereotype circulating in discourse that Belarusians are compliant, law-abiding and patient people. The word itself might take on different meanings depending on the context and can be perceived as both a negative and positive trait. See more: https://svaboda.org/a/pamiarkounyja/29017729.html

3.6. Results of Analysis of Narratives in Official Discourse

The results of the communications analysis of Lukashenka's speeches demonstrated the existence of a substantial and, most importantly, sustainable change in the constructed cultural identity domain, namely the reconstruction of the narrative on perception of the Belarusian language. It is important to highlight that this reshaping of the language role began against the backdrop of fewer Belarusians considering the Belarusian language to be a feature that distinguishes Belarusians from Russians. IISEPS polling data of 2015 showed that, compared to polling in 2006, the number of Belarusians who believed that Belarusians differed from Russians because of the language decreased from 34 to 25 percent.[146] The new narrative on the Belarusian language seems to have been purposely introduced to strengthen the self-identification of Belarusians. Both Lukashenka and other officials began to portray the perception of the Belarusian language as a distinctive feature of Belarusianness, the primary element that distinguishes the nation and distances it from Russian cultural and informational influence. The creation of a new narrative in the cultural dimension required the authorities to change the previous perception of the Belarusian language and carefully adjust their earlier narratives, including that concerning bilingualism and the role of the Russian language, in order not to exclude the Russian-speaking part of the population and avoid a response from Russia.

The constant and, compared to the past, much more frequent reference to, and stressing of, the country's political independence and sovereignty in communicative events, where narratives of cultural identity elements were reshaped, leads to the conclusion that the observed discursive reconstruction of the national identity elements can be interpreted through the prism of the search for ontological security. With these discursive changes the authorities addressed the potential ontological insecurities that stemmed from the pre-Crimea identity discourse and policies that they themselves had been constructing, when they focused too much on "brotherly" ties with Russia and did not build sufficient and significant distinctiveness in terms of the "shared history", the meaning of the language for identity perception, and the roles of other identity elements which one might perceive as bonding to Russia as nation and even as a Federation.

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[146] Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, "Language and National Identity." Results of the National Opinion Poll, March 2014 <http://iiseps.org/?p=869&lang=en> [2022-09-18]

While the key discourse setter for the authorities, Lukashenka, was introducing changes in the identity discourse in terms of perception of cultural elements, the key narratives on history and some other identity domain elements was maintained. From the quantitative perspective, the composition of the identity discourse on state media remained largely unchanged with the preservation of a heavy focus on the GPW and the Soviet period (see Chart 2 below). This demonstrates that the changes to the identity narratives were targeted and compiled so as to avoid too much drift from the previously constructed compilation of the identity narratives.
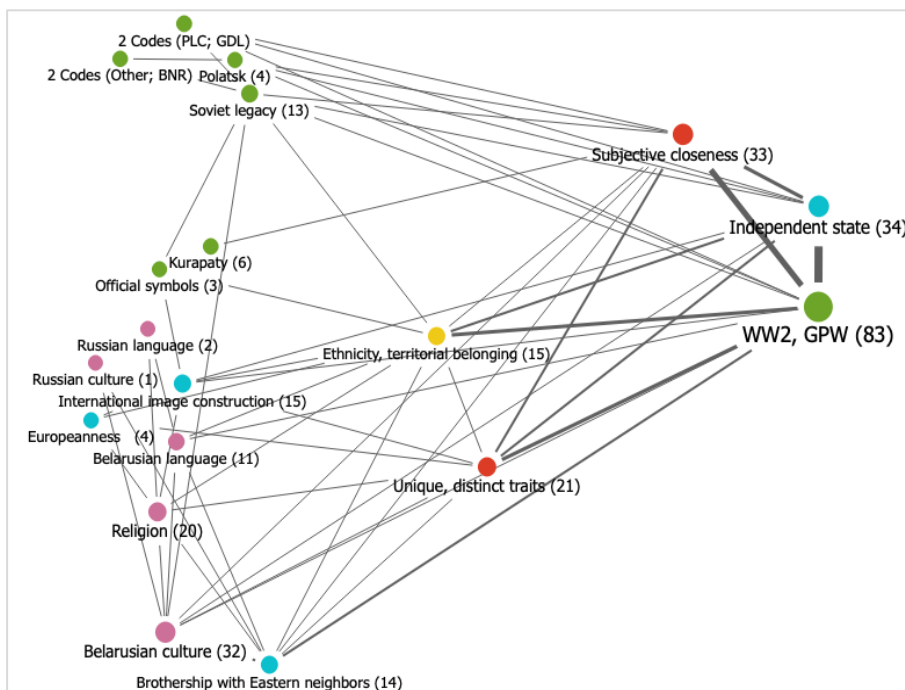
Chart 2. Cluster and code co-occurrence analysis of the BelTA sample.[147]

The Soviet-centrism and theme of the GPW was maintained as the central theme for identity construction, especially by the state media. Together with the changing cultural dimension, pursuing the same goal of diminishing Russian cultural and linguistic influence and boosting Belarus' ontological security, the authorities, again mainly Lukashenka, added reservations to the historical narratives to make the people of Belarus a central element of Soviet

[147] Line thickness shows occurrence of codes in the same document (demonstrating interconnection of different narratives); colors indicate elements belonging to different dimensions; font and code size indicate code frequency.

history and incorporate Soviet-nostalgic people into the constructed statehood narrative that stressed Belarusian distinctiveness.

The authorities' discourse, particularly the discourse observed on state media, also contains clearly expressed psychological, political and territorial dimensions, which are heavily interconnected in their communications. In terms of psychological bonds, "peace" and "stability" traits are clearly used in an attempt to construct a distinctive feature of Belarusians and the Belarusian state and serve as a central feature reflected in other identity dimensions, including the territorial and historical dimensions. At the same time, the peace narrative, coupled with potential cleavages addressed in the territorial dimension elements, and the major narrative of the political dimension (the bolstered independence element), when analyzed through the lens of OST, point to the prevailing anxiety and even context of fear in which the overt cultural domain changes were taking place.

The exact scope of the authorities' effort to rebuild other identity dimensions, particularly in relation to history, will be evaluated after the analysis of social practices in the last empirical part of this dissertation. Nonetheless, the communications analysis has already indicated the problem of analysis of ontological security perceptions at the different levels. The communications analysis of the various pro-government messengers in the BelTA sample, compared with Lukashenka's individual communications, show a few particularities. On the one hand, the state media discourse echoes Lukashenka's more or less previously established identity narratives; on the other, it does not provide a quantitative reflection of reconstructed narratives on language or ties with Russia. This might reflect the top-down communication strategy common with authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. At the same time, the fact that multiple high-level officials followed Lukashenka's example in terms of the Belarusian language, reveals how his communication and ontological anxieties might be spreading from an individual to a group level, and from the group level to society as a whole. Furthermore, the analysis of Lukashenka's and state media communications demonstrate a significant level of anxiety in terms of different domestic turbulences and differences that, depending on their nature, could either be exploited by Russia or threaten the constructed narratives or, importantly, the power position of the authorities' group.

From the communications analysis it can already be observed that making constant references to the preservation of the independent political state and drawing distinctions between Belarusians and Russians in the discourse, wrapped in the context of communicative events discussed in this Chapter, demonstrate the concern of Lukashenka's group with respect to both

physical and ontological security. The careful manner of communication and surgical change of narratives did not jeopardize relations with Russia or create potential physical insecurities. On the contrary, the careful modification of identity narratives discussed in this Chapter shows that the authorities' tactics were aimed at building up identity distinctiveness while maintaining the discourse on "brotherly" Russia. The constant stress on independence and the concerns expressed about the war support the argument that this narrative shift was most likely introduced out of fear of the security challenges that could stem from a weak identity.

4. UNOFFICIAL IDENTITY DISCOURSE(S)

There is a claim widely made in the academic and analytical literature that there are competing, alternative narratives to Lukashenka's and an identity model (a compilation of narratives) that exists outside of the authorities' discourse and communications at official level. However, the diversity of media channels and fragmentation of opposition forces does not allow one to assume that there is a single and unified unofficial identity model. To conceptualize these identity narratives, and subsequently to test that assumption of diversity of the identity variants, I conducted a comparative content analysis of two non-governmental media outlets, as well as 11 semi-structured interviews with independent experts and democratically minded political activists. The latter interviews were designed to reveal both the known and perceived perceptions of the respondents of different identity elements, and the narratives and different patterns of those narratives, that might suggest the coexistence of multiple identity variants and the varying prioritization of different identity elements. In addition, the interviews helped to address the problem of individual-state level analysis, demonstrating how in certain cases individually perceived identity narratives and ontology does or does not match the narratives desired at state level and constructed in broader discourse.

Since this research is designed to reveal the different identity elements and the variations of narrative in the discourses rather than their distribution in society, I use the term unofficial identity discourses as a technical term to refer to discourses and narratives constructed by non-governmental actors, including independent media, civil society, and opposition activists.

Further, in this chapter, a more detailed overview of each of the identity elements discussed is presented, disclosing what meanings are attributed to them and what features discourse formers and interviewees perceive as essential for them personally and for Belarusian society more generally. The way respondents and discourses interact, in terms of the prioritization of different identity elements and the construction of the respective narratives, reveals both personal and group level ontological anxieties shared by the respondents and discourse creators.

As the aspect of change is an important part of this dissertation research, I will highlight how the narratives and beliefs conceptualized in this research compare to the previous understandings of identity elements outlined in the existing literature. However, jumping ahead of the conclusions reached in this part of the research, I would like to stress that asserting change and drawing direct comparisons with the official discourse is not always possible or

straightforward give the existing contradictions within unofficial identity models and their elements. Therefore, in some cases the change is presented on the basis of interview data – perceptions of Belarusians and their reflections of what has changed in recent years.

The chapter begins with a section discussing identity elements within the cultural dimension, with the greatest focus on the role of language, as these elements were the most discussed by the respondents during the interviews and constitute one of the largest shares of independent media discourse. Then, I will proceed with analysis of perceptions in relation to the other four identity dimensions, doing a substantial stop next at the historical dimension as it raises a lengthy debate about the importance of different historical periods and the respective narratives of statehood.

4.1. Cultural Identity Dimension

The views of non-governmental groups and individuals in relation to the Belarusian language have always been somewhat divided, with different political and civic forces having multiple visions of what role the language should play in society. Before the emergence of soft-Belarusization, leaving aside "bilingual authorities", scholars researching Belarusian national identity classified three groups that advocated a different choice in respect of language: first, the so-called proponents of the mono-linguistic Belarusian nation, and second, proponents of a bilingual Belarus. There was also a third group that propagated the idea of a multi-lingual and multi-cultural Belarus.[148] In terms of the political programs and stances on the policy regarding the use of the Belarusian language, there were always forces with a stronger position in relation to the Belarusian language, such as the BPF[149] or Belarusian Christian Democrats[150], advocating the clearly implied supremacy of the Belarusian language, which, in their view, should remain the only state language, as well as political forces with more moderate stances, such as the United Civil Party, who were not proactively raising the language issue.

The language issue in the identity forming discourse was one of the major elements when analyzing the independent media discourse and individual

[148] Bekus, '*Hybrid' Linguistic Identity*, 42-44.

[149] Татьяна Мельничук, "У Лукашенко 9 конкурентов, но шансов у них немного." *Русская служба Би-би-си*, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2010/11/101118_lukashenko_rival> [2022-09-18]

[150] УНІАН, "В Беларуси требуют отмены государственного статуса русского языка" <https://www.unian.net/world/754426-v-belarusi-trebuyut-otmenyi-gosudarstvennogo-statusa-russkogo-yazyika.html> [2022-09-18]

respondent stances. The analysis of the oldest Belarusian newspaper, *Nasha Niva*, demonstrated the overwhelming focus of the sample of articles on cultural identity elements. As shown in Table 12, the most frequently assigned codes related to the Belarusian and Russian languages, 88 and 29 articles respectively, while the cultural elements were referenced in nearly every second article selected for the sample: 119 out of 254.

Table 12. Culture codes within the *Nasha Niva* sample.

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
Belarusian culture	15	5,91	12,61
Belarusian language negative	1	0,39	0,84
Belarusian language neutral	7	2,76	5,88
Belarusian language positive	80	31,50	67,23
Cultural symbols (*vyshyvanka*)	10	3,94	8,40
Religion general	12	4,72	10,08
Russian culture	3	1,18	2,52
Russian language negative	10	3,94	8,40
Russian language neutral	15	5,91	12,61
Russian language positive	2	0,79	1,68
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	119	46,85	100,00
DOCUMENTS without code(s)	135	53,15	-
ANALYZED DOCUMENTS	254	100,00	-

The Belarusian language was presented in a predominantly positive way; 80 out of 88 mentions were positive or rather positive, with many attempting to raise the importance of this issue and accord significance to this identity element. At the same time, given the general overtly pro-Belarusian character of this media outlet, the clear majority of communications, instead of discussing the direct role of the Belarusian language in forming a distinct national identity, focused on different issues related to the Belarusian language, often taking the role of the Belarusian language in terms of self-identification for granted and not requiring explanation for the readership of the outlet. Only a small proportion of communicative events explicitly portrayed the language as the primary attribute of national identification guaranteeing the longevity of the nation and, importantly, the future of the state. A series of published articles made a direct link between the preservation of the language as the means of ensuring the continuity of the nation, which demonstrates the significance of the narrative for purposes of

identity construction, and at the same time directly reflects ontological anxiety in terms of the potential risk of losing this signified element.

> But we will survive as a nation if we preserve our language, if we teach our children and grandchildren our native language. [...] Our language is the guarantee of the survival of the nation, the guarantee of the future of the nation. (Appeal of a group of cultural figures: Mikola Savitski, Leanid Lych, Mikola Kupava, Tamara Karotkaya, Syarhei Bakhun, Vital Abakanovich, 2017, *Nasha Niva* sample)

The second group of communicative events on *Nasha Niva* was related to building a general positive perception of the Belarusian language, without overtly shaping its identificatory function: 42 articles referencing the Belarusian language positively could be classified as articles where the language role was not directly addressed but their contents contributed to the reinforcement of the significance of the language previously discussed. These articles often made a positive comment about being able to see Belarusian language in public places and other communications. Even though there was no direct identity purpose inserted into that kind of communicative event, they still served as an important supplementary reinforcement of the first group of messages on the need to preserve the Belarusian language in order to preserve the national identity. Meanwhile, the third group of articles can also be seen as a reflection of the ontological anxiety stemming from the acknowledgement of the weak role of the language in the self-identity of broader society, as these articles discussed problems of the popularity and use of the Belarusian language, suggesting that this important identity element does not have enough popularity in the society, particularly in the education field. Some columnists discussing messages of this kind implied the supremacy of the Belarusian language and shared the belief it should be the dominant language in society, unlike the Russian language.

In relation to the Russian language, in a similar way to the official discourse, the constructed narratives around the two identity elements largely intersected. In over a half of the *Nasha Niva* articles mentioning the Russian language, the Belarusian language was also referenced. Given the widespread popularity of the Russian language, spoken by the majority of the population, it was rather problematic to avoid talking about its role when the role of the Belarusian language was being mentioned. However, significantly there were no prevailing narratives or even messages implying the identity building role of the Russian language or another self-identificatory function of the latter. Some of these aimed at stressing the opposite – the absence of a direct relationship between Belarusianness and the Russian language, which was

seen as a pragmatic asset along with other foreign languages. Most frequently, the Russian language was mentioned in a rather neutral manner (15 of 27 articles). Since some of the communications were aimed at stressing the inadequacy of the low popularity of the Belarusian language, the Russian language was also naturally discussed in this context.

> The English and Russian languages are necessary to work, Belarusian – to exist. (Architect Alyaksandra Bayaryna, 2017, *Nasha Niva* sample)

At the same time, on *Nasha Niva*, there were ten articles portraying Russian as a negative attribute allegedly harming Belarusian national identity. It was common in these articles for the columnists to view the Russian language as a factor which facilitated the decline of the Belarusian language. There were also a few articles directly discussing the identificatory role of the Russian language and culture. Some of them emerged after Svetlana Alexievich won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2015. These communications supported the narrative that the Russian language was also an attribute of a Belarusian person and did not imply Russianness. The message of identity function attributed to the Russian language was not visible, and regardless of which stance was communicated (neutral to the Russian language, or seeing Russian as a Belarus-owned language, or hostile to the Russian language), all three kinds of messages complemented the idea of the distinct and primary role of the Belarusian language in terms of identity formation, and, importantly, ruled out an identity forging role for the Russian language.

> It [Nobel Prize] was received by a Belarusian author, who writes in fact in Russian. This proves the following: the Russian language of a Belarusian [person] is no worse than the Russian [language] of any Russian [person]. (Belarusian writer Viktar Martinovich, 2015, *Nasha Niva* sample)

> [...] the Russian language is also our language, even if some pretend that it is a foreign language. We have heard this language since childhood. Russian is culturally not alien to contemporary Belarusian people. (Andrei Khrapavitski, 2016, *Nasha Niva* sample)

While, as demonstrated above, the cultural national identity dimension focusing on the role of language constitutes the core of the entire cultural dimension in the *Nasha Niva* sample, the sample composition of RFE/RL differs, suggesting that this group of authors tend to prioritize, and be concerned about, other identity domains comparatively more than the cultural identity elements. The focus on cultural elements on RFE/RL is less intense

(only 33 percent of the articles analyzed, see Table 13 for the distribution and code breakdown). But similarly, to *Nasha Niva*, the RFE/RL cultural dimension is comprised of codes mainly referencing and discussing the role of the Belarusian and Russian languages, with 76 and 37 documents respectively containing these codes.

Table 13. Culture codes in RFE/RL sample.

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
Russian language positive	1	0,27	0,83
Russian language neutral	22	5,96	18,33
Russian language negative	14	3,79	11,67
Russian culture	7	1,90	5,83
Religion general	14	3,79	11,67
Cultural symbols (*vyshyvanka*)	9	2,44	7,50
Belarusian language positive	62	16,80	51,67
Belarusian language neutral	14	3,79	11,67
Belarusian language negative	0	0,00	0,00
Belarusian culture/literature	23	6,23	19,17
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	120	32,52	100,00
DOCUMENTS without code(s)	249	67,48	-
ANALYZED DOCUMENTS	369	100,00	-

In terms of the Belarusian language codes within the RFE/RL sample, only 11 articles gave an overt message on its role in terms of Belarusian identity formation and did not require interpretation of the messages within the article's context more generally. In 14 articles the Belarusian language was mentioned rather neutrally, meaning that its role was neither explained nor easily interpretable from the article's context. And the remaining articles mentioning the language required analysis to extract their meaning. In the majority of these articles, the authors advocated, on a general level, a greater role for this identity element. However, these articles did not do that directly, probably because the audience of solely Belarusian-language newspapers did not require extensive elaboration on the Belarusian language's role. As in *Nasha Niva*, the specific Belarusian-language readership dictated the nature of other discussions related to the language question. A couple of articles promoted the idea of switching to Belarusian Latin, which can be perceived currently as far from the general position of its audience, and as the completely "next level" in terms of the promotion of the Belarusian language.

A series of articles on RFE/RL were anxiety-driven and discussed the discrimination of the Belarusian language (as compared to Russian) in the public field (particularly education), publishing in Belarusian, labeling products in Belarusian, and other fields. Such claims contributed to the more general narrative aimed at raising the importance of the preservation of the Belarusian language and thus strengthening the general narrative that Belarusian is an important element of Belarusian identity.

> The Belarusian language – unfairly and not because of its people's will – was put on the edge of survival. It is also a sphere of civic and national memory, history, and culture. The best representatives of our nation lost their lives in GULAGs for the language – thousands and thousands of the best. Scientists, poets, teachers. (Belarusian journalist, writer, historian Syarhei Ablameyka, 2018, RFE/RL sample)

The RFE/RL sample of articles also contained several smaller and more fragmented (in terms of their distribution across the sample) messages. These messages did not form a separate narrative, but rather attempted to deconstruct the narrative that Belarusian language is a symbol of nationalism in the negative connotation of this word. There were also authors that discussed the interconnection of the perception of the Belarusian language and its actual use vis-a-vis self-identification. In these messages, the Belarusian language was presented as a value rather than as a means of communication, suggesting the inclusiveness of Russian speakers within Belarusian identity if the latter perceived the Belarusian language with respect. A few other articles intended to connect Belarusian language use (as an act) with certain positive attributes, such as intellect and bravery. In a couple of other articles, the Belarusian language was presented as the element that could potentially become a fundamental element of the Belarusian nation's longevity and guarantor of the Belarusian state's independence, presenting the language as a pillar of Belarusian self-identity and the survival of nationhood.

> We don't have a single religion, a single tradition, or something else. We have only the language. As, for instance, Baltic nations had on the eve of the dissolution of the USSR. (Belarusian journalist, writer, Syarhei Dubavets, 2016, RFE/RL sample)

Unsurprisingly, since many of the RFE/RL articles were related to the promotion of the Belarusian language and problems of usage, the perception of the Russian language was also shaped in a number of the same articles. A few authors summarized this coexistence of the languages in the following manner: they perceive and present the Belarusian language as an attribute

associated with emotion and the soul, while they perceive Russian language instrumentally – as a pragmatic language of communication that neither has an identity building function in Belarus nor defines the Belarusian people. Twenty-three of the 38 Russian language-related codes were classified as neutral. The remaining codes can be interpreted as creating a rather negative image of the Russian language through recalling the waves of Russification as negative to the identity-forming process that took place both in Soviet times and Lukashenka's ruling period. Both of these communication directions, as in *Nasha Niva*, primarily rule out the identificatory function of the Russian language and in these terms pro-actively address potential fears concerning Russia's cultural influence on Belarusian identity.

> It [Russian language] is a purely technical thing, like an app on a smartphone. No one is writing poems about the Russian language […]. It is impossible to call it the "language of ancestors" because that would be an overt silliness. (Belarusian journalist, writer Syavyarin Kvyatkouski, 2015, RFE/RL sample)

> There is a cult of the Russian language in Russia. There they call it "great and powerful". […] In Belarus it is a technical tool, like a fork, or saw, or computer. (Kvyatkouski, 2016, RFE/RL sample)

Overall, although the general narratives on the Belarusian and Russian language elements are somewhat similar in both media samples (there is a common understanding of the Belarusian language as an important identity element), the RFE/RL sample appears to be more fragmented in terms of messages related to the Belarusian language given the lack of a quantitively dominant language narrative. In the RFE/RL sample, there is no single overt narrative in terms of the role of the Russian language in self-identification of Belarusians, and there were almost no articles in which the Russian language could be interpreted as the "mother tongue" of Belarusians (except for one article containing the idea that language is not an identity attribute at all). Nonetheless, when analyzing these smaller narratives and messages in the Belarusian language in conjunction with messages in the Russian language, the language-related communications support the general idea of reinforcing the pro-Belarusian language narrative and presenting it as the only native language of Belarusians.

In addition to the compilation and recreation of numerous narratives from the media analysis above, a similar tendency was observed during the conduct of interviews, though the greatest difference between public discourse and individual interviews was observed in terms of respondents leaning towards "softer" and, at first glance, conflicting messages. The Belarusian language

was seen as an essential element by all the experts and politicians interviewed; neither group denied or diminished the importance of the language. However, not all shared the belief that this was the only, or a self-sufficient, element of Belarusianness. Many expressed their support for further development of the language and saw this element as having the highest potential when thinking about Belarusian self-identification in the long-term, believing it could be a factor that could unite the "fragmented" Belarusian national identity. Respondents did not elaborate much on why language is the top element, implying that a unique language is seen as the most exposed and thus clearest element which could distinguish Belarus from neighboring nations.

> [Belarusian language] is the first attribute by which you can identify people in Europe. If you are not an expert, it could be hard to distinguish a Lithuanian from Belarusian. But language is the primary [feature], which allows us to identify a person. (Interview with Politician #3, 20-29, regions)

> It is impossible to understand the existence of the contemporary Belarusian state without the Belarusian language and the Belarusian-language literature tradition. Therefore, I stand for the increasing significance of the Belarusian language as an identity element and as an element of Belarusian culture. (Interview with Expert #4, 40-49, Minsk)

When speaking about the Belarusian language and its role in self-identification, respondents neither accorded absolute supremacy to this element nor vehemently claimed that knowledge of Belarusian is an absolute requirement for self-identification. Politicians took such an approach due to their willingness to avoid exclusion of significant parts of the population, who do not use the Belarusian language daily. Following this argument, an essential reservation in terms of perception of the Belarusian language was made by some respondents – they tended to believe that it was not about knowing the language but mainly about respecting both Belarusian culture and language and recognizing their importance, and ultimately implying that Russian speaking citizens might self-determine as Belarusians if they respect the Belarusian language and culture. Although this message was observed when analyzing the independent media discourse, during the interviews this notion was way more clearly expressed and reflected personal views and a personal understanding of self-identity.

> Belarusianness is not only about using the language but about respecting the language, respecting the history, respecting this land and territory (Interview with Politician #5, 40-49, regions)

When a person understands the existence of a separate Belarusian language, which was not allegedly invented in the 20th century by the Communists but used to exist even earlier [...]. It is not necessary to use [Belarusian] extensively. A person can speak Russian, listen to Western music, watch American movies, but when they encounter Belarusian culture and history, they associate that with something related to them and something that brings positive emotions. (Interview with Expert #2, 30-39, Minsk)

Compared with the content analysis of the independent media, interviews provided important insight in respect of the changes of the perception of the Belarusian language. Respondents stressed that the perception of the Belarusian language is changing significantly across different demographic groups, as well as groups that have different political affiliation, including both the individuals associated with the authorities on the one hand, and the general public on the other. According to the interviewees, the perception of Belarusian has undergone two important transformations. First, several respondents pointed out that in recent decades the Belarusian language managed to overcome the stereotype of being perceived as a "sign of provinciality", which was assigned to it in Soviet times. This stereotype stemmed from the situation when Belarusian was more widespread in the regions and rural settlements, while the Russian language was prevalent in the cities and the capital. The respondents shared their memories when Belarusian-speaking rural dwellers tried to switch to Russian for pragmatic reasons, such as career opportunities, or for fear of being labeled a "villager."

When I was at school, there was a division – Belarusian speakers were from the village, Russian speakers from the cities. Later on, everything got mixed. (Interview with Politician #5, 40-49, regions)

I remember in Soviet times we had such a division, when if you speak Belarusian, you are a "villager." [...] But today, I see how this perception of language is changing. (Interview with Politician #4, 40-49, Minsk)

When my parents, after graduation, moved from the village to the city, they actively demonstrated that they belonged to Russian culture. Back then, we had a significant distinction between Russian city culture and low village culture. [...] And they forgot the Belarusian language or were pretending that they had forgotten it. (Interview with Expert #1, 50-59, Minsk)

The second stereotype, which recently has been gradually disappearing, was related to the perception of the Belarusian language as a political stance. According to the respondents, the Belarusian language was for decades associated with being a political symbol of the opposition and the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), whose agenda was built mainly around the issue of language revival. With generational and political landscape changes, as well as changes in the authorities' discourse and practice aimed at depoliticizing the choice of the language, as discussed in the previous chapters, the Belarusian language stopped being seen as a political marker and was not associated with supporting the opposition parties or displaying political opposition to Lukashenka's regime, which allowed the re-enactment and routinization of the language narrative in much broader social groups.

> The negative trend that the Belarusian language equals opposition [disappeared]. This was an obstacle for Belarusization and for "normal people" in the government to implement the Belarusization policy. We had a big label, a stereotype, that if you speak the Belarusian language, you are BPF [...] I felt this when we collected signatures back in 2012 [...] now it has ended, it is gone, this stereotype is gradually disappearing, there is only a bit left. (Interview with Politician #6, 40-49, Minsk)

> You can stand outside with a white-red-white flag, speak Belarusian, and no one will call you a nationalist, an ardent nationalist. You are not even a BPF-person anymore. (Interview with Politician #5, 40-49, regions)

> There is a change taking place in the self-consciousness of Belarusians. Speaking Belarusian, wearing national costumes, clothes, even placing BNR symbols on your car, all this is becoming a new normal for Belarusians. [...] This does not cause any concern for citizens. (Interview with Politician #4, 40-49, Minsk)

As for the perception of the Russian language among interviewees, as in the non-governmental media discourse, the majority of informants tended not to assign a significant identity-building function to the Russian language. In particular, they did not consider it as native or equal to Belarusian, as Lukashenka attempted to present the language in his discourse. Regardless of their attitude to the Russian language, interviewees' responses directly or in a veiled manner suggested favoring the supremacy of the Belarusian language in terms of Belarusian identity construction. Also, in response to the claims and accusations frequently observed in the Russian media discourse that the Russian language had been discriminated against in Belarus with the

emergence of soft-Belarusization[151], the interviewed experts and politicians, even those who belonged to nationalistically minded political forces, maintained quite a moderate and reserved approach when speaking about the Russian language. Similarly to some of the messages identified during the media content analysis, they also tended to look at the Russian language instrumentally, perceiving the Russian language as a legacy that will remain/should be maintained for pragmatic reasons, such as more convenient communication in professional fields. In their view, the Russian language could not be perceived as an important element of Belarusian identity, but they still spoke about it fairly positively or neutrally, noting that for the majority of the population it remained the primary language for their day-to-day communication. Thus, the language should be maintained for a period of time and for certain purposes but as a non-identity element.

> We also thought about what language we should use when communicating with voters. We understood that we need to communicate in Russian because people think and feel in the Russian language. [...] In life, we can cultivate and propagate the Belarusian language, but we are consciously building our political communications in Russian to consider the interests of the people, their demands. There are more opportunities to be understood and be heard. (Interview with Politician #6, 40-49, Minsk)

> My relationship with the Russian language is absolutely normal. Because I think that [this] language cannot damage statehood. For instance, in the U.S. people speak English but, nonetheless they have a very high level of national self-identification. (Interview with Politician #1, 30-39, regions)

> I do not consider it to be successful and reasonable to consider it [the Russian language] as one of the foundation elements. For the reason that it is not unique to Belarus. The Belarusian language is unique to Belarus. It [Russian] performs communicative, pragmatic functions and will perform these for 5-10 years. Maybe it will stay forever. (Interview with Expert #3, 40-49, Minsk)

There were respondents who believed that the Russian language could have an impact on Belarusian identity and was simply important for the Belarusian nation and its culture. While they were pro-Belarusian,

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[151] In recent years, certain Russian online outlets have begun circulating narratives of Belarus being hostile towards the Russian language and Russian speaking population.

respondents separated Russian culture from the Russian state, and this allowed them to consider Russian culture as a politically independent element and an important legacy, which had value and impact on Belarusian self-consciousness. Interestingly, some respondents referred to the Belarusian Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich as an example of the interrelation between Belarusian identity and Russian culture.

> Russian [language] – as of today, it is likely to be a part of Belarusian consciousness, and it cannot be broken in a harsh way as it would have certain consequences for society. This break would simply be rejected. (Interview with Politician #4, 40-49, Minsk)

> Today, of course, the majority speaks Russian. Second, I agree with [Svetlana] Alexievich that Russian culture is a part of our culture. (Interview with Politician #3, 20-29, regions)

> [...] It would be quite naive to say that the Russian language is some sort of foreign language, brought by bloody occupants and not close to anyone here. This is not true. Obviously, the Russian language is native for many here [...] it seems to me that the Nobel Prize of Alexievich helped a lot, because only a few will be ready to claim that Alexievich is not part of Belarusian culture because she writes in Russian. (Interview with Expert #2, 30-39, Minsk)

Even though the primary focus of the interviews and content analysis was naturally skewed towards the language domain and questions about the role of the Belarusian and Russian languages, the cultural dimension contained a broad list of other possible attributes, including literature and other arts, religion and customs, which were more rarely mentioned compared with the language question but still noticeable when analyzing media outlets and interview data.

In the RFE/RL sample, identity cultural elements other than language were referenced in 23 articles, mainly focusing on Belarusian literature. Three notable narratives can be extracted from these articles. First, Francysk Skaryna is frequently referenced, proving the longevity and long tradition of Belarusian literature and the printed Belarusian word, and at the same time emphasizing Belarus' belonging to Europe culturally. Second, there is a visible narrative of pride in relation to Belarusian writers, such as Yakub Kolas or Yanka Kupala. This narrative of pride in Belarusian literature is reinforced by the Nobel Prize for literature. Although Alexievich's writing in the Russian language is debated in some articles, her contribution to Belarusian culture and literature is widely acknowledged. Some authors even argue that the achievements of Belarusian literature are not duly

acknowledged by the Belarusians themselves. The third narrative is interconnected with the historical dimension and the Soviet times in particular, reminding the readership that Belarusian culture suffered due to the Stalinist repressions and execution of the most notable Belarusian cultural figures of the 20th century. Although they were killed, Belarusian culture survived and flourished. In a similar vein, Belarusian culture in *Nasha Niva* was generally but positively mentioned in 15 articles, with respect to literature and Belarusian writers and their works. Kupala, Bahdanovich and Karatkevich in particularly were emphasized as an important legacy of the Belarusian nation, instilling an emotion of pride. Meanwhile, Russian culture was mentioned only in seven articles of the RFE/RL sample, and three articles in *Nasha Niva*, without any specific role prescribed for it in terms of the identity formation. In one of these articles, the Belarusian journalist Vital Tsyhankou shared a relatively hostile approach towards the impact of Russian culture by criticizing the scope of the teaching of Russian literature in Belarusian primary education. In sum, in both of the media outlets, the primary emphasis was on the significance of Belarusian literature, with a key message aiming to instil the pride based on the unique Belarusian culture as an important marker of a distinct national identity.

In relation to cultural symbols, the *vyshyvanka* was trending at the beginning of the period of analysis and was thus discussed in nine articles published between 2014 and 2019 in the *Nasha Niva* sample and was mentioned in ten articles in the RFE/RL sample, as an important visual attribute of Belarusian culture. Although it was not particularly emphasized for the purpose of self-identity, the *vyshyvanka* was presented as an important cultural symbol distinguishing Belarusian culture. Not all the authors who made references to this symbol viewed it as a sufficiently notable visual attribute of Belarusianness (with some even seeing it as a rather banal symbol), suggesting instead their preference and the need to popularize other identity elements and visual symbols, such as national historical symbols.

Religion as a cultural element of identity appeared relatively rarely, either through stressing the belonging to certain confessions or through featuring religious commitment as a trait or as a form of custom. A very few authors on RFE/RL referenced religion as a potential attribute of identity but predominantly dismissed its role in identity construction, claiming that the religious factor did not play and should not play any identificatory role for Belarusians. Furthermore, some linked the multi-confessional country narrative to the psychological dimension by asserting the tolerant nature of the Belarusian nation. A similar pattern was observed in 12 articles in *Nasha Niva* that referenced religion. In this small number of communicative events,

one could observe a clear tendency to present Belarus as a religious but multi-confessional state. Notably, several articles that appeared in the sample were authored by priests and believers from different confessions, including Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Jewish. Some authors understood a multi-confessional state as one where historically many different religions coexisted, implying that religion cannot be an identity attribute, while others who spoke about the multi-confessional character clearly focused only on confessions of Christianity, thus, seeing Belarus as Christian nation.

> Are such conflicts possible in the country, where for centuries Catholic churches were built nearby Orthodox churches in the squares, and nearby there were synagogues and mosques, and sometimes even Lutheran churches? (Belarusian journalist Dzmitry Hurnevich, 2017, RFE/RL sample)

> Belarus is a multi-confessional state. There are Russian Orthodox believers, many Catholics, and Protestants. Also, there are Jewish, Muslim (since the rule of Vytautas). So, which of these confessions becomes nation-forming? All of them? Then we would have many ideas. I suggest leaving a person alone with God. (Belarusian writer Viktar Martsinovich, 2017, *Nasha Niva* sample)

On the other hand, a few RFE/RL authors softly presented some elements of negative perception of the Orthodox Church (as an institution rather than a religion), attributing this to Russia's soft-power (as Belarus does not have its own Orthodox Church) and the relatively low support demonstrated by the Orthodox Church for the Belarusian language, compared with other confessions in the country. Two articles positively mentioned the Greek Catholic Church, attributing to it support for the pro-Belarusian historical movement and acknowledging the role of the priests in preserving the Belarusian language. However, both of these messaging lines were too scarce in terms of frequency to attribute a narrative-forming function to them.

In line with the official discourse and independent media discourse, the respondents interviewed portrayed Belarusians as being tolerant to all religious groups and faiths, and did not identify this as a theoretically possible identity attribute. However, later in the discussions, when the respondents were speaking about the personal level and about other cultural elements, one could observe an affiliation with Christianity more generally, in relation to customs and religious practices. Some respondents also alluded to the fact that, while religion as such was not a defining attribute, influential actors in the different confessions in Belarus could impact one or other choice of identity, for example, through the language they used during their services,

having regard to the Belarusian-language services in Catholic church. At the same time, there was not much discussion of the narratives of pro-Belarusian Catholicism or pro-Russian Orthodoxy that could be found in literature.[152] The general discourse of the media samples analyzed and the interviews does not provide a single narrative in terms of what role religion plays as an attribute of the self-identification of Belarusians, if any at all.

Overall, the cultural dimension is seen as one of the key elements in the unofficial identity discourses. Unlike in the authorities "disciplined" discourse, here we certainly cannot speak about a single or even common assessment of what role the Belarusian language has been or should be playing in terms of national self-identification, plus there are deviations between personal and constructed self-identity. The only point of agreement between the respondents and the different media discourses is that the Belarusian language is important, and that it is one of the key attributes of the national identity. The discrepancies begin when the level of this importance and the promotion strategy is discussed.

As in the case of the view of the Belarusian language, there is also no single understanding of what role the Russian language is or should be playing, with some columnists alleging that the language as such may not be an important identity element, especially for those Belarusians who are Russian speakers. The dominant view here (both in the media and among interviewees) was that it should be perceived instrumentally and pragmatically, as discussed above, denying this element and its capacity to be identity forming and excluding it from the identity discourse, first, to reinforce the distinctiveness of the Belarusian language and second, to minimize the potential exploitation of the Russian language issue by malign actors. This pattern of instrumental perception of the Russian language, with the emphasis on the Belarusian language as one of the key identity elements with the role of distinguishing Belarusians, suggests that the actors are using the unofficial discourse to construct cultural identity elements which build greater identity resilience to the potential Russian cultural influence and at the same time address the ontological anxiety among Belarusian speakers.

Altogether, the interview and content analysis data on language issues demonstrated that, on the question of what role the Belarusian language could and should play, there is a change of view. Out of a mono, bilingual or multi-lingual role of language, in line with the groups suggested in the literature, the current dominant view is something in-between the first two groups. There is a clear preference for the Belarusian language but no dominant view in favor

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[152] Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity,* 157-159.

of its imposition and no radical or strictly negative perception of the Russian language, which leads to the conclusion that, in unofficial discourse currently, there is a dominant view in favor of the Belarusian language without the need to be fluent in it, and that its preservation is important. Moreover, this highlights an issue about the level of analysis, clearly demonstrating that narratives constructed for the national level may not necessarily fully match the perceptions held at the personal level or play the same role there.

There is one aspect of the language element which went through a process of transformation on both the opposition and government sides. In an article published by Bekus in 2014, the author argued that there was "an extreme politicization of the language issue […] reference to language in the media, education or other spheres of life is interpreted as a political declaration either against or in favor of the official political stance."[153] As the data in this section showed, the Belarusian language is not seen as a political attribute or political stance and is not seen as a sign of political opposition to Lukashenka's regime, which suggests that to some extent the Belarusian language, as a coherent part of the national ontology, has already been routinized beyond the political groups and their discourses.

Other cultural elements are mentioned much less compared with the Belarusian language. An important role is attributed to Belarusian literature and certain cultural symbols, like the *vyshyvanka*, but to say that these are identity-constituting elements would be overestimation. They are perhaps seen as a reflection of a former pro-Belarusian national identity. Religion, on the other hand, though it is present in the discourse, is not presented as an identity marker, which thus implies the multi-confessional and tolerant nature of the Belarusian nation, which matches the narratives observed in the general discourse.

4.2. Political Identity Dimension

Due to the authorities' foreign vector, which was dominated by fluctuating, but ultimately consistently stressed, "brotherly" ties with Russia, and due to the persistent official effort to promote nostalgia for a collective Soviet past, Belarusians were for decades stereotypically portrayed as extremely close, if not similar, to Russians. In the Belarusian political discourse studied by Nelly Bekus in 2008, the author distinguished two prominent views of Belarusian geopolitical belonging within the Belarusian opposition's discourse of that time. The first view implied that Belarus shares

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[153] Bekus, '*Hybrid' Linguistic Identity*, 41.

European history and values, it belongs to Europe and the West, but the authorities are dragging it East. The second group of intellectuals advocated the idea of Belarus as an "in-between nation", meaning that Belarus belongs neither to the East nor to the West, and that it should hold an "intermediate position on the civilization divide."[154] In the meantime, in the last decade, there have been varying views expressed in respect of Belarus' geopolitical orientation among the opposition parties of the country, with conservative forces, such as the BPF, advocating turning away from Russia[155], while others, such as the movement "For Freedom", actively promoted orientation towards the EU[156], and forces like "Tell the Truth" in 2015, through their presidential candidate, advocated full neutrality.[157]

As for society, the 2020 protests clearly demonstrated that geopolitical orientation was not at the top of the protesters' agenda.[158] In the meantime, the available sociological data leads to the conclusion that, when faced with the question of geopolitical preferences, Belarusians tend to have mixed opinions. At the same time, there is a very strongly expressed preference for remaining an independent and sovereign state. According to an online survey conducted by Chatham House in September 2020, 41 percent of respondents were in favor of geopolitical union with the EU and Russia at the same time, while another 23 percent favored being outside any geopolitical blocs. This matched the mood prevailing prior to the 2020 protests, when a face-to-face poll conducted by BAW in December 2019 demonstrated a continuous decline of supporters of the union with Russia. Between January 2018 and December 2019 the percentage of supporters dropped from 64 to 40 percent, but most importantly, a clear majority of respondents – almost 75 percent, shared the belief that both states should be fully independent countries

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[154] Nelly Bekus, "European Belarus versus State Ideology: Construction of the Nation in the Belarusian Political Discourses." *Polish Sociological Review*, 3(163), 2008, 264-271.

[155] ТУТ БАЙ (TUT.BY), "Телевыступление лидера БНФ Янукевича: Открыть границу с Западом и ввести контроль на границе с Россией." Retrieved from Наша Ніва, 2016, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=175438&lang=ru> [2022-08-28]

[156] Движение «За Свободу», "Губаревич: Евразийский союз может стать точкой невозврата." 2013, <https://mff.by/rus/news/3273/> [2022-08-28]

[157] Еўрарадыё, "Таццяна Караткевіч апублікавала сваю перадвыбарчую праграму." 2015, <https://euroradio.fm/taccyana-karatkevich-apublikavala-svayu-peradvybarchuyu-pragramu> [2022-08-28]

[158] Linas Kojala, "Protests in Belarus: Geopolitical Considerations and the Future of Lukashenko." *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/08/protests-in-belarus-geopolitical-considerations-and-the-future-of-lukashenko/> [2022-08-28]

maintaining friendly relations.[159] In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and Belarus' disputes with Russia over further integration within the framework of the Union State treaty in 2019, territory and sovereignty, a formal attribute of a sovereign and independent nation-state, and at the same time a core attribute of the civic nationhood model, became, in terms of frequency of mention, an underlying national identity element in the unofficial discourse.

In a similar way to the polling data showing a strong preference for independence, both independent media outlet discourses analyzed also demonstrated a firm stance on independence and the importance of preserving the distinct borders of the state. The notion of having a sovereign state runs as a thread through different dimensions in both the RFE/RL and *Nasha Niva* samples. As an illustration, the term *independence* commonly appears when discussing the BNR period, as it was the first modern Belarusian state, and when discussing its "successor", the BSSR.

A lexical search revealed that the terms *independence* and *sovereignty* were extremely frequently used when discussing other identity attributes – these terms appeared in 79 documents of the *Nasha Niva* sample (out of 253), and in 136 documents of the RFE/RL sample (out of 369) and were commonly used in conjunction with narratives across all five identity dimensions. From an identity construction perspective, such frequent references to a sovereign state served primarily as a means of stressing the distinctiveness of Belarusians from their neighbors and their affiliation with the modern state. Also, when viewed in light of the OST framework and matched with other narratives, it served to stress a distinct identity, which can be seen as an indication of the ontological anxiety that spills into physical state insecurity in identity-forming discourse. Qualitative data collected during the interviews complements this tendency, implying that any identification without political elements will not find support in any of the national identity variants.

> [...] A new generation grew up, which got used to living in a sovereign state. Such an identity – "to live in an independent state" – really exists. (Interview with Expert #1, 50-59, Minsk)

> It is a value of the existence of an independent state and sovereignty because this is something that Belarusians got used to in the last decades. [...] It is not a secret that, during the last Soviet referendum, Belarusians voted more than ever for preservation, but once they got

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[159] Белсат, "Обвальное падение: число сторонников союза с Россией снизилось на треть", 2020, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/obvalnoe-padenie-chislo-storonnikov-soyuza-s-rossiej-snizilos-na-tret/> [2021-12-30]

this statehood, Belarusians got used to it. [...] Similarly, the understanding that we are a separate nation is growing. Nowadays, no one would come up cheering for Russian athletes during a tournament, this would be odd – these are not our athletes, but in the early 1990s, that was quite normal. (Interview with Expert #2, 30-39, Minsk)

In line with these narratives, many of the interviewees explained that the experience of an independent modern Belarus over decades became a certain attribute which, for some, was an important marker in defining Belarusian identity and distinguishing Belarus from the neighboring countries, particularly Russia, which might be seen as the primary successor of the USSR legacy, and which was close to Belarus at the time of the dissolution of the USSR.

In those times, the majority was unsure whether they wanted to live in sovereign Belarus, or they wanted some sort of a union state in the full meaning of this term… with a single parliament and other attributes. In those times, the majority supported such an idea. But today the union state means [free] borders, access to markets but not loss of sovereignty. (Interview with Expert #3, 40-49, Minsk)

Belarusians understood that it is better to live in an independent state. They understood the value of independence, that this is something valuable, important. No one is making decisions in some Kremlin or some Vilnius how Minsk should live. [...] And the younger generation has grown up, which has no idea what the USSR is. (Interview with Politician #3, 20-29, regions)

Amid these strong narratives stating the crucial role of independence for self-identity, there is a certain level of debate in relation to the geopolitical elements of the political dimension. Unlike in the official media discourse, these discussions constituted a substantial share of the independent media discourse on political elements of identity. In both outlets the political dimension is primarily reflected through two prisms: first, the Europeanness of Belarus, answering the question whether the nation belongs to the European family of nations; and secondly, how Russians as an ethnic group on the one hand, and as a political formation on the other, should be perceived by Belarusians in terms of a separate or similar identity.

In the *Nasha Niva* sample, the perception of Russia and Russians was one of the dominant political identity topics. The perception of Russia and its ties to Belarusians was discussed in 28 articles, especially in the year 2014, shortly after Ukraine's Crimea was annexed by the Russian Federation. In view of a series of other important developments and crises in bilateral

relations concerning, for example, potential deployment of a Russian airbase in Belarus, disputes over energy, the so-called "dairy wars" (instances when Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance of Russia was banning the export of dairy products from Belarusian enterprises), and overt political pressure for "deeper integration" in 2019, along with Russia's continuing aggression in the region, all asserted the importance of this topic for identity formation, reflecting a particularly high level of anxiety. These developments dictated not only the frequency of references to the topic of Russia but also contributed to the appearance and prevalence of particularly negative narratives on this topic, clearly indicating the perception of Russia, and too close cultural and political affiliation with Russia, as an ontological and potentially physical threat.

All types of messengers on *Nasha Niva*, including ordinary citizens, experts and influencers, delivered messages denying the idea of the so-called "Russian World", openly accusing the Russian Federation of imperialism and aggression, with particular concern that this aggression would reach Belarus, and at the same time expressing solidarity with Ukraine. The outlet served as a platform for countering narratives malicious to Belarusian identity which were floating around the malign Russian media, including such claims that Belarusians and Russians are "the same people". Several articles also criticized the activities of Russian actors and countered statements made by them that directly threatened the self-identity of the authors and constructed pro-Belarusian narratives. In addition, there was also a correlation between a perception hostile to Russia and the Belarusian language code. In nine out of 28 articles featuring the perception of Russia, the Belarusian language code overlapped with these communications. A few messengers created a trend by implying that the rising importance of the Belarusian language served as a countermeasure to the idea of the so-called "Russian World" spreading in the country, believing that the Belarusian language strengthened Belarus' unique identity and contributed to the prevention of possible aggression by Russia. Ultimately, all these narratives and messages were aimed at stressing Belarusian independence and the distinctiveness of Belarusians from Russians and Belarus from the Russian Federation, simultaneously creating a hostile image of the latter.

In the case of the RFE/RL sample, the perception of Russian and Russians was shaped in 47 documents[160] out of 369. One of the prevailing

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[160] It is worth noting that articles that solely focused on developments in the Russian Federation (not referencing Belarus-Russia connections), as well as articles discussing or analyzing Russian foreign policy issues, were omitted.

messages constructed the idea that Russians historically used to be people who were quite hostile to Belarusians. While in *Nasha Niva* Russianness is blended with the language issue, on RFE/RL the co-occurrence of the perception of Russia is connected with historical narratives, particularly those related to the Soviet period and the GDL/PLC periods (in 18 of 47 articles. the perception of Russians is discussed in the context of historical topics). The political dimension tends to be closely, but often not directly, linked with other identity dimensions, even when there is no co-occurrence of the codes, as we can interpret many of the GDL or PLC references, particularly the mentions of historical personalities like Kalinouski, as having a strong built-in flavor of hostility towards Russia, at least as political entities existing during different historical periods in different forms. Through such a historical lens, Russians and political formations, such as the USSR and the Russian Empire, appear in an extremely negative light. Russians are presented as occupants and historical enemies rather than as "brother Slavs", as claimed in official Belarus and Russia discourses.

A supplementary narrative to this narrative, portraying Russians as historically hostile, consists of a series of messages featuring "Russian Imperialism", the "Russian World", and a similar type of rhetoric that only increases the distinctions between Belarusians and Russians by reinforcing the hostile image of the latter (especially in the contemporary regional context), and subsequently points to a high level of ontological anxiety, given that these references occur in identity-building discourse. One of the notable patterns relates to elements of the psychological and cultural dimensions discussed further in this chapter. Several RFE/RL articles attempted to deconstruct the narrative of Belarusians and Russians being "brothers" due to their cultural similarities and allegedly similar mentality. Although some authors did not deny the cultural ties, within the same framework of national stereotyping they alleged and emphasized behavioral differences.

> Belarusian national character has a certain stability, it excludes all kinds of extremes, jumping from the radical revolutionary to the persistent conservatism (which is the case with Russians, even within one generation). (Belarusian journalist Vital Tsyhankou, 2014, RFE/RL)

Discussion of the idea of Europeanness was much rarer compared with discussion of the ties with Russia and Russians. Only 6 articles in *Nasha Niva* contained mentions of Europeanness in terms of its link to Belarus. Europeanness or the perception of the West more generally were not particularly discussed in the RFE/RL sample, as only 13 articles touch upon this potential identity aspect. Only one article-outlier published in *Nasha Niva*

contained a negative perception of Europe, in which a pro-governmental influencer was quoted as saying that "Western values", namely tolerance and democracy, "threatened civilization" and indirectly suggested that Belarus was not part of Europe. Remarkably, the journalist covering this material used framing techniques that refuted the statements made by this messenger. The remaining articles implied that the Europeanness of the Belarusian nation was testified by the history and cultural tradition of Belarus. The case for this belonging is argued by stressing the cultural and historical ties of Belarus, particularly the GDL and PLC, with European civilization. A similar pattern was observed in the interviews.

> In fact, ten centuries of our culture are ten centuries of the richest European culture. (Banker, philanthropist Viktar Babaryka, 2014, *Nasha Niva* sample)

To summarize the narratives built around the political identity domain elements, first of all, there is a single outlier element in terms of the absence of public debate – the notion that Belarus is an independent and sovereign country stands as a critical element of the national identity of Belarusians. This idea, which overlaps totally with the similar narrative in the official discourse, runs as a thread in all the analyses conducted (the interviews and media content analysis), which allows one to conclude that this civic element of national self-identity is of extraordinary significance for all groups. It also serves as evidence of the overlap of ontological and physical security concerns, given the context of the communications, including the re-emerging perception of the hostile image of Russia in the same discourse. In terms of the choice between East and West, the Europeanness of Belarusians is rarely specially mentioned as an element, as it mainly reveals itself in the historical rather than the political dimension.

While the perception of Russia and relations with it as a nation and as a political formation constantly appeared in the discourse of both outlets, the overall nature of these references and communications were reactive and deconstructed other narratives, by addressing malicious narratives that could be seen as potential ontological threats, rather than constructing narratives that contain identity meanings. The difficult political context and the ongoing crises on the bilateral and regional agenda, coupled with Russia's aggressive agenda pushing pro-Russian narratives, as well as the Russian narratives mocking a distinct Belarusian identity, forced messengers on both outlets either to react to these or to counter these messages which were malicious towards Belarus' identity, thereby countering the challenge to ontological security. In other words, the new context post-2014 resulted in some changes

by shifting the previous debate in independent discourses (as to whether Belarus is a European state or a "bridge") to another, more narrow, focus on Russia, to its distinctiveness from Belarus, and to its influence, including potential threat, to Belarus.

4.3. Territorial Identity Dimension

The dimension of territorial identity may appear in the elements of affiliation with a particular territory, which is interconnected with the political element of an independent state recently discussed. Two other aspects of territorial identity relate to ethnicity and the potential regional differences within a single country, which were introduced in Chapter 3 when discussing this dimension in the official discourse. Starting from the ethnicity element in the independent discourse, the interview data collected showed that Belarusian political activists and experts assess quite critically the importance of ethnicity or ethnic boundaries as identity attributes, believing that there is only a vague understanding of what ethnicity means, in view of Belarusian history. Most interviewees considered attempts to build identity by ethnicity as meaningless and not applicable, given the historical and social context.

Independent media articles raising this question of ethnicity also suggest that this identity aspect is not under discussion. The topics of the role of ethnicity and territorial belonging scarcely appeared in the analyzed media samples. The role of ethnicity was generally ruled out as not applicable to the national identity element, while the narrative on identification with a certain territory (excluding discussion of identification with an independent state discussed in the previous section) was too rare to draw any tangible conclusions or insights. Although the ethnicity aspect was more frequently brought up in the RFE/RL sample, different authors unanimously stated that the Belarusian national movement was historically inclusive of different ethnic groups.

> Belarusian nationalism has never been aimed at expansion. Its ideologists were Belarusians, Russians, Tatars, Jews, and representatives of other nations who were fascinated by the Belarusian project. The expression "nationalism" has always meant something different to us than to the nations that have been formed a long time ago. (Journalist Dzmitry Hurnevich, 2017, RFE/RL sample)

Supplementary to this idea, some articles raised the importance of the aspect of territorial belonging, which allows different ethnicities to identify themselves with Belarus as a state within clear territorial boundaries.

Furthermore, some argued that identification with the territories that existed for tens of centuries, such as the city of Minsk, proved the longevity of the Belarusian nation.

> Belarus is not a state called "Belarus", which appeared a hundred years ago. And not even necessarily the Belarusian language or Belarusian nationality, which appeared no more than 150 years ago (at the same time as the very concept of nationality). Belarus is a territory and the people who live and who have lived in this territory for centuries. (Columnist Ales Chaychyts, 2016, RFE/RL sample)

Despite some historical facts that might imply regional identity differences within Belarus, such as the fact of the historical separation of the Eastern and Western parts of the country, or the 1994 election results showing higher support for nationally oriented candidates in the Western districts of the country,[161] no significant regional divisions were observed in the interview data. Only a very few interviewees, mainly regional politicians, pointed to important distinctions that prevail across different regions (*voblasts*) of Belarus, but, in doing so, they referred to the psychological dimension – some believed that the stereotype of calm and disengaged people came primarily from the Eastern oblasts, arguing that the Western oblasts tended to be more politically engaged and protest-oriented than the rest of the country. As the quantitative data shows, neither media outlet referred to regional differences of contemporary Belarus within the framework of the identity-building domain. This allows one to conclude that, even if there are regional differences in contemporary Belarusian society, there were no actors who attempted to build narratives featuring regional difference as an identity element.

Similarly, as in the official discourse, the territorial domain was largely dismissed in the independent discourse as an important identity dimension. Instead, the non-governmental actors reiterated the multi-ethnicity narrative, which was also found in the authorities' discourse, but in a slightly different light (not from the perspective of the national movement). At the same time, unlike Lukashenka, the respondents interviewed did not express the same level of anxiety concerning potential national cleavages that could stem, for example, from regional differences, which leads to the conclusion that this element is of particular concern for Lukashenka, who, as shown earlier, might be concerned with his personal ontology in terms of how he and his regime is perceived by the Western parts of the country, whom the respondents saw as

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[161] Электоральная география 2.0, *Беларусь. Президентские выборы 1994*.

more protest-oriented, and which, prior to the nationwide 2020 protests, demonstrated more public unrest.[162]

4.4. Historical Identity Dimension

When analyzing the different unofficial discourses, historical dimension narratives appeared to be one of the most difficult to conceptualize. It was especially difficult to capture any change, as this depended on the reference point taken, as well as the existence of conflicting historical narratives on virtually every historical period, complicated historical developments, changes in history education at schools, and other factors leading to a complex interpretation of the historical statehood of Belarus. Despite this plurality, both the interview data and media analysis show that different historical narratives remain important identity elements. At the same time, debates and conflicting narratives in the historical domain may not only reflect differences in terms of different identity variants promoted by non-governmental actors, but may also demonstrate how constructed narratives coexist with the self-identity of the non-governmental actors.

The most recent historical formation, the BSSR, which existed for seven decades, certainly impacted the development of national identity and, specifically, identity attributes such as the Belarusian language. Different Soviet policies and events of that period, including *korenizatsiia* and the first wave of Belarusization, Russification, Stalinist repressions, the unification of Eastern and Western parts of Belarus in 1939, and the Chernobyl disaster, also had an impact. Each of these developments had consequences for the development of a distinct Belarusian identity. According to Lastouski, the Soviet period in the "Belarusian historical memory is not perceived univocally." A positive image is mainly formed by the so-called Great Patriotic War, while other events are perceived contradictorily.[163] In terms of the main opposition narratives, the Kurapaty mass executions and Soviet repressions have always been one of the historical events constantly brought up by opposition forces, basically since Zianon Pazniak revealed the Kurapaty site to the public in 1988. Since 1989, the Belarusian opposition has been holding annual rallies to commemorate the Chernobyl disaster. Both of these events are used to support an emphasis on the extremely negative legacy of the Soviet period for Belarus.

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[162] For example, the persistent ecological protests against the construction of the Brest battery plant that took place weekly from February 2018 until 2020.
[163] Lastouski, *Historical Memory as a Factor of Strengthening Belarusian National Identity*, 420-421.

The content analysis of independent media outlets demonstrated that, regardless of what meaning is assigned to Soviet times, this historical period is inevitably discussed in terms of identity construction. The historical dimension was the second most referenced category in the *Nasha Niva* "Opinions" section with 33.7 percent of articles referencing it. Within this category, which is broken down in Table 14 below, the Soviet period was the most frequently referenced historical period, followed by the BNR, which was referenced in 26 articles.

Table 14. Historical periods in the *Nasha Niva* sample.

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
Soviet period	34	13,44	40,48
BNR	26	10,28	30,95
PLC	16	6,32	19,05
GDL	14	5,53	16,67
Polatsk Duchy	2	0,79	2,38
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	84	33,20	100,00
DOCUMENTS without code(s)	169	66,80	-
ANALYZED DOCUMENTS	253	100,00	-

Within the RFE/RL sample, the historical dimension was the dominant identity dimension, with certain historical periods referenced in over 200 documents at least once. Here as well, the most discussed historical period was the Soviet period, referenced in 118 documents, followed by the BNR period, and the frequently interconnected GDL and PLC periods. The Polatsk Duchy was referenced in a single article. In the RFE/RL sample, the sophisticated nature of some of the analyzed texts and the specificity of the topics raised in a number of articles (that recall the academic discussions of historians rather than blog posts) suggest that some of the texts in the sample were aimed at audiences that were very well informed about certain historical events and formations, who did not require persuasion on general themes or meta-narratives.

Table 15. Historical periods in the RFE/RL sample.

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
Soviet period	118	31,98	58,71
Polatsk Duchy	1	0,27	0,50
Other	11	2,98	5,47
PLC	26	7,05	12,94
GDL	36	9,76	17,91
BNR	37	10,03	18,41
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	201	54,47	100,00
DOCUMENTS without code(s)	168	45,53	-
ANALYZED DOCUMENTS	369	100,00	-

The analysis of the Soviet period codes in the RFE/RL sample revealed the prevalence of an extremely strong anti-Soviet element that is reflected in the form of several specific narratives. The most prevalent message refers to the massive repressions undertaken by the Soviets on Belarus' territory and the deportations of Belarusian people to GULAGs. The most quoted event is the purge by the NKVD in 1937, with the Kurapaty site being the most frequently mentioned keyword (230 times in 32 articles). In some articles the repression narratives are particularly strong as they are conveyed through a personal prism by the sharing of stories of family or relatives who were repressed.

> More than a hundred people were killed in one night of Communist terror in Belarus in 1937 – there were also other days and other nights, other years. Many still hear the phrase "not everything is bad which is related to the Soviets, the Communists, and our history." History which includes at least one such night, always remains the story about that night. (Director of RFE/RL Belarus Service, Alyaksandr Lukashuk, 2017, RFE/RL sample)

In terms of the *Nasha Niva* sample, in a clear majority of cases the Soviet times were also portrayed in a negative light. The overarching narrative constructed by various authors referenced the same topic of Soviet repressions against the Belarusian people and intelligentsia in 1937, with mention of the Kurapaty site, signifying its importance for the Belarusian nation. The Kurapaty site was mentioned in nearly half of the mentions, and this half predominantly occurred in articles published between 2018 and 2019, which coincided with, and reflected, the widely discussed developments of those years, namely the controversial opening of the restaurant on the site of

Kurapaty and the civic struggle to defend the place. The struggle, which continues today, was marked by a "culmination" in 2019 when the authorities demolished 70 of the crosses erected by activists in spring 2019. Besides emphasizing the Soviet terror, some articles in RFE/RL clearly rejected any claims prevalent in governmental narratives that sowed doubt about who was responsible for the mass killings. Some columnists also clearly articulated that the repression outweighed all possible positive things that could be said about the Soviet period, including the economic boom or the early Belarusization policy that took place prior to the repression.

> [...] Black holes were supposed to swallow us, but against all odds we are alive. We have our own country, own language. We are alive! [...] The time will come when we investigate the traces of Stalinist crimes and erect monuments there. Kurapaty is the symbol of our memory and our future. (Nobel Prize Winner, Svyatlana Alexievich, 2018, *Nasha Niva* sample)

The repression theme dominating the historical identity discourse in the independent media clearly counters and conflicts with the set of historical narratives propagated by the authorities. But the topic of repressions is not the only narrative that outweighs Lukashenka's discourse. A key set of narratives from the Soviet period also relates to the themes of World War 2 and the GPW, which are the core historical references for the authorities' identity discourse. One can summarize that columnists of both the independent outlets analyzed intended to counter the discourse dominant in pro-governmental media and government communications, and also dominant in the Soviet, and currently Russian, narrative, glorifying May 9 ("Victory Day") and participation in World War 2/GPW. The columnists tried to counter the latter narrative by placing great emphasis on the human and territorial losses that Belarus and the other Soviet republics suffered during the war and also by suggesting that Belarus was dragged into the war against its will, presenting the sacrificial nature as pure tragedy rather than taking pride, as the authorities attempted to frame it in their discourse. Building on this message, a couple of articles also challenged the significance of July 3, 1944 (the officially celebrated Independence Day) when the Soviet army "liberated" Minsk.

> In reality it is quite a different war and victory for Russians and for Belarusians. For Russians it is their own, for Belarusians – it is one more occupation, which did not end with the liberation of a single person to date. (Belarusian journalist, writer Syarhei Dubavets, 2018, RFE/RL sample)

The overwhelming criticism of the Soviet period, and in some cases Communism, as a phenomenon, and the consistent reinforcement of the topic of repressions when discussing or even mentioning the Soviet era, indirectly diminishes the existing narrative (also noted during the interviews) that the BSSR was a "golden age" for the country due to the growing economic wellbeing in the last two decades of Soviet occupation. RFE/RL columnists who directly touched upon this narrative, which for many contemporary citizens is also associated with Soviet nostalgia, did not try to diminish it. However, they connect that wellbeing to objective non-political processes, such as industrialization and migration to urban settlements.

Within the framework of the development of statehood, Soviet rule was brought up in a few articles of both outlets when talking about two historical events – the first being the reunification of the Belarusian nation when territory previously occupied by Poland was merged with the BSSR. The articles mentioning this historical event tend to assess it programmatically – avoiding the glorification of Soviet rule and recalling the process which led to reunification and the upcoming repression that wiped out Belarusian nationally-oriented intelligentsia. Second, in respect of the whole BSSR period, although this is acknowledged by some for its contribution to the formation of the Belarusian political state, the reader is constantly reminded that its creation was a calculated political decision on the part of the Soviets rather than their genuine intention.

> [...] the existence of the BSSR, from which independent Belarus grew up, was a side effect, an unintentional outcome of the generally imperialist policy of the USSR Communist leadership. (Political analyst Valery Karbalevich, 2017, RFE/RL sample)

> The USSR was not an empire of nationalities, it was a prison of nations. National autonomies with prop attributes of statehood, including the BSSR, were an unvoiced compromise of the Communists with the existing public and armed national-liberation movement and de facto a cover for the policy of Russification and oppression. (Columnist Ales Chaychyts, 2016, RFE/RL sample)

Additionally, authors in both outlets promoted the theme by assessing the Soviet era from the angle of occupation of an independent state – the Belarusian People's Republic by the Bolsheviks, which can be interpreted as an attempt to totally deconstruct the narrative that the Soviets facilitated the creation of the Belarusian political state.

Those who claim that Belarusians should glorify Lenin, saying without Lenin we wouldn't have a sovereign state, these people either pretend or are really narrow-minded. (Belarusian writer Viktar Martsinovich, 2016, *Nasha Niva* sample)

The Bolsheviks came to power, they suppressed the Belarusian People's Republic in blood, and two decades later created Kurapaty. (Journalist, politician Syarhei Navumchyk, 2017, RFE/RL sample)

Non-governmental media discourse on the Soviet period can be summarized as falling within the two groups of narratives. First, there are the narratives that attempt to sustain and reinforce the understanding of Soviet trauma, particularly Kurapaty, already existing among their readership, while the second group is aimed at deconstructing pro-Soviet narratives that dominate the government discourse. Soviet-related narratives are more frequently aimed at destruction of existing narrative strategies rather than building new identity narratives. The findings from the analysis of the non-governmental outlets suggest that for their columnists the pro-Soviet narratives had always been a cause of anxiety, and only the negative experience of trauma formed part of the constructed Belarusian identity. To fill this void created after deconstruction, other periods important for Belarusian statehood, which served as alternatives for identity constitutive purposes, were emphasized.

While the perception of the Soviet period was presented in a predominantly negative light on both media outlets, the discussions with interviewed politicians and experts on the topic of BSSR were more complex and sometimes full of contradicting assessments, depending on which decade respondents thought it important to highlight. They disclosed a more complicated understanding of self-identity when they reflected the individual level in terms of ontological perceptions. When the respondents tried to assess the BSSR period as a whole, they tended to proactively take the "middle-ground" and mention both the pros and cons that Belarus experienced during this long period of building Communism. Those who framed the BSSR period positively tended to focus on the later decades of the BSSR. Nonetheless, nearly all respondents sought to balance out the positive perception by referring to the earlier Soviet periods, the consequences of the war, and Stalinist repressions, particularly the massacre in Kurapaty and the wiping out of the intelligentsia of the 1930s, with consequences for national identity and the Belarusian mentality.

I think we can be proud of some parts of the Soviet period… We should admit the input of the USSR, namely, into culture and history. Massive

resources were spent for each republic to formulate its identity. (Interview with Politician #6, 40-49, Minsk)

If we look at the economy, development, and territory – this was huge progress. The infrastructure was laid down. Civilization reached barely accessible regions. On the other hand, the way everything was done, the way the historical memory was depleted, how many people were deported, died, locked at home with the fear that the KGB could pay a visit… (Interview with Politician #5, 40-49, regions)

For the Belarusian nation, for the Belarusian identity, much more was done during the Soviet times than in the pre-Soviet periods. Naming ourselves Belarusians, the Belarusian language, Belarusization – this is the period of Soviet history. We had many Belarusian books published and had Belarusian education, schools. We could say that now everything that was achieved back then is ruined. Of course, there are nuances [...] (Interview with Politician #3, 20-29, regions)

Especially in the post-war [Soviet] period, we had many positive moments related to economic developments, even cultural developments. Maybe positive is not the right word, but we had moments that defined what the Belarusian nation is today. If we exclude this period, the Belarusian identity would not be comprehensive. We cannot eliminate this period to build identity exclusively on the GDL, for example, or the 19th century. […] The only thing – this [Soviet] period should not be dominant […] it requires a certain rethinking to understand it as part of Belarusian history […] (Interview with Expert #4, 40-49, Minsk)

Although Belarusian politicians sometimes attempted to take a moderate position when talking about the Soviet experience of Belarus, they were still quite far away from the official Soviet-centric narrative that avoids even a mention of the negative consequences brought by Soviet rule. Opposition politicians and experts, similarly to the independent media discourses, also disagree with the authorities' focus on the so-called GPW and the "Great Victory", believing that the war is neither an appropriate topic for pride nor that, in the USSR context, it contributed to Belarusian national distinctiveness.

Sure, we had a spirit of victory. But there is simply no need to speculate on this so much. We hear only official pathos, and no one wants to see problems, or see some honest and genuine truth that there were no winners in that war. (Interview with Politician #6, 40-49, Minsk)

Again, everything is placed on World War 2, the victory. But this is not something that highlights Belarusian nationality. This is the element of the Soviet, of something broader. Victory on a broader scale. It is impossible to interpret this within the national framework. (Interview with Expert #3, 40-49, Minsk)

In terms of pre-Soviet and medieval historical periods, an underlying theme observed throughout the interview discussions concerning the different historical periods was the idea of the importance of building a "deep identity", which means understanding the Belarusian state formation and continuity of its history beyond the early 20th century and the Soviet period in particular. As a possible "starting point", respondents chose references to the GDL, PLC, or even the Duchy of Polatsk, but the former two got much more traction compared to the last of these. A similar trend of focusing on the GDL and PLC is observed in independent media discourses, where they were frequently referenced in both outlets.

As for the GDL period, three narratives could be identified from the RFE/RL sample. The first narrative stems from the communicative events which discuss the question to which nation the legacy of the GDL belongs and what the role of Belarusians was. The ultimate conclusion of this discussion appears to be a narrative that the GDL legacy does belong to Belarusians, and they should claim it and perceive the GDL as its own historical formation. The second narrative, constructed through discussion of certain historical events associated with the GDL, particularly the Orsha battle, reinforces the narrative that the GDL was a period of military glory and national pride. The third narrative presents the GDL as an important period for Belarusian culture and language. In the *Nasha Niva* sample, I observed the drawing of a similar direct link between Belarus and the GDL, presenting it as a legacy of Belarus, utilizing this period to demonstrate the longevity of Belarusian nationhood, and presenting it as the key alternative period to the Soviet era.

[...] the day of the battle of Orsha, September 8, is the most Belarusian celebration. Because it took place in Belarus territory, meaning that the ancestors were defending their land. (Political analyst, Valery Karbalevich, 2017, RFE/RL sample)

The respondents interviewed saw the period of the GDL as one of the periods on which a "longer" and "deeper" narrative of the formation of Belarusian statehood could be built. Some respondents tended to romanticize this period and feel pride in the achievements of the GDL. They shared a positive attitude towards the GDL period and assessed positively the recent erection of monuments to the GDL Dukes. They saw this as an opportunity to

find inspiration and enrich Belarusian historical narratives with historical personalities and events which had thus far not been promoted enough. Some considered this period as extremely important as they tended to believe it testified to the Europeanness of Belarus.

> This is the case on which we can build our national pride. We participated in these battles, where the destiny of Europe was determined. [...] And we knew how to live within a common territory with different cultures, different nationalities. That was a brilliant experience for a multinational and multi-religious country. (Interview with Politician #5, 40-49, regions)

> The periods when contemporary Belarusian lands were a part of such states as the GDL or the Commonwealth, which were undoubtedly European states, part of European culture and politics. This left a mark on Belarus that it undoubtedly remains a European country, not Eurasian or Asian, despite all the political tendencies, Soviet influence, and Russian influence. (Interview with Expert #2, 30-39, Minsk)

> Definitely, we can take many images and narratives from there [the GDL] that make Belarusian identity more sustainable, more diverse, and interesting for contemporary Belarusians. (Interview with Expert #4, 40-49, Minsk)

According to Bekus, non-state historians view the GDL positively, as largely or even purely a Belarusian state.[164] However, different views among columnists were scarce but nevertheless present. For instance, *Nasha Niva* republished fragments of the Belarusian-Polish historian Aleh Latyshonak's interview to Euroradio, in which he portrayed the GDL as a "slavery-based state" and argued that the GDL's successes were not Belarusian, saying that the Belarusian nation was built starting from the late 19th century.[165] Some of the respondents interviewed also shared skepticism of the GDL becoming a significant Belarusian identity narrative. This skepticism was related to sharing the GDL legacy with neighboring countries, specifically Lithuania and Poland, and the questionable self-identification of the GDL leaders and ancestors, who lived in contemporary Belarus' territory, referred to by respondents as *Litviny*. The respondents believed that, while the GDL should

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[164] Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity*, 180-182.
[165] Наша Ніва, "Алег Латышонак: ВКЛ было рабаўладальніцкай дзяржавай, а Гедымін — акупантам." «Ідэя Х», *Еўрарадыё*, 2019, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=239210> [2022-08-28]

constitute a part of the Belarusian statehood narrative, it should not become the dominant narrative.

> I do not think it is reasonable to talk about Belarusian identity because the only thing related to Belarusian identity was the old Belarusian language [...] (Interview with Politician #1, 30-39, regions)

> This was an important milestone in history, and certainly, there would not be a continuation without it. But this is not only Belarusian history. Poland and Lithuania and others claim this history. (Interview with Politician #5, 40-49, regions)

> Each nation has heroes. Possibly, this [the GDL period] could become an opportunity for the heroization of the Belarusian people and Belarusians as a nation. But then you cannot say "Belarusian," there were no Belarusians, there was Litviny – a huge state. (Interview with Politician #3, 20-29, regions)

> What took place in the 16-17th centuries was not a Belarusian state. It is important for the Belarusian statehood and Belarusian nation, but there was no Belarusian state as such. (Interview with Expert #3, 40-49, Minsk)

The period and events related to the PLC were also seen as important and honorable for Belarusians, including for highlighting their Europeanness. However, as with the GDL period, the respondents shared frustrations concerning the common and shared history and Belarusian self-identification, which were not overtly observed when analyzing the independent media discourse.

> It is clear that there are no perfect periods; there is no period when everything was just perfect. If we take the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, we see issues of Polonization, issues with the decline of the Belarusian language, questions of Polish culture also present. But for me, this is first of all about the European context. (Interview with Expert #2, 30-39, Minsk)

> Then people did not identify themselves as Belarusians. People called themselves Litvins. Only Kalinouski established the idea of Belarusians. (Interview with Politician #3, 20-29, regions)

In terms of mass media content, instead of referencing the PLC period as a historical political formation, the clear majority of the references to this formation were made by referring to two associated historical figures: Tadeusz Kosciuszko and Kastus Kalinouski. Both historical figures were

presented as heroes of the Belarusian nation. In both outlets, Kalinouski was particularly frequently discussed, partly because of the discovery of his remains in Vilnius and reburial in 2019. Roughly half of the mentions of the PLC in the RFE/RL sample occurred in 2019 after the discovery of Kalinouski's remains in Vilnius. This clearly boosted public discussion of Kalinouski's role and Belarusianness. Despite many of the articles not being constitutive of identity, they all agree on and convey a basic narrative that Kalinouski was a national hero of Belarus and a symbol of the fight for the independence of the Belarusian nation.

> Vintsent Konstantin (Kastus) Kalinouski can surely be called the founder of the Belarusian national idea, the true father of the Belarusian nation and even modern Belarusian language. Detailed analysis clearly demonstrates that Belarusian politicians of the early 20th century inherited and followed the legacy of Kastus Kalinouski. (Ablameyka, 2019, RFE/RL sample)

With the rise of discussion about Kalinouski, there was a need to counter the anti-Belarusian messages about him, such as references to the 1863 uprising as the "Polish uprising". Similar kinds of narratives and discussions challenging the Belarusian affiliation of historical personalities were relevant also in the case of Kosciuzko. The *Nasha Niva* outlet served as a venue for historians and influencers to counter these narratives, which at the same time served as an opportunity for emphasizing the place of Kalinouski and Kosciuszko in Belarusian national history. In the RFE/RL sample there was also a series of articles that tried to deconstruct the narrative of Kalinouski and his uprisings as non-Belarusian or pro-Polish, and there were articles discussing the role of Kalinouski within the framework of the debate as to where his remains should be buried. Virtually all the respondents paid an extraordinary tribute to the personality of Kalinouski, whom they perceived as a genuine Belarusian hero who, in their view, certainly identified himself as Belarusian, without any further question.

The particularly negative attitude of some columnists towards the Soviet period also stems from the supplementary narrative that the Soviets terminated the only truly independent, in their view, Belarusian national state – the BNR. References to the BNR were present in 37 articles of the RFE/RL sample, constituting around one fifth of the total historical discourse. Notably, in 25 percent of these articles the BNR was mentioned along with the Soviet period, presenting the BNR as a more genuine alternative to the governmental narrative putting the central focus on the BSSR. The number of references to the BNR peaks in 2018, approaching the 100th anniversary of the proclamation

of the Republic. In these articles, the period of the BNR is portrayed as one of the most important periods for the statehood of the country and the nation due to its political declaration and appearance as a Belarusian political entity on the map of Europe, with "Freedom Day" (March 25, the proclamation of the BNR) presented as the day of restoration of genuine interdependence. The word "restoration" is key for some authors, who introduce the narrative that the short-lived BNR is not the first reflection of Belarusian statehood but rather the "cherry" (as one of the authors cited below calls it) of Belarusian statehood that began in medieval times.

> What to do with Freedom Day, with the proclamation of independence of the BNR on March 25, 1918? It is the most important event in Belarusian history in the 20th century, despite the fact that the republic only lasted for a short period of time. (Navumchyk, 2019, RFE/RL sample)

> Belarus for me is a subject. Both a political and cultural subject, which begins with the Polatsk principality, develops in the GDL, and transforms into the BNR, as the cherry on the cake. (Kvyatkouski, 2017, RFE/RL sample)

In the *Nasha Niva* sample, the BNR was referenced in 26 articles. As with the previously discussed outlet, more than half of the mentions of the BNR occurred in 2018, the year when the 100th anniversary of the BNR was celebrated. A part of these articles focused on the organization of March 25, the Freedom Day anniversary, instead of directly discussing the historical formation itself. Such references as a rule did not contain overt messages explaining the significance of the BNR but the importance of this would for a reader be naturally implied. In a few explicit BNR-centered communications in *Nasha Niva*, this period was also presented as the key historical formation for the creation of independent Belarusian statehood. Although the messengers seem to understand the limitations of this short-lived historical formation, the act of proclamation of an independent and solely Belarusian Republic was enormously important and symbolic from the perspective of self-identity.

> As for me, the proclamation of the BNR was more declaratory [...] Nonetheless, this was an attempt to create the idea of a national state! [...] The BNR is a certain landmark, even if utopian, short and politically without result, but still. (Protopriest Syarhei Lepin, 2018, *Nasha Niva* sample)

One *Nasha Niva* article referencing the BNR cited the authorities' group representative, the parliamentarian Valery Varanetski, who said that the authorities recognize March 25, 1918 as a historical fact that might consolidate society. Similar views were common during the interview stage. Both the politicians and experts interviewed accord great significance to the proclamation of the BNR and share the belief that it played a crucial role in defining national identity and statehood. Unlike the independent media samples that were clearly tailored towards historically aware audiences, respondents, without contradicting each other, provided more in-depth understanding of why this particular period was key for them. Although the BNR period was short, it contains a few storylines that could be used for the narrative, but most importantly, it was seen as completely different from the historical periods discussed above, as it brought something that previous historical narratives were lacking – exclusive ownership of the political formation. The fact of the proclamation of a distinct Belarusian republic was seen as a romantic idea but, at the same time, as a firm and indisputable fact of the creation of the separate nation of Belarusians, a country with the concrete attributes of the state, such as borders. The politicians believed this was a message which was easy to convey to the public, and that the historical narrative of BNR had great potential. At the same time, they regretted attempts undertaken by neighboring countries, and even some Belarusian representatives, to tarnish the image of the BNR or diminish its significance in terms of preserving Belarusianness.

> This is an important period. Maybe it was even not as important back then as it is now. Because today it serves as a symbol of genesis, the first Belarusian state. (Interview with Politician #1, 30-39, regions)

> When you speak about the GDL, it is very hard to explain. People do not want to hear what the GDL was and what relation we have to it. Therefore, it becomes easier to tell them what they can understand – to talk about the BNR. (Interview with Politician #2, 40-49, in exile)

> In contrast to the GDL, there are no doubts as to whether this is something Russian or Rusynian, Lithuanian-Belarusian-Ukrainian, or something else… This is exactly the beginning of the Belarusian nation-state. Therefore, from the perspective of Belarusian statehood formation, this momentum of the BNR is the most substantial. (Interview with Expert #3, 40-49, Minsk)

To summarize the historical dimension in the unofficial discourses, the historical national identity elements are of high importance in both the public

and individual discourse. In one of the media outlets, this dimension even surpassed the language and cultural dimension. Unofficial discourses present themselves in a much more complicated light, as the number of narratives is much higher, and there is a real ongoing debate concerning the importance of different historical periods and how they should be perceived from the perspective of identification. Perhaps only the BNR period is similarly important and positively presented across the independent discourses and different respondents, who connect it to the political element of an independent state. In the meantime, both the media messengers and the respondents interviewed had a more conflicting understanding of other periods, and the Soviet period in particular.

The Soviet period is presented in a predominantly negative light in independent media outlets, mostly highlighting the traumatic experience of the Belarusian nation (which, of course, should be perceived as an identity-constituting narrative) and deconstructing the government narratives about the GPW. At the same time, except for Kurapaty and the repression narratives, the respondents demonstrated a varying evaluation and emphasis of the Soviet period. With respect to self-identity, this period appeared to the respondents in a more conflicting light than in the analyzed media outlets. While acknowledging that the experience was traumatic for the nation, the respondents also emphasized the positive aspects of this period, even sometimes repeating official discourse narratives. Such a difference between individual and publicly presented narratives reflects the issue of the level of analysis, suggesting that not all constructed identity narratives are equally important for the self-identity of the messengers.

Despite the statement found in the academic literature that the GDL and PLC periods are commonly viewed as positive by non-governmental historians cultivating alternative history,[166] in my research focusing on media outlets and the respondents' reflections on self-identity, these periods were not perceived solely as positive, and the respondents accorded varying degrees of importance to these periods. Nonetheless, in public discourse, these periods remained central, since some messengers made both overt and non-overt references to Russia when discussing these periods, creating a historically hostile image of the latter, as well as stressing the "deep" roots of Belarusianness, which might be perceived as an attempt to emphasize the historical elements of national identity, which would directly address the ontological insecurities of today.

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[166] Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity*, 180-183.

Ultimately, despite the varying assessment of the different periods and the different narratives prevailing, unofficial discourses in the historical domain contribute to the construction of a very distinct Belarusian identity as defined relative to neighboring nations, and this distinctiveness builds towards an increase in the sense of ontological security. The ontological security framework also allows one to see that non-governmental actors have to deal with a twofold anxiety when constructing the historical identity domain. First, in the public sphere, they attempt to deconstruct the regime's narratives related to the Soviet period to preserve their constructed variants of identity, where the Soviet repression narrative plays a key role in terms of national memory, and to counter the narratives of a "shared Soviet history" that tend to eliminate the national factor. Second, the deconstruction of Soviet myths and pro-Soviet narratives creates space for non-governmental actors to emphasize other historical periods and formations, particularly the BNR, which are particularly important when defining Belarusianness in their discourse.

4.4.1. Reflection of national identity in historical symbols

When conducting the content analysis, articles were frequently accompanied by visuals, including different historical and political symbols. Even though the selected content analysis method did not include analysis of imagery, some of the historical symbols appeared in the texts of media samples and during discussions with the respondents.

The Belarusian national white-red-white flag, which was the official flag after regaining independence in the 90s and was adopted during the BNR period, and which could also be perceived as a reference to the heraldry of the GDL and PLC, was one of the most frequently referenced historical symbols, which was referred to in the text of 37 articles in both outlets analyzed (see Tables 16 and 17 below).

Table 16. References to symbols in the *Nasha Niva* sample.

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
White-red-white	21	8,30	75,00
Pahonia	11	4,35	39,29
Official symbols red-green	5	1,98	17,86

Table 17. References to symbols in the RFE/RL sample.

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
White-red-white	16	4,34	59,26
Pahonia	14	3,79	51,85
Official symbols red-green	11	2,98	40,74

The mentions of the white-red-white flag frequently appeared in conjunction with mentions of another popular alternative symbol, the *Pahonia* coat of arms. A clear majority of mentions of the white-red-white flag were positive, directly, or not overtly, emphasizing the importance of this symbol for Belarus' identity. One article published in *Nasha Niva* even quoted a representative of the authorities, Henadz Davydzka, who positively referred to the white-red-flag, suggesting that official historical status could be assigned to that symbol. In a few cases the white-red-white flag was used just as an illustration for articles not directly related to identity symbols.

In the RFE/RL sample, both of these symbols were first of all presented as historical, and a number of articles constructed the narrative that they were symbols of the historical legacy and thus should have remained as the symbols of the contemporary Belarusian state. In some articles, through associations with opposition figures and political events, the white-red-white flag (or its colors) appears as a political rather than historical symbol, a symbol of the opposition to Lukashenka and also to the Soviet past of the country. At the same time, these symbols within the RFE/RL discourse were presented as an alternative to the official state symbols, which were frequently associated with the Soviet period, which in this sample by default implied a negative connotation. In addition to "Sovietization" of these symbols, they were also presented as artificial and not genuine, and thus not eligible to perform an identificatory function. The only identification of their construct in the sample was identification with the political regime of Lukashenka.

> The red-green flag was created in 1951. There is no one who under this [flag] was victorious. In the times of independence only one person was – Lukashenka, who even associates sports victories with his politics. (Kvyatkouski, 2018, RFE/RL sample)

The perception of the symbols among the respondents was not as straightforward as portrayed in the media discourses, and that is most likely due to a conflicting understanding of history among the different actors, and the possible difference between ideal narratives and personal beliefs. The majority of respondents preferred the white-red-white flag and *Pahonia* coat

of arms over the official red-green flag and coat of arms (as these were much like the BSSR symbols) and, thus, perceived the latter not as a genuine but as an artificial political construct, which did not create any bonds with the "genuine" Belarusian past. Such a perception is linked with the "deep" understanding of statehood by the respondents described above, as the white-red-white flag refers to a greater and older statehood and appears to the respondents as historically justified.

The leaders of public opinion interviewed in early 2020 were skeptical about the prevailing importance of symbols for the general public, and some said that, for them personally, all current official and historical symbols mattered for their self-identity (in fact, according to the Chatham House data, society's preferences concerning these symbols is divided[167]). According to these respondents, the symbols serve rather as the visualization of other identity attributes (primarily the perception of the Belarusian language and non-Soviet history) but not as a standalone element. Several experts pointed out that citizens would need to "get used to" the white-red-white flag and *Pahonia* if one day they are to be proclaimed official state symbols. They think that middle-ranking officials, including the new generation of state ideologists, would not resist, as they do not have a strong perception of the political competition associated with the symbols earlier in the 1990s. The only group which would continue to strongly oppose such a change is the law enforcement representatives, in whose understanding it is deeply rooted that the white-red-white flag is the distinctive symbol of their rivals – the political opposition.

> Obviously, there is a passive majority for whom these are not vital questions, for whom the issues of unemployment and income are much more important. But this passive majority will quickly adapt to the return of the historical flag and coat of arms. Those who in stadiums cheer with red-green will similarly start cheering with white-red-white and would not see any problem. (Interview with Expert #2, 30-39, Minsk)

> If ten years ago, you had placed the *Pahonia* on your car, that would mean each traffic police officer would be biased against you. Now there is no such thing. Even for the government representatives, this becomes a normal phenomenon, not causing negative emotions. Changes take

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[167] Янина Мороз, "Насколько опасна война флагов для белорусского общества?" *Deutsche Welle*, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/naskolko-opasna-vojna-flagov-dlja-belorusskogo-obshhestva/a-56684481> [2022-08-28]

place, and they are positive. (Interview with Politician #4, 40-49, Minsk)

According to the interviews, the perception of historical symbols underwent the same overt change and transformation in the years 2014–2019, including the depoliticization of their choice, as with the perception of the Belarusian language. They highlighted the increasing demand for products featuring national white-red-white ornaments and the general neutral or positive attitude that had emerged in society and even government officials. As proof of the changed perception, experts drew attention to the fact that in the last 5-6 years, public demand for pro-Belarusian attributes had increased, and small amateur businesses selling mainly shirts with national symbols had evolved into medium-size companies generating significant profits.

The analysis of symbols revealed a couple important aspects of identity construction in the discourse. First, symbols were not seen as a stand-alone narrative but rather as a visualization of certain identity narratives. They visualized and reinforced constructed historical identity narratives on pre-Soviet historical periods, particularly the BNR, of which the anniversary was celebrated under the white-red-white flag by tens thousands of people (further discussed in Chapter 5 as one of the practices). Second, during the period of 2014–2019, the respondents noted the change – the de-politicized nature of these symbols, meaning that they were no longer perceived as a sign of the opposition parties and could be utilized for wider identity construction purposes, including stressing the "deeper" roots of statehood as discussed in section 4.4.

4.5. Psychological Identity Dimension

When speaking about the subjective feeling or certain bonds that unite Belarusian people and make them distinct from neighboring nations, the respondents interviewed tended to bring up cultural practices and habits that they believe are common for many Belarusian citizens and could be used to define the Belarusian nation. The most overt distinctions, from the respondents' standpoint, stem from the stereotypes allegedly attributed to the Belarusian mentality and the Belarusian "character". While some respondents, when discussing political and historical questions, revealed subjective aspects of Belarusian behavior and temperament, such as a narrative of patience, others tended to believe this is largely a speculative question based on stereotypes. Nonetheless, some of the well-known stereotypes did appear during the interviews and conduct of media analysis.

The online survey conducted by SATIO in 2020 (commissioned by the *Budzma Belarusami* and *Godna* campaigns) included a question researching the alleged distinct traits of Belarusians. Answering this question, many of the survey respondents also noted the attributes discussed in this section, including the patience, hardworking character, tolerance, peacefulness, etc. already mentioned.[168] The experts and activists interviewed spontaneously mentioned similar things, including "hardworking people" and "people who favor stability." One of the most overt and frequently raised characteristics-stereotypes was *pamiarkounasc* – a controversial belief quite widely circulating in the country's discourse that Belarusians are compliant, patient people who abide by the rules.[169] The politicians, in particular, were convinced that this feature was prevalent and manifested itself in the form of fear and passive political participation caused by years of non-democratic rule and discouragement of being active in public life.

> For example, we differ from the Eastern neighbors, from the Russians, as we have an amiable temper. Tolerance, forbearance – you mostly notice this when traveling abroad and have a chance to compare. (Interview with Politician #1, 30-39, regions)

> I think this is some sort of modesty… [...] Lack of initiative, *pamiarkounasc* – people would stand at midnight in front of a red light and will not cross the street even though there are no cars, when you could have crossed [the street] thirty times. Such excessive obedience. (Interview with Politician #3, 20-29, regions)

> It is traditional to say that Belarusians are tolerant, patient, non-conflicting, calm. Maybe this is the distinguishing feature of Belarusians. But we are always ready to stand up for ourselves. (Interview with Politician #4, 40-49, Minsk)

Some respondents shared, while some challenged, the second part of the image promoted by the authorities, who tend to cultivate the image of Belarusians not only as peaceful and tolerant, but also as people who favor and seek stability. Although some experts stated that Belarusians have a non-impulsive character and do not react to triggers as quickly as their neighbors,

[168] SATIO, "Нацыянальная ідэнтычнасць беларусаў." *«Годна» and «Будзьма Беларусамі!»*, 2020, <https://budzma.by/upload/medialibrary/f6a/f6aaee2efac71f1d5bfb88a806451410.pdf> [2021-12-30]

[169] Вінцук Вячорка, "Што папраўдзе значыць слова „памяркоўны"?" *Радыё Свабода*, 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/pamiarkounyja/29017729.html> [2022-08-28]

this does not necessarily mean they are tolerant. Furthermore, the experts and some regional politicians pointed to important "character distinctions" that prevail across different regions (*voblasts*) of Belarus, believing that the stereotype of calm and disengaged people comes primarily from the Eastern oblasts. In contrast, the Western oblasts tended to be more politically engaged and protest-oriented than the rest of the country.

Although it is largely a speculative dimension that respondents preferred to dismiss from identity-forming discourse, the elements of it relating to the psychological dimension appear important and even more elaborate in the mass media samples. These elements appeared in 13 percent of articles in the *Nasha Niva* sample and in nearly 12 percent of the articles in the RFE/RL sample. In both media outlets, articles attributing certain values to Belarusians can be split into two groups: articles claiming positive distinctive values and traits common to Belarusians, and articles criticizing Belarusians for the lack of specific character features or emphasizing negative traits. Speaking about the latter traits, which were generally rarely mentioned other than the "tolerance myth" referred to above, some *Nasha Niva* authors pointed to individualism, which allegedly is reflected in things such as the inability to share happiness for the achievements of a neighbor, jealousy, or a preference not to get involved in others' problems.

Opinions reflected in the analyzed media outlets also reflected narratives similar to those of the respondents, for example, that Belarusians are people of order, excessively law-abiding, non-violent and peaceful people. In some cases, these qualities were challenged as negative. In others they were framed so as to draw a contrast with neighboring nations by comparing Belarusian "character" with Russian or Ukrainian (Belarusians generally are presented as being "humbler" in such comparisons). Some columnists in *Nasha Niva* supported the generally accepted trait of Belarusians being tolerant, patient, and open to different social groups. Others on the same outlets challenged this "characteristic", calling it a myth, giving as an example the perception of the LGBTI community in the country. The stereotype of a "tolerant nation", also found in the authorities' discourse, was one of those most frequently mentioned in the RFE/RL sample. The columnists criticized this "feature" somewhat and explained it in a rather negative light, presenting it as "tolerance" through patience and making concessions where they should not be made. Some articles directly challenged the trait of "tolerance", ruling it out as a myth not corresponding to actual reality, and argued there was false perception of other potential qualities such as patience and the rather introverted temperament.

It seems that a fairytale about the tolerance of Belarusians was made up by some foreign cultural figure or an ideologist of Soviet times. […] The fact that Belarusians are not waving arms or are being sober and keeping their words to themselves, does not mean that they are tolerant at all. (Kvyatkouski, 2015, RFE/RL sample)

One of the ways subjective closeness was constructed in the mass media was through historical narratives, particularly focusing on the specific sufferings experienced by the Belarusian nation, such as the sufferings from decades of wars and terror in the Soviet era. A few authors of the RFE/RL sample suggested that the subjective closeness of Belarusians could be built around Kurapaty. These authors believed that this page of national tragedy of Belarusian history could unite Belarusians, even those with different political beliefs and attitudes towards the current political regime. This aspect of national trauma combined with the broader experience of Soviet repression and other issues such as the Chernobyl disaster could certainly serve as a narrative which supported the subjective closeness of Belarusians.

The psychological dimension is generally perceived as a speculative dimension of identity. Both the respondents and media outlets tend to reproduce certain stereotypes or what are believed to be "national traits" in a quite similar manner. At the same time, despite the speculative nature pointed out by the respondents, there are a number of narratives around "peacefulness", "tolerance", "stability" and other features-stereotypes that are discussed in the discourse, attempting either to confirm or refute them, and reproduced when probed on this question separately. Regardless of whether negative or positive traits or stereotypes are reflected in the discourse, these are important from the identity-building perspective as they tend to draw a contrast with neighboring countries and constitute distinctiveness. Furthermore, the important psychological aspect of subjective closeness appears in other identity dimensions, as it is particularly connected to the historical dimension, but to different elements in comparison with the authorities' discourse.

4.6. Results of Analysis of Narratives in Unofficial Discourses

Conceptualization of a single unofficial identity model is not possible because the media and interview findings lead to the general conclusion that there is no single identity variant in unofficial discourses which is maintained by people who do not follow official identity narratives. Different combinations coexist in terms of the perception of the group of identity elements. The respondents' views demonstrated the complexity of the identity

topic and a competing understanding of a number of identity elements. Furthermore, this did not always overlap with the discourse observed in the independent media outlets. And the discourse on media outlets also differed, demonstrating that the ontological security aspect cannot be fully comprehended when analyzing only the generalized public discourse at the state level.

While *Nasha Niva* and RFE/RL are both classified as non-governmental media, they tended to prioritize different identity elements. For both outlets (as well as the respondents interviewed), the historical and cultural domains were of key importance, but in the case of *Nasha Niva*, the pro-Belarusian language narratives were dominant and formed a major cluster which was interconnected with almost all other identity attributes across the different dimensions. The pro-Belarusian language narrative coexisted with a neutral perception of the Russian language, which generally did not play any role in identity formation. A similar pattern in terms of the perception of the Belarusian language and its coexistence with the Russian language was observed. Unlike in *Nasha Niva* (see Chart 3), the cluster in RFR/RL (see Chart 4) was the second most dominant, greatly outweighed by the historical dimension, with greater coverage of a range of historical periods. Such a difference suggests that, while the group of columnists in *Nasha Niva* supports the building of a stronger identity distinct from Russia, minimizing ontological anxiety and insecurity through the Belarusian language as a key identity element, the RFE/RL sample was more focused on building distinctiveness through the historical domain, thus conflicting to a greater extent with the identity discourse of the authorities.
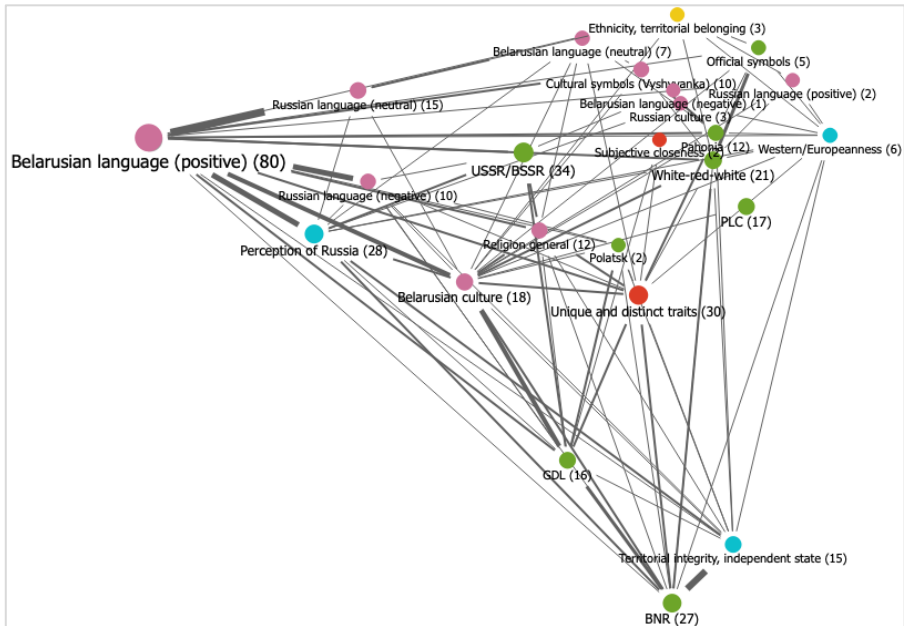
Chart 3. Cluster and code co-occurrence analysis of the *Nasha Niva*.[170]
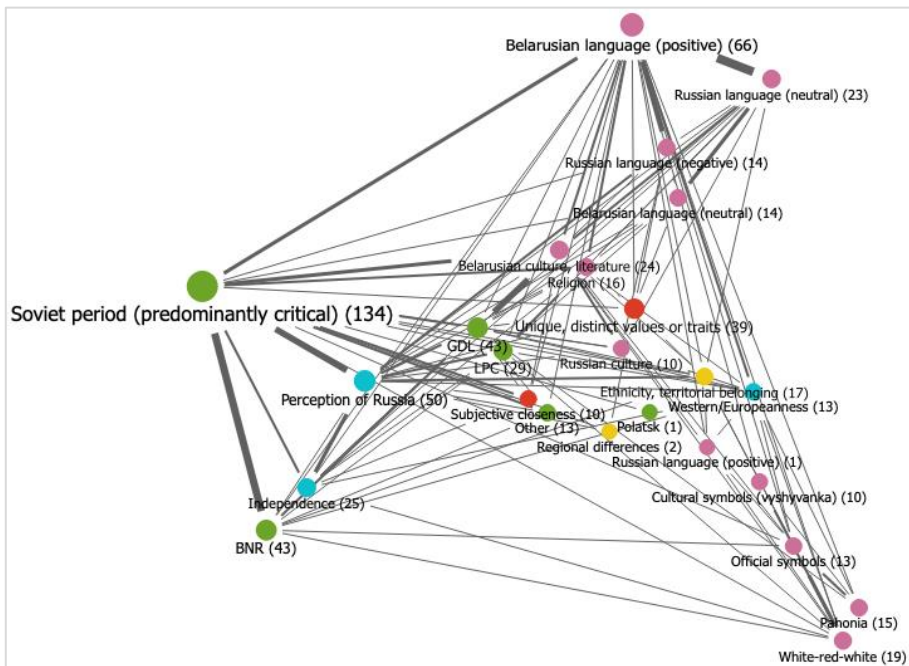
Chart 4. Cluster and code co-occurrence analysis of the RFE/RL.

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[170] Line thickness shows occurrence of codes in the same document (demonstrating interconnection of different narratives); colors indicate elements belonging to different dimensions; font and code size indicate code frequency.

A particularly strong anti-Soviet cluster, which also implied a rather hostile perception of Russia, became a dominant narrative in the RFE/RL sample. Meanwhile, although the Soviet period formed a distinct cluster in the *Nasha Niva* sample, suggesting that the anti-Soviet aspect is an important distinct attribute of the identity they are attempting to construct, it occupied a small share, with the columnists of this outlet being more focused on the linguistic element of the identity narratives, emphasizing more of Belarus' distinctiveness and engaging more in countering pro-Russian narratives which mocked Belarus' identity or propagated ideas of the "Russian World". RFE/RL columnists were more focused and concerned with the historical identity dimension overall, establishing a clear anti-Soviet narrative and, thus, primarily deconstructing the official authorities' historical narratives, while emphasizing pre-Soviet periods in order to establish identity distinctiveness in the cleared space. The experts and political activists interviewed demonstrated at the personal level a variance of views in terms of their assessment of the Soviet period, where the co-existence of different narratives conflicted much more, and was more complex, than observed in either of the media samples.

In terms of other differences in the historical domain, the BNR period, though similarly positively presented, was comparatively less dominant in the RFE/RL sample because of the greater focus there on the GDL and PLC periods. In both outlets the latter period was mainly reflected through the key historical personalities of that time. Overall, the BNR formed strong clusters in both outlets, and both outlets had a particularly strong interconnection with the independent/sovereign state narrative, making this combination of the political and historical narrative one of the biggest distinctions. Belarusian politicians and experts, although they represented different political organizations and ideological views, concurred with the non-governmental media discourse with regard to the BNR assessment, which suggests that this historical formation is the least controversially interpreted by unofficial actors.

The territorial and psychological dimensions are largely dismissed in the independent discourses as identity dimensions which are not significant. This to some extent overlaps with the narratives constructed by the authorities. Moreover, some of their narratives are being replicated (or vice versa) in both discourses. However, it is worth noting some important differences when comparing the dimensions in the two discourses. First, when speaking about the territorial dimension, the aspect of regional differences was proactively addressed by Lukashenka with a note of worry, while it was not addressed at all in the media discourse and was presented as something not threatening by

the interviewed experts and activists. With respect to the psychological dimension, while speaking about the stereotypes and "national character", some of the narratives widespread in the official discourse, particularly those concerning "peace" and "tolerance", were replicated in unofficial discourses. Some non-governmental actors attempted to refute them or present them in a negative light, showing that different social groups of a single country may have different motivations and concerns behind the same narratives from the identity-building perspective.

The analysis of unofficial discourses and views among respondents allows us to conclude that the respondents have different understandings and evaluations of the role of Russian culture and the Russian language, as well as the importance of different historical periods, the Soviet chapter in particular, pointing to the absence of a single and fully consolidated alternative vision of the constructed Belarusian national identity. The only elements that were similarly interpreted at all levels of analysis and which found a clear priority in terms of significance for identity formation was the political element of identification – the existence of a sovereign and independent state. This common focus on the single political element, which can also be attributed to the civic aspect of nationhood, serves in the context of identity discourse as evidence of a blurred line between physical and ontological security as constructed and perceived by non-governmental Belarusian actors.

At the same time, when comparing the political dimension and cultural dimension with the analyzed communications of the authorities, one can already observe a clear and full overlap of at least two narratives. The first is the signification of the existence of an independent state, and second, which is a new overlap – seeing Belarusian language as a distinct feature of identity. Therefore, returning to the OST problem of level of analysis, it is evident that there are multiple identity variants and that, at least a group level, it is important to disclose the full picture of identity construction before examining this at state-level. At the same time, we can observe the existence of narratives that are truly state-level beliefs, which can be seen as meta-narratives representing some of the common identity beliefs at the state level, regardless of the person's affiliation or whether they belonged to government or opposed the authorities' group.

5. IDENTITY BUILDING SOCIAL PRACTICES

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, identity narrative reconstruction takes place in different discourses, where we can clearly see the contradictions and competition of different narratives and identity models that reflect both varying and overlapping ontological security concerns of Belarusian non-governmental and governmental actors. Each discourse has a co-constitutive relationship with social practices, where what is being communicated finds reflection in other forms of communication, including specific actions. Narratives consumed by audiences of those discourses are further reconstructed not only in the discourse, but also in the practical domain, and vice versa – social practices undertaken by different groups tend to reinforce and construct identity narratives.

The analysis of practices focuses on the analysis of changes related to two domains: the cultural domain (namely, the Belarusian language element) and the history domain, where the most of the notable practical changes were observed during the research period. These two domains, as well as the specific areas of focus described in this section, were selected as a result of consistent monitoring of Belarusian media that I conducted between 2015 and 2019, collecting articles that discussed events and actions relating to identity formation. The interviews with experts were also used as a data source, as the experts helped in pointing to specific areas and activities where changes occurred, and to spheres where one might assume that changes occurred in light of the discursive changes discussed in previous chapters.

This section analyzes and evaluates changes in identity-building activities undertaken by three active groups with impact in the country: the authorities (including governmental media and GONGOs), civil society organizations, and private businesses. Since the most overt changes in discourse took place in terms of the changing perceptions and narratives in relation to the Belarusian language, the section will start from an analysis of practical changes in relation to this element. The discursive changes discussed in Chapter 3 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 efforts to popularize and protect the language. Therefore, in the first section of this Chapter, I will analyze the changes mentioned alongside the dynamics of statistics on Belarusian language education and printed materials, assessing, primarily, whether they indicate policy shifts and if and how they helped to address the issue of ontological anxiety.

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the authorities tended largely to avoid any major discursive change of the historical narrative, particularly rethinking and openly revising the Soviet period, which is retained as a central element of the official historical narrative. The analysis of social practices, described in the second section of this Chapter, demonstrated that quite significant changes took place there as well, despite these rather insignificant changes in the discourse. This was particularly true for the historical periods, namely the GDL, that sought to develop a "deep" statehood narrative but were not widely referenced in Lukashenka's or state media communications. The section on history-related social practices also focuses on areas identified via monitoring and interviews that have changed, and will cover aspects of practices related to monuments, changes in official history education, and non-governmental initiatives propagating pre-Soviet historiography.

5.1. Belarusian Language-Related Social 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. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, it became evident that Belarus was in a particularly dangerous position due to the linguistic policy of the Belarusian authorities. Soon after Lukashenka came to power, he organized a referendum in 1995 that granted state-language status to the Russian language, which soon after was perceived as the official political and cultural language of Belarus,[171] with most officials, including Lukashenka himself, using predominantly Russian in their public communications.

With the changing discourse concerning the presentation of the Belarusian language and its role, this trend has been slightly reversed. The first and the most overt practical change in linguistic practice was related to the comparatively more widespread use and demonstration of the Belarusian language in the communications of government officials. One of the earliest and most prominent acts was performed by Lukashenka in 2014, when he delivered a part of his official Independence Day speech in Belarusian. Following this, there were several other instances of Lukashenka speaking in Belarusian, particularly during events where Belarusian national identity had to be stressed, such as the awards ceremony "For Spiritual Revival",[172] or in

[171] Bekus, *'Hybrid' Linguistic Identity*, 26-27, 34.
[172] Наша Ніва, "На цырымоніі ўручэння прэміі «За духоўнае адраджэнне» Лукашэнка выступіў па-беларуску." 2020, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=244104> [2020-11-22]

2019, when paying a visit to Austria, Lukashenka left a note in the Book of the Honorable Austrian Parliament in Belarusian.[173] Following this demonstration of language choice in public communication led by Lukashenka, other public officials followed this path. A number of high-ranking officials up to Prime Minister level[174] spoke Belarusian during public events and interviews, stressing the importance of preserving the Belarusian language and culture. Arguably, this move not only reinforced the newly reconstructed narrative in the official discourse, stressing Belarusian distinctiveness, but also set a path for further depoliticization and subsequent routinization of the language issue, making it an integral part of the reconstructed understanding of the Belarusian "self".

The increased demonstration of the Belarusian language in official communications was coupled with the appointment of Belarusian-speaking government officials, which eventually increased the pool of government representatives that could speak Belarusian in public, and simultaneously served the purpose of demonstrating that the Belarusian language was an attribute of the incumbent government as well, not only the political opposition as it used to be perceived before. Even though this was not a completely new trend and similar kind of appointments were made in 2009–2010,[175] the trend got much stronger in the years 2014–2019, when a series of higher-ranking officials were appointed from the pool of Belarusian speaking public servants. In 2017 Lukashenka appointed Alyaksandr Karlyukevich as Information Minister. The new appointee was known for a rich media record

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[173] БелТА, "Лукашенко встретился с председателем Национального совета Австрии." 2019, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-vstretilsja-s-predsedatelem-natsionalnogo-soveta-avstrii-368837-2019/> [2020-11-22]

[174] Наша Ніва, "Румас і Кавальчук выступаюць па-беларуску." 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=221753> [2020-11-22]

Наша Ніва, "Услед за Румасам на беларускую мову перайшоў і міністр спорту Сяргей Кавальчук: «Я таксама павінен»." 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=221701> [2020-11-22]

Трибуна, "Румас выступил на «Звездном мяче» на белорусском языке: «Ігар Крывушэнка прымусіў нас пахвалявацца, але ў адказны момант яго зборная праявіла характар»." 2018, <https://by.tribuna.com/football/1069346453.html> [2020-11-22]

Наша Ніва, "Пасол у Аўстрыі Алена Купчына дала інтэрв'ю на БТ па-беларуску." 2019, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=240768> [2020-11-22]

[175] Vadzim Smok, "Belarusianization: A New Wave." Eastern Europe Studies Centre, *Bell*, 2010, 3, <https://www.eesc.lt/uploads/news/id387/Bell%2010%20(20)%20(2010).pdf> [2022-0-28]

but more importantly he is a Belarusian-language fiction writer.[176] There were a series of appointments to the country's universities: Dzyanis Duk, described by Lukashenka as a "healthy nationalist", became the rector of Lukashenka's alma mater, Mahilyow State University.[177] Later the same year, the Belarusian speaking historian Iryna Kiturka became Rector of Hrodna University[178]. In 2018 a Belarusian speaker, Natalya Karcheuskaya, became the First Deputy Minister of Culture.[179] Appointments confirming the new trend of elevation of Belarusian-minded people into new positions were made in the Presidential Administration in 2019. In March, the historian Alyaksandr Kanoyka, who defended his Ph.D. in the Belarusian language, became the chief specialist on ideology management.[180] A few months later Lukashenka 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 this appointment of Kuntsevich was made in line with the soft-Belarusization trend.[181]

In the same years, Minsk and other cities of Belarus witnessed a growing number of public signs and directions in the Belarusian language, such as street names, schedules, banners, and advertisements. For instance, in the past, Minsk Airport used to display flight schedules in Russian, English and even Chinese, but since 2018 the Belarusian language has been included.[182] The names of geographical locations have also been transliterated into English

[176] Павел Мицкевич, "Новым министром информации Беларуси стал Александр Карлюкевич - белорусскоязычный писатель." *Комсомольская Правда в Беларуси*, 2017, <https://www.kp.by/online/news/2882763/> [2020-11-22]

[177] Наша Ніва, "«Здаровы нацыяналіст» Дзяніс Дук узначаліў ВНУ, якую скончыў Лукашэнка." 2017, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=198204> [2020-11-22]

[178] Наша Ніва, "Рэктарам Гродзенскага ўніверсітэта стала беларускамоўны гісторык." 2017, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=201494> [2020-11-22]

[179] Радыё Свабода, "Новая намесьніца міністра культуры – беларускамоўная харэограф і кандыдат мастацтвазнаўства." 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29598232.html> [2020-11-22]

[180] Наша Ніва, "Галоўным спецыялістам упраўлення ідэалогіі Адміністрацыі прэзідэнта стаў гісторык, які абараніў дысертацыю па-беларуску." 2019, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=228168> [2020-11-22]

[181] Пётр Рудковский, "Новый идеолог: либерал, поэт, симпатик белорусизации." *Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies*, 2019, <https://belinstitute.com/be/article/novyy-ideolog-liberal-poet-simpatik-belorusizacii> [2020-11-22]

[182] Наша Ніва, "У аэрапорце Мінска нарэшце з'явіўся расклад па-беларуску." 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=202827> [2020-11-22]

from the Belarusian form[183] in contrast to the previous practice of using transliteration from the Russian. In relation to online space, in response to an inquiry from the opposition,[184] starting in January 2019 state entities were legally obliged to publish certain aspects of information on their websites in the Belarusian language, including information about the relevant entity, appeals, services, and contact form.[185] From the perspective of ontological security, as Mitzen argued, social practices define actual society, and its continuation depends on the reproduction of these practices, suggesting that routines are what constitute society and stabilize the individual identities of its members.[186] The growing public display of the Belarusian language served a purpose similar to the broader use of the language by officials. It naturalized and, importantly, routinized the use of this identity element, not just ensuring the display of distinctiveness by showcasing a unique feature in public, but also making this element, which was new for the authorities' group, a part of the larger biographical narrative, where language is constantly reinstated in public practice and individual behavior, encouraging ontological security at both the state and individual-group levels, and leading to a more stable sense of identity.

The use of the Belarusian language in parliamentary work, including the issue of legal acts in the Belarusian language, remained extremely scarce. The percentage of legislative documents issued in the Belarusian language stayed at roughly 3 percent.[187] Despite this quantity, several important pieces of legislation were translated into the Belarusian language following the order given by Lukashenka in 2019. An Expert Council on the translation of legislation was created, which since 2019 has already approved the translation

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[183] Андрей Дроб, "«Строго следуем букве закона». Минский метрополитен — о транслитерации на информационных указателях." «Минск-Новости», 2020, <https://minsknews.by/strogo-sleduem-bukve-zakona-minskij-metropoliten-o-transliteraczii-na-informaczionnyh-ukazatelyah/> [2020-11-22]

[184] Радыё Свабода, "Сайты дзяржаўных арганізацыяў перакладуць на беларускую." 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29251835.html> [2020-11-22]

[185] Национальный правовой Интернет-портал Республики Беларусь, "О внесении изменения и дополнений в Положение о порядке функционирования интернет-сайтов государственных органов и организаций." 2017, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=C21700797&p1=1> [2020-11-22]

[186] Mitzen, 348.

[187] Наша Ніва, "Мінюст пярэчыць словам дэпутата Місько: прымаць законапраекты на дзвюх дзяржаўных мовах можна." 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=205539> [2020-11-22]

of large pieces of legislation,[188] including the Electoral Code, Civic Code, and Labor Code. As of November 2021, out of 26 codes, 11 codes had been translated.[189] This process of translation of legislation into Belarusian was not terminated even after the events in 2020, with the government planning the further translation of Codes for 2022.

Overall, Belarusian officials seem to have treated the new meaning of the Belarusian language as an important characteristic of Belarusian national identity in both the discourse and social practices after 2014. This contributed towards greater significance being accorded to the Belarusian language, as well as the routinization of its use, particularly within their own group. Routinization in the form of the public display of the language and its use in official communication, especially when the language was spoken by high-ranking government officials, removed the "opposition" label from it, making it a catch-all identity element appealing to all groups in society. In addition, as pointed out earlier in this article, the context of hybrid threats and fears of a Crimea scenario, served as evidence for the potential motivation of the authorities to draw a greater distinctiveness for their constructed national identity, in order to minimize Russian influence over society, and importantly, over Belarusian officials as well, who had for years been influenced by pro-Russian attitudes and views from the regime itself.

This new role assigned to the Belarusian language was also documented in the country's strategic documents. In March 2019, Belarus published the Concept of Informational Security. This document included a separate section on values and established practices. The Belarusian language was named in it, along with bilingualism, as a factor facilitating the rise of the national consciousness and spirituality of Belarusian society, while the development of the Belarusian language was described as the "guarantor of the humanitarian security of the state."[190] Following the adoption of the document, in an interview with *TUT.by*, the State Secretary of the Security Council, Stanislau Zas', outlined the government policy position. He claimed that the authorities did not aim to enforce the Belarusian language but strived

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[188] БелТА, "Избирательный кодекс и Кодекс о браке и семье переведены на белорусский язык." 2019, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/izbiratelnyj-kodeks-i-kodeks-o-brake-i-semje-perevedeny-na-belorusskij-jazyk-367625-2019/> [2020-11-22]

[189] Национальный правовой Интернет-портал Республики Беларусь, "11 кодексов переведено на белорусский язык." 2021, <https://pravo.by/novosti/analitika/2021/november/67463/> [2021-12-30]

[190] Национальный правовой Интернет-портал Республики Беларусь, *О Концепции информационной безопасности Республики Беларусь.*

to make it popular and trendy in the population, particularly among the younger generation.[191] This case was one of the most overt instances when the Belarusian language was, first of all, documented as a distinct identity element, and, most importantly, declared as a national security issue in strategic documents, being portrayed extremely clearly as a security issue which was of concern to the government.

Belarusian speakers and Lukashenka's opponents have frequently referred to the de-belarusification of the Belarusian education system. The official statistics suggest that this trend of declining Belarusian-language education has continued despite the more overt declaratory use of the language by the government. More importantly, socioeconomic processes ongoing in the country in the last decade, such as the urbanization of the population, heavily influenced the possibility of effective implementation of soft measures, while the authorities are reluctant to adopt reforms, as the latter would showcase a clear preference for the Belarusian language, thus undermining the narrative of the bilingual nation constructed by Lukashenka, not to speak of potential criticisms coming from neighboring Russia.

The use of Russian language in pre-school and secondary school education is predominant across all regions of the country, ranging according to the region from 84.3 to 96.5 percent of children for pre-school education[192] and from 79.9 to 97.9 percent of children in secondary schools.[193] Meanwhile, the number of schools with Belarusian language education is in sharp decline and decreased by almost five hundred between 2012 and 2018 (from 1,764 to 1,282). Experts believe the situation could be even worse, given that some schools maintain the language status simply as a formality.[194] The vast majority of pre-school and secondary schools in the Belarusian language are in rural areas. Roughly 90 percent of children get pre-school education in the Russian language in Belarus. However, at the same time more than half the children in rural areas study in Belarusian. As for secondary education, over 90 percent of the Belarusian-language schools are located in rural areas while the same overwhelming percentage of Russian language schools is located in

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[191] Артем Шрайбман, "Госсекретарь Совбеза: Зачем чиновнику согласовывать с начальством появление в СМИ?" *TUT.BY*, 2019, <https://news.tut.by/economics/630845.html> [2019-05-25]

[192] National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus, "Education in the Republic of Belarus." *Statistical book*, Minsk, 2019. [2020-11-22]

[193] *Ibid*.

[194] Радыё Свабода, "Мінус 482. Як скарачалася колькасьць беларускамоўных школаў." 2020, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30477770.html> [2020-07-01]

urban areas. As urbanization takes place, the number of Belarusian language schools is decreasing, while the number of Russian language schools and students is gradually increasing, as in rural areas. The overall number of facilities in rural areas has been decreasing along with the overall number of children there. For illustrative reasons, between 2012 and 2018 the number of pre-school facilities in rural areas decreased by 323, while in urban areas it increased by 62. As for schools, the number decreased from 2,094 to 1,614 in rural areas, while it remained nearly the same in urban areas, decreasing only from 1,448 to 1,421.[195]

As for higher education, the number of students studying in the Belarusian language is marginal and constitutes only around 300 people (academic year 2018/2019), while the number of students studying in two languages remains at around 40 percent of the total number of students. Despite these pessimistic statistics, an important change in terms of Belarusian language perception has occurred in academia. In 2019, independent media reported that one of the candidates in the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs defended their thesis in the Belarusian language.[196] Several years ago that story would have been surprising. However, the experts interviewed stressed that academia has been undergoing quite significant changes in terms of the Belarusian language within university walls. One of the interviewees argued that the use of the Belarusian language is much more widespread and common among academic staff now than it was several years ago when academics were consciously limiting use of the Belarusian language inside academic walls, as it could have been interpreted as a political act. Paradoxically, it appears that the element of potential insecurity (the risk of being labeled and prosecuted as an opposition member) has disappeared, suggesting the depoliticization and routinization of the language which was discussed previously in this work has already taken place.

While the government is largely failing to provide access to Belarusian-language education and to promote its popularization, primary and secondary education in the Belarusian language has become a challenge for those parents who want their children to study in Belarusian but are ignored by the government in response.[197] Civil society has therefore taken the lead in

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[195] National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus, *Education in the Republic of Belarus*.

[196] Наша Ніва, "«Воспользовался конституционным правом»: в Академии МВД прошла защита диссертации по-белорусски." 2019, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=223783&lang=ru> [2020-11-22]

[197] Наша Ніва, "Мінадукацыі — беларускамоўным бацькам: Варта пачынаць з сябе." 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=206186> [2020-11-22]

providing accessible 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 classes online.[198] Belarusian language promotion and advocacy campaigns also spread to the private sector. A few well-known companies, such as the mobile provider "Velcom"[199] and gas station network "A-100",[200] increased their efforts to introduce more of the Belarusian language into their operations, and to offer campaigns for Belarusian speakers, and so on. Even state-owned businesses, like the watch factory "Luch", adjusted their production to meet the expectations of Belarusian-speaking customers.[201] In this case, businesses had a twofold intention, as the interviewed experts argued. Some firms were genuinely interested in the promotion of the Belarusian language on the values level, while others were 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 reinforced the growing trend of Belarusian language popularization and point to the same conclusion that there was a clear demand for more of the Belarusian language in Belarusian society which the authorities could not resist, not to mention the argument for strengthening elements of pro-Belarusian identity.

The tendencies in relation to Belarusian-language printed material were (without going into the reasons behind this) somewhat similar to the situation with Belarusian-language education. Belarusian-language literature has reached a marginal level compared with the Russian language printed matter. At the same time, the situation with book and brochure publishing discloses a positive trend in terms of Belarusian language growth, as the number and volume of Belarusian books reached its highest number in 2018-2019 since at

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[198] KYKY.org, "Теперь беларуский язык можно учить онлайн и бесплатно. Больше никаких отговорок!" 2020, <https://kyky.org/news/teper-belaruskiy-yazyk-mozhno-uchit-onlayn-i-besplatno-bolshe-nikakih-otgovorok> [2020-11-22]

[199] Белсат, "Прочитай стихотворение на белорусском языке и получи «iPhone»." 2017, <https://naviny.belsat.eu/ru/news/prochitaj-stihotvorenie-na-belorusskom-yazyke-i-poluchi-iphone/> [2022-09-18]

[200] Хартыя'97, "Сеть заправок А-100 официально подтвердила переход на белорусский язык." 2015, <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2015/1/8/134338/> [2022-09-18]

[201] Наша Ніва, "Паглядзіце, якую прыгажосць выпусціў "Луч"! ФОТЫ новай калекцыі, прысвечанай беларускай мове." 2019, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=225726> [2020-11-22]

least 2010, despite the decrease in the overall number of books and brochures in the country. However, given the current ratio of Russian-to-Belarusian publishing, publishing in Belarusian remains at a very low level.
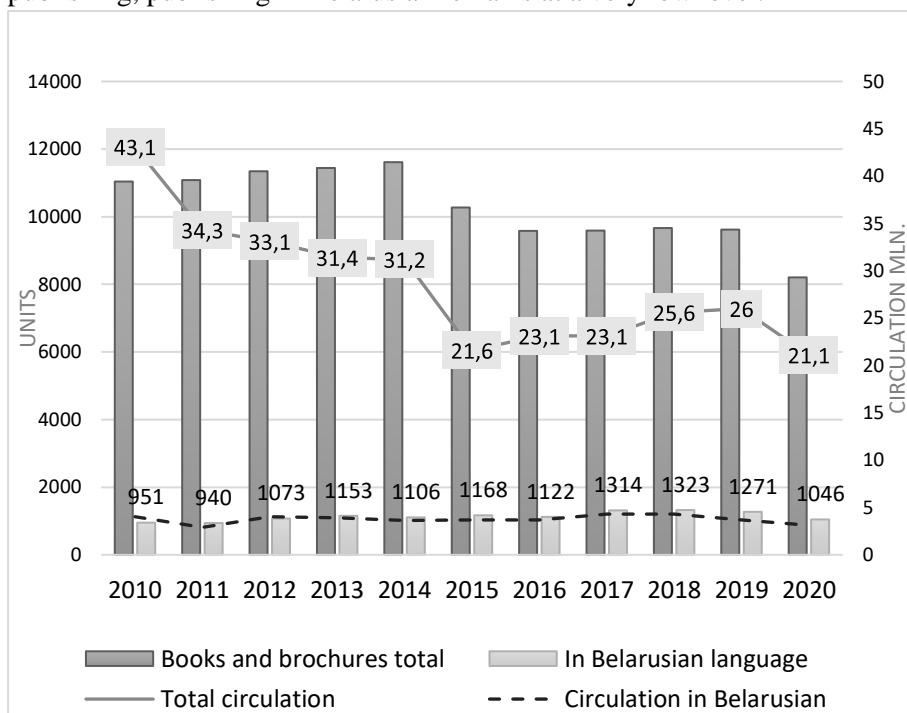
Chart 5. Circulation of printed material: total vs Belarusian language.[202]

While the authorities refrained from changing negative trends in language education and making significant policy decisions, potentially for fear of undermining the bilingual nation narrative constructed by Lukashenka or else fearing direct criticism and counter-action from neighboring Russia, civil society in Belarus played a key role in shaping national identity through initiatives to popularize the Belarusian language, and through language protection activities, the organization of cultural and historical events, and creation of new trends. The most prominent campaigns popularizing the Belarusian language were initiated by independent groups and associations, musicians, artists, and others. The experts interviewed unanimously highlighted the role of civil society organizations, such as the aforementioned *Mova Nanova* and *Budzma Belarusami* and *Art Siadziba*, acknowledging their significant contribution to the promotion of Belarusian culture and language.

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[202] Национальная книжная палата Беларуси, "Печать Беларуси в цифрах." 2020, <https://natbook.org.by/index.php?id=32> [2021-12-30]

Another important trend in relation to Belarusian language practices concerns the protection of the status of the Belarusian language and the relative responsiveness of the authorities to activists and initiatives, such as *Umovy dlya Movy*[203] ("Conditions for the [Belarusian] Language"), that protect the rights of Belarusian language speakers. For instance, a former employee of the Ministry of Defense was made administratively accountable for sharing insults directed against the Belarusian language on his Facebook account.[204] In December 2019, there was a high-profile case when the insults of an IT worker directed against the Belarusian language became the subject of an administrative case and led to the termination of her contract (reportedly for violation of the company's policy) in a reputable IT company.[205] In a similar vein, the authorities took direct action against Russian sources maliciously posting about Belarusian identity, by blocking sites such as *Sputnik i Pogrom*.[206] Furthermore, a few years ago, a prominent case was opened against *Regnum* columnists,[207] who were accused of inciting hatred towards Belarusian identity, including the language. In the court hearings, the prosecutor detailed the accusations, which included denying the historical heritage of the GDL and diminishing the importance of the Belarusian language, among other things.[208]

In light of the practices mentioned above, one of the major questions that arises is what is the actual perception of the Belarusian language in society? According to the 2009 census, 53 percent of all Belarusian citizens declared Belarusian as their mother language. In 2019 another census kicked off in the

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[203] Умовы для мовы! Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/pg/umovymovy/> [2021-12-30]

[204] Наша Ніва, "74-гадовага экс-работніка Міністэрства абароны пакараюць за абразу беларускай мовы." 2020, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=248860> [2020-11-22]

[205] Татьяна Карюхина, "Тестировщица, которая оскорбила мову в соцсети, больше не работает в EPAM." *Dev.by*, 2020, <https://dev.by/news/mova> [2020-11-22]

[206] Министерство Информации Республики Беларусь, "Доступ к интернет-сайту sputnikipogrom.com ограничен." 2017, <http://www.mininform.gov.by/ru/news-ru/view/dostup-k-internet-sajtu-sputnikipogromcom-ogranichen-603/> [2017-06-18]

[207] Татьяна Мельничук, "За что в Белоруссии арестовали пророссийских блогеров?" *Би-би-си*, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/russian/features-38276394> [2017-06-18]

[208] Vadzim Smok, "Pro-Russian bloggers sentenced: Belarus draws red lines in propaganda war." *Belarus Digest*, 2018, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/pro-russian-bloggers-sentenced-belarus-draws-red-lines-in-propaganda-war/> [2020-11-22]

country and several independent organizations were advocating boosting this number by naming Belarusian as their mother language. Soon after the census ended, before announcing the official results, Belarusian officials already disclosed that the number of Belarusian citizens considering their mother language to be Belarusian had,[209] according to the census, increased to 61.2 percent of ethnic Belarusians.[210] The controversy concerning the mother tongue in the census questionnaire lies in its definition of how the mother tongue is described – the first language learned in childhood.[211] At home a majority of the total Belarusian population still speaks Russian (71.4 percent) as against nearly 26 percent speaking Belarusian (2020).[212] At the same time, 54.1 percent of the total population indicate Belarusian as their mother tongue and 84.9 percent (3.7 percent increase compared to 1999) consider their nationality as Belarusian.[213] This trend, and the absence of further decline (as compared to 1999), allow one to argue that, while the majority are not speaking Belarusian at home, many Belarusians still use the Belarusian language as an important marker for self-identification.

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[209] Наша Ніва, "Белстат: Цифры о популярности белорусского языка значительно выше, чем 10 лет назад." 2020, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=246424&lang=ru> [2020-11-22]

[210] Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, "Общая численность населения, численность населения по возрасту и полу, состоянию в браке, уровню образования, национальностям, языку, источникам средств к существованию по Республике Беларусь." Minsk, 2020, 36.

[211] BelarusFeed, "OPINION: Census 2019 Or What Is Wrong with The Mother Tongue Question." 2019, <https://belarusfeed.com/opinion-belarus-census-2019-language-question/> [2020-11-22]

[212] Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, *Общая численность населения*, 44.

[213] *Ibid*, 31-32, 44.
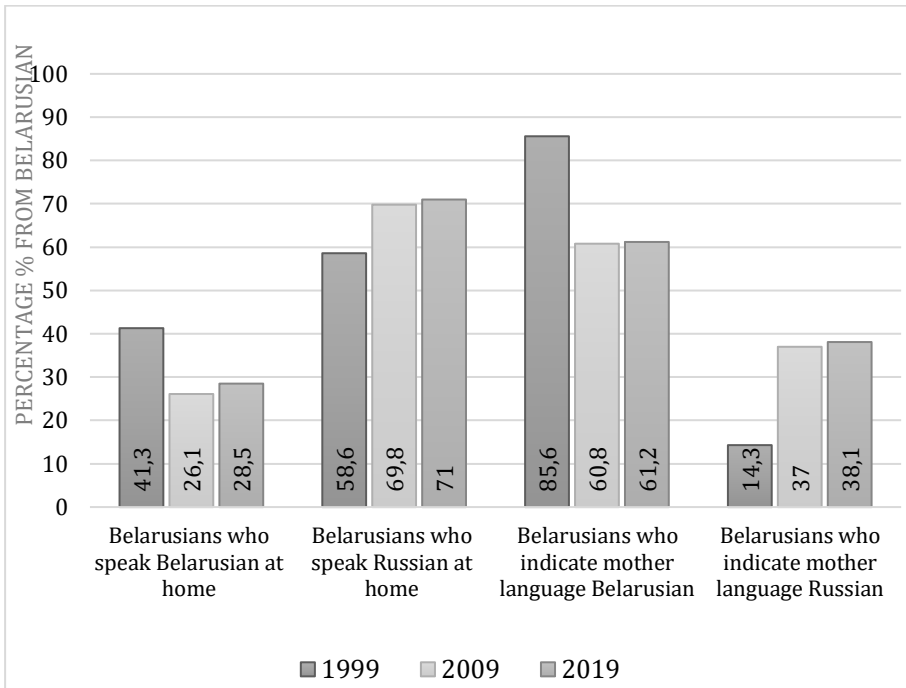
Chart 6. Language choice within the share of the population, who identify themselves as Belarusians.[214]

During the 2019 census, Lukashenka completed the census questionnaire in the Russian language, but indicated the Belarusian language as his mother tongue,[215] highlighting the identificatory function of the latter. A somewhat similar tendency also appeared as a pattern in the interviews with Belarusian politicians and experts, who tended to believe that it was not about knowing the language but mainly about recognizing the importance of both Belarusian culture and language and respecting them, meaning that it was not essential to know the language but was far more important to respect it, thereby showing pro-Belarusian consciousness. This argument can also be supported by the independent polling data. A non-governmental survey on Belarusian values conducted in 2018 demonstrated that 65.9 percent of Belarusians would like their children to speak Belarusian as well as they speak Russian, and 86.1 percent considered the Belarusian language to be the "most important part of

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[214] Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, *Общая численность населения*, 36.

[215] БелТА, "Лукашенко принял участие в переписи населения Беларуси." 2019, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-prinjal-uchastie-v-perepisi-naselenija-belarusi-366639-2019/> [2020-11-22]

[Belarusian] culture and must be preserved."[216] This data suggests that, from a certain angle, the routinization of the language by the authorities was inevitable. Even though Belarus is an authoritarian regime which is not accountable to the electorate, the moods of today's society are important to consider even for an authoritarian ruler, who wants to ensure his personal longevity and his place in a changing society. From this perspective, Lukashenka and his group were forced to try to adapt to society's demands, which he clearly displayed when indicating his mother language during the census, so as, first of all, to be seen as a part of the broader Belarus narrative and ensure his personal ontological security and continuity in the changing society and its elements of identity.

To summarize this section, several important changes have taken place in terms of the change in the practical use of the Belarusian language. The authorities have not taken policy measures or practical steps to reverse the negative trends relating to Belarusian language education. In the absence of policies, in line with the changes of discourse, between 2014 and 2019 the authorities signified the role and importance of the Belarusian language as an identity building element by showcasing this attribute in their public communications. Simultaneously, the government officials, at least at certain levels, backed civil society initiatives for the protection of the Belarusian language and did not interfere with initiatives that popularized the Belarusian language and culture, at least before the events in 2020, when they started looking with hostility at every independent initiative, regardless of its activities.

When looking into these processes through a constructivist lens, the significance of these language-related social practices is relatively high. Symbolic acts before the 2020 protests, such as Lukashenka speaking Belarusian, reversed the patterns established previously and assigned new meanings and perceptions to this identity element in the eyes of the public. Importantly, it also familiarized the Belarusian language for Lukashenka's group – the officials and other government representatives, as well as the society as a whole. The Belarusian language was portrayed in such a light as an important distinct identity attribute of a distinct Belarusian identity, and such a view found support within Belarusian society, which subsequently contributed to a decrease in ontological insecurity at the state level and

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[216] Исследовательский центр ИПМ, "Опрос. Изучение ценностей белорусского общества." *Кастрычніцкі эканамічны форум (KEF)*, 2018, <http://kef.by/publications/research/opros-izuchenie-tsennostey-belorusskogo-obshchestva/> [2020-11-22]

consequently a greater consolidation of pro-Belarusian identity narratives overall.

The targeted and mainly declaratory nature of the official changes, which were not supported 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 instrumentalizing civil society. This means that their implemented changes had a practical and instrumental motivation, and in the face of the changing context and challenges of preserving power, further shifts in relation to the perception of the Belarusian language can be expected.

5.2. Revisiting Practices Related to the History of Belarus

Belarus' neighbor, Russia, is also known for the propagation of its historical narratives in the region, particularly those related to the Soviet Union and World War 2. 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."[217] Therefore, the interpretation of Belarusian history, particularly in relation to its statehood, became another area of concern of the Belarusian authorities and non-governmental actors, as it became one of the potential vulnerabilities to Russian influence, given the constructed centrality of the Soviet past in the official identity construction process. History teaching in Belarus has undergone multiple stages and changes in the past few decades. Therefore, before embarking on the analysis of historical periods and narratives replicated in social practices, it is important to give an overview of the most recent changes in history education, including the official policy guidelines for historical narration of Belarusian statehood.

In the existing literature, scholars researching history education identified multiple stages, from a highly Soviet-centric approach to more moderate stances towards the previous periods.[218] In the years 2018-2019, a new curriculum and a university course entitled "History of Belarusian

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[217] Ivo Juurvee, Māris Cepurītis, Ieva Bērziņa, Diana Kaljula, "Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment 2016/2017." *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2018, 9, 44-45, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-footprint-in-the-nordic-baltic-information-environment-20162017/138> [2022-09-28]

[218] Vladimiras Snapkovskis, "Pagrindiniai Baltarusijos Respublikos istorijos politikos raidos etapai ir tendencijos." In *Lietuvos ir Baltarusijos istorijos politika* (editors: Raimundas Lopata, Inga Vinogradnaitė) (Vilnius: Vilniaus Universitetas, 2016), 12-55.

Statehood" was developed, which replaced the previous course "History of Belarus". This could mark a new stage of history education in the country. The old course on Belarusian history at universities was taught for 34 hours, while the new course is larger in volume (54 hours).[219] The central piece of the study materials for the new course, as pro-governmental historians called the "innovative teaching", was a schoolbook with a similar title.[220] Two important changes stemmed from this development. First, under the supervision of the authorities, the official historians attempted to refine the official teaching of Belarusian history once again. Second, as those pro-government historians-authors of the book note, "…For the first time in historiography, Belarusian scholars analyzed the first settlements on Belarusian lands, the tribal principalities, and the first historical forms of Belarusian statehood", in which these historians include the Principality of Polatsk and Principality of Turau, Kyivan Rus, the GDL, and the PLC.[221] The authors of the book – historians promoting the official discourse, argue in the preface that their concept assumes that Belarusian statehood is continuous, and Belarus is a co-owner and co-establisher of the multiple historical formations mentioned above.[222]

In the meantime, the independent Belarusian scholar Lastouski analyzed school textbooks published between 2016 and 2018, and observed a similar tendency of "an increasing trend to derive the origins of Belarusian statehood from the history of the Principality of Polatsk, as well as emphasizing the Belarusian character of the GDL," which, he argues, "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."[223] While this

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[219] Наша Ніва, "Шесть часов на президента, восемь — на ВКЛ: каким будет новый вузовский курс «История белорусской государственности»." 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=218519&lang=ru> [2020-11-22]

[220] БелТА, "Ученые завершили работу над учебником по истории белорусской государственности." 2019, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/uchenye-zavershili-rabotu-nad-uchebnikom-po-istorii-belorusskoj-gosudarstvennosti-374119-2019/> [2020-11-22]

[221] BelTA, "Book about Belarusian statehood history launched in Minsk", 2019, <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/book-about-belarusian-statehood-history-launched-in-minsk-117998-2019/> [2020-11-22]

[222] НАН Беларуси, *История белорусской государственности. Том первый. Белорусская государственность: от истоков до конца XVIII в.* (Минск: Беларуская навука), 2018, 6.

[223] Aliaksei Lastouski, "Return of the "Long Genealogy" to School Textbooks on the History of Belarus." *Ideology and Education in Post-Soviet Countries*, Issue №2(13), 2019, 185.

represents a 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, from an ontological standpoint this demonstrates that the Belarus' statehood is longer than Russia's and, in view of the periods referred to, particularly the GDL and PLC, it constructs historically hostile perceptions of Russia as a neighbor.

In the context of public communications, the GDL and Polatsk Duchy periods were rarely brought up in the discourse by the authorities. However, it was mainly these pre-Soviet periods that were boosted in contemporary history teaching and a number of remarkable social practices related to these periods took place. The Polatsk legacy was showcased not only in education but also by building monuments. In addition, the GDL narrative began appearing in the form of monuments and reconstruction of castles. In recent years, the narrative has become even stronger with the appearance across the country of a series of monuments honoring GDL leaders: for Duke Algirdas (Algerd) in Viciebsk, Vytautas (Vitaut) in Hrodna, Gediminas (Gedimin) in Lida,[224] Leonas Sapiega (Leu Sapieha) in Slonim.[225] In 2020 it was announced that a monument to the GDL Statute will appear in Minsk.[226] Although some of these monuments were initiated by civil society and sponsored by non-governmental funds,[227] the authorities still did not forbid their erection. The reference to the medieval past and pre-Soviet statehood of the country was particularly visible during the 2019 European Games, which were widely promoted by the authorities as they were hosted by Belarus for the first time. The authorities used this event 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 the GDL and the

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[224] Наша Ніва, "Помнік Гедыміну ў Лідзе адкрылі пад дзяржаўнымі і нацыянальнымі сцягамі." 2019, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=236912> [2020-11-22]

[225] Радыё Свабода, "Ад Скарыны да Касьцюшкі. Каму з гістарычных асобаў паставілі помнікі у сучаснай Беларусі." 2019, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29979509.html> [2020-11-22]

[226] Еўрарадыё, "У Мінску з'явіцца помнік Статуту ВКЛ і Канстытуцыі Беларусі." 2020, <https://euroradio.fm/u-minsku-zyavicca-pomnik-statutu-vkl-i-kanstytucyi-belarusi> [2020-11-22]

[227] Алесь Дашчынскі, "«Рашэньне пра фінансаваньне прынялі цягам дня». Спонсар расказаў, чаму вырашыў падарыць Лідзе помнік Гедзіміну." *Радыё Свабода*, 2019, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30121848.html> [2020-11-22]

preceding periods.[228] The phone survey commissioned by OSW in 2020 found that more Belarusians believed that their state should draw on the traditions of the GDL (39.7 percent) than the Soviet Union – 28 percent.[229] The polling data again points to the same assumption as with the Belarusian language, that the motives behind the introduction of this "deeper" historical narrative could be twofold: first, establishing a greater distinctiveness for Belarusian national identity and thus addressing ontological weakness, but secondly, this could be a reaction to changing social preferences to ensure one's own continuity in the changing society, for which an old Soviet-centric narrative clearly cannot work and serve as an element attractive to all groups.

The experts interviewed argued that the authorities were attempting to balance relations with Russia and, thus, they largely refrained from open actions in relation to the promotion of pro-Belarusian national identity and deferred to civil society in this regard. Civil society and its activities were sometimes seen as serving not only the public interest but also in these particular circumstances the interest of the incumbent authorities. Therefore, after the emergence of soft-Belarusization, the authorities provided greater space for civil society and the political parties to act, which included the provision of legal registration, permissions for various events, and even the erection of monuments. The highlight of indirect support and, at the same time, the demonstration of the limits for domestic political opponents was the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the BNR, which was legally permitted by Minsk authorities even though the BNR period had been the most controversially described historical period in their public communications, and the anniversary was organized by civil society and oppositions activists.

Lukashenka embraced the idea of the formation of a modern independent state in that brief period. On the other hand, he accused the founders of the BNR of collaborating with hostile regimes.[230] Similarly, there was no consistency in terms of policy towards the BNR, as both positive and negative actions and statements from the authorities occurred during the period

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[228] Наша Ніва, "Погоня, Витовт, Шагал, Быков. Вы не поверите, но все это было на открытии Европейских игр." 2019, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=232583&lang=ru> [2020-11-22]

[229] Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), *Belarusians on Poland, Russia and themselves*.

[230] БелТА, "Лукашенко о БНР: необходимо знать правду о тех событиях, но гордиться ими не стоит." 2018, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-o-bnr-neobhodimo-znat-pravdu-o-teh-sobytijah-no-gorditsja-imi-ne-stoit-294905-2018/> [2019-05-25]

analyzed. Amid this indecisiveness, prior to the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the BNR (celebrated on March 25, 2018), the Presidential Administration appealed to the Academy of Sciences with a request to clarify the role of the BNR in the history of Belarus. The Academy of Sciences did not reveal the details of their response but directed journalists to the position outlined in the "History of the Belarusian Statehood" mentioned above, the authors of which take a so-called nationally oriented position, seeing it as a very significant event attempting to create a Belarusian statehood.[231] Prior to the 100th anniversary of the BNR, a couple of important events took place in Belarus. In the Minsk Park of Yanka Kupala a memorial stone dedicated to the brothers Lutskevich, founders of the national movement of the early 20th century, was erected.[232] A number of state entities were involved in this initiative, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the House of Representatives. The monument was financed by the Minsk authorities.[233] In the same year, the National History Museum hosted an exhibition dedicated to the anniversary of the BNR, exhibiting BNR maps, documents, and a number of other items from that period. A number of government-led bodies, including the Central Archive of the KGB, helped to prepare the exhibition project.[234] Shortly after Freedom Day, the exhibition "Code 25.03.18" was held in the Republican Arts Gallery of the Belarusian Union of Artists, showcasing founders of the BNR.[235] The authorities also allowed the large-scale 100th anniversary of the BNR to take place in Minsk, which was primarily organized and led by civil society and the opposition, and attracted

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[231] Intex Press, "Администрация Президента направляла запрос в Академию наук о роли БНР и приняла позицию национально-ориентированных историков." 2018, <https://www.intex-press.by/2018/03/01/administratsiya-prezidenta-napravlyala-zapros-v-akademiyu-nauk-o-roli-bnr-i-prinyala-pozitsiyu-natsionalno-orientirovannyh-istorikov/> [2019-05-25]

[232] Наша Ніва, "В Минске началось празднование 100-летия провозглашения БНР: установлен памятный знак в честь братьев Луцкевичей." 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=206146&lang=ru> [2019-05-25]

[233] Сяргей Абламейка, "Пляменьніца Луцкевічаў: устаноўку памятнага каменя ў Менску арганізавалі ўлады Беларусі." Радыё Свабода, 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29086555.html> [2019-05-25]

[234] Захар Щербаков, "«Первые шаги на пути независимости». К столетию БНР в Минске открылась выставка." *Naviny.by*, 2018, <https://naviny.by/article/20180314/1521046150-pervye-shagi-na-puti-nezavisimosti-k-stoletiyu-bnr-v-minske-otkryla> [2019-05-25]

[235] Наша Ніва, "В Минске проходит выставка «Код: 25.03.18», посвящённая 100-летию провозглашения независимости БНР." 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=207577&lang=ru> [2019-05-25]

tens of thousands of people.[236] However, just a year before, in 2017, amid the "social parasite" protests, Freedom Day turned into a big crackdown by the authorities on peaceful protesters.[237] The subsequent rallies on Freedom Day did not enjoy the government's support either, proving that the authorities continued to maintain a strict line dividing identity building activities undertaken by non-governmental actors and their political actions. In 2020, a whole new chapter in terms of social practices and symbols in relation to the BNR, namely the white-red-white flag of the BNR, was opened, which falls outside this research period but is briefly discussed in the conclusions.

As for the Soviet period, a couple of overt and important changes were observed in relation to the rituals and symbols of the Soviet era, which remained central in the regime's discourse. First, the Belarusian authorities made an attempt to "nationalize" the role of the USSR and tried to present this period from a more Belarusian angle rather than following the broad "Great Victory" narrative as it appears in Russia. Second, the authorities, in a very limited way and rather sporadically, began admitting one the negative sides of the Soviet period, the Soviet repressions, but kept this issue away from any bigger politicization, thus frustrating the democratic forces' efforts to properly commemorate the victims.

Lukashenka continued to praise May 9, which he portrayed as one of the major events for the development of statehood. May 9 is one of the most important events in the Russian Federation, which has its own widespread symbols and customs. Understanding that, Belarus' authorities have taken several steps not only in the discourse but also in practice to adopt May 9 in a way which adds more Belarusian consciousness to the practices and rituals surrounding this date. And these steps were not limited to Lukashenka turning down invitations to May 9 parades in Moscow. First, the authorities gradually replaced the controversial St. George's Ribbon, which became a symbol of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, and on a massive scale introduced the Belarusian red-green ribbon as the replacement of this Russian military symbol. Some of the customs, such as the "Immortal Regiment" march, a procession where people carry portraits of relatives who participated in World War 2, were either replaced by similar processions titled

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[236] Ольга Шукайло, "День Воли в Минске: задержания, тысячи людей у театра, БЧБ-флаги только до ограждений." *TUT.BY*, 2018, <https://news.tut.by/economics/586290.html> [2019-05-25]

[237] Татьяна Мельничук, "Протесты в День Воли в Минске: сотни задержанных." *Би-би-си*, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-39393401> [2019-05-25]

"Belarus Remembers",[238] or even banned when organized by openly pro-Russian forces.[239] As such, these were small adjustments, but conversely, they can be seen as a manifestation of high ontological anxiety with respect to Russia's influence through common historical narratives and rituals.

As for the repressions and that side of the Soviet history of Belarus, one of the most critical pages is Kurapaty, a place where, according to historians, over 100,000 NKVD victims are buried.[240] Generally, the authorities have tended to avoid this topic, but recently Lukashenka ordered the building of a monument there (soon after Lukashenka's order, a monument to commemorate the victims was erected), and similarly to the opposition, pro-governmental organizations, the BRSM and Belaya Rus', began to organize *subbotniks* there and take care of the place.[241] But 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 the restaurant built near the Kurapaty site. In spring 2020, the authorities dismantled over 70 crosses erected by civil society activists.[242] While the authorities made targeted changes to some of the social practices to highlight pre-Soviet statehood and to adjust Soviet rituals, a full acknowledgement of the Soviet terror or other tragic 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. They thus kept it central in their constructed statehood narrative.

Overall, there were no major shifts in official communications in terms of their historical narratives. But, regardless of whether the top-level authorities dictated the changes in historical narrative, or this process was

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[238] Зьміцер Мíраш, "Віцебскі гарвыканкам забараніў шэсьце 'Несьмяротнага палку' 9 траўня." *Віцебская вясна*, 2019, <https://vitebskspring.org/news/mirnyja-skhody/item/3189-shestse-nesmyarotnaga-palku> [2019-05-23]

[239] Наша Ніва, "У Мінску забаранілі асобнае шэсце «Несмяротнага палка»." 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=209195> [2019-05-23]

[240] Денис Мартинович, "Кто и когда расстреливал людей в Куропатах. 10 вопросов и ответов по материалам следствия." *TUT.BY*, 2018, <https://news.tut.by/culture/606056.html> [2019-05-25]

[241] Аэлита Сюльжина, "Более 100 добровольцев вышли на субботник в урочище Куропаты." *СБ. Беларусь Сегодня*, 2019, <https://www.sb.by/articles/v-kuropatakh-proshel-subbotnik-po-blagoustroystvu.html> [2019-05-25]

[242] Александра Богуславская, "Война за память: чем властям Беларуси мешают кресты в Куропатах." *Deutsche Welle*, 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3GKcC> [2019-05-25]

largely driven by middle rank officials, new practices in the historical domain were considerable, as through education, monument building and emerging symbols they tended to reshape the previously officially prevailing understanding of Belarusian statehood. By broadening the narrative of the roots of Belarusian statehood so as to stress the greater longevity of the nation, and by rethinking the Soviet period and associated customs and symbols by placing greater emphasis on Belarus, the Belarusian authorities attempted to seek similar objectives as with according significance to the role of the Belarusian language – to facilitate the construction of a distinct national identity, which has less in common with (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. Through minimizing Russia's influences and reducing state-level ontological anxiety, the regime sought to preserve its rule against external threats but also strived to construct its continuity internally, adapting to changing societal demands and worldviews.

5.3. Main Results of the Analysis of Social Practices

To conclude this Chapter, alongside the changes in discourse concerning the presentation of the Belarusian language, the reshaped understanding of Belarusian statehood and the longevity of the nation was observed, with an emphasis on the pre-Soviet periods, particularly the GDL, accompanied by modification of rituals and practices in relation to the World War 2/GPW period. In terms of the practical changes in relation to the Belarusian language, although the status of the Belarusian language in the official discourse was elevated, the efforts to broaden its use in practice were limited to rather "soft" actions, such as translation of the legislation, while the key role in the popularization of the language was taken by civil society. During the period between 2014 and early 2020, the Belarusian authorities allowed, and in some cases even facilitated, a number of practical developments to be undertaken by civil society groups that contributed to building a distinct pro-Belarusian identity. From the theoretical perspective of ontological security, which argues that protection of one's identity and the "self" can be as important as physical security, this policy can 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 level, directly

blending motivation of both ontological and physical security needs at the state and personal level.

To increase the distinctiveness of identity by engaging in the reconstruction of elements of Belarusian language and history, the authorities repeated the pattern described by Steele, when states take seemingly irrational steps when seeking ontological security[243] – they did not want to take the risk of further worsening relations with Russia and facilitated the growth in 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 the 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 chose 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 changes discussed, also signals that the government's intentions were driven by rational calculations rather by values. Simultaneously, empirical data shows that elements of Belarusian national identity have been evolving without government interference. Therefore, the authorities were legitimately concerned that the narratives and practices they previously promoted might no longer fit contemporary society, and thus would not ensure their group's continuity.

While objectives of different Belarusian domestic actors to strengthen national identity overlapped, what differed was the motives behind the social practices and actions undertaken by pro-governmental and non-governmental actors. At the state level, both civil society and the authorities, by undertaking identity-strengthening activities, sought to increase the country's ontological security through building stronger distinct elements of Belarus' identity. On the individual-group level this aspiration was driven by a slightly different rationale. Unlike civil society actors, who had no aspirations for political power, the authorities, in light of the changing regional circumstances, by seeking state-level ontological security, also sought their individual continuity, attempting to find continuity of their rule in the sovereign state and also their place in the contemporary Belarusian society, which, as the quantitative data demonstrated, indeed matched the new social practices.

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[243] Steele, 3.

6. KEY RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Utilizing a complex analysis that involved mass media content analysis, analysis of the Belarusian authorities' communications, and semi-structured interviews with experts and politicians, this thesis analyzed the contemporary identity-building processes to conceptualize the national identity models and demonstrate what and how the Belarusian national identity elements were constructed through changing identity narratives and practices and how these new models coexisted. The dissertation research used a complex approach to conceptualize identity models, collecting and analyzed empirical data within five identity dimensions defined in the theoretical literature: psychological, political, cultural, territorial, and historical, and multiple elements within these. The analysis of empirical data was conducted with the help of the theoretical approach of OST, revealing how changes in discourse and practice addressed the emerging ontological challenges faced by governmental and non-governmental actors that were promoting or facilitating those changes.

The research conducted in this dissertation demonstrates that between 2014 and 2019 (the period covering processes after the occupation of Crimea and prior to the 2020 protests) identity elements in both official and unofficial identity models were reshaped by assigning new meanings to identity elements mainly belonging to the cultural and historical identity domains:

- The first and the most overt change in the official discourse was identified in relation to the changed perception of the language as an element of officially constructed identity. Prior to the reconstruction of the Belarusian language narrative, officials attempted to deconstruct the previously prevailing narratives and ideas around the Belarusian language, including the language being understood as the distinct attribute of the opposition to Lukashenka's regime. The Belarusian language, viewed in the light of adjustments to the Russian language narratives, became one of the primary symbolic elements of Belarusian national identity for the authorities' group, distinguishing the nation and the authorities' group from external actors, namely Russia. The representation of the Russian language also faced certain changes as the dominance and "ownership" of the Russian language were challenged in the official discourse.

- In line with the new discourse, a series of social practices related to the Belarusian language took place, including display of Belarusian in public places and demonstration of the Belarusian language in public communications, which served two purposes: establishing a

greater external distinctiveness, and depoliticizing and then routinizing the language domestically, thereby recreating the sense of ontological security as routines are of high importance for the sense of continuity. Nonetheless, the key educational and promotional areas of the Belarusian language did not receive a significant boost from the official side. They have been primarily driven by civil society.

- Another change in the official identity model occurred due to the construction of the "deeper" statehood storyline, with increasing references to pre-Soviet periods, particularly the GDL. There was a changing interpretation of historical statehood at the official level, which entailed forming a "deeper statehood narrative". It was not that overtly expressed in the official discourses but is reflected in the social practices analyzed. There is a greater emphasis on popularization of the GDL period, which is now literally reflected in monuments in the squares of a number of cities. A similar kind of practical "shift" for some time occurred in relation to the BNR, which is not discussed in official discourse, but observable in the practices, particularly around the time of the 100th anniversary of the BNR. In addition to that, the government changed a series of practices relating to the Soviet period and attempted to "nationalize" and localize it by replacing with Belarusian equivalents rituals and symbols common in Russia and other CIS countries. All of these changes, similarly to the discourse construction, led to the creation of an identity more distinct from Russia.

- The analysis of unofficial discourses confirmed that there is no single alternative to the authorities' identity discourse as the narratives constructed and reinforced by different outlets and non-governmental actors around specific identity elements differ in both the perception of the role of the identity elements and the prioritization of the identity dimensions. Therefore, references to the coexistence of official and unofficial identity models should imply multiple identity variants, not the coexistence of the two. Having this in mind, it is not possible to draw clear distinctions between what the unofficial identity looked like before and after 2014. Nonetheless, a series of changes can be seen overtly when analyzing contemporary unofficial discourse. These include: opinions on the role of the Belarusian language less fragmented than before, acknowledgement of the depoliticization of the choice of language, and a greater focus on the political identity dimension. It can be concluded from the analysis that the major

changes were related to asserting the role of the Belarusian language as a distinct and (importantly) depoliticized identity attribute that should be cultivated in society. Although its knowledge is not a must for self-identification, honoring it is. While historical interpretations remain not fully consolidated in relation to the different historical periods, there are many shared commonalities around the traumatic experiences of the Soviet period and glorification of the BNR that appear to find more consensus than in the past, both in the discourse and practices. Overall, there were changes in unofficial narratives but they were not drastically different from the previous alternative narratives around different identity elements. This demonstrates the reduced dispersion and growing consolidation of some of the key identity elements and narratives, in particular the Belarusian language.

The identity narrative changes addressed growing ontological security challenges as they took place in the context of sovereignty discussions. They also built a greater distinctiveness (the core aspect of securing identity) of Belarusian national identity:

- The changes to the language and historical narrative were introduced in the context of an increased concern regarding the sovereignty of the state. Stressing independence and sovereignty in parallel became one of the key narratives in both the official and unofficial identity discourses. The unofficial discourses in 2014–2019 shared a common focus on the political dimension, with sovereignty and political state elements peaking in the years 2014 and 2015, which coincided with changes in the regional context (the occupation of Ukraine's Crimea, the war in Ukraine's Donbas). Sovereignty and independence were highlighted more and became a more important standalone element for self-identification for all groups regardless of their political affiliations.

- The changes in both official and unofficial discourses during the period of the analysis arguably established a greater distinctiveness of identity and resilience to potential exploitation of Russian-friendly attitudes in society. This, coupled with the aforementioned increased emphasis on independence and sovereignty in both official and unofficial discourses (which, in the case of the latter, are directly tied to discussion of the potential threat of Russia's aggression or the threat to sovereignty more generally), leads to the conclusion that, first of all, there is a high level of ontological and physical anxiety on

both the state and individual-group levels, and second, different actors commonly connect weak identity with potential threats to the state's body – physical security and independence. The fact of change in representation of certain identity elements suggests that neither group felt secure with the previously maintained weak and non-established identity models.

- Targeted changes of identity elements show an overlap in the motives for identity narrative change at a state level, but differences in relation to the individual-group level prevail. Different motives at the state and individual-group levels, where the changing domestic situation, including a naturally evolving society in the third decade of its independence, forced the authorities to change key narratives and adapt their promoted identity model to meet the changing social context and to secure their power. In other words, Lukashenka's regime had to "fit the trend" and find its continuity in the changing society. Unlike the other groups whose actions primarily were driven by the security of the state, the targeted and instrumental nature of changes by the authorities' group allows one to conclude that it is mostly concerned with securing its own place in society and securing independence to preserve its rule. This means that their implemented changes have a very practical motivation. In face of the changing context and other security challenges (including the need to preserve power), more and different kinds of shifts can be expected.

Differences in the set of identity elements related to Belarusian nationhood, the role of language, and state sovereignty became less overt between the models at the national level. However, the official and unofficial identity models overall still maintained notable differences:

- The official identity model (summarized in Table 18 below), unlike the unofficial models of identity (summarized in Table 19 below), is rather homogeneous. But only a very narrow circle of high-ranking officials seemed to be allowed to change previously established identity elements, while those maintaining the general discourse focus on a very narrow selection of established narratives. The unofficial identity models were more fragmented, with certain non-governmental actors being primarily concerned about language, and others about historical narratives. Nonetheless, when comparing the official narratives with the unofficial models, many of the differences still occur primarily in the historical domain. When unofficial groups

themselves debate certain historical periods, there are more common points.

- With the reconstruction of the Belarusian language narrative, the line of difference in the cultural domain became much more blurred in this regard. Both the authorities and nongovernmental actors focus on the cultural domain. One can observe an overlap between the models, in terms of the elevation of cultural identity elements with the aim of stressing cultural and linguistic distinctiveness and the constant focus by all groups on the political dimension, reflected in the preservation of the sovereignty of a political state. This is also the case with social practices in the historical dimension which, similarly to the discursive changes, establish a greater distinctiveness of Belarusian identity by drifting away from a "common" Soviet history approach. Therefore, it can be concluded that both official and unofficial forces overlap in terms of their anxieties and related meta-narratives at the state level.

- In official discourse and practice, the most significant change of identity elements was identified in the cultural and historical dimensions: the role of the Belarusian language and the interpretation of Belarus' statehood. However, at the same time, some of the previous key narratives (particularly bilingualism, and the centralism of the GPW) remained in place and were further cultivated to maintain the previous autobiographical narrative promoted by the authorities. In addition, a series of smaller-scale narrative differences in territorial, political, and psychological dimensions were observed. Therefore, we cannot conclude that there was a major change in official identity as a whole, but we can conclude that there were targeted but notable changes to identity elements which are key in the classical understanding, that is, language and history. These certainly served as an impetus for building a more distinct and consolidated identity, and by doing so, increased the ontological and physical security of the authorities' group during the time period analyzed.

This dissertation also sought to provide a contribution to OST. Application of OST to the Belarusian case allowed the exploration of changes to existing theoretical premises and the development of the following modifications:

- First, in the case of Belarus, there is not a conflicting but a complementary relationship between ontological and physical security. In declaring and expressing quite openly fear of the hybrid threats from Russia, both Belarusian non-governmental and

governmental actors focused on strengthening the distinctiveness of the national identity, particularly in shaping identity narratives vis-à-vis Russian identity and addressing pro-Russian narratives. The form of Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2013-2014 demonstrated that ontological insecurity, stemming from an enemy exploiting certain weaknesses in identity, might result in greater risks to a country's territory and directly spill over into physical insecurity. Arguably, Belarusian actors feared somewhat similar scenarios. In this case, their identity-related actions that addressed ontological insecurities were aimed at building the greater resilience of society and, thus, simultaneously addressed potential physical security gaps.

- Second, while OST scholars commonly place emphasis on stability and continuity of identity and of everyday practices as the condition for ontological security, in Belarus, sustaining the existing situation of unconsolidated identity did not address ontological anxiety and only increased potential ontological insecurities. Since the identity model was not fully formed and was extremely vulnerable due to the excessively close ties to Russia, the reconstruction of identity was deemed necessary as Belarus faced new types of potential external threats. Therefore, certain elements of Belarusian national identity have changed in recent years, modifying the previous understanding of official and unofficial variants of the identity model, particularly in respect of elements that previously might have been seen as creating common ties with Russia (for example, the Russian language).

- Third, while OST in international relations commonly focuses on the state level, the analysis of Belarusian national identity formation demonstrated that the distinction between individual-group and state levels is extremely important to maintain. In the case of Belarus, there are multiple identity variants and, thus, different anxieties and a different sense of ontological insecurity. These differences were seen even among non-governmental actors where each was placing a different emphasis on different identity narratives. This existence of continuing contradictions between the official and unofficial models, as well as within the unofficial models, point to the need to employ OST for analysis of identity at least at group and state level. While the motivations for changes on the part of the non-governmental groups and the authorities' groups match on the state level (to secure the continuity of the independent state), there are important

differences at the individual-group level, since the state authorities are concerned with securing their power. Arguably, the changing domestic situation, including the naturally evolving national identity, have forced the authorities to adapt the identity model which they had previously promoted, to meet the changing society and social context and to secure their consolidated power via securing their "self" under the new context. In addition, even though the personally perceived ontology was not the focus of this research, as the interview findings demonstrated, the nationally constructed elements and narratives of identity may not necessarily reflect the genuine understanding of the "self" maintained by those who construct these narratives. Therefore, this might be explored at an even more granular, individual level in further research.

This dissertation tunes into three discussions that have been taking place in relation to the development of the Belarusian national identity:

- The first discussion point on the dominance of the so-called civic nationhood elements stated by other scholars is addressed through new empirical data provided in this dissertation. It shows that developments in the identity field that took place consistently over a period of more than six years were mostly focused on history and language. Although civic nationhood elements as conceptualized in Guibernau's political dimension indeed remained central and were even highlighted, overall, both official and unofficial actors tended to prioritize the historical and cultural dimensions when reconstructing identity elements. Therefore, in speaking about constructed national identity (not necessarily perceived by society at large), we cannot claim the dominance of civic nationhood today. In addition, recent social practices concerning Belarusian language and history analyzed in this dissertation, as well as the reviewed polling data, also suggest that the cultural domain elements of identity may have grown deeper roots in the Belarusian consciousness today than they had before 2014. This assumption requires further quantitative studies focused on individual-level perceptions of identity. In summary, taking into consideration this major emphasis on the cultural identity elements, the claims of the dominance of the constructed civic-oriented identity model previously made (before 2014) do not correspond to the results of the analyzed period (2014–2019) in terms of the narratives prevailing in the official discourse and in official and unofficial social practices.

- As for the second discussion point addressed in this dissertation – how new identity building processes reshaped the coexistence of the so-called "official" and "alternative" Belarusianness, the conclusions reached by this research suggest that notable changes to the official identity model in both discourse and practice took place between 2014 and 2019, with more focus put on non-civic identity elements, particularly in the official discourse, which was not the case before 2014. As for unofficial models (or alternative Belarusianness), another particularity of this research was analysis of multiple identity elements at the same time, which helped to reveal multiple possible variants of different identity elements within the unofficial discourses, suggesting that there is no single "alternative" identity and no competition of the two models as defined in the existing literature, but rather there are more possible variations of unofficial models. Simultaneously, given this fragmentation, it is more difficult to draw a definitive conclusion on the scope of changes to the alternative models, but the changes in the unofficial discourse and practices described above clearly demonstrate that there was more consolidation and a shift in focus in response to the regional security challenges and changing political context.
- With respect to the third discussion point in relation to the Belarusian nation and national identity "born" or "reinvented" in 2020, the practices and narratives analyzed in this dissertation (particularly the findings concerning the depoliticization of historical symbols that later became even more widespread, the role of the civil society sector in bringing communities together for activities of identity building and monument construction, and the more consolidated identity narratives across different identity variants) uniformly indicate that the 2020 events were the continuation of the developing identity and possibly (to some extent) even the result of discursive and social practice changes that were building a distinct Belarusian national identity and consolidating a greater national consciousness in the preceding years.

6.1. The 2020 Events and Potential Areas to Focus on in Future

The research period for this dissertation covers the years 2014–2019. Both the interview and media data were collected and mainly analyzed before the 2020 mass protests and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Nonetheless, this research covered a period crucial for identity formation that

may have affected the events in 2020 and subsequently. The impact of events starting from 2020 on future identity formation remains to be assessed, nevertheless, I would like to offer some reflections on how relevant processes have evolved so far.

Between 2014 and 2019, the period covered by this research, Lukashenka's search for ontological security transformed his actions and discourse, in order to adjust the concept of Belarusian identity and to confront potential threats to Belarus' sovereignty emerging from Russia, including potential threats to his own personal rule. The recent developments in the country, which started in 2020 with an eruption of protests unprecedented in scale, suggest that the previous balanced approach had "side effects" not considered or not seriously assessed by the authorities. As Steele argued, "while state agents have the ability to transform their actions so that they can confront self-identity threats, they also can construct self-delusional narratives that become quite harmful to their ontological security, and their ability to act, in the long term."[244] While Lukashenka may have not been delusional in terms of the narratives he constructed, the authorities most likely underestimated their role in uniting different social groups when co-opting some of their narratives, as well as the level of consolidation emerging from the vanishing identity cleavages, and from the growing civil society, independent networks and capacities resulting from these processes.

The popularity of the identity-building practices facilitated by civil society organizations and private businesses concerning the popularization of the Belarusian language and certain historical periods, as well as the rise of the white-red-white symbols even before the 2020 revolution, demonstrates that these ideas were supported among citizens, increasing the capacity and role of civil society and private initiative in the country. Arguably, this, at least partially, contributed not only to the strengthening of a distinct identity but also to the consolidation of Belarusian society. Lukashenka's violent response to the 2020 protests enormously expedited the ongoing identity consolidation processes and changed its trajectory by boosting the subjective closeness and solidarity of the nation.

In 2020–2021, many cultural initiatives, together with the whole of civil society, were repressed and liquidated, undoubtedly hindering further work. The massive scale of this action suggested that the liquidation of the CSO sector was not subject to any particular kind of CSOs, as clearly apolitical organizations have been subjected to government repression. At the same time, other initiatives that were launched by the government, such as the

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[244] Steele, 49.

translation of legislation, have been continuing at least on the basis of inertia, while independent language promotion initiatives have had to adjust.

The white-red-white flag and the *Pahonia* coat of arms (the historical BNR symbols) had been considered by law enforcement agencies as the distinguishing mark of Lukashenka's opponents long before 2020, when they became the dominant symbol of the protests. Post-election protests encouraged the rise of white-red-white symbols to unprecedented levels, with the meaning of the symbol potentially changing from historical to political. Although the protests began with protesters occasionally using various symbols and flags, including the state flag, the protesters gradually shifted to using mainly white-red-white flags and these colors. The popularity of this anti-government symbol took on a clear political meaning, with citizens opposing the government displaying it across the city in different forms and shapes. The white-red combination became a combination also used for ribbons, paintings, and the arts, becoming a distinctive symbol of the peaceful protest movement against fraud and violence.

The authorities facilitated two processes which ultimately led to the further politicization of the symbols and the emergence of stronger cleavages in society. The unprecedented violence and repression, coupled with the government's fierce effort to display the red-green state flag, resulted in a new meaning of torture and violence, and in support for Lukashenka being associated with the red-green flag. At the same time, Lukashenka's government also reverted to the well-known image of Lukashenka, which was potentially secure in terms of Lukashenka's constructed and personally perceived old "self" – the image of *bat'ka* ("father of the nation") that arguable resonates mostly with his support base rather than the nationally-oriented and democratically minded groups. The government also made the white-red-white flag a target in their disinformation campaign, even labeling this later as "extremist", "fascist", and literally making it a reason for the prosecution of individuals and organizations. The Lukashenka government's war against this symbol reached even absurd levels, when substantial administrative resources were deployed not only to arrest people for wearing or displaying these colors, but also to eliminate any public display of this color combination, even when they appeared for clearly apolitical reasons, such as marking industrial towers.

Arguably, Lukashenka failed to ensure his continuity and "place" in the changing Belarusian society. He therefore had to roll back some of the past practices given the emergence of massive opposition and even the demonstration of subjective closeness against him. To survive politically and find continuity of his "self" under the new circumstances, he started to build

cleavages and capitalize on cleavages. There are numerous illustrations to support this argument, including the absence of any signs of the authorities' willingness to re-engage with the part of society opposing their rule, along with massive propaganda and "legal" campaigns proclaiming dissident voices as "extremist", and a growing list of political prisoners and political verdicts, which have created even greater divides in the society. These serve as evidence that the authorities have focused on re-establishing their ontological security exclusively within their own group of supporters, rethinking previous practices, and excluding the groups of society that previous identity practices have included. The continuing repression coupled with the reversion to anti-Western rhetoric suggests that the authorities completely changed course in terms of how they would ensure their ontological security, by focusing on specific groups of their supporters, and excluding others.

Some new shifts in identity might be expected as a result of the 2020 events. Along with a stronger protest movement and consolidation of protesters, new bonds appeared between the people, the protesters, the victims of state repression, and other social groups. It can be argued that a new image of the nation of Belarus was displayed to the country and the whole world. White-red-white crowds of hundreds of thousands of Belarusians demonstrating explicit peacefulness against the regime of violence and torture reinforced national stereotyping, namely the view of 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. At the same time, the traumatic experience of tens of thousands of Belarusians (at least 50,000 people became the victims of state repression) in detention centers, such as Akrestina, and during the marches, became a trauma that has shaped and will shape the future identity of the people through their relation to Lukashenka's government and law enforcement. The consolidation of society, which took the form of the massive protests that emerged in response to the excessive violence and torture used against the first protesters, has continued beyond that particular timeframe. It distinguishes those who suffered and continue to suffer state repression. It takes different forms depending on how this trauma is manifested. It reaches Belarusians who were not directly affected by the repression through the massive amount of images recorded by witnesses that spread all over social media, and domestic and international news outlets.

Belarusian identity continues to develop. It continues to build on the new subjective meanings that appeared in 2020, including international recognition of Belarusian democratic aspirations, national pride, common trauma, and ongoing state repression. It is reinforcing the previous processes

and narratives – such as building distinctiveness through the Belarusian language and culture. All of these factors continue the further consolidation of groups in society, with the effects of these processes to be seen in the future. The authorities demonized some of the attributes of identity, such as the white-red-white flag, but at least at the time of writing, they had not returned to the previous narratives overtly hostile to the Belarusian language, possibly because the language was not in fact a unifying feature or attribute during the protests. Nonetheless, with growing national consciousness and continuing promotion of the Belarusian language by non-governmental actors, if the view is taken that the shift in the language narrative by the authorities in the period 2014–2019 was instrumental, it is fully possible and even likely that Lukashenka's and his regime's hostility to the Belarusian language will return.

At the start of her book "The Identity of Nations", Guibernau posed the question "Why are the Basques prone to violence and the Catalans are not?". A similar kind of question, but comparing Ukrainians and Belarusians, frequently emerged when discussing the Belarusian 2020 revolution. As a rule, people who are not familiar with Belarusian identity naturally expect that the protesters of a neighboring country will build barricades and carry stones not flowers. A number of observers were wracking their brains trying to understand how several hundred thousand demonstrators protesting against state violence could act so peacefully and dissolve without leaving a single piece of waste after them. Well, the answer lies in the distinct identity of Belarusians. The 2020 events and the consolidation of the Belarusian society demonstrated not only the solidarity and bonds between the Belarusian people, but also proved their unique and distinct identity.

Table 18. Official Identity Model in 2014–2019

Dimension	Identity Element	Representation of Identity Elements
HISTORICAL	*Polatsk Principality*	Though rarely appearing in the discourse, this period is commonly perceived as the beginning of Belarusian statehood, which at the same time establishes the long-lasting statehood narrative.
	Grand Duchy of Lithuania	No clear representation in the discourse of this period, scarce but positive mentions of the GDL, suggesting that this period at least is not alien to Belarus. However, the authorities undertake/allow extremely overt social practices strengthening the positive representation of this period.
	Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth	No clear representation in the discourse due to the limited number of communicative events, not reflected in the practical domain either.
	Belarusian People's Republic	No clear representation in the discourse, but in the existing communications is perceived rather controversially, and a series of events related to the 100th anniversary of the BNR were permitted.
	Soviet Period/WW2/GPW	The Soviet period with the Great Patriotic War as the core event of this period remains the most important period in the official identity, with increasing focus on the role of the Belarusian people and replacement of symbols and customs common in Russia with Belarusian analogues. The representation contains a few very stable and widespread narratives, including seeing the "Great Victory" as the greatest achievement and sacrifice of Belarusian people, defining the GPW as the "foundation of independence", and building the closeness and unity of the people. The Soviet period itself is not embraced as much as the GPW; however, the repression of the Soviet regime continues to be denied and largely ignored.

POLITICAL	*Historical symbols*	Official state symbols associated with sovereignty (no particular narrative). *Pahonia* is perceived rather neutrally with some signs of growing positive perception among officials (until 2020), but white-red-white flag continues to be perceived as rather political and hostile.	
	Independent state	Independence and the political state presented as a key identification attribute, which is integrated and connected with basically all other identity dimensions and narratives.	
	Perception of the West/Europe	In the very limited number of communications on this element, Belarus is presented as a culturally European country, but from a political perspective Belarus is stated to be a "bridge" between the East and the West, corresponding to the claimed multi-vector foreign policy.	
	Perception of East/Russia	Russians continues to be seen as a "brotherly nation" across authorities' discourses, regardless of the changing social context and bilateral relations over the years. At the same time, there is a strong implied interconnection with the political dimension emphasizing the political sovereignty and distinctiveness of Belarusians and Russians and stressing the pragmatic areas of cooperation.	
CULTURAL	*Religion*	Two contradicting narratives, both scarce in the discourse: one claiming that Belarus is multi-confessional nation (religion plays no role in self-identification)	Even less frequent: the second claiming that Belarus is a Christian country pursuing "Christian values".
	Belarusian language	The language element was addressed by top-level officials, who reconstructed the Belarusian language representation conveying a new representation of the Belarusian language as the key national identity attribute – the primary and supreme distinctive element distinguishing Belarusians. Simultaneously, the narrative of the Belarusian language as a political opposition attribute was deconstructed. Both officials and governmental media discourse created a representation of the Belarusian language as a natural non-political demand of society. The practical popularization of the language is "delegated" to local authorities and civil society.	

	Russian language	With the growing importance of the Belarusian language, the authorities' and governmental media discourses did not diminish the Russian language role. Still presenting Belarus as a bilingual nation. This representation was supplemented by narratives claiming that the Russian language is co-shared heritage of several nations and that it is not a decisive element for self-identification. Officials' discourse constructed a rather pragmatic and instrumental representation of Russian language, suggesting that the Russian language should be retained for pragmatic reasons.
	Belarusian culture	Rarely brought up elements, a general narrative that Belarusian is a distinct culture, with a focus on literature. Sports emphasized as a separate cultural field with some identity-building function – a source of national pride.
	Russian culture	
	Cultural symbols	N/A in discourse, promotion of the *vyshyvanka* in public (but avoiding white-red version).
PSYCHOLOGICAL	*Subjective closeness*	Interconnected with political, historical, and cultural dimension elements.
	Distinct traits	Peace and stability as commonly pursued goals and also traits of "Belarusian character". Hardworking is another distinctive trait of the nation.
TERRITORIAL	*Ethnicity*	Ethnicity does not play any role in identification.
	Territorial belonging	Interconnected with political and historical dimensions, namely elements of independence and GPW as a fight for own land.
	Regional differences	Raised but dismissed and seen as not important in identity formation.

Table 19. Unofficial Identity Models in 2014–2019

Dimension	Identity Element	Representation of Identity Elements		
HISTORICAL	*Polatsk Principality*	Rarely mentioned but if brought up, it is mentioned in the light of one of the earliest statehood narratives.		
	Grand Duchy of Lithuania	An important political formation which is a part of Belarusian statehood, a historical legacy co-shared by several nations, including Belarusians.	Acknowledged period but skeptical view of its role in terms of the existence of genuine Belarusianness.	
	Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth	Generally positive assessment as mainly disclosed through references to Kalinouski and Kosciuszko and the 1863 uprising.		
	Belarusian People's Republic	One of the few historical periods where the debate among unofficial views is not significant. The clearly dominant view is that this period laid the foundation of the contemporary Belarusian state.		
	Soviet Period/WW2/GPW	The repression theme as a part of the Soviet period is not denied and is condemned by all alternative forces, differences occur in relation to the BSSR and GPW.		
		The GPW and "Great Victory" should not be glorified as Belarus was forced into this war.	BSSR was a period of occupation that halted Belarusian statehood and its development.	BSSR was a "golden age" in terms of social and economic development, as well as language revival in the 20s.
	Historical symbols	White-red-white and *Pahonia* are the only legitimate symbols of the Belarusian people.	Both official and historical symbols are important Belarusian symbols, the official symbols became a part of Belarusian identity.	
POLITICAL	*Independent state*	Perceived as the greatest value and one of the core elements of identity.		

	Perception of the West/Europe	Rarely brought up but, if mentioned, claims of Europeanness of Belarus in terms of culture and history.	
	Perception of East/Russia	Strong anti-Russian (state) discourse stressing distinctiveness between both the nations and countries.	Neutral approach to Russian people, perceiving them as close in terms of mentality, etc.
CULTURAL	*Religion*	Rarely brought up, religion does not play any role.	Belarus is a "rather Christian" country.
	Belarusian language	Belarusian language is perceived as one of the most important identity elements.	Rarely observed but there is a view adhering to a bilingual nation narrative, or not seeing language as one of the primary identity attributes.
	Russian language	Instrumental perception of Russian language, believing it could be retained for pragmatic reasons and is not shaping identity.	Negative-hostile perception of Russian language as it is blamed for Belarusian language decline and harming Belarusian identity.
	Belarusian culture	Main focus on Belarusian writers, including victims of Soviet terror, seen as a foundation of national culture and source of pride.	
	Russian culture	Russian culture is hostile, imposed, and harming Belarusian identity.	Belarusians are a part of the Russian cultural world, or in other words, Russian culture is also Belarusian, which does not define self-identification.
	Cultural symbols	*Vyshyvanka* is a positive symbol but not too important in terms of self-identification.	

PSYCHOLOGICAL	*Subjective closeness*	Subjective closeness could be built around traumatic periods and events, particularly Kurapaty.	
	Distinct traits	Focus on negative traits/stereotypes/myths such as *pamiarkounasc*.	Tolerance, openness, law-abiding nature presented as positive distinctive traits.
TERRITORIAL	*Ethnicity*	Does not play a role in terms of identification as a Belarusian. Sometimes repeated multi-ethnic state and tolerance arguments.	
	Territorial belonging	Rarely mentioned but, for some, identification with the territory is important as it proves the nation's longevity.	
	Regional differences	Acknowledged but no identity-building role is assigned.	

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ANNEXES

Annex 1. The sample of Lukashenka's communications analysis

In chronological order:

1. Официальный интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь (January 2014), "Встреча с руководителями крупнейших белорусских СМИ", http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/printv/vstrecha-s-rukovoditeljami-belorusskix-smi-7880/

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5. Официальный интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь (September 2014), "Встреча с членами Совета Палаты представителей Национального собрания", http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/printv/vstrecha-s-chlenami-soveta-palaty-predstavitelej-natsionalnogo-sobranija-9884/

6. Официальный интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь (October 2014), "Пресс-конференция Президента Республики Беларусь А.Г.Лукашенко журналистам российских региональных средств массовой информации", http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/printv/press-konferentsija-prezidenta-respubliki-belarus-aglukashenko-zhurnalistam-rossijskix-regionalnyx-sredstv-10025/

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8. Официальный интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь (January 2015), "Стенограмма встречи с представителями белорусских и зарубежных СМИ", http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/printv/stenogramma-vstrechi-s-predstaviteljami-belorusskix-i-zarubezhnyx-smi-10760/

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24. БелТА (August 2018), "Интересы Беларуси и России никогда не противоречат друг другу – Лукашенко", https://www.belta.by/president/view/interesy-belarusi-i-rossii-nikogda-ne-protivorechat-drug-drugu-lukashenko-315854-2018/

25. Наша Ніва (January 2019), "На церемонии вручения премии «За духовное возрождение» Лукашенко часть речи произнес по-белорусски", https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=223366&lang=ru

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30. БелТА (November 2019), "Лукашенко: вопрос языка у нас решен раз и навсегда", https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-vopros-jazyka-u-nas-reshen-raz-i-navsegda-369474-2019/

Annex 2. Codebook of the authorities' communications analysis

Code System	Frequency
Narratives	377
Statehood	8
Religion	6
Perception of Russian language	25
Russian is the "second" mother language	10
Russian language needed for pragmatic reasons	3
Russian language is the heritage of three nations	4
Belarus contributed to development of Russian language	4
Russian language is not Russia's language	5
Relations with Ukraine	7
Perception of Belarusian language	32
Lukashenka speaks Belarusian	5
Belarus is a bilingual nation	15
Belarusian language needs development	5
Belarusian is a distinctive feature of the Belarusian nation	12
Does not require support or protection	1
Language cannot be enforced	6
Relation to the West	10
Relation to Russia	43
There is a 'group' in Russia that wants to threaten Belarus	3
Integration projects should be based on equality	5
Belarusians and Russians are different and sovereign	7
Cooperation with Russia is primarily economic	8

Common history with Russia	4
Russia is a strategic partner	5
Russia and Belarus are brotherly nations	14
Economic model	6
Political system model	2
Relation to BNR	12
Relation to GDL	1
Relation to USSR	12
Values of the nation	28
tolerance	2
peacefulness	14
unity	5
honor	4
Independence and sovereignty	13
Territorial and ethnic integrity	23
ethnicity	5
internal territorial integrity	3

Annex 3. Codebook of media content analysis (condensed)

Code System	Description
META	
Message type	
Naturally occurring, not overt	Messages from which identity messages might be extracted.
Naturally occurring, identity-related	Messages that one might assume to constitute identity messages as they clearly emphasize identity building function of the message/element.
Response-based messages	Messages in response to assigned identity-related tasks or prompts, or reaction to events that threaten identities.
HISTORICAL DIMENSION	
Other	Mention of periods outside the codebook (e.g., Russian Empire).
Polatsk	References to Polatsk Duchy or related events/actors.
PLC	References to Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth or related events/actors.
GDL	References to Grand Duchy of Lithuania or related events/actors.
Soviet Period/WW2/GPW	References to Soviet period, repressions, WW2, BSSR, GPW
BNR	References to BNR events/actors and "Freedom Day"
Symbols	Pahonia, white-red-white flag, official state symbols
POLITICAL DIMENSION	
International image construction	Portraying desired international role/image
Perception of Eastern neighbors	East: Belarusians and Russians are brotherly nations
Europeanness/West	West: Belarus is a part of Western civilization

Sovereign/independent state	References to existence of state

CULTURAL DIMENSION

Religion	References to specific confession or the role of religion
Russian culture	Literature, music, other arts and cultural figures
Belarusian culture	Literature, music, other arts and cultural figures
Belarusian language	Pro-language, neutral, or negative perception of the language role
Russian language	Pro-language, neutral, or negative perception of the language role
Cultural symbols	*Vyshyvanka*, folk symbols, etc.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

Subjective closeness	Various claims of different things building alleged unity and closeness
Unique, distinct traits	Stereotypes/claims about distinct features

TERRITORIAL DIMENSION

Territorial integrity	Raising importance of territorial borders
Regional differences	Differences within country regions
Ethnicity/territorial belonging	Role of ethnicity, identification with certain lands

Annex 4. Interview questionnaire (English translation)

[Disclaimer]

The first question which I would like to ask you as a politician/expert is what you think is the most important attribute, feature of Belarusianness and Belarusian identity?

[Transition to section depending on the answer to the first question]

LANGUAGE

Belarusian language:

- o What is your perception of the Belarusian language?
- o What role does the language play in terms of self-identification?
- o What is the perception of the Belarusian language in society?
- o Do you think it [perception] is changing?
- o In recent years, the authorities have begun speaking positively about the language. Do you share this narrative and do you notice any practical changes stemming from this?

Russian language:

- o What is your relation towards the Russian language?
- o What role does this language play in terms of self-identification of Belarusians?
- o Has the status of the Russian language been changing in society? Do you notice any changes?

HISTORY

- Which historical period do you consider being the most important for the formation of Belarusian statehood? Why?
- What is your perception of the GDL?
  - o With reference to the monuments in Lida and other cities, have the authorities decided to include the GDL in the official narrative, as a period important for national identity?
- What is your perception of the BNR?
  - o How is it seen in the official discourse?
- Perception of the Soviet period.
- Whom would you consider a national hero?

SYMBOLS

- Which symbols do you value the most?
- White-red-white flag and *Pahonia* – what is your perception of these symbols?
- How do you feel about the official state symbols?

VALUES

- In your opinion, what brings Belarusians together?
- Are there any traits or values which you would say make Belarusians different from other nations?
- What is your view on claims of *pamiarkounasc*? People who are peaceful and seeking stability?

POLITICAL

- From your perspective, what position should Belarus hold in terms of foreign affairs?
- Which countries would you say are "closer" to Belarus?
    - Russia
    - West

RELIGION

- Does religion play any role in terms of national identification?

TERRITORY

- Does belonging to a certain ethnic group matter for identity?
- What about the place where you were born?
- Citizenship?
- Are there any notable or important regional differences?

CULTURE

- What impresses you the most in Belarusian culture?

PRACTICES

- Do you as an expert/politician facilitate the development of the national identity?
- What is the role of civil society in the formation of the national identity?
- Has the attitude of the authorities towards your activities changed?

- In your opinion, who are the major actors forming the identity? In society? Among the authorities?
- Is it true (as some claim) that there is much greater use of the Belarusian language in the public sphere?
  - Who is facilitating this trend?
  - Do you notice a demand in society?

WRAP-UP

- Would you say that Belarusian identity is changing or staying the same? Let's say, by comparing Belarusians ten years ago and now.

Annex 5. Article samples used for content analysis

Nasha Niva Document System	#
Document codes	621
Nasha Niva	0
2014	107
«В Беларуси в каждом городе стоит памятник Сатане»	2
«Извините, а можно по-русски?» — «Хадайніцтва адхіліць!». Фелье…	3
«Прэзумпцыя вінаватасці» белмоўных	2
Адам Глобус: Я на стороне слабого	3
Александр Пашкевич: Белорусский язык вне политики — это нонсенс	2
Александр Сокуров: Страшное затмение нашло на русских людей	2
Банкир Бабарико: Мы очень хотим сделать так, чтобы Беларусь зав…	8
Белорус — национальность или гражданство? В концепции «гражданс…	2
Белорусскоязычные: «То, что есть между нами»	2
Белорусы готовы сражаться за независимость — результаты опроса	2
Большинство считает тех, кто всегда разговаривает по-белорусски	2
В День Воли в Швеции подняли бело-красно-белый флаги	3
В Минске прошли Белорусские певчиские сходы	2
Виталий Цыганков о 17 сентября: Вы против того, что территория	2
Вышыванки переживут. Ольгерда Бахаревича отвечает Стас Карпов	2
Денис Блищ выступил за возвращение герба «Погоня» и бело-красно…	5
Дмитрий Дрозд: Фразу «Мы один народ» нужно запретить	1
Зміцер Дашкевіч. Праўда ці мова?	2
Ивонка Сурвилла призывает соотечественников достойно отметить Д…	3
Код белорусов — травма	2
Кто такой Альгерд? Видеоопрос в Витебске у памятника великому к…	2
Куропаты обязательно посетит президент	2
Лукашенко как «пуп земли» для оппозиционных белорусов	2

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Дмитрий Гурневич: Довыколупывались. На глазах рассыпается самый…	2
Дмитрий Дашкевич о референдуме: Я помню, как я, 13-летний подро…	3
Змитер Дашкевич: Мова — она для всех?	2
Историк Пашкевич: «Нашей» верой было не только униатство	2
Как белорус сменил имя в паспорте «Васілій» на «Васіль» — пошаг…	2
Как мы перестали быть советскими женщинами, а стали белорусками	2
Крик души: «Парень обратился ко мне, водителю, по-белорусски. П…	2
Наумчик: День Независимости надо было переносить с 27 июля, но…	3
Пазняк сформулировал ряд замечаний по сохранению чистоты белору…	4
Пальчис: Праздники, которые Беларусь пропускает	5
Профессор Леонид Лыч: Лишь введение белорусского языка в официа…	3
Профессор-идеолог	2
Российский блогер Артемий Лебедев о Беларуси Я больше не знаю н…	2
Стась Карпов: Почему русскоязычные сами хотят, чтобы русский яз…	3
Стась Карпов: Смешные люди со своим «сначала экономика»	2
Чем белорусы отличаются от украинцев	2
Шоумен Константин Каверин: Причины моего отвращения к белорусск…	2
Шоумен Константин Каверин: С языком все хорошо, это со мной не…	3
2018	116
«Беларуси нужен патриотизм». Лауреат «Пулитцера» о родине праде	3
«Ідзе пакаленне, у параўнанні з якім Пазняк і Дашкевіч будуць п…	2
«Надо быть конченым, как белорусский Минкульт, чтобы снимать фи…	3
«Советская Белоруссия»: Белорусскоязычный университет нельзя со…	2
EADaily: Празднование Дня Воли — очередная уступка белорусским…	1

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BelTA Document System	#
Document codes	506
BelTA	0
2014	137
70-летие освобождения Беларуси напоминает славянским народам о…	5
Основным императивом Послания Президента явилась отсылка к гос…	2
Александр Косинец_ День Независимости объединяет разные поколен…	4
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SUMMARY (SANTRAUKA)

Problema ir tyrimo klausimas

Rusijos agresija, nukreipta Ukrainos, Sakartvelo ir kitų suverenių valstybių atžvilgiu, privertė daugelį valstybių Rytų Europos regione dar labiau sunerimti dėl savo saugumo. Baltarusija, asimetriškai susaistyta su Rusijos Federacija glaudžiais energetiniais, ekonominiais ir kariniais saitais, susidūrė su padidėjusia rizika savo suverenitetui ir nepriklausomybei. Paskutinįjį dešimtmetį, iki visiško santykių su vakarais suprastėjimo po 2020 metų įvykių, baltarusių valdžia stengėsi diversifikuoti šalies eksportą ir energetinius išteklius, ieškojo naujų finansavimo galimybių Kinijoje. Karinėje srityje 2016 metais Baltarusija priėmė naują gynybos doktriną ir oficialiai įtvirtino „hibridinio karo" sampratą.[246] Žvelgiant iš „hibridinių grėsmių" perspektyvos, tapatybei įtakos turinčių saitų mažinimas tapo vienu didžiausių iššūkių ir grėsmių. Itin glausti kultūriniai ir tapatybės saitai su Rusija buvo propaguojami pačios baltarusių valdžios. Naujų grėsmių akivaizdoje, siekdama spręsti susidariusią situaciją, baltarusių valdžia ėmėsi naujų praktikų, kurios buvo nukreiptos į baltarusių nacionalinės tapatybės išskirtinumo konstravimą, įskaitant istorinių ir kultūrinių tapatybės elementų, tokių kaip baltarusių kalba, rekonstravimą. Pastarosios vaidmuo oficialiame diskurse ženkliai pakito. Iš politinės opozicijos simboliu laikytos kalbos ji virto vienu pagrindinių elementų, skiriančių baltarusius nuo rusų. Galiausiai, baltarusių kalba net formaliai buvo įtvirtina kaip „valstybės humanitarinio saugumo garantas"[247] naujoje informacinio saugumo koncepcijoje.

Šiuolaikinėje pasaulio politikoje fizinis saugumas, teritorijos ir politinio suvereniteto išsaugojimas, be jokios abejonės, išlieka esminiu kiekvienos suverenios tautos siekiu. Mažai kas ginčytųsi, kad nepriklausomos ir suverenios valstybės gali veiksmingai funkcionuoti neišsaugodamos šio savojo „kūno". Vis dėlto, hibridinių grėsmių kontekste, kaip teigia ontologinio saugumo teoretikai (OST), itin aktualiu tapo dar vienas bazinis kiekvienos suverenios valstybės poreikis – ontologinio saugumo užtikrinimas, kitaip tariant – nacionalinės tapatybės apsauga. Remiantis OST

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[246] БелаПАН, "Новая Военная доктрина Беларуси учитывает расширение спектра источников военных угроз." *Naviny.by*, 2016, <http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2016/04/04/ic_news_112_472931> [2017-06-18]

[247] Национальный правовой Интернет-портал Республики Беларусь, "О Концепции информационной безопасности Республики Беларусь." 2019, <https://pravo.by/upload/docs/op/P219s0001_1553029200.pdf> [2020-11-22]

prielaidomis, ontologinis saugumas – tai valstybės išskirtinumo išsaugojimas, tautinės tapatybės puoselėjimas,[248] kuris yra tiek pat svarbus, kiek fizinis saugumas, ypač hibridinio karo, kuris taikosi ir išnaudoja tapatybės skirtis ir su tuo susijusias įtampas visuomenėje, akivaizdoje. Rusijos Federacija, siekdama destabilizuoti situaciją Ukrainoje[249] ir kitose regiono valstybėse, kuriose yra rusakalbės visuomenės grupių, kalbos elementą naudoja kaip ginklą. Be to, ji siekia paveikti rusakalbių žmonių turinčias šalis ir besikišdama į vidinius valstybių reikalus kelia grėsmes tų šalių nacionaliniam saugumui.[250]

Neilgai trukus po 1994 metų rinkimų, Aleksandro Lukašenkos vadovaujama valdžia nematė ontologinio saugumo grėsmių ir neatrodė susirūpinusi probaltarusiškos nacionalinės tapatybės konstravimo klausimais. Priešingai, A. Lukašenka sutrukdė tautinio atgimimo judėjimui, antrajai baltarusizacijos bangai, ir tuo pačiu ėmėsi politikos, dėl kurios visuomenė susidūrė su debelarusifikacija ir rusifikacija. A. Lukašenkai atėjus į valdžią rusų kalba tapo pagrindine oficialia kultūros ir politikos kalba, tuo tarpu baltarusių kalba patapo opozicijos simboliu. Be to, gražindamas modifikuotą sovietinę simboliką, atsisakydamas Baltarusių Liaudies Respublikos (BNR) atributikos, perkeldamas nepriklausomybės dieną į liepos 3 d., minėdamas „sovietų Minsko išvadavimą", A. Lukašenka stiprino prosovietinį valstybingumo naratyvą. Jo vykdomos reformos nutolino šalį nuo vadinamojo etnonacionalinio tapatybės modelio. Baltarusių valdžia ėmėsi kurti tapatybės modelį, kuris atmetė etnonacionalinius elementus, tokius kaip kalba. Tapatybę bandyta formuoti atsigręžiant į sovietinę praeitį, saitus su Rusija, ir, vėliau, prioretizuojant pilietybę bei tapatinimąsi su valstybe, kaip politiniu dariniu.

2014 metais minint oficialią nepriklausomybės dieną A. Lukašenka prakalbo baltarusiškai. Ukrainos Krymo okupacijos, kuri įvyko tais pačiais metais, kontekste, baltarusių analitikai prakalbo apie naują baltarusizacijos

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[248] Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma." *European Journal of International Relations*, 2006, Vol. 12(3), 352-353.

[249] Iryna Matviyishyn, "How Russia weaponizes the language issue in Ukraine." *Atlantic Council*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-is-the-only-winner-of-ukraines-language-wars> [2022-09-18]

[250] The International Peace Institute, "Grigas: Putin Uses "Compatriot Protection" Plan to Restore Russia's Clout." 2016, <https://www.ipinst.org/2016/06/beyond-crimea-the-new-russian-empire> [2022-09-18]

bangą, pavadindami ją „minkštąja baltarusizacija". [251] Ekspertai susiejo šios tendencijos atsiradimą su Krymo okupacija, [252] kuri įvyko keli mėnesiai prieš pasakytą baltarusiškai kalbą ir galimai parodė nacionalinės tapatybės stiprinimo būtinybę. Nuo 2014-ųjų pradžios iki ankstyvųjų 2020-ųjų (nuo Krymo okupacijos iki 2020 m. rinkimų kampanijos ir protestų), baltarusių valdžia propagavo naujus tapatybės naratyvus viešajame diskurse – konstruojant tapatybę kalbos elementui suteikė naują vaidmenį. Kartu su naujomis diskursyvinėmis praktikomis atsirado ir naujos socialinės praktikos, kurios buvo nukreiptos į baltarusių kalbos ir tam tikrų istorinių naratyvų rekonstravimą. Šios praktikos vyko ir buvo skatinamos ne tik pilietinės visuomenės veikėjų, bet ir aktyvistų bei privačių verslų. Visi šie veikėjai pasinaudojo minkštosios baltarusizacijos tendencija, kaip galimybe plėsti aktyvizmą ir konstruoti probaltarusišką nacionalinę tapatybę.

Šioje disertacijoje pristatomas tyrimas prisideda prie trijų diskusijų, vykstančių akademikų ir politikos apžvalgininkų, analizuojančių Baltarusiją, tarpe. Pirmiausia, patikrinama ar ankstesniuose tyrimuose suformuluota išvada, kad Baltarusijoje dominuoja vadinamasis pilietinis tautiškumas, pagrįstas tokiais tapatybės elementais kaip pilietybė, bendra teritorija, valstybės suverenumas, [253] o ne etniniais tapatybės elementais,[254] vis dar yra pagrįsta, atsižvelgiant į tai, kad šešerius metus šalyje vyko minėtoji minkštoji baltarusizacija ir su ja susiję procesai, tame tarpe kultūrinių tapatybės elementų rekonstravimas. Antrasis diskusinis taškas paliečia tai, kiek nauji tapatybę formuojantys procesai pakeitė prieš tai aprašytus tapatybės modelius, vadinamąjį „oficialųjį" ir, Nelly Bekus žodžiais tariant, „alternatyvųjį" baltarusiškumą.[255] Trečioji diskusija, kurią nagrinėja ši disertacija apima paskutiniaisiais metais girdimus teiginius, kad 2020 metais atsirado „nauja" ar „atgimusi" baltarusių tauta. Be abejonių, 2020 metais vykę protestai ir represijos buvo neturintys precedento šalies istorijoje. Šių protestų

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[251] Андрей Тимаров, "Белорусизация: миф или реальность?" *Deutsche Welle*, 2014, <https://dw.com/ru/белорусизация-миф-или-реальность/a-17791982> [2022-09-18]

[252] Vadim Mojeiko, "Soft Belarusization: A New Shift in Lukashenka's Domestic Policy?" *Belarus Digest*, 2015, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/soft-belarusization-a-new-shift-in-lukashenkas-domestic-policy> [2022-09-18]

[253] Alena Marková, "Language, Identity, and Nation: Special Case of Belarusian State- and Nation Formation." *The Journal of Belarusian Studies*, Vol. 8, issue 3, 2018, 35-37.

[254] Renee L. Buhr, Victor Shadurski and Steven Hoffman, "Belarus: An emerging civic nation?" *Nationalities Papers*, 39(3), 425-440.

[255] Nelly Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity: The Official and the Alternative "Belarusianness"* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010).

pagrindiniu simboliu tapo istorinės vėliavos spalvos – balta–raudona–balta. Kaip parodo iki 2020 metų vykusių procesų ir diskurso kaitos analizė, 2020 metų įvykiai turėjo ir turės įtakos tolesnei baltarusių tapatybės raidai, tačiau į juos teisingiau būtų žvelgti kaip į prieš tai vykusių tapatybinių procesų tąsą, naują tapatybės raidos puslapį, bet ne tapatybės atskaitos taktą.

Atsižvelgiant į paminėtus diskutuotinus baltarusių tapatybės raidos ir sampratos aspektus naujajame kontekste, disertacijoje keliamas **tyrimo klausimas**: kaip ir kokie šiuolaikinės baltarusių nacionalinės tapatybės modeliai buvo konstruojami valdžios ir nevyriausybinių veikėjų 2014–2019 metais, ontologinių iššūkių kontekste.

Siekiant pateikti išvadą, kokio masto pokytis įvyko ar neįvyko bendro tapatybės modelio atžvilgiu, pokyčių, vykusių nuo 2014 iki 2019 metų analizė pareikalavo kiekvieno specifinio tapatybės elemento tyrimo. Tokio pobūdžio prieiga pareikalavo dviejų lygių analizės. Pirmiausia, lyginant su prieš tai konceptualizuotais elementais identifikuoti, kaip ir kokie tapatybės elementai keitėsi,, kokia šio pokyčio svarba bendram tapatybės modeliui, ir kiek esmingas šis pokytis. Šis analizės lygmuo apima tiek diskurso, tiek tapatybę formuojančių socialinių praktikų, kurios buvo tokios pat reikšmingos kaip ir besikeičianti komunikacija, tyrimą. Antrasis analizės lygmuo skirtas šių pokyčių įkontekstinimui, kuris, pirmiausia, paremtas ontologinio saugumo teorija. Šiame lygmenyje ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas nevyriausybinių ir valdžios veikėjų sukurtų modelių aiškinimui, atskleidžiant įtampas tarp šių grupių ir pokyčių priežasčių skirtumus. Šioje disertacijoje, kelti keturi uždaviniai:

1. Tiriant naratyvų pokyčius oficialiame ir neoficialiuose diskursuose ir šių keičiamų naratyvų ontologinio saugumo kontekstą identifikuoti kaip keitėsi tapatybės elementai 2014–2019 metais.
2. Ištyrus sąveiką tarp pasikeitusių naratyvų diskurse ir besikeičiančių socialinių praktikų identifikuoti naujas tapatybę konstruojančias socialines praktikas.
3. Palyginus tam tikrų tapatybės naratyvų pokyčius ir bendrą tapatybės elementų sankaupą, kurios laikosi veikėjai, įvertinti tapatybės modelių pokytį.
4. Atskleidžiant pastarojo meto naratyvų pokyčius tapatybės elementų atžvilgiu, konceptualizuoti ir palyginti šiuolaikinius oficialius ir neoficialius tapatybės modelius, parodant kaip koegzistuoja oficialus ir neoficialūs modeliai.

Šiame darbe tapatybė nagrinėjama remiantis modernistine-konstruktyvistine prieiga. Tapatybė konceptualizuota pritaikant Montserrat'os Guibernau penkių dimensijų nacionalinės tapatybės modelį, kuriame tapatybė skaidoma į penkias skirtingų elementų grupes: istorinę, politinę, kultūrinę, teritorinę ir psichologinę dimensijas. Minėtasis modelis disertacijoje taikomas Baltarusijos atvejo diskursui ir praktikų analizėms tirti. Kiekvienas minėtasis tapatybės elementas įtraukia grupę naratyvų, apibrėžiančių tą elementą. Šių praktikų ir diskursų konstruojamų elementų kompiliacija ir yra tai, ką galime vadinti tapatybės modeliu. Tuo tarpu, ontologinio saugumo teorija leidžia geriau suprasti ir interpretuoti kaip skirtingi oficialūs ir neoficialūs naratyvai ir praktikos leidžia skirtingiems veikėjams kurti skirtingas ar panašias reikšmes, kai jie susiduria su ontologiniu nerimu ir ontologiniu nesaugumu. Pagrindinė tyrimo tezė kyla iš OST, kurios pagrindinė prielaida yra ta, kad be fizinio saugumo šalys tuo pačiu siekia ir ontologinio saugumo – savo įprasminimo ir tapatybės išsaugojimo. Rusijos agresijos ir hibridinio karo kontekste, Baltarusija, nors ir nesusidūrė su akivaizdžiomis fizinio saugumo grėsmėmis analizuojamu laikotarpiu, tačiau ji ir joje veikiantys skirtingi veikėjai, valdžia ir nevyriausybinės grupės, susidūrė su padidėjusiu ontologiniu nerimu ir ontologiniu nesaugumo jausmu.

Šios disertacijos **tezėje** teigiama, kad po 2014 baltarusių valdžia ir nevyriausybiniai veikėjai susidūrė su padidintu ontologinio nesaugumo jausmu, dėl kurio šie veikėjai transformavo prieš tai jų konstruotus baltarusių nacionalinės tapatybės naratyvus. Dėl šios transformacijos oficialus ir neoficialūs tapatybės modeliai pasikeitė, kadangi pasikeitė tapatybės elementų prioretizavimas ir siekiant kurti labiau išsiskiriančią baltarusių tapatybę atskiriems tapatybės elementams buvo suteiktos naujos prasmės. Minėtų modelių skirtumai, susiję su baltarusių valstybingumo traktavimu, kalbos ir valstybės vaidmeniu, tapo mažiau ryškūs kalbant apie nacionalinį lygmenį. Vis dėlto, kalbant apie daugelį kitų nacionalinės tapatybės elementų visose penkiose dimensijose, ypač žvelgiant į istorinių sovietmečio ir BNR periodo naratyvų interpretacijas skirtumai tarp oficialaus ir neoficialių modelių išliko pastebimi. Ankstesniuose tyrimuose keliama prielaida, kad matomas pilietinio tautiškumo dominavimas gali būti ginčijama atsižvelgiant į tirtų naratyvų pokyčius kultūrinėje dimensijoje. Be to, galimas skirtingų naratyvų prioretizavimas tiek oficialiame, tiek neoficialiuose modeliuose ir pastarųjų variacijose. Disertacijoje konceptualizuojami šiuolaikiniai

tapatybės modeliai ir analizuojami šių modelių konstravimo procesai taip pat atmeta literatūroje sutinkamą dichotominį požiūrį į baltarusių nacionalinę tapatybę bei parodo nuoseklią ir tęstinę, o ne staigiai besikeičiantį tapatybės raidą per pastarąjį dešimtmetį.

Nors dalis disertacijos rezultatų gali būti interpretuojami kaip patvirtinantys šias prielaidas, visgi, joje netestuojamos ir nekvestionuojamos pamatinės OST prielaidos, teigiančios, kad ontologinis saugumas yra esminis valstybių poreikis, toks pat svarbus kaip ir fizinis jų saugumas. OST naudojama kaip įrankis analizuoti tapatybės naratyvų ir socialinių praktikų pokyčius, kaip priemonė, leidžianti interpretuoti skirtingų veikėjų skirtingą požiūrį ir motyvaciją keičiant tapatybės elementus. Kartu su analizuojamais naratyvų pokyčiais, OST parodo kaip valdžios ir nevyriausybinių veikėjų ontologinis nesaugumas keičiasi naujame kontekste.

Šiame darbe, pritaikius šią teoriją Baltarusijos atvejui ir išanalizavus su tapatybės pokyčiais susijusius procesus, modifikuotos trys OST įžvalgos. Pirmiausia, tai ontologinio ir fizinio saugumo santykis, parodant, kad jis, atsižvelgiant į naujas grėsmes, gali būti komplementarus. Antra, OST dažnu atveju pabrėžia tapatybių stabilumo ir tęstinumo svarbą, o tuo tarpu Baltarusijos atvejis parodo pokyčio ir adaptacijos svarbą kai nėra susiformavusios konsoliduotos tapatybės. Trečia, OST tradiciškai taikoma aiškinant reiškinius iš valstybės, kaip veikėjo, perspektyvos, o tuo tarpu šioje disertacijoje kreipiamas dėmesys tiek į valstybės, tiek į individualų-grupės lygmenis, parodant besiskiriančius tarp grupių naratyvus, kurie vyrauja toje pačioje valstybėje. Be to, nors valstybės lygiu tapatybės rekonstrukcijos motyvacija gali tarp skirtingų veikėjų sutapti (nepriklausomos valstybės išsaugojimas), kalbant apie individualų-grupės lygmens motyvaciją matomi galimi skirtumai.

Tyrimo naujumas

Baltarusių tapatybė dažniausiai yra tiriama iš istorinės perspektyvos, giliai analizuojant tam tikrus istorinius periodus, asmenybes ar įvykius ir su jais susijusius tapatybės naratyvus. Matomas ryškus diskursą ir tapatybę, kaip daugiadimensinį tyrimo objektą, analizuojančių studijų, kurios tirtų šiuolaikinę baltarusių tapatybę, konstruojamą po 2014 metų, atsiradus naujai baltarusizacijos bangai, trūkumas. Šioje disertacijoje, pirmiausia, pristatomas tyrimas iš naujo įvertina kitų tyrėjų tezę, kad Baltarusijoje įsivyravo pilietinis tautiškumas. Daugiau nei pusę dešimtmečio vykusi nauja baltarusizacijos banga galimai pakeitė šią tezę, kuri kyla iš iki 2014 metų tyrimų atliktų.

Disertacijoje iš naujo įvertinama, ar pilietiniai tapatybės elementai vis dar sudaro diskurso ir socialinių praktikų konstruojamų tapatybių branduolį. Dauguma baltarusių tapatybės tyrimų paremti statistine arba istorine analizėmis ir matomas aiškus tyrimų, kurie analizuotų skirtingų veikėjų konstruojamus tapatybės diskursus, trūkumas. Tad šioje disertacijoje į baltarusių tapatybę žvelgiama ne per statistinę ar istorinę, bet per skirtingų veikėjų konstruojamų tapatybės diskursų analizę. Be to, ši disertacija prisideda prie baltarusių tapatybės tyrimų keliais aspektais: pritaikoma ir modifikuojama OST prieiga; priešingai, nei kituose tyrimuose, analizuojančiuose vieną ar kelis tos pačios grupės tapatybės elementus, šiame tyrime konstruojamos tapatybės analizuojamos aprėpiant visus ją sudarančius elementus (dėmenis) pagal M. Guibernau teorinį tapatybės modelį. Galiausiai, šioje disertacijoje konceptualizuojami modeliai, kurie vyravo diskurse prieš prasidedant 2020 metų protestams.

Disertacijos struktūra ir metodologija

Atsižvelgiant į tiriamo tapatybės koncepto kompleksiškumą ir tai, kad vyrauja daugybė skirtingų veikėjų propaguojamų konkuruojančių tapatybės naratyvų, siekiant išanalizuoti tiek oficialius, tiek neoficialius tapatybės diskursus bei socialines praktikas nuo 2014 metų iki 2019 metų pabaigos. tyrimas apima kokybinių metodų kombinaciją. Disertacija pradedama teorines prieigas ir konceptus apžvelgiančiu skyriumi, pristatoma ontologinio saugumo teorija ir tai, kaip ji pritaikoma Baltarusijos atvejui, parodant kaip diskursyviniai ir praktikų pokyčiai yra nukreipti į ontologinio saugumo didinimą. Teorinėje dalyje taip pat pristatoma konstruktyvistinė prieiga, M. Guibernau penkių dimensijų tapatybės modelis, kurio pagrindu paremtas tyrimo dizainas. Kitame darbo skyriuje, aprašomi ir paaiškinami kokybiniai metodai ir analizės gairės.

Empirinė disertacijos dalis sudaryta iš trijų skyrių: pirmiausia analizuojami valdžios atstovų ir vyriausybinės žiniasklaidos (pagal minėtas penkias teorines tapatybės dimensijas) diskursyviniai pokyčiai, toliau – neoficialių (nevyriausybinių) veikėjų ir nevyriausybinės žiniasklaidos kuriamų tapatybių diskursų analizė, o paskutiniame skyriuje analizuojamos labiausiai matomos socialinės praktikos istorinėje ir kultūrinėje dimensijose (šiose dimensijose buvo išskirta daugiausia praktinių pokyčių monitoringo metu).

Valdžios diskurso analizė, kuria pradedama empirinė dalis, prasideda nuo A. Lukašenkos komunikacijos analizės, koduojant ir analizuojant 30

komunikacinių įvykių, kuriuose fiksuojamas bandymas keisti su tapatybės elementais susijusius naratyvus. Toliau atliekama turinio analizė, kurios metu koduojami ir analizuojami straipsniai publikuoti valstybinės žiniasklaidos priemonės BelTA nuomonių skiltyje (iš viso analizei atrinkti 184 straipsniai iš 2007 straipsnių skiltyje). Analizuojant nevyriausybinių veikėjų diskursus, taip pat atlikta turinio analizė, atrinkus 622 straipsnius iš 5465 straipsnių publikuotų analogiškose skiltyse: nevyriausybiniuose portaluose *Nasha Niva* ir Laisvosios Europos radijuje / Laisvės radijuje (RFE/RL). Siekiant adresuoti tapatybės kompleksiškumo problemą, papildomai buvo atlikti 11 pusiau struktūruotų interviu su nepriklausomais ekspertais ir politiniais aktyvistais. Papildomai buvo analizuojama, kaip skiriasi tapatybės lygmeniu konstruojami naratyvai ir naratyvai, kurių laikosi respondentai, kaip individai. Ekspertinių interviu duomenys taip pat papildė toliau sekančią socialinių praktikų analizę ir jos struktūrą. Socialinių praktikų analizės pagrindą sudarė žiniasklaidos pranešimai, kurie buvo surinkti atliekant medijų monitoringą (tapatybės tema) ir laisvai prieinami duomenys bei dokumentai.

Pagrindiniai rezultatai ir išvados

Pasitelkus kompleksišką analizės prieigą, apimančią žiniasklaidos turinio analizę, Baltarusijos valdžios komunikacijos analizę ir pusiau struktūruotus interviu su ekspertais ir politikais, šioje disertacijoje, konceptualizuojant nacionalinės tapatybės modelius ir parodant, kokie tapatybės elementai ir kaip buvo rekonstruojami keičiantis naratyvams ir socialinėms praktikoms bei kaip šie nauji modeliai koegzistuoja, buvo analizuojami šiuolaikiniai tapatybės konstravimo procesai. Tyrime pritaikytas tapatybės modelių konceptualizavimo metodas, apimantis empirinių duomenų rinkimą ir tapatybės elementų analizę penkiose teorinėje literatūroje apibrėžtose tapatybės dimensijose: psichologinėje, politinėje, kultūrinėje, teritorinėje ir istorinėje. Empirinių duomenų analizė atlikta pasitelkus OST teorinę prieigą, atskleidžiančią, kaip naratyvų ir praktikų pokyčiai atliepė kylančius ontologinius iššūkius su kuriais susidūrė vyriausybiniai ir nevyriausybiniai veikėjai.

Šioje disertacijoje atliktas tyrimas parodė, kad 2014–2019 m. (laikotarpis, apimantis po Krymo okupacijos prasidėjusius procesus ir besitęsusius iki 2020 m. protestų) tapatybės elementai tiek oficialiuose, tiek neoficialiuose tapatybės modeliuose buvo pertvarkyti, suteikiant naujas reikšmes prieš tai vyravusiems tapatybės elementams, daugiausia iš kultūrinės ir istorinės tapatybės dimensijų.

- Pirmasis ir akivaizdžiausias oficialaus diskurso pokytis įvyko kalbos, kaip oficialiai konstruojamos tapatybės elemento, atžvilgiu. Prieš rekonstruojant baltarusių kalbos naratyvą, valdžios atstovai ėmėsi dekonstruoti anksčiau vyravusius naratyvus ir idėjas apie baltarusių kalbą, kuri lig tol buvo suvokiama kaip A. Lukašenkos režimo opozicijos skiriamasis bruožas. Baltarusių kalba, analizuojant kartu su rusų kalbos naratyvų atžvilgiu pokyčiais, valdžios grupei tapo vienu iš pagrindinių baltarusių nacionalinės tapatybės elementų, išskiriančių tautą ir vadžios grupę nuo išorinių veikėjų – pirmiausia, Rusijos. Paneigus rusų kalbos dominavimo ir „nuosavybės" aspektus, Rusų kalbą apibrėžiantys naratyvai taip pat buvo pakoreguoti.

- Kartu su diskursyviniais pokyčiais, buvo randama naujų socialinių praktikų, susijusių su baltarusių kalba, įskaitant baltarusių kalbos demonstravimą viešose erdvėse ir oficialioje komunikacijoje, siekiant sukurti didesnį išorinį tapatybės išskirtinumą ir depolitizuoti, o vėliau rutinizuoti baltarusių kalbos elementą, taip užtikrinant tęstinumo ir tuo pačiu ontologinio saugumo jausmą. Nepaisant to, didelis baltarusių kalbos populiarinimas, įskaitant švietimo sritį, iš valdžios didelio postūmio nesulaukė. Šioje srityje pagrindinį vaidmenį užėmė pilietinė visuomenė.

- Kitas oficialiai konstruojamo tapatybės modelio pokytis apėmė „gilesnio" valstybingumo istorijos konstravimą, vis dažniau referuojant į ikisovietinius laikotarpius, ypač Lietuvos Didžiąją Kunigaikštystę (LDK). Oficialiajame lygmenyje, konstruojant „gilesnio valstybingumo" naratyvą keitėsi šalies valstybingumo traktavimas. Nors šis pokytis nebuvo atvirai propaguotas oficialiame diskurse, jis buvo ryškiai matomas analizuojant socialines praktikas, pastebint, kad didesnis dėmesys skirtas LDK laikotarpio populiarinimui, kuris dabar tiesiogine prasme buvo įpaminklintas daugelyje miestų. Kažkuo panašus oficialus praktinis „nuokrypis" kurį laiką buvo matomas ir BNR laikotarpio atžvilgiu, kuris beveik visiškai buvo ignoruotas oficialiame diskurse, tačiau buvo pastebimas praktikoje, ypač minint BNR 100-metį. Be to, bandant „nacionalizuoti" ir lokalizuoti šį laikotarpį pakečiant Rusijoje paplitusius ritualus ir simbolius baltarusiškais atitikmenimis, valdžia pakeitė daugybę su sovietmečiu susijusių praktikų. Visi šie praktiniai pokyčiai, kaip ir diskursyviniai pokyčiai, lėmė labiau nuo Rusijos atitolusios ir išskirtinės tapatybės kūrimą.

- Neoficialių diskursų analizė patvirtino, kad nėra vienos bendros alternatyvos valdžios kuriamam tapatybės diskursui, nes skirtingų nevyriausybinių veikėjų kuriami ir rekonstruojami naratyvai apie konkrečius tapatybės elementus skiriasi tiek tapatybės elementų suvokimo, tiek tų tapatybės dimensijų prioretizavimo atžvilgiais. Atsižvelgiant į tai ir referuojant į oficialių ir neoficialių tapatybės modelių koegzistavimą, reikėtų nepamiršti, kad egzistuoja ne du tapatybės modeliai, bet daugybė skirtingų neoficialių modelių variantų. Dėl šios priežasties neįmanoma aiškiai atskirti ir konceptualizuoti to, kaip atrodė neoficialiai konstruojama tapatybė iki 2014 m. ir po to. Vis dėlto, analizuojant šių dienų neoficialius diskursus matoma daugybė pokyčių: nuomonės dėl baltarusių kalbos vaidmens atrodo labiau konsoliduotos nei anksčiau, kalbos pasirinkimas depolitizuotas, didesnis dėmesys skiriamas politinės tapatybės dimensijai pabrėžti. Atlikus analizę galima daryti išvadą, kad pagrindiniai pokyčiai buvo susiję su baltarusių kalbos, kaip savito ir (svarbu) depolitizuoto tapatybės elemento, kurį reikėtų puoselėti visuomenėje, vaidmens įtvirtinimu. Nors šios kalbos žinios nėra būtinos saviidentifikacijai, tačiau tampa svarbus šio elemento gerbimas. Kalbant apie istorinę dimensiją, skirtingų istorinių laikotarpių interpretavimas išlieka nevienalytis, tačiau yra matoma daugiau bendro požiūrio taškų, kai yra kalbama apie sovietmečio patirtį ar BNR laikotarpį. Nors pokyčiai neoficialiuose diskursuose matomi, tačiau jie drastiškai nesiskyrė nuo ankstesnių alternatyvių naratyvų. Tai rodo, kad kai kurie pagrindiniai tapatybės elementai ir juos kuriantys naratyvai, ypač kalbant apie baltarusių kalbą, tampa vis labiau konsoliduoti.

Tapatybės naratyvų pokyčiai – tai reakcija į augančius ontologinio saugumo iššūkius, nes pokyčiai vyko suvereniteto išsaugojimo diskusijų kontekste ir kūrė didesnį baltarusių nacionalinės tapatybės išskirtinumą (pagrindinį tapatybės saugumo aspektą).

- Kalbos ir istorinės dimensijos elementų naratyvų pokyčiai buvo įvesti augant susirūpinimui dėl valstybės suvereniteto išsaugojimo ir stiprėjant ontologiniam nerimui. Nepriklausomybės ir suvereniteto akcentavimas tapo vienu iš pagrindinių naratyvų tiek oficialiuose, tiek neoficialiuose tapatybės diskursuose. 2014–2019 m. neoficialiuose diskursuose daug dėmesio buvo skiriama politinei tapatybės dimensijai. Suvereniteto ir politinės valstybės išsaugojimo

klausimas aukščiausią aktualumo tašką pasiekė 2014 ir 2015 m., keičiantis regioniniam kontekstui (Krymo okupacija, karas Donbase). Suverenitetas ir nepriklausomybė tapo ne tik labiau akcentuojamais, bet ir pagrindiniais identifikacijos elementais visoms visuomenės grupėms, nepaisant jų politinių pažiūrų.

- Tiek oficialaus, tiek neoficialių diskursų pokyčiai analizės laikotarpiu neabejotinai įtvirtino didesnį identiteto išskirtinumą ir tuo pačiu visuomenės atsparumą draugiško Rusijai požiūrio potencialiam išnaudojimui siekiant paveikti suverenitetą. Šie pokyčiai kartu su anksčiau minėtu padidėjusiu nepriklausomybės ir suvereniteto akcentavimu tiek oficialiuose, tiek neoficialiuose diskursuose (pastarieji tiesiogiai kalba apie galimą Rusijos agresijos grėsmę ir grėsmes suverenitetui) parodo, kad, visų pirma, buvo matomas didelis ontologinis nerimas ir nerimas dėl fizinio saugumo tiek valstybės, tiek individų ir / ar jų grupių lygmenyse. Antra, skirtingi veikėjai silpną tapatybę dažniausiai sieja su galimomis grėsmėmis valstybės fiziniam saugumui ir nepriklausomybei. Tirtų tapatybės elementų reprezentacijos keitimasis rodo, kad nė viena grupė nesijautė saugi žvelgiant į visuotinai neįtvirtintus prieš tai vyravusius tapatybės modelius.

- Žvelgiant į valstybės lygmenį – tikslingi tapatybės elementų pokyčiai rodo panašią skirtingų veikėjų motyvaciją keisti tapatybės naratyvus, tačiau skirtumai individų ir / ar jų grupių lygmenimis išliko. Skirtingi individų ir / ar grupių motyvai atsiskleidžia tada, kai yra įvertinama besikeičianti šalies vidinė situacija, įskaitant natūraliai kintančius visuomenės, mininčios trečiąjį nepriklausomybės dešimtmetį, poreikius, kurie galimai privertė valdžios atstovus keisti pagrindinius naratyvus, adaptuoti savo propaguojamą tapatybės modelį, kad jis atitiktų kintantį socialinį kontekstą ir išsaugoti savo relevantiškumą. Kitaip tariant, A. Lukašenkos režimas turėjo „sekti paskui tendenciją" ir užtikrinti savo tęstinumą besikeičiančioje visuomenėje. Skirtingai nuo kitų grupių, kurių motyvaciją pirmiausia lėmė noras išsaugoti nepriklausomą valstybę, valdžios grupės kryptingas ir instrumentinis pokyčių pobūdis leidžia daryti išvadą, kad jai labiausiai rūpėjo užtikrinti savo tęstinumą ir valdžią, kadangi nepriklausomybės užtikrinimo siekis pirmiausia reiškė ir savo valdžios išsaugojimą. Atsižvelgiant į tai, galima daryti prielaidą kad valdžios įgyvendinti pokyčiai turėjo labai praktinę motyvaciją ir besikeičiant aplinkybėms

ar atsiradus naujiems saugumo iššūkiams galima tikėtis naujų poslinkių bet kuria kryptimi.

Su baltarusių valstybingumu, kalbos vaidmeniu ir valstybės suverenitetu susijusių tapatybės elementų grupių skirtumai tapo mažiau akivaizdūs žvelgiant valstybės lygmeniu. Tačiau vis dar išliko reikšmingi skirtumai tarp oficialaus ir neoficialių tapatybės modelių.

- Disertacijoje konceptualizuotas oficialus tapatybės modelis, skirtingai nei neoficialūs tapatybės modeliai, yra vienalytis. Panašu, kad tik labai siauram aukšto rango pareigūnų ratui buvo leista keisti anksčiau nusistovėjusius tapatybės elementus, o tie, kurie plėtoja bendrą valdžios diskursą, kalbėjo tik apie nusistovėjusius naratyvus. Neoficialūs tapatybės modeliai yra fragmentiški. Kai kurie nevyriausybiniai veikėjai kertinį vaidmenį asocijuoja su kalba, kiti – su istoriniais naratyvais. Nepaisant to, lyginant oficialaus ir neoficialių modelių naratyvus, daugelis skirtumų vis dar išliko, pirmiausia, istorinėje tapatybės dimensijoje. Nors skirtinguose neoficialiuose diskursuose galima pastebėti mažiau tarpusavio neatitikimų, visgi, skirtingi diskursai skirtingai interpretuoja tam tikrų istorinių laikotarpių svarbą ir pačią interpretaciją.
- Rekonstravus baltarusių kalbos naratyvą, skirtumai tapatybės kultūrinėje dimensijoje šiuo atžvilgiu tapo blankesni. Tiek valdžios institucijos, tiek nevyriausybiniai veikėjai daug dėmesio skyrė kultūrinei tapatybės dimensijai. Kalbant apie kultūrinių elementų iškėlimą, siekiant pabrėžti kultūrinį ir kalbinį tapatybės išskirtinumą bei žiūrint į nuolatinį visų grupių susitelkimą ties politine dimensija ir politinės valstybės suvereniteto prioretizavimu, galima pastebėti modelių panašumų. Panaši tendencija matoma ir žvelgiant į istorinei dimensijai priskirtinas socialines praktikas, kurios, kaip ir diskursyviniai pokyčiai, sąlygoja tolesnį atsiskyrimą nuo „bendros" sovietinės istorijos traktavimo, kas kuria didesnį baltarusių tapatybės išskirtinumą. Todėl galima daryti išvadą, kad tiek oficialaus, tiek neoficialių veikėjų nerimas ir su tuo nerimu susijusių metanaratyvų propagavimas nacionaliniu lygmeniu yra panašus.
- Oficialiajame diskurse ir praktikose reikšmingiausias tapatybės elementų pokytis buvo identifikuotas kultūrinėje ir istorinėje dimensijoje: analizuoti baltarusių kalbos vaidmens ir Baltarusijos valstybingumo interpretacijos pokyčiai. Tačiau tuo pat metu kai kurie ankstesni pagrindiniai pasakojimai (tame tarpe dvikalbystės

naratyvas ir fokusas į „Didįjį Tėvynės karą“) išliko ir buvo toliau plėtojami siekiant išlaikyti ankstesnį valdžios grupės sukurtą autobiografinį pasakojimą. Be to, analizės metu buvo išskirti ir mažesnio masto naratyviniai skirtumai teritorinėje, politinėje ir psichologinėje dimensijose. Todėl negalime teigti, kad įvyko esminis viso oficialiosios tapatybės modelio pasikeitimas, tačiau galime daryti išvadą, kad įvyko tikslingas ir pastebimas tapatybės elementų (pirmiausia, klasikinių, tokių, kaip kalba ir istorija) pokyčiai. Tai neabejotinai kūrė ryškesnę ir labiau konsoliduotą tapatybę, tuo pačiu didinant valdžios grupės ontologinį ir fizinį saugumą analizuojamu laikotarpiu.

Šia disertacija taip pat siekiama prisidėti prie OST prieigos plėtojimo. OST pritaikymas Baltarusijos atvejui leido ištestuoti esamas teorines prielaidas ir pasiūlyti sekančias teorines modifikacijas.

- Pirma, Baltarusijos atveju ryšys tarp ontologinio ir fizinio saugumo yra komplementarus – vieno tipo saugumas papildo kitą. Deklaruodami ir gana atvirai išreikšdami baimę dėl hibridinių grėsmių iš Rusijos, tiek Baltarusijos nevyriausybiniai, tiek vyriausybiniai veikėjai daugiausia dėmesio skyrė nacionalinės tapatybės savitumo ir išskirtinumo stiprinimui, ypač formuodami naratyvus Rusijos tapatybės atžvilgiu ir reaguodami į sutinkamus diskurse prorusiškus naratyvus. Rusijos agresija Ukrainoje 2013–2014 m. parodė, kad ontologinis nesaugumas, kylantis iš priešo, išnaudojančio tam tikras silpnąsias tapatybės vietas, gali sukelti didelę riziką šalies teritoriniam vientisumui, taip tiesiogiai peraugant į fizinį nesaugumą. Galima teigti, kad Baltarusijos veikėjai bijojo panašaus pobūdžio scenarijų, todėl ėmėsi veiksmų, kurie sprendė ontologinio nesaugumo klausimus, siekė didinti visuomenės atsparumą ir užpildė galimas fizinio saugumo spragas.

- Antra, nors OST mokslininkai dažniausiai akcentuoja tapatybės ir kasdienių praktikų stabilumą ir tęstinumą kaip ontologinio saugumo sąlygą, Baltarusijoje, paliekant neišspręstą esamą situaciją, kuomet tapatybė nėra konsoliduota, nebūtų sumažintas ontologinis nerimas, o tik padidintas potencialus ontologinio nesaugumo jausmas. Vientisas tapatybės modelis nebuvo iki galo įsivyravęs ir itin paveikus potencialioms grėsmėms dėl pernelyg glaudžių ryšių su Rusija. Dėl to, Baltarusijai susidūrus su naujo tipo potencialiomis išorinėmis grėsmėmis, tapatybės rekonstravimas buvo

neišvengiamas. Pastaraisiais metais rekonstruoti disertacijoje išskirti baltarusių nacionalinės tapatybės elementai, ypač tie, kurie galėjo būti laikomi kaip kuriantys bendrus ryšius su Rusija (pavyzdžiui, rusų kalbos vaidmuo), tuo pačiu pakeičiant anksčiau suformuotą supratimą apie oficialius ir neoficialius tapatybės modelių variantus.

- Trečia, nors tarptautiniuose santykiuose OST dažniausiai orientuojasi į valstybinį lygmenį, baltarusių tapatybės formavimo analizė parodė, kad svarbu išlaikyti atskirtį tarp atskirų grupių ir valstybinio lygmens. Baltarusijos atveju matomi keli tapatybės variantai, taigi, ir skirtingas nerimo lygis ir, galimai, skirtingas ontologinio nesaugumo jausmas tarp skirtingų veikėjų. Tokio pobūdžio skirtumai buvo pastebėti net tarp nevyriausybinių veikėjų, kai jie akcentavo skirtingus tapatybės naratyvus. Šie išliekantys prieštaravimai tarp oficialaus ir neoficialių modelių, o taip pat neoficialių modelių skirtumai, rodo, kad tapatybės analizei būtina taikyti OST prieigą, analizuojant tapatybės naratyvus ir grupės, ir valstybės lygiu. Nors nevyriausybinių grupių ir valdžios grupių motyvai valstybiniu lygmeniu sutampa (siekis užtikrinti nepriklausomos valstybės tęstinumą), atskirų grupių lygmeniu yra esminių skirtumų, nes valdžios institucijos tuo pačiu rūpinasi savo galios užtikrinimu. Galima teigti, kad besikeičianti padėtis šalies viduje, įskaitant natūraliai besikeičiančią tautinę tapatybę, privertė valdžios institucijas pritaikyti anksčiau propaguotą tapatybės modelį, prisitaikyti prie besikeičiančio visuomenės ir socialinio konteksto taip užtikrinant savo galios konsolidaciją ir savąjį „aš" naujame kontekste. Be to, nors asmeniškai suvokiamos ontologijos analizė nebuvo tarp šio tyrimo tikslų, interviu su tapatybę konstruojančiais veikėjais rezultatai parodė, kad nacionaliniu mastu sukonstruoti tapatybės elementai ir naratyvai nebūtinai atspindi tikrąjį savojo „aš" supratimą. Todėl nauji tyrimai gali telkti daugiau dėmesio individo saviidentifikacijos suvokimui.

Ši disertacija įsilieja į tris diskusijas, baltarusių nacionalinės tapatybės raidos tema.

- Pirmoji, kitų mokslininkų pateikta diskusija apie vadinamųjų pilietinės tautybės elementų dominavimo teiginį. Disertacijoje šis teiginys analizuojamas pasitelkiant naujus, šioje disertacijoje pateiktus, empirinius duomenis. Šie duomenys parodė, kad daugiau nei šešerius metus nuosekliai vykę tapatybės naratyvų pokyčiai daugiausiai buvo orientuoti į istoriją ir kalbą. Nors politinėje

dimensijoje konceptualizuoti pilietinės tapatybės elementai iš tiesų išliko vienais pagrindinių ir, netgi, buvo akcentuojami labiau nei prieš tai. Tiek oficialūs, tiek neoficialūs veikėjai, rekonstruojant tapatybės elementus, pirmenybę teikė istoriniams ir kultūriniams elementams. Todėl kalbėdami apie konstruojamą nacionalinę tapatybę, šiandien negalime kalbėti apie pilietinio tautiškumo dominavimą. Be to, naujausios socialinės praktikos, susijusios su baltarusių kalba ir istorija, kurios analizuotos šioje disertacijoje, ir apžvelgti apklausų duomenys rodo, kad kultūriniai tapatybės elementai šiandien baltarusių sąmonėje galėjo įauginti gilesnes šaknis nei iki 2014 m. Ši prielaida reikalauja tolesnių kiekybinių tyrimų, orientuotų į tapatumo suvokimą individo lygmeniu. Apibendrinant galima teigti, kad atsižvelgiant į šį ženklų kultūrinės dimensijos tapatybės elementų iškėlimą, anksčiau (iki 2014 m.) daryti teiginiai apie sukonstruoto pilietiniu tautiškumu grįsto modelio dominavimą neatitinka analizuojamo laikotarpio (2014–2019 m.) tendencijų ištirtuose diskursuose;

- Antroji diskutuotina tema – klausimas, kaip nauji tapatybės formavimo procesai pakeitė vadinamojo „oficialaus" ir „alternatyvaus" baltarusiškumo koegzistavimą. Šio tyrimo išvados leidžia teigti, kad oficialus tapatybės modelis susidūrė su pastebimais pokyčiais tiek diskurse, tiek praktikoje. 2014–2019 m. laikotarpiu daugiau dėmesio buvo skirta ne pilietinės tapatybės elementams oficialiajame diskurse, ko nebuvo matoma ankstesniais laikotarpiais iki 2014 m. Atliekant tyrimą buvo išanalizuota daugybė tapatybės elementų vienu metu, taip atskleidžiant kelis galimus skirtingų tapatybės modelių variantus neoficialiuose diskursuose ir parodant, kad nėra vienos „alternatyvios" tapatybės ir dviejų modelių konkurencijos, kaip apibrėžta esamoje literatūroje, kadangi egzistuoja daugiau galimų neoficialių modelių variantų. Atsižvelgiant į modelių fragmentiškumą, sunku suformuoti galutinę išvadą dėl alternatyvių modelių pakeitimų apimties;

- Trečia diskusija susijusi su 2020 metais „gimusia" ar „iš nauja atrasta" baltarusių tauta ir nacionaline tapatybe. Šioje disertacijoje analizuojamos praktikos ir naratyvai (ypač atsižvelgiant į istorinių simbolių, kurie greitai išplito protestų metu, depolitizavimą, pilietinės visuomenės vaidmenį įtraukiant piliečius į tapatybės kūrimo procesus ir labiau konsoliduotus tapatybės naratyvus skirtingose tapatybės variantuose) rodo, kad 2020 m. įvykiai veikiau buvo tapatybės raidos

tęstinumas ir galbūt (tam tikru mastu) netgi prieš tai vykusių diskursyvinių ir socialinių praktikų, kuriančių išskirtinę ir konsoliduotą baltarusių nacionalinę tapatybę ir savimonę, rezultatas.

Šios disertacijos tyrimas apima 2014–2019 metais vykusių procesų analizę. Interviu ir žiniasklaidos analizės duomenys buvo surinkti iki 2020 metų įvykių, vadinasi, dar neprasidėjus protestams ir 2022 metų pilno masto Rusijos karinei invazijai į Ukrainą. Tačiau šis tyrimas aprėpė ypač svarbų tapatybės formavimuisi laikotarpį, kuris turėjo įtakos 2020 metų įvykiams ir tolesnei tapatybės raidai. 2020 metų ir tolesnių įvykių įtaka tapatybės raidai reikalauja naujų tyrimų, o šios disertacijos išvadose pateikiama refleksija kaip procesai vystėsi lyg šiol. Apibendrinant galima teigti, kad baltarusių tapatybė toliau vystosi, įtraukiant naujas reikšmes, atsiradusias po ir dėl 2020 metų įvykių (nauja trauma, didžiavimasis parodytu solidarumu, nauji naratyvai). Tapatybės raidos dinamika toliau pasižymi disertacijoje tirtų naratyvų stiprėjimu, įskaitant tapatybės išskirtinumo didinimą referuojant į baltarusių kalbą ir kultūrą. Tuo tarpu valdžia demonizavo tapatybės elementus, kurie įsivyravo protestų metu, ypač baltą-raudona-baltą vėliavą, tačiau (bent jau šio teksto rašymo metu) negrįžo prie dar ankstesnių atvirai neigiamų baltarusių kalbos atžvilgiu naratyvų. Atsižvelgiant į analizuotą instrumentinį požiūrį, neatmetama, kad priešiški panašaus pobūdžio naratyvai gali grįžti į režimo retoriką, kaip kad sugrįžo ir sustiprėjo kuriamas *batkos* įvaizdis ir kryptingas valdžios vykdomas baltarusių visuomenės skaidymas siekiant išsaugoti savąjį „aš" bent jau „savųjų" režimą palaikančiųjų, tarpe.

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